**The Little Black Book of Negative Thinking**

- **A Philosophical Approach to Depression -**

**by**

**Peter Wilberg**

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**This book aims to question and rethink many of our ordinary assumptions about ‘depression’ and in doing so help us to understand our own and other people’s depressive symptoms in a more philosophical way. Its motto is: "melancholics of the world unite - you have nothing to lose but your shame".**

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The Missing Mood of our Times

‘Be Happy.’

The commandment of our times.

For it is ‘good’ to be happy and ‘bad’ to be sad.

So people feel happy, or else unhappy…

Hurt or anxious, angry or mad.

Above all, ’depressed’ - but rarely *sad*.

For sadness needs patience.

People have no time for it.

Indeed they are afraid of it.

For with other feelings there is

Always something they can do.

But ‘sad’ is something we can only *be*.

It is not a feeling we can blurt out or

Blame on others.

Sadness takes us down into ourselves.

But people want to stay ‘up’,

Sadness means feeling low,

Getting be-low our surface.

But people prefer to get ‘high’ than low.

Sadness means ‘going under’, but people

Lack the patience to *undergo* their sadness.

Sadness. The *missing mood of our times*.

But a missing mood is like a missing limb,

An absent mobility of feeling.

Grounding us in our innermost, lowermost depths.

The missing mood is a deep hole in our humanity,

Making the world a sad place,

Where no one has the courage to be sad.

People dare not sink into this hole, for doing so

Would fill it – with sadness and a deeper joy.

From this hole all manner of hateful feelings

Worldly horrors and false happiness arise, but

No true empathy for others, no tender sadness

With which to tend them - to fill their emptiness.

Emptied of sadness, of joyful depth of self ,

Barren of earnest, inward resolve,

The commandment still reads: ‘Be Happy.’

Peter Wilberg

…the future enters into us…in order to transform itself in us long before it happens. And this is why it is so important to be alone and attentive when one is sad…the more still, more patient and more open we are when we are sad, so much deeper and more unswervingly does the new go into us, so much the better do we make it ours, so much the more will it be our destiny.

Rainer Maria Rilke

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## Eight Theses on Depression

1. Depressive states can occur whenever we can find no solution to important life questions. They are the individual’s way of experiencing and responding to the depressive process - itself a natural and healing process in which our inner self withdraws from normal patterns of relating in order to recreate itself and respond to the pressures and questions that the ego poses to it.
2. The depressive process need not be experienced as a process of gradually giving up of all hope - resigning oneself to never “finding an answer”. Instead it can be experienced as a process of gradually giving up our old questions, and discovering new ones.
3. To talk of “fighting” and “beating” depression is a contradiction in terms. For depressive suffering is itself a result of fighting the depressive process. Part of this fighting is clinging on to old questions and desperately seeking solutions to them. Another part is covering up depressive states in order to keep body and mind functioning in conformity with social pressures.
4. If “positive thinking” is used by the ego to “fight” and “beat” the depressive process, it undermines the individual’s capacity for creative questioning and critical thinking, both of which depend on our ability to acknowledge the depressive process as a healthy response to personal and social pressures.
5. Negative thinking is radically negative - it questions the very division of thinking and feeling into opposed “positive” and “negative” thoughts. It validates the depressive process, which forces us to question the ego’s terms and categories, and takes us to deeper levels of consciousness where these are transcended.
6. Depression is the individual’s way of getting closer to the Self in a culture which confuses the Self with the ego. The Self experiences and feels questions which the ego can not yet articulate in words. But the ego seeks solutions only to its known and already formulated questions.
7. Behind all our questions about ourselves and others is a quest to relate to ourselves and others in a new way. Like meditation, the depressive process can bring the ego closer to the Self. In doing so it allows us to relate to each other more authentically - with and from our core Self as well as from our ego.
8. Depressive states and processes actually allow us to listen more patiently. Deep healing and transformation comes not through “helping” but through the openness to hearing the inner voice of the Self. Learning to respond to depression means not just learning about depression but learning from depression - learning to hear with the ear of the Self as well as the ear of the ego. This type of hearing is not a therapeutic technique or instrument - a means to an end. It is an end in itself , the achievement of a spiritual intimacy with ourselves and others.

