

Transcript of seminar with Wilfred Bion

at the Tavistock Clinic, 1977

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EXTRACT FROM SEMINAR ONE - listen

Bion: Now the point I want to make is that when you have forgotten all that you can about your patient – who will do his best to remind you – then you may have a chance of penetrating the impressive caesura of knowledge, facts, and so forth; and a chance of hearing these very small things which are so difficult to hear or see. What I want to suggest again is, falling back on rather metaphorical use of language, is the growth of *a germ of an idea*. But it seems to me that the first point about this is that one should give oneself a chance, as the observer, of having a germ of an idea; and that the germ may look very odd indeed until it has taken shape as an idea which can be articulated.

If I could consider myself qualified to understand the language, I would be very glad if my patient would use any language that they can mobilise. For example if I say to a patient, where did you go last night and what did you see? the patient may be very anxious to insist that they went to bed and went to sleep. I say, I don't mind what you did with your body: where did you go and what did you see? The person who is a very good artist would presumably be able to say, I'll show you, and put a line on a piece of paper around that idea, and then he could show it to me. I take it that if a person was musically gifted, they could even make black marks on paper and call them things like 'crotchet rests', notes on the stave of music. To me they don't mean a thing. But I am assured by some people I have seen that they can 'read a score', and when they say that they can read a score, they mean that they can hear the noises. Incredible, isn't it. But that's the sort of thing that we have to deal with. Facts, which are incredible. That's the fascination of this job. That if one can get through to a fact, it takes a lot of believing. There's no fiction can touch it.

As I say it would be very much to my advantage if I could understand music and if the person could resort to that; but actually they are limited by having to talk to a person who has a limited command of articulate speech, so the patient has to do a lot of work to *tell you what he knows* – namely, where he was last night and what he saw.

I think I had better stop now, to give you a chance to ask me what you want to ask me. I can't promise to answer it but I can certainly promise to ask some more questions.

Participant: I think you have been talking a bit about the limitations of the setting. I wonder if you could say something about where you find the setting in fact does block almost completely our knowledge of human beings: where it is defective, where it is at its best.

Bion: Can you give me an idea of what you have in mind when you talk about the setting?

Participant: The analytic setting; the kind of experience, the kind of information you have there. I am thinking specifically of your writing on memory.

Bion: From the point of view of the analyst: you have in front of you somebody whose anatomy and physiology can be quite important. You can think, this patient looks ill. And if you think about it for a greater length of time, you may be able to define in your own mind, what you mean by looking ill: what does an ill person look like. A good physician will say, that patient has a cathectic flush; and from that point they can interpret what that particular kind of flush means. Physicians usually call these things diagnoses; but in fact they are interpretations. They are interpretations of the information that is brought to them by their senses. Now what information is brought to your patient by their senses we do not know; but you can get an idea of what information is brought to you by your senses, if your senses

have a *chance* of seeing, hearing, smelling whatever it is that does present itself; and then you can try to transcend those senses as to what they mean – what their origin is.

Putting this very crudely one could say: in an analytic situation there is the analyst and a patient, and then there is a third party who is watching it, and listening. There always is; there are always three people anyhow. Very often there are others, much more shadowy: relatives, husbands, wives, fathers and mothers of children. Those objects (I'm using the word deliberately, vague word) exert an influence. So one is aware of something which I call hearsay evidence. The evidence which I hear said. And I rate that very low indeed. If one tried to evaluate it, you can say that the evidence which I get from my patient while the patient is with me is worth 99, and all the rest can share the one per cent between them; it is of such a low order it is hardly worth bothering with. I can hear all kinds of things which the patient has heard or been told, about me, or that they believe; it is of very little importance indeed because all I am hearing is what the patient has heard said.

What I want to hear is something which is buried in all this noise. Physicians and surgeons are quite used to considering the findings of embryologists, and they think there are signs in the human body of vestiges of different kinds of life: an amphibian stage, and so forth. When it comes to the mind, I think it is something similar. What I want to notice – if possible – are the vestiges, the remnants, which have so succeeded in surviving in the mind of the particular person. But the environment is, for me, all this noise that is brought through sight, hearing and so on, and by what the patient is saying: including masses of theories of medicine, psychoanalysis, painting, music and so on. But buried somewhere in all that there is a vestige of something that is still operative. So if one is given a chance – if the patient actually turns up and there are two of you in the room at the same time – then you have a chance of seeing these very faint signs; and perhaps after a time they will begin to fall together and form a pattern, and the pattern itself will form in such a way that you think you might be able to translate the impression that you get into articulate speech.

