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## *Teaching Bion: Modes and Approaches*

### Chapter 5 **Building a 'Bion Container'**

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*Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli*  
(the fate of the book depends on the grasp of the reader)  
-Terentianus Maurus

#### **Introduction**

My passion for the work of Bion has grown steadily over the last 30 years. My earliest meaningful encounter came in studying *Experiences in Groups* while training as a psychologist and conducting group therapy in a hospital setting. In conjunction with this, a three-day Tavistock Group immersed me in a deep personal experience of Bion's discovery of the basic assumption groups. In the early 1980's, the San Francisco psychoanalytic landscape was grounded in the American ego psychology tradition, and the contributions of the British schools were still on the horizon. However, by the time I entered institute training in 1992, a rapidly expanding interest in Klein, Winnicott, and Bion had occurred, and Albert Mason, James Gooch, and James Grotstein were members of our visiting faculty. Mason had been encouraged by Bion to move from England to Los Angeles in the 1970's, and Grotstein and Gooch had been profoundly influenced by their analyses with Bion. Personal contact with these teachers who had known Bion encouraged me to sail further into his mysterious waters, to begin to find my bearings,

and to plunge into the profound depths of his psychoanalytic vision. After certification as an analyst in 1998, my interest deepened in dialogue with several respected colleagues, culminating in the formation of a Bion Study Group led by Dr. Grotstein. Immersing ourselves in the relaxed setting of my home for a full Saturday, Dr. Grotstein guided us in close readings of Bion's texts that we then integrated with case material. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Grotstein for his transmission of Bion. His knowledge is encyclopedic, his comprehension profound, his writing mind-expanding (e.g., 2000, 2007, 2009a, 2009b), and his ability to convey Bion with wisdom, humility, and humor has been of lasting inspiration to me in my own teaching.

During the last 20 years I have taught Bion in graduate schools, private study groups, outpatient clinics, and inpatient programs. At a more advanced level, I have taught Bion seminars for 4 years at the Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California, and I am presently engaged in a three-year tenure as the Bion instructor for the San Francisco Center for Psychoanalysis. I have used and transmitted Bion in writing (e.g., 2001) and as part of numerous scientific meetings of local institutes and organization. In the last few years, my most rewarding endeavor has been finding my own 'Bion voice' in the creation of larger group daylong workshop presentations (2010a, 2013a, b, c, d).

### **Texts and Core Concepts**

Seminars in our part of the world are usually 6-8 weeks long, a brief period that makes it important to focus on the most essential concepts proffered by Bion. I have gradually arrived at a sense of which concepts tend to be 'user-friendly' (e.g., the theory of thinking, attacks on linking, alpha function, container-contained), which are more

intermediate in difficulty (e.g., O, dream-work alpha, contact barrier, reversible perspective), and which are best approached with a more advanced group (e.g., the Grid, transformations in hallucinosis, the mystic and the group, beta screen). In any case, I proceed from the ground up to see where the group's fulcrum point of learning pivots. My primary texts are three papers: *Differentiation of the Psychotic from the Non-Psychotic Personalities* (1957), *Attacks on Linking* (1957), and *A Theory of Thinking* (1962a), and three books: *Learning from Experience* (1962b), *Elements of Psychoanalysis* (1963), and *Attention and Interpretation* (1970). I do inform students of the full scope of Bion's writing and include selections from the international seminars for examples of Bion's thought-provoking comments to those who came to learn from him. I also provide a bibliography of secondary texts (e.g., Grinberg et al, 1971, Bleandonu, 1994; Symington & Symington, 1996; Grotstein, 2007). I use the same core readings regardless of the group's level, since the 'O' of Bion, when encountered repeatedly, inevitably evokes further evolution of alpha function and learning from experience in all of us as we allow his writing to work on us.