## “How are you?”

“Fine, Thanks.” But why should one imply that all’s well in the best of all possible worlds - when it patently isn’t. Why should even admitted suffering and pain be minimised or sugar-coated. Because the other person might find this disturbing or see you as a burden? Perhaps they will - and so they should. For those who are disturbed, the burden is already there and they are carrying it. If compassion means anything it means sharing a burden, however heavy - not sharing it on condition that it first be lightened or made light of. Many of those “depressive” people who seem to carry the world’s burden on their shoulders may indeed be bearing the burden of questions that other members of their family and social circle, or society at large are unwilling to face - as do philosophers or scientists or artists who go where angels fear to tread. Except that they do not merely confront the questions they bear within them intellectually, instead they experience and feel these questions.

## Experiencing the Question

Ours is a culture that values creative products without acknowledging the inner processes required to incubate and generate creativity. We live in a culture of solutions and answers, treatments and therapies. We have forgotten what it means to question; forgotten that without unresolved questions - lived and experienced questions and not merely intellectual or technical ones - life itself is emptied of meaning and vitality. To experience an unresolved question at a deep level means that we no longer “have” a question. Rather the question has us. Maybe we cannot even name it. This is often experienced as being in a mood or depressed for an unknown reason. What is unknown is the question. But that may be because we are on the threshold of discovering a new question rather than plying ourselves for a solution to old ones. In our solution-oriented culture we equate the human capacity to question with the ability to verbally cross-examine our thoughts, feelings and actions in order to find solutions - when what we really need to find is the real question. The creativity required to discover the real questions confronting us is not the same creativity that we apply to solve an already known and formulated question. For it is only by letting go of our old questions that we can begin to rethink them. Part of the depressive process consists in giving up our old questions in order to bear the deeper questions that “have us” - the ones we feel inside. We do not only pose questions to ourselves - giving them time to gestate and grow within us. Allowing ourselves to live the question - to be it - we become the answer. For just as being pregnant with a child alters the mother’s whole relation to her body, her self and her life, so does bearing an as yet unspoken question. The birth of the new question, our ability to recognise and formulate it in words, is at the same time the final death of our old questions and struggles - and the intractable problems bound up with them. The gestation is at the same time a mourning.

## Depression and Philosophy

Rethinking the questions we have about our lives is not the same as looking for solutions. It is a philosophical process in the deepest sense, and a deepening process in the philosophical sense. The practice of philosophy has traditionally been associated with a melancholy disposition. This association is still reflected in the phrase “taking a philosophical attitude”. Being “philosophical” does not mean studying philosophy academically. Nor does it simply mean being resigned to one’s fate in a passive way, or resigning oneself to finding no solutions to life. It means surrendering to the loss of one’s old questions. The first philosophers of ancient Greece did not “study” philosophy. They did not only seek the “meaning of life”. They sought to live their lives in a meaningful way. They did not only seek new ways of thinking but new ways of living - of meeting and responding to life and its living questions. The intellect poses questions “about” life and turns the world into an object of analysis in order to find answers. It believes that it has found an answer when it can represent and objectify the relationships between things. The Self doesn’t ask questions “about” life - it experiences questions in its life. It does not try to represent the relationships between things or between people but quests a new relationship to them. Being philosophical is not a practice of the mind but of the Self. Today philosophy is no longer a practice of the Self but a mere academic speciality - the study of philosophical ideas. Being “depressed” is modern man’s substitute for philosophical reflection.

“Freedom is only to be found where there is burden to be shouldered. In creative achievements this burden always represents an imperative and a need that weighs heavily upon man’s mood, so that he comes to be in a mood of melancholy. All creative action resides in a mood of melancholy, whether we are clearly aware of the fact or not, whether we speak at length about it or not. All creative action resides in a mood of melancholy, but this is not to say that everyone in a melancholy mood is creative.