It's a bit complicated, because one would like at the same time to be able to say something which the patient could understand. That is very difficult; it is very difficult first of all to get clear what one understands oneself, because of having to fall back on a very debased form of communication – the verbal communication which has been so devalued that one finds it hard to sharpen up the words enough to give them some kind of meaning.

So, while apparently there are only two bodies in the room, I think one has to go beyond that and detect this *third* – at least, the third who is also of course detecting what it detects. The analyst is being analysed all the time by this third party. If you are fortunate, after a while I think even the patient gets this third party brought home enough for him to be aware of its existence.

I don't know if that has got anywhere near to what it is that you were asking me, but we could go on with the debate.

Mattie Harris: I would like you to expand if you could on what you mean by *at least* a third party, as if you had others also in mind: as if you thought that the analysand *also* had some third party eventually – I don't know whether you'd call it 'internal objects' (a jargon term) –

Bion: Freud says somewhere that it isn't an analysis unless you have laid bare the oedipal situation. Well, there again he is falling back on a verbal transformation of some kind of visual image of three parties. I don't think it is enough. People also talk about omniscience, or omnipotence. When you do that you have brought in more parties still. I don't think it is reasonable to give an interpretation unless you feel fairly convinced that you at any rate have evidence of this third party and then third, fourth, fifth or anybody else.

If you take Melanie Klein's theory of projective identification: if I remember rightly, what she says is that the infant splits the object into fragments and then the fragments are evacuated. But she describes this as an omnipotent *phantasy*. Myself, I think one would have to consider this whole question of phantasy as omnipotence some time or another. But leaving that aside for the present, I think that you can get a situation in which the patient has really

got rid of – to the best of their ability – all the senses which are disagreeable or unpleasant. For my part, I feel I have good reason to think that this process takes place even *before* birth. So, to get a situation in which the patient could be said to have ideas which they have never been conscious of – of course that is hopelessly contradictory, because I am having to use articulate language, when I am awake – articulate language. Freud, when he talks about the interpretation of dreams, does not I think really consider the fact that, assuming the patient had (as he says) a dream, they had an experience in what I would consider a very different state of mind from that in which when you are awake. Therefore, the story that a patient tells you is *his* version of what happened last night, but he doesn't really know because he was in an entirely different state of mind from that in which he is consciously telling you the dream. I don't think the theory of the conscious and unconscious – which is extremely useful, but like all useful things it really becomes a bit of a pest after a time because it gets in the way of being able to see other things that one doesn't know; it stands in the way of one's own ignorance, in other words; so that there is very little chance of investigating this realm of ideas which have never been conscious, and this state of mind which is not available when the patient is talking to you with all his wits about him in broad daylight and you are listening to them in broad daylight with all your wits about you. This means there is a difficulty in our own being able to penetrate to one's own experience of what is taking place: because of this kind of diaphragm, this caesura which you can't get past, but which makes impressions which are usually not available to you when you are fully conscious and wide awake.

This is another reason why I think there is a lot to be said for considering – well, what I have previous called alpha elements, beta elements and so on, but which are not really psychological because I keep them for something which I don't know and will never know; I am assuming some kind of physical counterpart. But when it does become conscious, then I think it becomes conscious in this way: as a somewhat fanciful theoretical construct. Speculative imagination, speculative reasons. No doubt if somebody else was present they could consider these speculative reasons as being rationalisations, and they would be quite correct. It depends which way you look at it: this way, or that way. Or as I put it previously, psycho-somatic or soma-psychotic – it's the same thing: the same impressive trauma, looked at from different sides.

Judith Elkan: Could you refer back to that evocative phrase you used – 'the growth of the germ of an idea' – and what you meant by that, and whether this has a connection with what I began to think about in terms of getting rid of all the outer noise and listening to something not yet known. Is this in the patient, or in the analyst, or in the relationship?

