EARLY ONE MORNING, a few months after starting kindergarten, my daughter, Jenna, grabbed some crayons and white paper and snuggled up next to me on our living-room couch.

HELPING CLIENTS “What should I draw, Daddy?” she asked.  
EXPERIENCE THEIR How about a picture of you playing soccer?” I suggested, knowing how excited she INNER FREEDOM was to be starting her first-ever season. The idea appealed to her, so she got to work while I continued typing on my laptop. Before long, she’d rendered a green field, a red and yellow goal, and a uniformed girl looking down at a black ball. “I don’t know what else to draw,” she said.  ■ “What’s the weather like out there on the soccer field?” ■ “The sun’s shining and there are some clouds. Good idea, Daddy!” ■ “Want to know a cool way to draw clouds?” I asked. ■ “How?” ■ “Color the sky everywhere the clouds aren’t.”
Long pause. Her forehead furrowed. Then, suddenly, her eyes sparked with delight, registering a predawn dawning. “Yes!” Two clouds appeared in an expanse of blue. An epiphany! She’d grasped the presence of absence: not-being giving rise to being. Her first Taoist revelation, her first taste of what Zen Buddhists call nondualistic thinking—recognizing the necessary connections, rather than the obvious divisions, between seeming opposites.

Centuries ago, Taoist philosophers—Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and others—wrote about the interplay of opposites in the process of change. They viewed polarities as mutually defining expressions of the same whole, recognizing, along with the Buddhists, that those who divide life into discrete, competitive dichotomies—self vs. other, pleasure vs. pain, good vs. bad, life vs. death—end up separated from their own experience and desperate to cast out problems in the pursuit of peace and pleasure.

Jenna discovered that clouds could appear in her picture as a direct result of her not drawing them, that clouds and sky together define a whole that includes them both. I bring this holistic, nondualistic appreciation to my hypnosis and brief-therapy practice, to help clients shift their relationship to problems they typically experience as invading their lives.

Incorporating some basic Taoist and Zen assumptions and practices in our work can dramatically alter how we engage with clients and what we do to make a difference. We can’t deliver Enlightenment, but we can help clients experience greater freedom in how they experience and relate to their problem.

STEPHANIE, A POLITICAL science professor at a nearby university, came to see me with the hope that I could help her get her anxiety under control. A scholar with an outstanding reputation, she’d begun feeling panicky when faced with speaking engagements, finding herself beset with a dry mouth, a pounding heart, and an urgent need to pee. She’d recently turned down an all-expenses-paid trip to lecture at a meeting in New Zealand, and, much to her dismay and irritation, she’d even found herself feeling shaky while teaching her undergrad and graduate classes. She’d begun to meditate more regularly and had even had two hypnosis sessions with a therapist, all to no avail. The therapist had taught her to cue feelings of deep relaxation by touching her right thumb and index finger, but the strategy failed to combat the panic that gripped her when she went back in the classroom.

Stephanie, who’d been meditating on and off for years, talked about the effort she had to expend to keep her analytic mind in check. I could certainly relate. How many times had I tied myself in knots while trying to stop thinking? If you’ve done any meditation yourself, you’ve probably learned the hard way that thinking about not thinking is itself a thought, and that any effort you make to empty your mind only fills it up. In a similar way, whenever Stephanie got anxious, she’d try to convince herself that the sensations were inappropriate, or she’d try to cue relaxation. Instead of feeling better, she’d end up in that same paradoxical place she experienced when meditating; just as thinking about not thinking is itself a thought, feeling anxious about not feeling calm is itself an anxiety. In both activities—meditating and lecturing—Stephanie’s conscious mind was working at cross-purposes with her body, dividing her in two.

The previous therapist’s efforts to counteract Stephanie’s anxiety with relaxation only underscored the split. It was a perfect example of “dualistic thinking”—separating experience into discrete opposites, as if anxiety could be cast out in favor of calm; self set apart from other; pleasure isolated from pain;

“We can offer the helping clients find to themselves good experienced without reference to bad; mind somehow surgically removed from body. Of course, in ordinary life, our habits of perception and language usually conspire to ensure that the “observer” part of us—the part that identifies itself as “I”—feels distinct from, yet somehow responsible for, our experience. This delusion works reasonably well until a symptom takes over, refusing the efforts of the “Observing-I” to constrain or direct it, thereby causing great distress.