“As a creative and essential activity of humanbeing, philosophy stands in the fundamental mood of melancholy.”

Martin Heidegger

## “Self Help”

Most self-help books on anxiety and depression imply triumphantly that the author has “the solution”. In fact they do not even have the question - or rather the question does not yet have them. People who claim to have “overcome” depression are claiming, if not to have all the answers, then at least to have all the questions. But what sort of person claims to no longer have to experience new and unformulated questions - or claims that all life’s questions are resolvable through a set of self-help techniques. Such a person is not a model of mental health, but suffers from a characteristic modern-day pathology - the pathology of technique-itis. Similarly, anyone who is proud of never having been seriously depressed is not healthy but sick - not least given the sad sicknesses of society and the planet today. True “self-help” means helping the ego to get closer to the Self - not helping it to “treat” the Self with techniques and “manage” it as an object.

## “Positive Thinking”

Positive Thinkers argue that negative feelings are the result of negative thoughts. But if we don’t allow ourselves to feel our feelings, negative or positive, how can we think at all ? A “thinking” based on the discrimination of feelings into “positive” and “negative” is like keyboard music based on banning those nasty awkward and irrelevant black keys. Or worse, the banning of “sad” or “tragic” music. I wonder how the proponents of “positive thinking” respond to serious (sorry about the word) music. Would they send Tchaikovsky to a therapist because his 6th Symphony is so full of despair. I suggest they listen - they will find it so despairing that its negativity borders on positive exultation! Since when are certain tones or chords of feeling “positive” and others “negative” ? The basic error of positive thinking is the belief that feelings can be labelled in this way at all. It is the type of purely verbal thinking that needs to positively identify feelings in words - to label the music of feeling tone. Having labelled them it negates certain types of feeling, judges them and rules them out of order. Feelings which are negated do indeed feel as if they are negative.

## “Negative Thinking”

Negative thinking, on the other hand negates the very division of feeling into “positive” and “negative” feelings. Cognitive Therapists and proponents of positive thinking, on the other hand, both concur that depression is a state to be overcome - that feeling bad is bad. This encourages people to think that if they feel depressed there is something “wrong” with them - that if they feel bad maybe they are bad in some way. Positive thinking affirms this negation of the Feeling Self. Negative thinking is doubly negative - a negation of this negation! Most people who are depressed have good reason to be depressed. Most unnecessary depression is a result of putting pressure on oneself self to be happy, feel good, and therefore be able to function normally. This pressure comes from our positive thinking culture - ultimately the culture of the capitalist work ethic.

##  10 Commandments of Negative Thinking:

Do NOT put pressure on yourself to...

.”beat” depression

 . think positively

 . be happy

 . feel good

 . succeed

 . get what you want

 . improve your sex life

 . find love and fulfilment

 . take things in your stride

## Cognitive Therapy

The approach of cognitive therapy to “beating depression” distinguishes itself from crude positive thinking maxims, but it is based on the same premise - that feelings can be divided into positive and negative, good and bad - and the latter minimised by awareness and control of negative thoughts. Professor Anthony Clare has said of it “It has a horribly bland feel. There’s no sense of the sheer tragedy and pain of people’s lives. It’s a suburban vision with the lawns all mowed, the car polished, and all the housework done. I don’t know that I’d like to live there.”

## Radical Negativity

What is ordinarily regarded as “negative thinking”, thinking which is pessimistic or resigned, berating or blaming ourselves and others, is in essence a form of positive thinking - for it picks upon some fact or feeling, draws conclusions from them and posits these conclusions as an absolute and unchanging truth. Radical negativity is not “negative” thinking in the ordinary sense, nor its simple negation - the replacement of pessimistic thoughts with optimistic affirmations. It is the transcendence of black-and-white, all-or-nothing, either-or thinking. This type of thinking is bound to pairs of opposites posited by language. Radical negativity is not “either-or” but “neither-nor” thinking. For in the end things are neither as bad as they look nor as good as we would like them to be. Thinking in opposites, however, is a form of positive thinking, for it is the ego’s way of establishing and maintaining some “positive” hold on its experience in words - whether in an optimistic or a pessimistic way. “Neither-nor” thinking neither affirms nor negates but takes time instead to listen. Depression can be a great teacher of radical negativity - offering us the opportunity to stop doing and to start being; to stop affirming or negating and start to listen; to stop trying to help or heal and start to hear. For it is not helping but hearing that heals. The depressive process is one in which we gradually shift our identification from the ego to the Self. For whilst talking and verbal thought depend on systems of opposites, however refined, our listening need not be bound by verbal opposites. Depression teaches us to deepen our listening - to distinguish the ear of the ego from the ear of the Listening Self.