Bion: It is in the relationship. And here again, I think it is very unsatisfactory to speak of it as a transference and a countertransference; because although they are useful theories and useful phrases, again they become obstructive; because I think there is something which very rapidly comes to exist when there are two people in the room – one of them wanting to be analysed, and the other wanting to be an analyst. So the germ of an idea really belongs to both. Of course it is tempting to say that even in physiological sex this should be true of the germination of a child. If the two people were two minds coming together and not just two physiological objects – male and female having intercourse – then I think it would be quite a different matter; I think that something different is born, literally and metaphorically, from what is born when it is simply a question of two bodies coming together, a penis and a vagina.

So I think that in the analysis, where one doesn't usually have physical contact, something analogous to that takes place. Ideas *are born*, if they are given a chance. I have tried to tell people before that no matter how difficult, how awkward, how obstructive your patient happens to be, there is one thing it is as well to realise (because as one realises it, it becomes more and more useful) that the best collaborator you are ever likely to get is not your supervisor or your teacher or whoever you go to for a second opinion – but your patient. So this same person who appears to be so hostile, so negative – there is where you are going to get your real co-operation.

That is also an instance in which it is so easy to be flooded – with all this abuse and hostility and all the rest of it – so much information that one just cannot get beyond it. Conversely, if (particularly if one is tired) one gets a rush of theories to the head, then you get to a point in which, while it sounds like articulate speech, it is in fact noise – it is jargon. There again it is not really fair to expect the patient to unearth the meaning of the floods of psychoanalytic theory to which he is being subjected.

But it certainly is a collaboration between the two. And I think there is something which is very fascinating about the analytic intercourse, for that reason – that between the two of them, they do seem to give birth to an idea, and possibly, if one is used to it, one can turn it into an interpretation, or verbal construction of some sort. But I think gradually, patients themselves get better and better at it, until if the *pair* are fortunate, the analysis becomes redundant; it becomes unnecessary. So the patient and the analyst can part and go their own ways. But by that time one hopes that the patient themselves is able to at least give their own ideas a chance.

It is interesting sometimes to see this with regard to a patient who has given up painting or drawing or even music; and then finds that they can *actually* paint or draw – it is ‘coming back to them’ as they call it. I haven’t actually had the experience of analysing somebody who has become a composer, but I see no reason at all why a patient shouldn’t in fact find that they are capable of becoming a composer. The person concerned does allow his ideas to germinate in the way they would. Unfortunately it is much more difficult than it sounds. It is extraordinary how much one has an itch for the patient to say it in their own words; it may not be their means of communication anyway – they ought really to be learning to draw or paint or compose music. That is what makes the practice of analysis difficult: because you are trying to listen or observe, and you may be observing it in the wrong spot. If you do that then you don’t observe where the germ is germinating in the patient; because your mind is directed in the wrong direction.

Participant: Can you say something about how you would recognise this process of the germination of an idea, and its characteristics, as distinct from the noise you were describing – are there some general guidelines as to how you would get a sense that *that* was happening?

Bion: I don’t think I *can*. All I can say about it is to fall back on a kind of geometrical picture; taking the Euclidean idea of parallel lines that don’t meet. If you imagine the parallel lines stretching out behind you and pivoting, then there is a certain point at which the lines cease to meet; if you go on pivoting then they meet at the other end. I think that with binocular vision you get a similar thing; there is a point of focus at which the vision unites in one’s own mind. Now how that appears from one’s own conscious view of the situation is difficult to say, except that you feel, ‘I think I know what he means.’ And after a time it grows and grows and you get more and more sure that you are right in knowing what he means, and then you give your interpretation. But that is putting it into the nearest I can of verbal communication, and as I say, when one is quite conscious. Freud talks somewhere about the state of being in relaxed attention; I think that is quite right; but I think it also implies forgetting these various theories and preconceptions and hopes generally. So that there will be a chance of the point of focus declaring itself.

