Hakomi: A Little History

by Ron Kurtz

I built Hakomi through trial and error out of components that I tried and found worked. It wasn't shaped by any grand plan. Like any stubborn fool, I had to find out for myself. I read. I got ideas. I never incorporated anything without trying it out first. When I tried mindfulness, it worked. If I was nonviolent, clients felt safer. When people felt safe, it was easier for them to be mindful. Doing experiments with clients in mindfulness, evoked useful reactions. It was easy and it worked. Personally, I liked being non-violent. I was not efforting. I felt compassion and all that felt good to me. I wasn't thinking about the long run. I was using what worked and I really didn't see what was coming.

From What Works to Spirituality

When I built Hakomi on the principles of non-violence and mindfulness, it gave the therapy a strong spiritual foundation. Working out of those principles, which require respect, sensitivity, presence and compassion on the part of the therapist, leads very naturally to loving experiences and finally to spiritual experiences. The method is pointed in that direction. Early in its development, one long-time teacher of Buddhism called Hakomi "applied Buddhism". The method from the beginning had this spiritual direction built into it. It continued to influence the work as the method developed and techniques were added.

Here's how it happened. The work evolved both vertically and horizontally. Horizontal growth means more of the same, like more computers popping up everywhere. Vertical growth means something new, like the Internet linking all those computers. Horizontal growth is growth in numbers. Vertical growth is a change in form, an emerging of new capabilities. A child learning new words is growing her language ability horizontally. Learning to use words in sentences is vertical growth[1].

Adding new techniques to Hakomi was a horizontal development. Techniques are more or less all on the same level. Adding new techniques is horizontal expansion. The introduction of mindfulness was different. It was more than just a new technique. It was a vertical jump. It influenced all the techniques. It gave the method new depth and greater power. Using mindfulness, I could do things that I couldn't do before. In addition, it made nonviolence essential and that in turn made the personal development of the therapist essential.

From the Intrapsychic to the Interpersonal The Healing Relationship

I used to think of psychotherapy as intrapsychic. I used to think that the client did all the work internally. The therapist suggested things, but was basically not really involved as a person. Sadly, that was the way I thought. I thought of myself as a technician. My image was the master swordsman in the movie *Seven Samurais*. He did what he did without emotions, passion or personality. His goal was perfect precision. I thought of myself in that same way, as trying to master the techniques. This was no doubt inspired by a character flaw of mine. But I liked the image: precise, technical, effective, without feelings or personal involvement. I took a secret pride in that.

Eventually, though, I saw that the difficulties that emerged in therapy were the result of my personal limitations, my incomplete personhood. They weren't technical problems at all and it wasn't about mastery. It was my ego, my puffed up attitude and my inability to understand people, because I didn't understand certain things in myself. It was about my limited ability to relate. Again, the focus changed and the change was a vertical one. It was deeper than just technique. I came to a place where I focused for a few years on what I called the healing relationship. For a healing relationship to happen, more than just safety was needed; what was needed was the cooperation of the client's adaptive unconscious. A working relationship at the level of the unconscious was required. The real work needed a deep, person-to-person connection, and that's

a two-way street. Not only did I learn that I needed the cooperation of the unconscious, I also learned that I had to be worthy of it. I needed to earn it.

The healing relationship involves two basic things. First, the therapist has to demonstrate that he or she is trustworthy, non-judgmental and compassionate. Second, the therapist has to demonstrate that he or she is present, attentive and understands what the client is experiencing, moment to moment. If the therapist can consistently demonstrate those two things, that will earn the cooperation of the unconscious.

A client is usually responsive to a therapist who can do that. It's as if the client has been waiting for someone like that without even knowing it. If the client has painful secrets, shame, confusion or emotional pain, the therapist will need extraordinary sensitivity and real understanding and caring to become an ally of the unconscious. The adaptive unconscious has been managing that pain for a long time. It won't allow just anyone to become part of that process. The healing relationship is about gaining the trust and cooperation of the unconscious through compassion and understanding. If you can do that, therapy really happens. Building such a relationship doesn't have to take three months or three years. It can take as little as fifteen minutes. But creating it requires more than just technical skills.