## The Negative Logic of

## *Neither-Nor* Thinking

Neither-nor thinking is the negative alternative to positive thinking, which is essentially either-or thinking. This contrast is highlighted by the following sequence:

1. Positive “either-or” question. Example: “Is my life worth living or not ?”

2. Normal positive response - “yes”.

3. Negative “depressive” response - “no”.

4a. Positive thinking strategy : affirm that life is worth living.

4b. Cognitive therapy strategy : your feeling that life is not worth living is created by the thought that it is not worth living. Suspend this thought.

4c. Negative thinking: accept your negative feelings but negate the “either-or” and replace it with a “neither-nor”. This leads to the position that “my life is neither worth living nor not worth living”.

5. Neither-nor thinking poses a riddle. How can life be neither worth living nor not worth living? One general answer is: “my life may not feel fulfilling at the moment but that does not mean there is no chance that it will feel so in the future”. But the specific thoughts that affirm this feeling have to come intuitively - from the Self and not from the ego’s thinking alone. They are thoughts that reveal hitherto ignored dimensions of one’s reality - places where some light shines through.

6. Waiting in suspense. This is one of the root meanings of “to listen”. Neither-nor thinking frees the ego from the battle of positive and negative thoughts. This allows the ego to wait in patient suspense for healing intuitions to emerge spontaneously from the self - without forcing them through positive thinking cliches. This is the true function of the depressive process.

## The Language of ‘Depression’

The word ‘depression’ belongs to a family of words to do with pressure. These include the words “pressure”, “impress”, “express”, “repress” and “suppress”. In everyday language we talk of “not letting things get to one”, not letting the pressures of life get one “down”. But irrespective of how pressured we are, the Self is always affected by events - impressed by them in ways that we cannot immediately express. It takes time for us to process the Self’s impressions, even if we do not repress them. But if we have no time for the Self, then it makes its own time, slowing us down in a way we may experience as “depression”. The more pressure people feel in their working lives - however many holidays they take - the more they internalise the capitalist work ethic, and the less time they have for inner journeys, turning these into the hard work we know as “ suffering” depression.

## What is “depression”?

“Depression” is first and foremost a word - and a relatively recent one at that. Today the word depression is so over-used it has become almost meaningless. To say “I am feeling depressed” can mean I am feeling mentally and physically dysfunctional and debilitated, socially demoralised or demotivated, personally disappointed or disturbed, psychically depersonalised and unreal or simply slowed down and sad. But the multiplicity of states that the word depression can be used to cover, itself covers up a fundamental question and a fundamental paradox. The question of what depression is can only be answered by first asking not *who* is depressed but *which part of ourselves* experiences depression? The answer to this question is that the part of ourselves that “suffers” from depression is the part of ourselves that both causes and fights depression. This is the ego, a part of the Self with which we turn ourselves into an object - into a navel that we gaze at from above. The Self is never “depressed”. It can and does withdraw and it is the ego that feels abandoned and emptied by this withdrawal. The ego is taught to fear, resist and fight this withdrawal - and is stigmatised and isolated if it does not. It is the fear of isolation that leads the ego to fight the Self’s withdrawal which it experiences as a black hole opening up within. Paradoxically, it is fighting “depression” in this sense that causes depression to be “suffered”. It is giving in to depression - identifying with the Self and following it in its withdrawal- that allows the depressive process to be experienced as a healing and regenerative process.

