

The Ancient Thread of Authenticity

An Interview on Sacred Attention Therapy
with RICHARD HARVEY

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What is Sacred Attention Therapy?

Sacred Attention Therapy is the development and continuation of my therapeutic approach which I have been refining over the last 35 years.

The title points toward the need for a spiritual and sacred approach to healing in the present era. It incorporates the central feature of healing therapy which is giving attention, and attention is a function of love. Finally the title refers to the etymological meaning of therapy whereby it is concerned with soul or the essential inner person.

Sacred Attention references the etymological meaning of therapy: “attending to soul.” It refers us back thousands of years when a shaman, a priest, a holy man, a sadhu, or an eastern spiritual adept sat down with a pupil for Upanishads (literally “sitting at the knee”). Sacred Attention Therapy is listening with the whole self to the soul of the other. This is what therapy should always be, or at least always aim at, because this is the profound depth of healing and reverence which “two gathered together in My name” can bring about.

So much therapy is concerned merely with getting better as soon as possible. Today we have a much more complex and profound challenge. It is the disappearance of sacredness, spiritual values and practices. Authentic spirituality is disappearing so rapidly that we can hardly keep track of it. I would liken it to the disappearing rain forests and other similar eco-disasters. Except this inner ecology is something everyone can and should attend to. As human beings we have the potential to self-reflect. Not all inner disturbances are negative in origin. Sometimes it may be a sane response to an insane world! Self-reflection enables and empowers us to discern what is right and what is wrong, not in an outward moral sense but what resonates with your soul.

We have entered the age of the individual. There is no escaping this. Yet it is our very egocentric individualism that we should understand and embrace to liberate ourselves. This constitutes an entirely new paradigm of life, human spirituality, and global community. In the past we have sought organization, religion, and institutions to mediate our relationship with our soul and spirit and provide meaningful guidance. In the modern era a new paradigm of direct relationship with divinity involves the individual in a great act of self-responsibility. This self-responsibility begins with clearing out the past. It is what has been called therapy, counseling, or personal growth over the last four or five decades. We will need a new label soon. I have been considering this for some years now and I haven't come up with the appropriate term to denote inner work performed not from a pathological basis, a sense of weakness, or an inability to cope, but rather a paradigm of wise counsel and spiritual, soulful mentoring. For now, the best description I can find is sacred attention, hence Sacred Attention Therapy (SAT).

What is the basis of effective therapy?

Effective therapy depends on the sincere motivation and openness of the client, the skillfulness and empathy of the therapist, the quality of the therapeutic relationship, and the ability to focus keenly on the most crucial issues of the process which is a constantly changing perspective. There's much more we could say, but that's an accurate summary.

Which is the most essential element of all of these?

The therapeutic relationship.

Why?

Because it's the vehicle. Without the deep robust vehicle which the therapeutic relationship provides, the healing, insights, understanding, and changes which take place in therapy, between sessions, in the client's unconscious world, and in the healing energetic realms have no containment or safe space for integration and stabilization. Without the vehicle, we don't really get anywhere.

The therapeutic relationship in itself should be healing, ideally. Acceptance, attending, empathy, presence, and authenticity are just some of the characteristics of what makes the relationship special and often unique.

These wonderful qualities—acceptance, presence and authenticity—can they be taught? Is this what you learn in therapy training?

There are two kinds of therapists: the trained ones and the born ones. Get a born one if you can; someone who has always had a deep sense of resonance with the healing world through intrinsic truth and innate ability, a natural healer. A trained therapist acquires skills and learns strategies. It's OK for short-term counseling and relatively superficial problems. But in what is known as depth psychotherapy, at least some sense of deep life calling in the therapist is required.

Presumably you can be a born and a trained therapist?

Yes you can and that is perhaps the best of both worlds.

I have heard you saying that couples work is crucially important in the modern era. Why is that?

We are struggling to transcend a romantic myth that is about two thousand years old, and anachronistic. We must either transcend this myth or transform it. I would prefer an entirely new mythology to guide humanity in the times ahead. These times will either be extraordinarily dark or they will be the sign that we are emerging at last from the end of the Kaliyuga. These end times are crucial because depending on which way humanity goes, what decisions are made collectively, and what values are followed, almost anything can happen.