Given that Stephanie made her living talking in front of people, it made sense that she was anxious to get her ever-increasing anxiety in check. But despite how it felt to her, her panic wasn’t some foreign substance spreading through her body and invading her life. It was, rather, a mind-body battle, a spiraling negative interaction between conscious will and emotional feeling.

This is the opposite of what happens when meditation goes well. In basic breath meditation, for example, you just follow the breath, without trying to
regulate it, allowing the mind and body
to develop a relaxed but alert focus.
With consistent practice, you experi-
ence a shift in self-awareness, where
your Observing-I doesn’t distinguish
itself as separate from your body and
your thoughts/emotions/sensations. In
the simple practice of sitting and silent-
ly staying with your breath, your mind
becomes embodied, and your body
becomes mindful.

Despite their obvious differences, I’m
intrigued by the similarities between
meditation and hypnosis. Participants
in both activities are able to bridge the
divisions between mind and body,
between conscious and unconscious,

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and their problems.”

between will and action. They enter the
flow of their experience and encounter
without duality, whatever their minds
perceive, no longer distinguishing a
concrete "I" separate from whatever
they’re noticing. The usual boundaries
of conscious awareness become diffuse,
rendering irrelevant (at least temporar-
ily) the divisions between “me” and
“you,” “inside” and “outside,” “rational
and “emotional,” or “me” and "my
experience.”

In their different ways, both medita-
tion and hypnosis can lead to freedom
from dualistic thinking. The enlighten-
ment of Zen practitioners involves their
breathing such freedom into every-
thing they do. Through therapy and
hypnosis, clients discover a more
focused, less encompassing version of
the same thing: liberation in relation to
their problem. But for this to happen,
the therapist must avoid trying to coun-
teract whatever the clients are strug-
gling against.

I STARTED MY WORK with Stephanie
by disappointing her. "Unlike your
previous therapist," I said, "I won’t
attempt to use hypnosis to get rid of
your anxiety.

I’d rather thought that was the rea-
son I was coming here," she replied.
"Otherwise, what’s the point?"
"You’re a very sensitive person."
"Yes."
"So it doesn’t surprise me," I went on,
"that you’ve failed to block out what
you’re feeling in these anxiety attacks.
You’re an expert at noticing stuff, so
the alternative to blocking out, which
hasn’t worked, is tuning in. By noticing
and acknowledging whatever your body
is feeling, you give it an opportunity to
change in ways you don’t expect and
can’t predict."

I began by suggesting that Stephanie
play host to whatever sensation or
image or thought came into her aware-
ness. A meditation-informed approach
welcomes and incorporates distractions
emanating from both inside and out-
side the body, which has the effect of
dissolving the boundaries that isolate
the Observing-I from internal and
external experience.

When clients invite in something
they’ve been trying to shun, the shift in
orientation can be enough to effect sig-
ificant change. But the boundary
between the Observing-I and the symp-
tom can be even further diffused by sug-
gest that they match whatever out-of-
their-control experience they’re having
with an intentional imitation of it.

“Hear the rhythmic beeping of that
truck backing up out there on the
street?” I asked Stephanie. “If you were
to imagine an identical sound, so that
it mirrored the one out there in tone,
volume, pitch, and timing, then you
could hear the beeping in stereo. . . .
You can do the same thing with what-
ever’s going on in your head and in
your body. Got a persistent thought
that won’t stop? Feel a tightness in
your chest? You can double those up,
too. Stereo, sounds, stereo thoughts,
sterro sensations: take whatever is hap-
pening to you, and match it with a cor-
responding version that you purpose-
fully produce.”

While much of my approach to hy-
pronics has been inspired by Taoists and
Zen practitioners, this particular sug-
gestion came to me a few years ago
from a different wisdom source: my
then 7-year-old son, Eric. One day, com-
plaining of a bad case of the hicups, he
approached me in the kitchen and
begged me to scare them away.

“I couldn’t do that, Sweetheart,” I
demurred. “I don’t want to frighten
you.”

“Come on, Dad, they’re driving me
crazy, and nothing else has worked.”

“I don’t know, I . . . . AAAAAA-
HRRGGHHHH!!!!!!!” I sud-
ddenly yelled, lunging toward him, arms
outstretched, face as red and twisted
as I could make it.

I succeeded in ridding Eric of his hic-
cups but also in completely unnerving
him, chasing the blood out of his face
and bringing tears to his eyes. As I held
him, I thought about gentler solutions.