The creation of a healing relationship in therapy requires that the therapist be a certain kind of person, a person who is naturally compassionate, able to be radically present, able to give full attention to another, able to see deeply into people, and to understand what is seen. All of that takes a certain state of mind. We could call that state of mind non-egocentric. The therapist needs to be free of as many egocentric habits as possible when working with a client. Realizing that and teaching that was the next big vertical jump for Hakomi. This jump was beyond just the use mindfulness and non-violence. It was about who the therapist was, the therapist's being. It was about the therapist's consciousness.

The Development of the Therapist

This next step in the vertical evolution of Hakomi involved the personal—you could say, spiritual—development of the therapist. It involved the development of personhood, an expansion of understanding and insight into levels of consciousness beyond the ordinary, rational and objective. To sustain this higher level of consciousness, one needs a base, a source of inspiration. One needs to find, recognize and cultivate a source of spiritual (non-egocentric) nourishment. With a stable connection to that source, confidence, calm, understanding and compassion come naturally.

Outside of therapy, there are many, many sources of spiritual nourishment. But in the present moment of a therapy process, the best source I find is the client. I search for and find non- egocentric nourishment in some aspect of the client. This is very close to the Buddhist practice of searching for the seed of Buddha in every person. Or as Swami Premananda says, “The purpose of life is to see God in everyone and everything.” When he was asked how this was done, he replied, “In the silence.” The idea is to drop the “noise of self” and to recognize in the other an embodiment of the human spirit. With this as a base, therapy becomes a shared and heartfelt journey.

Working this way, compassion emerges spontaneously. With the mind quiet and attentive, understanding comes easily. The two qualities most important to the healing relationship, compassion and understanding, are the natural outcome of searching for non-egocentric nourishment in the therapist-client relationship. The development of that practice is a spiritual discipline and its fruition is personhood and full human beingness. It is this that makes the method not just psychotherapy, but also a spiritual practice.

Some years ago, I read Michael Mahoney’s book, *Human Change Processes*[2]. In it he cited a few, twenty-year long studies which showed that “the ‘person’ of the therapist is at least eight times more influential than his or her theoretical orientation and/or use of specific therapeutic techniques. I took that very seriously. I realized that I couldn’t just teach people method and technique. I had to define, recognize and teach personhood. Up to a point, that involves the normal personal growth and emotional work that we all can benefit from. Beyond that however, especially when you wish to become helpful to other people, spiritual development is a natural and necessary step. So I started to focus on the state of mind of the therapist. I developed methods to explore and support the spiritual development of the therapist. My trainings and workshops now include a lot of work and around what I call, loving presence.

The principles of mindfulness and non-violence were the beginning of Hakomi and the next vertical jump was loving presence and the focus on the state of mind of the therapist. All along, Hakomi was body-centered, about awareness, experience, and being in the present. It had its roots in Gestalt and Bioenergetics.

The Place of the Body and Immediate Experience

The body is alive with meaning and memory. Besides its use of mindfulness and nonviolence, Hakomi is definitely a body psychotherapy. Several things come to mind when I think of the body in psychotherapy. The first thing is Reich's belief that the body expresses a person's psychological history[3]. To one who can read it, the body reveals a lot of psychological information. Reich said, you don't need to ask about a person's psychological history. It is alive and present in everything the person does and the style with which he does it. The history is written in how people use their bodies: how they move, where their tensions are, what postures they take, even the structure. A therapist can look for that information and use it. It's one of the things we teach in Hakomi. We teach ways to understand a person's way of being from things like posture, movement patterns, breathing patterns, gestures, facial expressions, speech patterns, tone of voice, and so on. These all yield psychological information. This understanding of the expressions of self through the body is a basic component of body psychotherapy.