## “Fighting” Depression

Recent research into animal behaviour indicates that male animals appear to show all the signs of what we call “depression” when defeated in a fight with more powerful males. This “natural depression” is understood as an adaptive behaviour, a response that prevents the animal from fighting on and in doing so risking serious injury. For a long time psychologists have believed a “fight or flight” response to be part of our instinctual nature as human animals. This is seen as the biological root of human anxiety. The new research indicates that our cultural beliefs may have led us to ignore what may be a third instinctual response : the depressive response of “brooding surrender”. This again makes it a contradiction in terms to speak of “fighting” depression .

## The Energetic Cycle

All of us need times when we can withdraw into ourselves, creep into our own shell. We do so in order to create a safe space inside where we can just “be”, free of the constant pressure to act and communicate, to do and to speak. Entering this womb or inner sanctum of the Self allows us to begin feeling “real” again - to gather ourselves together and therefore recover what could be called our Sense of Self. This withdrawal and in-gathering is not a regressive process but part of a natural cycle of expansion and contraction of the Feeling Self - as natural as the cycle of waking and sleeping. In the outward-moving phase of the Energetic Cycle the energy of the Self suffuses the body, rising up to the head from its centre in the abdomen. As a result our bodies feel charged and energetic, our hearts responsive, our heads alert and clear. We are available for action and communication. In the inward-moving phase, on the other hand, the energy of the Self moves downwards from the head and heart and inwards towards our abdominal centre of gravity - what the Japanese call the “soul-belly” or hara. Feeling “down” is an awareness of this phase of the cycle, which may go together with a sense of fatigue, a growing state of dreaminess, a diminution of attention span and concentration and a desire for rest, peace, silence and aloneness. We are aware of the need for a “recharge phase”, in other words, as we are when we decide to retire to bed for the night. But the Feeling Self may withdraw into itself and enter an inward-moving phase at any time during our waking life. It does so whenever we feel overstretched by everyday activity, disappointed, hurt, ignored or mishandled by others - or simply bored by superficial communication and interaction. For in all these situations our Sense of Self suffers. Depression is not simply the result of the pressures of everyday living and relating. It is the result of not allowing the Self to respond to these strains in a natural way through the “withdrawal” phase of the Energetic Cycle.

## Anxiety

Whereas depression is a way of experiencing the withdrawal and contraction phase of the Energetic Cycle, anxiety is a response to the expansion phase. People get depressed when they feel their energy going down. People get anxious when they feel it rising with an intensity they cannot adequately express or fully repress - when they are unable to simply embody the energy of the feeling Self. Instead they become like overcharged plates, desperate for a way of discharging or draining the Self’s energy - a way of tranquillising body and mind. So-called “depressive anxiety” occurs at the turning point of the Energetic Cycle, when energy is beginning to fall, the Self beginning to withdraw, and our mood beginning to go down. A much deeper form of “paranoid-schizoid” anxiety is experienced, however, when the individual is so identified with the ego that they completely lose touch with the withdrawing Self and no longer know who they are. The Self, in other words, has passed below the subliminal threshold of our ordinary ego-consciousness as it does when we go to sleep - but with the ego still awake. The narrower and more rigid our ordinary ego-identity the closer we live to this anxious threshold of un-Self-consciousness. Anxiety and depression may both find expression in insomnia - an expression of over-strong ego-identification. Not sleeping at night can - up to a point and in the right circumstances - help the individual to recover a Sense of Self by staying awake at a time when the ego is less pressured to perform and can leave the Self to just be. For the body sleeps whether the mind follows or not. Falling asleep is the death of the ego-consciousness and the awakening of the dreaming Self. The dreams we have in the dawn hours are important because they occur at the turning point of the diurnal Energetic Cycle. The Self begins to re-suffuse the body with its energy at dawn. Anxiety experienced on waking may have to do with the ego’s fear of the Self’s energy, and depression with the awareness of physical ill-health because of the body’s incapacity to fully absorb and embody this energy. Anxiety and depression experienced during the day are also to do with the Self, which goes through numerous cycles of expansion and withdrawal during our waking hours themselves.

