Martin Buber: I–Thou and I–It relating

In the beginning is relation.  

(Buber, 1958:18)

Martin Buber (1878–1965) was an existentialist, philosopher and a prolific writer. His work on the philosophical articulation of the dialogic principle has been integrated into, and expanded, in gestalt therapy and in particular his poetic thesis on human existence I and Thou (1958). One of the founders of gestalt therapy, Laura Perls, reported that a personal meeting with Buber profoundly influenced her. Gestalt is indebted to Buber’s work for its values of presence, confirmation, authenticity, dialogue and inclusion.

I–Thou and I–It represent the two polar relational stances as the two primary attitudes that humans hold towards one another. It is between these poles that the natural flow of connection and separation takes place; both are essential in the give and take of human relating. This flow is essentially what we refer to in gestalt when we talk of dialogue. Buber says that all living is meeting, and these relational stances represent the attitude of that meeting. The hyphen between these two terms holds specific significance for it represents our eternal connectedness to the other and our world. According to Buber there is no ‘I’ that stands alone.

The necessity and inevitability of I–It relating has not always been fully recognized in the gestalt literature. I–It relating is an essential pole in the process of dialogue, being required for 'such functions as judgement, will, orientation and reflection' (Farber, 1966, quoted in Hyener and Jacobs, 1985: 52) and involves self-consciousness and the awareness of separation (Friedman, 1976, ibid). In I–It relating we are objectifying, goal oriented, concerned with doing rather than being. The task becomes figural whilst the other recedes into the ground. Such objectifying is a necessary part of relating. ‘The ontological character of existence requires both distance and relation.’ (Buber, 1965a: 61–62).
Whilst I–It relating may be a necessary part of our existence, it is only a part. We need separation and connection. However, we are living in times where an illusion of contact can masquerade in a multitude of forms of virtual contact. Isolation, detachment and alienation can become ‘comfortable’ options whilst intimacy and closeness can become increasingly unfamiliar alternatives. As we create more and more sophisticated ways of keeping our distance we ‘... split not only between persons, not only in our relationship with nature, but also within our own psyches.’ (Hycner, 1993: 5, original italics).

Without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives with only that is not human.

(Buber, 1958: 85)

There has probably never been a greater need to redress the relational imbalance through building the ground to facilitate I–Thou dialogue than there is today. So let me clarify what the I–Thou relationship is.

Whilst the I–It stance is concerned with doing and achieving in the relationship, the I–Thou is a state of being in relationship. The I–Thou relation trusts the between and is therefore willing to surrender to that between and in that surrender the other’s humanness is affirmed. An I–Thou meeting can only take place when both parties are willing to surrender to the between, it cannot be forced or coaxed. As Buber states, it comes through grace. Many clients that walk through our doors have been starved of such relating, they are not in a position to surrender to the between of a relationship to gain the nourishment they yearn. It is through the therapist’s willingness to hold an I–Thou attitude during I–It relating, to reach out and be available to the client without the expectation of being met that creates the ground for profound relational healing.

One of the ironies in this paradoxical profession is that if we aim for I–Thou relating or I–Thou moments, we immediately objectify the I–Thou, resulting in I–It relating. It is also the destiny of every I–Thou encounter to recede into our past, become a memory, perhaps to be treasured, perhaps vaguely remembered or to have its passing grieved over, but related to as a thing nevertheless, an event – an It.