A second aspect of body psychotherapy is that it is experiential. Experiences are bodily events like sensations, emotions, feelings and tensions. Focusing on experience rather than abstract ideas grounds insights and understanding in an immediate, perceptible reality. Working with present experience keeps the process real. Through experiments in mindfulness, we evoke experiences which are full of meaning for the client. Often the experiences that are evoked begin healing processes. This is not just experience for the sake of having experiences. Evoked experiences are how we discover who we are and how we came to be who we are. We may also learn how we might move on.

If I do an experiment in mindfulness and evoke an emotional experience, the person may report something like, "My heart feels like it's in my throat. My stomach is tight. I'm a little nauseous and I feel afraid." We're not discussing what might be true or what might have happened thirty years ago. We're discussing what is happening right now. And what is always happening right now is that beliefs, attitudes and emotions are influencing bodily events and felt experiences. Your mind is hooked up to your physiology. Hell, it's hooked up to everything.

The Beginning

I started doing psychotherapy in 1970. By 1979 I'd developed enough original techniques and ideas to justify calling the combination a new method. The Hakomi Institute started the same year[4]. Eight years later, in 1987, Swami Rama told me that I had a mission: to create a new method of psychotherapy. When I think about Hakomi, I think: in what way is it a new method of psychotherapy? Before I talk about that though, I would like to give you a little history.

My life as a psychotherapist began long before that meeting with Swami Rama. It started in graduate school, in the early sixties when I was a student of experimental psychology. After graduate school, I taught at San Francisco State. My first real excitement about therapy and groups came from my experiences at a workshop led by Will Schutz. It was something totally new to me and I became very excited about what he was doing. One of my friends from graduate school, Stella Resnick, was teaching nearby, at San Jose State. She had studied clinical psychology and was on her way to becoming a well-known Gestalt therapist. She encouraged me and we started co-leading sensitivity groups. I also took more workshops. That is how I got involved with psychotherapy. Most of what I learned then derived from Gestalt therapy.

For the next two years, I taught at San Francisco State and co-led groups with Stella. After that I went to Albany, New York, and started a private practice. I used mostly what I learned about Gestalt. Soon after starting private practice, I went into therapy myself, first with Ron Robbins and later with John Pierrakos, both bioenergetic therapists. I began to incorporate some Bioenergetics into my work. Before I had read Perls, now I read Reich and Lowen. I was also inspired by the work of Albert Pesso. Those experiences were the beginning of the Hakomi Method.

Two more things strongly influenced me. The first was eastern philosophy. I had been practicing yoga since 1959. In graduate school I got interested in Taoism and Buddhism. Awareness practices became part of my life. I started macrobiotics in 1972. My strong interest in Eastern philosophy and working with the body led me to Feldenkrais work. I took several workshops with Moshe and practiced the floor exercises. I also began being Rolfed at that time. All of this found its way into my thinking, my work and my writing[5].

The last strong influence on the work was my life-long interest in science. I was a math prodigy of sorts and always loved science. I minored in physics in undergraduate school and, for four years I worked as a technical writer in

electronics. My passion has been systems theory, especially the branch that studies living systems.

These threads: eastern philosophy, psychotherapeutic technique, and systems theory are the intellectual foundations of Hakomi.

From Breaking Down Defenses to Experiments in Mindfulness

The Bioenergetics techniques I was using seemed too forceful to me, at times even violent. In keeping with the eastern philosophies I'd studied, I wanted to be non-violent. So, I began to look for other ways to access and work with emotional material. Slowly I found ways to incorporate mindfulness and gentle interventions into my work. I began to use mindfulness this way: In the course of working with a person, I would get an idea about something the person believed that limited him or diminished his aliveness. I gathered a lot of experience interpreting behavior for what beliefs might be running it. Let's say the person believed he was not worth anything. At an appropriate time, I would ask about doing an experiment. If he agreed, I ask him to become mindful. (Sometimes, I taught people how to become mindful.) When he was in a mindful state, I would offer a statement that was precisely the opposite of his belief. For example, I would say something like: "You're a worthy person". I called these statements probes and I would set them up as little experiments. (An example of my science background.) I'd say, "What happens when I say….", and then I'd offer the statement. I was trying to evoke reactions. A person in mindfulness has no trouble noticing his or her reactions.