I like David Mitchell's book *Cloud Atlas* for its terrifying account of a future in which the moral degradation of a McDonald's-style religion takes over, where base instincts toward survival, purpose, and higher spiritual intuition congeal around an animalistic center and debase humanity through uniformity and conformity. This is truly terrifying. Worse, it is entirely possible. This would be one of the darkest scenarios imaginable.

Let us hope that the alternative is tenable. The spiritual revolution, the inner revolution in world consciousness must precede breaking through into the light. Couples work is crucial because it is intensified projection, profound obvious darkness. Whoever and whatever you are projecting your inner material onto, no one and nothing is usually as intense and concentrated as the person who is your loved object. The bitterness, the resentment, and murderous rage that accompany the end of relationships with its drama and betrayal are only equaled in intensity by the possessive love, loyalty, and attraction to the beloved at the beginning. The whole thing is a charade of course! Take away the disowning of our positive and negative traits and you see before you another human being, someone who you may or may not be able to love. The first stage of awakening offers a way through to personal transformation in Sacred Attention Therapy and takes you past this deluded state. The other is not yourself! He or she is the other! Regardless of the baggage you heap onto the beloved, the beloved is free. He or she is a person in their own right. Now how do you love them? This is a different question to the sticky, murky business of transferring mother or father and childhood images of attraction and aversion onto other people and—here's the tragedy—often basing your entire life on this relationship and generating children who grow up to do the same thing: darkness begets darkness begets darkness.

The first stage of relationship is working with the central truth *that relationships show you yourself*; they act as a mirror. The second stage of relationships is learning to separate and be an individual attending to your own destiny, capacity, and potential with the beloved at your side as a loving companion. The third stage of relationship is the spiritual stage of oneness with all things and the role of relationship in this third stage has yet to be envisioned. In a sense it's not really time yet, because we are such a long way off. The new myth will have to address this and point the way to a sane and compassionate way of creating relationships between human beings. Whether the model is monogamous, exclusive, possessive and based on dependence and insecurity remains to be seen. No one can invent the new mythology. It must emerge from the level of collective consciousness humanity reaches. Then the old mythology fades and a new one emerges and this new mythology reflects the conditions of truth that contemporary human beings have attained.

What can therapy do for us in the modern world? Among other things, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have been criticized for promoting conformism, and promoting a hidden consensus underlying the apparent liberation of the individual. What really can talking about our feelings and exploring the inner realms do for the individual and the world today?

Inner work and therapy are crucial to the survival of the world today—not only the physical, material survival but to the quality and culture of the world. This is because we are in a period of evolution where the world has expanded and developed outwardly and left the inner world behind. Our inner selves must catch up and restore the balance. Humanity today is underestimated, marginalized, disempowered, disabled, and

confused. Over and above this we are witnessing the atrophy of the sacred. The ancient thread of authenticity, sacredness, and spirituality is being eroded by a process that began hundreds and hundreds of years ago. Organized religion, organized society, organized morality and an almost complete ignoring of inner world have brought us to a critical juncture in humanity's evolution.

Today we are living from the mind and the mind is falsehood. Its extrapolations are false and its effect is neurosis, worry, anxiety, fear, guilt, and hate. In our hearts, we know this to be true. We need to live from innocence, from openness and vulnerability, awareness and devotion. If these qualities are practiced, life will shine and reflect truth, life will be authentic and loving, and human beings will become natural.

This cannot be done while carrying the immense baggage of conditioning and corrupt culture and a life dominated by mind. This can only be done through the heart manifesting the Divine soul or Buddha-mind or Christ-consciousness.

This is the heritage of humanity, the promise that destiny holds us to; this is the response of gratitude and devotion that the gift of life naturally provokes in us. To become and feel natural is where it all starts. The response to this impulse is to clear the inner realms and to purify inner processes of guilt, hate, fear, lack, and desire. The way is through forgiveness. And, yes, talking and inner exploration are enormously effective in bringing about healing and liberation from the personality, as long as the process unfolds in a deep relationship of trust, openness, and reverence for life.