### **Building a 'Bion Container'**

Since students are often baffled, mystified, and disturbed by Bion's style of exposition, I consider it my first task to begin developing a 'Bion learning container' to manage the emotional and intellectual turbulence that naturally arises within the group. I start by presenting a biographical and historical background within which to contextualize Bion's project and to differentiate it from that of Freud and Klein. Most importantly, I try to help students understand, that unlike Freud, Klein, and other theorists

who are at pains to clarify exactly what they mean, Bion has quite a different approach. Consistent with his theoretical sensibility, Bion rejected the premature certainties of analytic ‘psychobabble’ observing that these foreclosed curiosity and deeper contact with the O of the clinical process. Instead, he attempted a ‘Language of Achievement’, a language that avoids the pitfalls of certainty. This language is more indexical than iconic, that is, like poetry, it points towards and evokes more expansive thought rather than attempting to nail things down as we are accustomed to with other theorists. With this in mind, I encourage an immersion process wherein they read without the need for too much certainty and to stay engaged even if they feel they do not ‘understand’ (Ogden, 2004). Very much in line with Bion’s idea of bi-directional oscillation between PS $\leftrightarrow$ D, and with the evolution of alpha function, one has to allow what already seems known to be disassembled before it can re-combine into a new entity.

### **Points of Emphasis**

As has been noted, Bion’s writing is rich, evocative, and unsaturated and there are many ‘Bions’ that could be emphasized in teaching (De Bianchedi, 2005). In discussion with other Bion instructors, it becomes clear that, in addition to teaching the core concepts and canon, each of us approaching the O of Bion will develop subjectified personal points of emphasis. What follows are a few of my own:

#### **1. Bion is Unique as a Theorist**

Bion was unique among analytic theorists because he concerned himself not only with the evolution of mental growth in the analysand, but also with issues of mental

growth that apply to psychoanalysts as we attempt to grasp the O of the clinical process and generate models of what is happening. Thus, Bion offers not only a psychoanalytic theory of the mind, but also a theory of psychoanalysts trying to arrive at such theories.

## **2. Bion and Critical Pluralism**

Creatively extending Klein's concepts (e.g., projective identification and PS $\leftrightarrow$ D), Bion's work tends to be associated with the Kleinian School. However, the implications of the conceptual scaffolding he developed go well beyond Klein, and the level of epistemological certainty in Klein's work is foreign to Bion's sensibility. Where Freud and Klein were concerned with drives, anxieties, defenses, and unconscious phantasy that need to be 'known', Bion focus was on the process of 'knowing' itself. Mental growth is conceived of as a process of continual transformation of O at ever-evolving levels of abstraction while simultaneously maintaining deep emotional contact. At the same time there exists the rather tragic human reality, that we are fated to search for truth with inadequate equipment (Meltzer, 1978). Bion emphasized that psychoanalytic theories are better recognized as useful models rather than as scientific truths. I emphasize to students that the implications of this viewpoint argue against becoming an orthodox follower of any analytic tradition, and that anyone taking Bion's work seriously would want to consider all psychoanalytic theories as potentially useful models and favor selective integration over orthodoxy. Selective integration of theory and technique requires us to immerse ourselves in different approaches over time, putting them to use in the crucible of clinical work, and engaging in the conceptual work of bringing them together (where possible) in a continually evolving 'personal' model which is essentially a

subjectification of the O of clinical work through alpha function. In any case, I make the point that Bion's work supports the necessity for us to sustain a sense of critical pluralism, the basic assumption of which is that our understanding of the human psyche is inevitable limited, that no theory can capture it all, and the existence of competing theoretical orientations is of great value (Strenger 1997, p.127).

### **3. Psychoanalysis as a Probe**

In line with the comments above, psychoanalysis itself must always be in evolution, and Bion even suggests that we think of it as a process of inquiry rather than a body of knowledge about which we are certain: "It would be a valid observation to say that psycho-analysis cannot 'contain' the mental domain because it is not a 'container' but a 'probe'" (1970, p. 73). To quote Meltzer, Bion's vision "enable psychoanalysis to grow from a narrow theory of the neuroses and perversions, marred by overweening ambitions to explain everything, to a scientific method that may prove adequate to investigate and describe everything and explain nothing" (1978, p. 118).