I slowly started doing more and more of these little experiments in mindfulness. The client and I would observe the reactions. Sometimes, the reaction would be intensely emotional. So here was a way of accessing deep feelings around significant issues, arrived at completely without force. Just what I'd been looking for. The statements I offered were always positive, supportive and potentially nourishing. The reaction was the result of the person's not being able to accept this potential nourishment. As soon as I understood what some core issue was, I could usually bring it into awareness in an embodied, nonviolent way, using mindfulness.

So, when I think about what's new about the Hakomi method, I think this is one of the main things: Hakomi uses the evocation of experience in mindfulness in this precise way. This is not just another technique. It is the scientific core of the method and a fundamental difference in the way psychotherapy is usually done.

I do not know of any other method that evokes experiences while a client is in this particular state of consciousness. The reactions evoked give us reliable indications about what kinds of models, about herself and her world, are organizing the client's experience and behavior. More importantly, their models become clear to clients. Also, emotions are accessed in a gentle way and expressed spontaneously without using forceful techniques. I think this is partly because the client is an active, voluntary participant. There are no tricks or manipulations here. By going into a state of mindfulness, the client is making a deliberate choice to be vulnerable. It's not always easy to do. Clients relax their defenses when they become mindful. They understand that they may feel painful emotions in the process. I think they do so because they believe it is worth it. In order to understand themselves and to heal old wounds, they are willing to bring painful material into consciousness. There is no violence here. There is only the courage to face what is.

Non-Violence and Taking Over

I eventually de-emphasized Gestalt and Bioenergetics. I now used experiments in mindfulness to evoke emotions, insights, and memories. I also started to process the reactions to those experiments in a totally different way. I started "taking them over". And that's the second thing that makes Hakomi unique. It is our way of working with what are usually called "defenses". When an emotional experience emerges or is evoked by an experiment, the habits that manage that experience arise with it. I don't like to call those spontaneous reactions "defenses". I think of them as habitual adaptations that manage the emerging emotional experience. For example, a person experiencing sadness typically manages it by covering his face, tightening the muscles of his diaphragm, chest, throat and eyes, and folding forward. These reactions prevent the full expression of the emotional experience. They contain it and modulate its intensity. The experience is kept from becoming overwhelming. Sometimes, it is completely avoided.

I do not oppose these management habits or in any way force the situation. I do exactly the opposite. My general rule is: support spontaneous management behavior. If a person tightens his shoulders or covers his face, help him do it. I might use my hands to help him keep his shoulders together or to cover his face. That's taking over. I first ask permission, of course. And I also introduce mindfulness when it's possible to do so, making the taking over an experiment itself. For instance, I might say, "what happens for you when I do this…." as I slowly place my hands over the client's.

Taking over is also done verbally. It might happen like this: I offer a client a probe such as, “Whatever you feel is okay”, and the client notices an inner voice saying, “No it’s not!”. At that point, I might suggest that we take that inner voice over. I tell the client that we’ll repeat the whole exchange a few times, with me saying, “Your feelings are okay” and an assistant saying, “No it’s not!” with the client once again in mindfulness. (I usually have the help of an assistant when I’m working with clients. That’s another change I made to the method.)

That “No! They’re not!” inner voice the client hears is another form of management behavior. It suggests that for this client there is something wrong with believing that all of her feelings are okay. Perhaps she was punished in some way for feeling sexual or too happy. So it’s not safe to have those feelings. That is possibly how that reaction serves her. So, we take the inner voice over. Inner voices that come as reactions to a probe are good candidates for new experiments which follow the spontaneous behaviors of the client and for moving the process forward.