The trouble with this point, practically, is that you find yourself under pressure: the analyst will say whatever he’s got to say, then there is a new situation entirely; and you really don’t know what is going on because it is a new situation – things will not be the same. As likely as not the patient will say, *well* why don’t you say something? Or if not the patient then the relatives – why don’t you *do* something? So one is always under pressure prematurely and precociously to produce your idea. Poor little thing – pull it up by the roots and have a look at it. It hasn’t got a chance. So one has to act as a parent to the idea, protect it and give it a chance to grow in spite of these pressures. As the analyst you do have to be able to tolerate this state of ignorance. It is coming towards the weekend break, say, or some break or another, and you are under pressure to produce some sort of result.

I say some sort of result you know, but what one is really hankering after is spectacular cure – something you could really notice, something which could really be shown.

Meg Harris Williams: Could you say how that relates to the idea of there being a third person, or a third voice; and how can you tell when it's the third person who is as it were present; how do you distinguish between that and all the other things – whether it is a genuine third voice?

Bion: I think the sign that it is not right is the sense of anxiety, the sense of being out of step, the feeling that things aren't quite coming together. Tolstoy's description of Prince Andrei is: 'That is sooth, accept it; that is sooth, accept it'; he hears that constantly reiterated phrase. There is a certain point at which one feels, that is right. The patient, who is talking quite freely, doesn't acknowledge the interpretation, but they go on in a quite changed voice. You can feel then that something has clicked. But most of the time you have to tolerate this feeling of being out of phase, of its not being right. It is difficult to do because I think the moments of illumination are extremely rare and very few. I console myself with the thought that after one has seen a patient for say five or six years, it is possible that there may have been three moments of illumination. And three is enough. But there I am talking about proper illumination – the real thing; and that I think is very rare. Stacks and stacks of rational explanations, and rational accepting; there isn't any difficulty about that at all – there are millions of 'correct' interpretations. But the illuminating situations – the ones which really do the work – are only about three or four. If the two of them can stand it, they may last long enough for that to take place.

Mattie Harris: Would you be saying then that the real growth of the mind, or of illumination, is something that is outside transference, countertransference: it is where memory and desire are in abeyance and the new idea, the new illumination, finds room and development takes place in spite of the *chains* of those.

Bion: You see I don't think that they are always discernible in the direct relationship; but in the course of time they *are*; and there is where there is such a thing as the inheritance of acquired characteristics. I think that whatever happens to this country for example, nothing will quite undo the fact that Shakespeare existed. It is awkward because even now, I think very few people can read a Shakespeare play. You have to have expert actors to interpret the play; and if they really do it expertly, then you can say that you have really seen a *Twelfth Night*, or *Julius Caesar*, or *Macbeth*. Not a lot of people can say they have seen *King Lear*, but it presumably can be done. There again you see, one falls back on these people that we are dependent on. That is why there are some times when actors become famous. In America it is very striking that the BBC productions are spoken of very highly indeed, because, they say, the actors are so wonderful. If you see a BBC production of a play, it is a very stirring experience. But *reading* a Shakespeare play: I think one ought to be cautious about it and not get too misled by the fact that one can read and write. That's not good enough. It's like saying that because you can see black and white marks on paper, therefore you can read music – you can't. So I think people who would aspire to read a Shakespeare play would really have to go into a certain amount of training for the purpose.

Participant: Were you referring to something you have got quoted here, about the idea being born ... [*inaudible*]. Because earlier when you spoke about the third voice my mind went back to John Rickman's little dog by the side of the couch. But then of course as you went on I realised it wasn't anything of the kind.

Bion: First I would like to congratulate you on having a thought that might be quite wild. Because the advantage of something of that kind happening is that one can have what I describe as 'thoughts without a thinker'. Wild thoughts, stray thoughts; which can be as savage as wild dogs; and the fear of getting bitten by a wild, stray thought, intimidates most people. But if you can give it a home, temporarily, you may be able to domesticate it.

To carry on the point further: it is extraordinary that Shakespeare says: 'The raven himself is hoarse that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements.' There is only one word which is at all long, and that is 'battlements'. Put the lot together, and you get a phrase

which does something to you *today*. Now where that comes from I don't know. I don't know what happens to these things. I am reminded again of Milton's reference to Alpheus: 'Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past...' and so on. There he is using the simile of this river which goes underground and then bobs up again somewhere else. But where it comes up again goodness knows, and what effect it may have. Why a phrase of that sort goes through the ages. In a sense one could say well, in this country most people talk English so that is a perfectly simple explanation. I don't want to deny the perfectly obvious, simple explanation. What *we're* concerned with are the other explanations – even wild ones – which may be nearer the truth. And that would have to explain why this country could never again be the same after it had once had a Shakespeare.