A month later, Eric’s hicups had
once again gotten the better of him.

“Let’s try something other than
trying to scare them away,” I said.
“Want to?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“So here’s the deal. Get ready for the
next hiccup—Oh, that was a good one!
Excellent!—and when it comes—
Right, just like that!—see if you can
hiccup on purpose along with it.
Practice once or twice doing a fake hic-
cup. See if you can fake me out. Yes!
Just like that. Okay, so the very instant
that the next hiccup comes, see if you
can do a fake hiccup at exactly the
same time. Can you start the fake one
so quickly that it and the real one
sound like the same one? Make it so
they’re in stereo—an on-purpose one
and the regular one. So wait for the
hiccup and then—Oh, there’s one.
Wonderful! Did you manage to hiccup
on purpose along with it?”

“Not quite.”

“That’s okay, try again with the next
one. Come on, Hiccup. . . . We’re wait-
ing, Hiccup. . . . Hmm, it must have
gone out for lunch or headed to the
beach or something.”

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When we intentionally monitor or mimic a spontaneous body process, we end up with the same information or expression on both sides of the mind-body divide, so the boundary separating them becomes less distinct, and the hard and fast (and illusory) borders of the “self” give way. Meditators accomplish this when they “become one with their breath,” and people experiencing hypnosis get there as they notice the unfolding of a nonvolitional change, such as when their body becomes numb or their arm levitates “on its own.”

AS STEPHANIE ACCEPTED and volitionally mimicked the sounds, thoughts, and body feelings she was encountering, she was able, for the first time, to effortlessly enter trance. I began to talk about the various anxiety-provoking sensations that, in the past, would shut down her ability to think. I wanted to open up possibilities for her to respond differently to their initial appearance, to let her know that they could change not only by escalating out of control, but also by turning into something different.

Both Taoists and Zen practitioners embrace change as the primary fact of existence. Holding on to this perspective helps me appreciate that clients aren’t “stuck” and thus don’t need me to infuse them with motivation. All I need to do is find out how they and their symptoms are already changing and how, in response to our work together, this changing can shift in form or trajectory.

“Emotions aren’t called e-motions for nothing,” I told Stephanie. “They’re always in motion, always transforming. When you first notice a particular feeling or emotion forming in your throat, in your mouth, in your chest, you can find your curiosity grabbing hold, wondering, ‘How’s this going to change? Is it going to move to a different location? Is the intensity going to increase or decrease? Is the quality of it going to shift in some way?’ The fascinating thing about any emotion is that when it’s freed up to be itself, damned if it doesn’t go ahead and turn into something else.”

Stephanie had said that to keep her panic from overtaking her, she’d tried to distance herself from her audience, reminding herself that she was more educated than they were. So in addition to offering up ways she could connect with her internal experience, I also explored how she could connect with the individuals who were listening to her.

“As you’re meeting the gaze of this or that person in the audience, as you’re tuning in while speaking out, I wonder how the sensations you notice can continue to develop and begin to shift... What happens to your words when you see the lights come on in the eyes of that person over there to the right? How does your passion for your ideas heat up when the person back there starts taking notes?”

Such an orientation, fleshed out over the next couple of sessions, freed Stephanie to look inward and outward, tuning into the movement and interplay of her mind and body while attending to the facial expressions of her audience. Rather than backing away from her developing feelings and sensations, she could embrace them with the expectation of their changing.

We met a total of four times. At the end of our last session, Stephanie promised to keep in touch, but I didn’t hear from her for seven months. Finally a cryptic email arrived, explaining that she’d been “testing the waters” and that “all things are fine so far.” Ever the critical thinker and appropriately cautious about being deluded by false hope, she’d wanted to make sure that the changes she’d experienced were real and significant. Now that she’d rediscovered her voice and her ability to think in front of students and colleagues, she confirmed that she once again felt free to speak her mind.

It’s this feeling of freedom that most directly links the practice of hypnosis and therapy with ancient Taoist and Zen traditions. Of course, inducing a revolutionary overhaul of perspective and experience—“enlightenment”—is way beyond our job description and experience. Therapists aren’t masters, clients aren’t initiates, and therapy can’t produce a spiritual awakening from the prison of dualistic thinking. But by incorporating nondualistic principles and meditative wisdom in our work, we can help in the liberation of clients who are imprisoned by their problems. Such freedom—perhaps a kind of small “e” enlightenment—lies at the heart of therapeutic change.

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