The usual results of physically taking over a reaction are these: the person has an opportunity to relax his physical efforts at his own pace. In doing so, he begins to allow the experience and expression being managed to happen. It may also follow that images, memories and impulses arise as the management behavior relaxes.

If we take over an inner voice, listening to that dialog while in a state of mindfulness has a similar effect. Parts of the self that may not have been heard from before come into awareness. Memories of the situation that gave rise to the management behavior can also come into consciousness. Strong bodily experiences and intense feelings can be evoked when inner voices are taking over.

Important messages are silently conveyed by what the therapist is doing. If a client is managing his sadness by tightening his shoulders and therapist helps him do that, it may suggest to him that he is not alone in his sadness, that he has an ally. He has someone on his side, accepting something about him that he himself may not have accepted yet. It may be the first time he’s gotten the message that his sadness is okay to feel and that he will be supported in feeling it. With that it becomes easier to let go and feel more. It’s not that he has to let go. He’s simply been offered support for doing it and at his own pace. Letting it happen is up to him. All this makes it easier to allow the feelings he’s managing to come forth and be expressed. And it’s another way that the method is nonviolent.

When you feel that the therapist is on your side, not making you wrong for containing your “real” feelings, you may be able to go a lot deeper into your experience. You’re not struggling with it all by yourself. The act of taking over sends messages like these: “I can see that this is difficult for you.” “I’m willing to help you handle this experience.” “I’ll follow your lead.” “I won’t force anything.” “I’ll support your need to control your own process.” Taking over sends these silent messages through the therapist’s actions.

Such actions speak directly to the unconscious. When communication happens that way, we have to be extremely sensitive to the client’s reactions. We habitually pay constant attention to the client’s gestures, facial expressions and tones of voice. We must “read” these for what they tell us about the client’s experience in order to know when to continue going forward and when to back off. And what’s being helpful and what is not. When our actions are right, they are helpful and powerful. When they’re wrong, they typically evoke more management behavior.

Supporting spontaneous management behaviors helps create feelings of safety, relaxation, which help promote emotional expression, important insights and the movement of healing processes towards successful completions. These results seem paradoxical. A part of the person is trying to manage her experience, to hold it back or minimize it. The therapist offers support for that and the person’s experience deepens and moves on. Still, that’s exactly what taking over does.

These two aspects of the method—using evoked experiences in mindfulness and the nonviolent taking over the spontaneous management of the experiences evoked—are the unique developments that made Hakomi a “new method of psychotherapy”. And with that, I’m straight with the Swami.

Working with the Signal to Noise Ratio

The use of mindfulness in psychotherapy can be thought of as making the client more sensitive to her own internal world. From a signal detection point of view, sensitivity is a measure of the systems ability to detect a signal in a noisy background. The signal is anything you want to be aware of and the noise is anything that makes that harder to do. For example, if you’re trying to hear someone talking while there’s music playing nearby, the talk is signal and the music is noise. If you’re trying to listen to the music and people are talking nearby, the music is the signal and the talk is the noise. It is totally relative. From a psychotherapy point of view, the experiences that will create self-knowledge and healing are the signal and the habits that prevent that are the noise.

The two ways to increase sensitivity are: improve the capacity to detect signals or lower the noise. Increase the signal, lower the noise, or do both. Those are the options. Mindfulness lowers the noise. Becoming calm, lessening effort, suspending activities and following the flow of present experience without judgment quiets the mind and lowers the noise. The signal, self-knowledge, is much enhanced by this lowering of the noise. The higher signal to noise ratio significantly increases awareness of the habitual perceptions, sensations, feelings, thoughts and impulses that are the automatic expressions of who we are.

Eastern philosophy teaches that when the mind becomes totally silent, a direct spiritual experience is possible. Like the stars which appear when the sun goes down, spirit is really always present. It is hidden by the noise we make. The biggest noise is the clamoring of an ego-absorbed mind. All the adaptations and impulses designed to protect and enhance the sense of self, necessary and normal as they are, make a blaring noise that strangles the effort to obtain freedom from unnecessary suffering.