Actually the point is much the same I think with regard to the individual. It is extraordinary if you are directly asked 'who is that fellow now?' and I can't remember, nor can the person you are talking to; then a bit later, you find that you know the name perfectly well, it just comes up again. I think in this way one's own ideas also track their course through the mind or the personality, which is very difficult to trace. I think these ideas which have never been conscious do seem to be floating around somehow and do break through. They have never been conscious, and they come up much later when the embryo or the foetus is actually a person, sophisticated. So it's quite difficult to keep a track even of one's own ideas. I am sure that everybody is quite familiar with the situation in which you are pursuing a certain train of thought and you get derailed or derouted: there is some upheaval and you suddenly find yourself chucked off the route you were following – you lose your train of thought it is said. There is an emergence of some obstruction which prevents you from proceeding along the same lines.

Participant: The point about an idea as something that happens in a pair, using the sexual analogy – what about the group? I am conscious of us all being here.

Bion: Yes, well, I think there are advantages in a group. I can put it like this: if you take this narrative story all in a straight line, from A to Z, a group is rather like having the whole thing spread out all together not from A to Z but the entire alphabet. In short between the lot of us, I think we ought to be able to mobilise or germinate an idea which could be very difficult for any single individual to produce. For that reason, I think there is a lot to be said for universities – institutions like this one for example – although it is bound to be pretty clumsy because we have to arrange them geographically. That is to say, meet at the Tavistock Centre. It is dependent on this geographical distribution. But the more widespread the actual members of the group can be, it seems to me, that the basics for thought are very much improved.

This is why I was so impressed when Rickman told me about the private soldier he met at York station who said that the experience of Northfield (the Northfield Experiment, when he and I were there) made him realise what a university was. I have often thought that that man, who had no chance of education after fourteen, knew what a university was. I very much doubt that I – or how many of my contemporaries at Oxford – knew what a university was when they left. There is a case where the noise is so terrific – you can get a swimming blue, a rigger blue, a third in Classics, a first in Greats – and so on through the list. And all those points are irrelevant compared with the main point, which is, having learnt what a university is. This fellow without any educational chances, learned that. And as I say I doubt that any of those during my time at Oxford learned what a university was. We knew all sorts of blessed privileges and were awfully lucky; we had plenty of physical food; plenty of mental nourishment. So much indeed that as I say probably the main point escaped us.

Participant: When he says he has learned what a university is, what exactly do you think he had learned?

Bion: I would be tempted to think he hadn't learned anything if he had learned it *exactly*. One would be suspicious about anything that one knew exactly. I think one of the difficulties about mathematics is that it gives the illusion of having learned something exactly.

Participant: That's not true mathematics, that's arithmetic.

Bion: Well, I wouldn't like to say what it is, I don't know. But I don't think it is true mathematics. I think it is one reason the Intuitionists are right in suggesting there is much more to be learnt. A man as acute as Keynes was, who even produced a quite workable idea about economics that has lasted pretty much to the present time, launched out on writing about probability. I think *we* should have a lot more to say about probability. When one is dealing with these speculative reasons and speculative imaginations, I think one's only justification is to say this not an exact science, it is not exactly anything – that would produce a certainty. But in this area there is not enough evidence to amount to a fact, and that is when one resorts to probability. It is probable that such and such will happen. But ultimately that is what we have to be content with. We can only say probably; we have to leave the certainties to other people. When they have got tired of the certainties they will want to know a bit more about the probabilities.

If you take something simple, like crimes, you can have a whole organisation which will pin down the criminal exactly to xyz, and all the court of law has to do when they have found out exactly who did it, is to produce the exact diagnosis plus cure. There are only two: not guilty – go free, or guilty and spend so many years in jail or whatever. Nowadays the courts are tending to ask psychiatrists to give evidence. Heisenberg talks about the Uncertainty Principle.