This point of view is enlivening for therapists burdened by the pressure to choose the 'correct' theory, and it also potentiates creativity in the cross-cultural transmission and reception of psychoanalysis. It opens the door to possibility of new discovery by emphasizing that psychoanalysis is first and foremost a setting and process, and secondarily a set of theoretical conclusions, thereby representing Bion's epistemological perspective and encouraging the likelihood of 'learning from experience'. Chinese therapists, seeking to use the psychoanalytic approach in a very different cultural milieu,

were very receptive to Bion's culturally unsaturated model when I presented his ideas in Beijing and Shanghai (Rather, 2010b, 2010c).

#### **4. The Existential Dimension of Bion**

As Winnicott (1954) noted, Freud discovered and developed a *setting* that lends itself to uses other than those that Freud himself could have envisioned. Freud had developed his version of psychoanalysis primarily for analysands who entered the Oedipus phase as whole persons; Klein had made use of the analytic situation to treat analysands who were still in the process of bringing love and hate together and thereby becoming whole persons; Winnicott discovered a way of using the setting with patients who needed to establish a fundamental self before progressing toward the Kleinian and Freudian developmental tasks. I interpret Bion as further envisioning the setting and process as an existential domain in which the patient becomes increasingly able to 'suffer' the 'ultimate concerns' of reality 'O', including meaninglessness, loneliness, vulnerability, and death, themes normally attended to by existential analysts (e.g., Yalom, 1980). These uses of setting and process are not exclusive to different types of analysands, but rather correspond to different strata of psychological development relevant to every analysand at different moments and phases in treatment.

#### **Teaching Bion as a Transformative Experience**

The culmination of my own 'Bion voice' in evolution has been in creating a series of day-long workshops including *Playing with Bion: Dreaming Life into Theory and Practice; Understanding Psychotic States in Ourselves and Our Patients: A View From*

*Bion*; and *Playing it by Ear: Analytic Listening as a Creative Process*. These 6-hour workshops are typically attended by 25 to 50 therapists at different levels of experience, all seeking additional vertices from which to deepen their work. In each workshop, I present my own ‘take’ on the fundamentals of Bion, and, in conjunction with clinical material presented by myself and group members, use these concepts not only to better apprehend the psychic reality of our patients, but also to notice our own issues in attempting to use the “psychoanalytic function of the personality” (e.g., Bion, 1962a, Rather, 2001). For example, in a recent workshop, *All the World’s a Stage: Dream Work Alpha and the Waking Dream*, I used Bion’s revolutionary re-conception of dreaming to examine the way people apprehend O through conscious and unconscious alpha function which can create imprisoning narrative dramas which are self-perpetuating and preclude further learning from experience. The idea that O is always unknowable is not an abstract idea, but a rather tremendously practical tool in helping us help our patients in apprehend the psychic reality they have created in response to O, and within which they are fettered.

While much preparation is required for these longer seminars, they always potentiate a spacious and poetic reverie in me during which I feel myself evolving new ways of looking at Bion’s work. Much like a kaleidoscope that has finite number of pieces but an infinite number of conjunctions, Bion’s unsaturated concepts allow for, and require, an on-going subjectification by each teacher. There is good reason why my co-authors have used the word ‘transmitting’ with regard to teaching Bion. When I am discussing theorists such as Freud, Abraham, Ferenczi, Klein and Winnicott, I have a sense of teaching ‘content’, teaching what I ‘know about’. When I am ‘transmitting’ Bion, I often have a



sense of ‘becoming’ what Bion is pointing toward, and bringing ‘students’ to a place of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ rather than ‘knowing about’. I will end with a comment that, though focused on analytic treatment, is equally relevant to the experience of teaching Bion.

If, as I believe, the mind grows in proportion to the extent to which one inquires into it, then the relative proportions of what is known and what is unknown will be reversed the more the mind has evolved. Thus, at the end of a psychoanalytic treatment, we shall know proportionately less of this extended mind than we knew of it at the beginning. (de Bianchedi, 1991, p. 13)

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