In Hakomi, the information we're seeking (signals) is mostly of the nonverbal kind. The observations we make are of the concrete physical facts of the moment. Conversation, explanations, history, analysis and speculation—what the great theoretical biologist Francisco Varella called having an abstract attitude—are mostly noise. In a similar way, management behavior is also noise for the client. It minimizes the intensity of experiences which are important signals. As therapists, the management behaviors of our clients are signals. Again, signal and noise are relative.

Mindfulness, which involves the relaxation of management, the reduction of effort and a general quieting of the mind, is the main way the clients lower their own noise. Which also mean it increases sensitivity. When clients become mindful they deliberately make themselves vulnerable. That vulnerability gives the client access to feelings and memories that are not usually accessible. That's how mindfulness serves in this form of psychotherapy.

If you are going to use mindfulness in therapy, non-violence is absolutely essential. It doesn't work any other way. Because our clients are vulnerable, whether they're in mindfulness or not, they need to feel safe. That is most likely to happen if the therapist has an active deep respect and compassion for all beings. When those feelings are real and natural for the therapist, the client truly is safe. It also helps if clients feel cared for and understood. This is most likely to happen if loving presence is our state of being and the foundation of

our behavior. So, those are the first and most important tasks of any Hakomi therapist. With that in place, the work becomes both non- violent and intimate.

When noise is lowered, signals being masked will emerge. They appear as figures out of a fog. When the client is in mindfulness and experiences are evoked, there is no confusion about the source. The client knows that the reactions are her own, based on what she has done with the history of her experiences. The therapist is not asking her to believe anything, not offering interpretations, not trying to convince. They're not having a discussion about something. They are doing little experiments in mindfulness together and they're discovering the results.

The process goes like this: the client becomes vulnerable. An experiment is done and reactions occur. Using this method, we avoid interpreting or explaining a person to herself. She discovers who she is and how she's organized through her own work and at her own pace. And it happens within a safe setting and with a trusted guide.

So, two of the main advantages of this method are that it supports personal responsibility by showing clearly how experiences are organized by inner models and beliefs, and it avoids confusion by studying and processing evoked experiences in the here and now, letting the person discover who she is rather than theorizing about it.

One connection we have to Taoism, Feldenkrais work, and the Gestalt notion of figure and ground is this: awareness itself lowers the noise. When you turn your awareness toward something, you automatically lower the noise. When you start to pay attention to something, that is when you make it the signal (or the figure), other things automatically fade out. The noise lowers. If you draw attention to movements in slow motion, as Feldenkrais does, you will start to notice things that you did not notice before. That kind of attention allows time for signals to develop. The more time you take, the more information you get. In mindfulness, attention is concentrated, the pace slower. One's usual concerns are set aside. The focus is present experience, just as it is in Taoism, Feldenkrais, Gestalt and other consciousness disciplines.

From Experience to Insight

So, one of the ways Hakomi is body-centered is that it uses experience as the doorway to insight. It uses the bodily experience to evoke meaning. If a client is in mindfulness and I say, "Dogs are friendly" and he reacts with fear and disbelief, there's no question about what model he's holding. As soon as he's in

touch with it, with his beliefs and emotions, clear memories are likely to follow. And when memories are present, explanations aren't needed. They are the explanations. Even more important, when beliefs are conscious, doubt becomes possible. Change becomes possible. The thing that works is getting the connection between memories and present experience.

Here is how Hakomi works: the practice of loving presence helps the client feel safe and understood. That makes mindfulness possible. The therapist then finds ways (little experiments) to evoke experiences with the client in a mindful state. The meanings of the evoked bodily experiences are understood as direct expressions of core beliefs (models of self and the world that organize all experiences). When these core beliefs are made conscious and understood, change becomes possible. Where core beliefs are limiting, destructive, unbalanced or painful, they can be challenged. New beliefs can be tried and new experiences evoked, experiences that didn't happen, missing experiences. Safety, peace, freedom, aliveness are a few.