Participant: Your answer just now reminded me of an experience I have had for many years with a patient who is exceedingly *accurate*. He is very good with machines but not very good with people. He supplied me today with the following statement that his wife went to the greengrocer and asked how many pounds of potatoes would you buy for a party of twelve people, and he was so annoyed that she should ask what in his opinion could not be asked, or answered. He left the room and said to me, 'I don't understand: you said it was 50 minutes but I'm sure it was only ten.'

Bion: One has got very used to the idea that space and time can be measured and there are various instruments for doing so: anything from a watch to an affair like the 2000-inch – 200-inch – reflector at Mount Wilson (I said 2000 but it hasn't quite got to that yet). You get these radio telescopes with a very great baseline. These mechanical aids are very useful for our everyday purposes. How much they really apply to the realms that we are bordering on when we start doing analysis I don't know.

Melanie Klein said to me one day that even with the most profound analysis we can only just scratch the surface – which is about right I think. It may appear dogmatic if one tries to express oneself as precisely as possible, but in fact it isn't dogmatism one is trying to express; one is simply trying to use the language with as much exactitude as one can. Because it is easier for somebody else to understand what is meant if one is fairly constant with the use of words – or as I put it before, the individual can learn one's vocabulary.

Participant: Some people seem to find it very difficult in the kind of analytic intercourse you mentioned or even in groups, to remain within the realm of ideas; something else seems to happen between people. Whatever else is going on it is very difficult to keep within that ground; and some people seem to have peculiar difficulties in that way - to act or to cause others to act. I wonder if you had any thoughts about the nature of it.

Bion: Could you give me an example of it?

Participant: The sort of person who the analyst is most likely to react to rather than to be able to think about, and who may give many descriptions of similar events of other persons reacting to them, and they themselves taking action.

Bion: All I can say is that gradually you can get an idea of the minimum conditions which are necessary for you to be working. If those conditions are disregarded, then it becomes impossible for you to do the work. So from that point of view one can say, look, if you want me to be your analyst, then I must ask you to come at these hours fairly regularly; and if they don't then I would say I don't think the minimum conditions exist here for me to be analysing you. And in a group much the same thing applies. You have got to arrange group meetings in a certain place and at a certain time. It has nothing to do really with the realities

of the situation, excepting the realities of the individual limitations. Otherwise if you get a thing like a group conference, it is hopeless if people don't agree to keep fairly closely to certain hours of the day, or certain conventions of behaviour. To get up and use physical violence on another member of the group: that kind of thing must be understood as either within your scope – the kind of group within which you can operate – or if it isn't, then you have to say so.

Participant: I have been thinking about your university and the man who you said had no experience of a university but after Northfield he now knew what a university was. I was thinking that possibly it is when an experience is over that one knows what the experience was, because the physical certainty of being in the experience is gone and you have got the uncertainty; and the noise that you talk about is not there, and you are left in a way with an idea, with an experience, to reflect on in tranquillity as it were. I would like to hear what you think about that. It follows on that the time when the analyst is away, and there are gaps, is in a way the most important time of the analysis. It is when the actual physical contact of the analysis has finished, that is the most important time.

Bion: I think the most important thing about it is the actual germination of the idea. But I think this applies *in* the analysis.

People do seem to me to want to talk frequently as if they thought that the human character, or the actual person, behaves logically and rationally; what that really means is that the person behaves in a way which is *comprehensible* to the analyst. It is quite possible, if they obeyed the laws of ordinary social intercourse, the laws of grammar, the laws of articulate speech. But the fact that something is comprehensible to a mere human being is no justification for believing that therefore the universe in which we exist obeys the laws of human beings' grammar, or human beings' reasons or logic. We are simply ephemeral creatures living on a very insignificant spot of earth which circles according to the astronomers around a very insignificant, very ordinary star, occupying a somewhat peripheral position in a particular nebula. So the idea that the universe obeys the laws in such a way that it becomes comprehensible to us is sheer nonsense. It seems to me to be an expression of omnipotence at least or omniscience to imagine that it has to. This is why it is so striking that the astronomers have now discovered these black holes to which the ordinary laws of physics and chemistry do not apply: they say they have discovered two. Two holes – in the entire universe – to our knowledge; only two.

Mattie Harris: We should draw to a close today.

Bion: Oh.

Mattie Harris: We shall continue on Tuesday and Wednesday. Thank you very much. I am sure people will have much to think about.