If there is conflict about the expression of certain emotions, we support the actions that manage that expression if we have permission to do that. This usually results in a deeper, more complete and more satisfying release and, as is often the case when emotional expression goes beyond habitual boundaries, spontaneous insight and integration follow. The missing experience emerges and the process evolves into savoring and integrating.

Of course it's not all that linear. We often loop back to earlier steps, spending time building the relationship, trying new experiments, evoking new experiences and all that. But the general drift of each session and the therapy process as a whole tends to move in the direction I have described. As the process unfolds, there are ways to support each new development. Forcing things is never a good idea. Trying to overcome resistance usually just creates more resistance. Force evokes counterforce. I back off when I see that a client doesn't want to go any faster or pursue a particular direction. I try to understand why and maybe explore with the client what he or she needs around that. I'm not in any rush and have no need to push. But neither am I passive.

We work with people's organizing models of who they are and what kind of world they're in. We get to those models through the methods I've already talked about. We want to help people change the models that are causing unnecessary suffering. These models are not philosophical. They're not abstract. For the person holding a model, it is not theory at all. For that person, it is what's real. The deepest models are never questioned. They may not be in

consciousness at all. Nonetheless, they are in use. They are adaptations, old habits and they organize all experiences, all the time[6].

It is as if you had been wearing colored glasses all your life. If they are orange colored glasses, you have never really seen the color blue. You don't know what blue is, or that it even exists. All blue looks black to you. And if you don't know you are wearing orange glasses, you never will question the black you see. The deepest models you are using determine your perceptions and behaviors. Those models are your truth. They determine what you think, what you do and what you feel.

One very significant thing about Hakomi is that it brings these core models into consciousness. It gets to the core beliefs and the meanings that run your life. This gives you a chance to examine and to change them. Using mindfulness, people learn, through their immediate reactions, exactly how they habitually organize themselves and their world.

Transformation: Organizing Missing Experiences

When we help bring a limiting core belief into consciousness, we then want to provide an experience that challenges it. For example, a person may not be aware of the depth of his core belief until something happens to illuminate it. Some core beliefs are extreme and rigidly maintained, even as they are kept from consciousness. Let's say it is distrust and the person believes at a core level that no one can be trusted. A devastating experience of betrayal can make this belief seem to be a good one to hold, since it protects against further betrayal. A person with this core belief will be cautious with everyone and won't really trust anyone. This person may withdraw from contact and prefer to be alone because it feels safer. When we work with an issue like this, it may become clear to the client that she never felt safe with anyone. Fear and the painful memories arise. Together, client and therapist can then work through the pain of all this and in the end, create the possibility of feeling safe.

A core of distrust is extremely limiting. It is over-generalized and false. The truth is that some people are trustworthy and some people aren't. Some people will hurt you and some people won't. To change this core belief and to feel trust for at least some people, the client has to be able to know what trust feels like. The biggest help with that will be a conscious experience of trusting that ends well. And that's what we try to create. When it happens, even if just once, the client's model of the world is changed forever. If you're in a dark valley and have never

been there before, one flash of lightning that illuminates the mountains around you will be enough to tell you they are there. And in your mind, they will be there forever after. Just one experience of what you never knew was possible and you've learned it is possible. Possible for you. In fact, that first experience of what has long been missing feels incredibly good. That good feeling is an essential part of the healing process.

What's useful then is to spend time with the experience, savoring it. If you don't interfere, insight and integration will happen quite naturally. An important piece of her life will begin to make sense to the client. It all happens spontaneously. There's no need to lead this process. We only have to be present and witness it. We want to give the client time to fully absorb the missing experience, to memorize it, to fully savor it.

The client may speak about her insights or she may not. It is during these moments, that the client changes. Her old model is becoming incomplete. It is slowly being revised as memories and insights arise. Any core model has enormous influence on all levels, from physiology to relationship. Changing it takes time. In a typical session, it might take thirty or forty minutes to get to the missing experience and another twenty to savor it. In order to really stabilize the new model, the person has to use it in all kinds of applicable situations. Changes like this are integrated, one decision at a time.

I have an example. I once did a therapy workshop for a group of Rolfers. One woman, in her process, touched terror. It was set off by the statement, "You're perfectly welcome here." Her terror and fear was based on her model that she was not wanted. At the deepest level, she felt that her life was in danger. They didn't want her to be alive. These were the messages she took in as a child and it created this terrifying core belief. She screamed with the terror, while several of us held her very tightly, taking over the physical contractions that helped her manage the experience.

She reported feeling good screaming; it was a relief to let it out. After a while, the terror subsided and her body relaxed. One after another, for fifteen minutes or so, the people there who were all her friends, one at a time would say quietly, "You're perfectly welcome here." She kept taking it in. Finally, she became deeply relaxed and began to feel ecstasy. Held, loved and welcomed by her friends, for the first time in her life she felt safe.

I saw her two weeks later. She told me that, a few days after that session, she was walking down a street on her way to a friend's house and she started to feel uncomfortable. She was thinking, "I didn't call them. They don't know I'm coming over. They're not going to be happy about me just showing up." In the

middle of that internal dialogue, she suddenly heard a voice saying, “You’re perfectly welcome here.” She lit up. In an easy, light-hearted way, she continued on to her friend’s house.

Every time a client makes a choice like that she chooses an option from the new model rather than the old one. And every time those choices are confirmed, she changes. She grows step by conscious step into this new model. Eventually, the new model becomes habit and sinks back into the unconscious. That’s how people change. They have a new model. They use it, and when it works, it becomes habit.

Empowerment for the Journey

Another important thing about Hakomi is that it has within it the elements of a spiritual practice. If you’re involved in Hakomi, as a client or a student, you get a lot of experience doing self-study from a compassionate, mindful place. That’s a way of changing in a very basic way. That’s spiritual practice.

As you begin to distance yourself from your automatic behaviors and egocentric models about who you are, as you calm down and relax, you begin to find another part of yourself, a different level of yourself. As you distance yourself from egocentric habits, you become able to make spiritual choices, choices about things like ownership and competition. You become more at home in yourself and in the world; more friendly, less stressed out; all this just from practicing mindfulness and studying yourself. As missing experiences become part of you, there’s not so much inner noise from conflicted sub-selves. All therapy helps people move on in their lives, helps them towards fuller maturity and capacity. This method is particularly good for moving people towards and along their spiritual paths. Hakomi is pointed in that direction.

The primatologist John Napier once asked in a rhetorical way, “When did man emerge from the primates?” He answered this way. “The question is really irrelevant. He was there from the beginning.” Most of what man is was there in the primates all along. The potential for man was there; only a small change, only another small step was needed. One could ask a parallel question about Hakomi. When does Hakomi become spiritual practice? My answer: it was there all along. It was there in the use of mindfulness and in the principle of non-violence. It was there in the focus on here and now experience and the work of self-study. There in the quest for a loving, spacious and present state of mind. There for both client and therapist. It was there from the beginning.

1. The concepts of vertical and horizontal growth are from Ken Wilber's recent book Sex, Ecology, Spirituality.
2. Mahoney, M. J. (1991). Human change processes: The scientific foundations of psychotherapy. New York: Basic Books.
3. See Wilhelm Reich's Character Analysis.
4. I headed the Institute for it's first ten years, resigned in 1991, and am no longer involved in it.
5. I have published three books in English and three others in Japanese. The first book was The Body Reveals, written with Hector Prestera, M.D., published in 1976. The second book described the Hakomi Method and was entitled Body-Centered Psychotherapy and was published in 1991.
6. For more about this, see Jeff Hawkins book, On Intelligence.