## Core Communication and the Fear of Intimacy

Why do we not allow the Self its “depressed” withdrawal phases while we are awake? One reason is work organisation and the work ethic - the pressure to continue to “function” - whether at work or simply socially - whatever our inner state of being. So we may even compensate for the impulse to slow down by speeding up, compensate for lack of sharp concentration by concentrating harder, compensate for a tendency to introversion by becoming even more social and extroverted. Another related reason for resisting the Self’s withdrawal is that, were we to follow the Self in its withdrawal phase, our resulting physical demeanour might be interpreted as tired, apathetic, heavy, despondent, depressed, unavailable, withdrawn, offended etc. In order to save face we put on a face, acting as if we were in the expansive phase of the Energetic Cycle. But perhaps the most important and most hidden reason why people fear to be themselves when their Self is withdrawing and contracting has to do with communication. In our culture we identify “positive” communication and interaction with the maintenance of an outward-oriented, “extroverted” stance. We confuse authentic relating with “inter-personal communication”. Authentic relating is based on true inner contact with others - with and from the Self. Inter-personal communication is maintained through a social mask or “persona”. The withdrawal of the Self from ordinary social communication brings us to the threshold of a different, more intimate type of communication with others. The fear of this silent, more intimate communication is a major reason why “depression” itself is feared, and why it is identified with isolation. The depressed person feels isolated because our culture is one which places a premium on verbal communication and “self-expression” rather than on true Self-to-Self contact and communion. People who feel tired, withdrawn or “down” often think they cannot communicate well with others. Potentially, however, they make much better listeners than people who are bubbling with energy and ideas, for they are able to tune in and respond to others from the Self rather than reacting emotionally.

## Being and Doing

When someone is “depressed”, they often do not know what to do or say. This is part and parcel of the healing function of depression, which is to create an inner space in which the Self can simply be. The person who is “depressed” challenges us to find a way of being with another person that does not depend on doing - on saying or asking something, reacting to them or getting them to react to us. But many people have never known what it means to be with someone in this way, nor experienced the sort of intimacy and communion that it can bring. When they were infants and young children their parents may have constantly pestered them to do or not do something, say or not say something. Their every move and state of being might have been prematurely reacted to by their parents or caretakers - questioned or criticised, put into words or met with a verbal remark. In such a situation - often repeated in bad counselling or therapy - the Self feels itself turned into an object and mishandled. As a result it withdraws. The child may not appear depressed. But this is only because he or she has been taught to relate and communicate through a verbal mask and to identify with this persona. At some stage, however, the mask may crumble and the individual may “feel” depressed. But most of the pain and suffering associated with depression comes from the isolation it brings, and the pressure on the sufferer to overcome this isolation by restoring their mask rather than giving it up. Society relates only to individuals who are “positive” in their inter-personal communication and interaction. It scorns and stigmatises those who feel and follow the gravitational pull of their core Selves, and provides no response to their inner need to relate to others from their core.

## Responding to Depression

The worst part of depression is a sense of inner isolation that it brings. But perhaps this isolation is not merely a result or accompaniment of depression but part of its very essence. In depression we are forced to confront the basic aloneness of the Self. But aloneness need not imply loneliness. It only becomes loneliness when we do not feel a sense of connectedness to others from the Self. The feeling of isolation that results from lack of what I call “core relatedness” to others is in large part a social creation. We grow up in a culture where superficial “ego-relatedness” dominates, where people do not know how to be with one another except through some form of doing. When depression causes us to withdraw from ordinary communication and leads us towards a deeper level of contact with our Selves, then other people’s egos may feel threatened, abandoned and powerless. The depressed person challenges them to get in touch with themselves on a deeper level in order to respond to the depressed person from the core. To “take up” this challenge would require them to move down into themselves. For only by going to where the depressed person is can the latter feel that somebody is actually with them. Being with another person means finding the place within ourselves that corresponds to where they are and contacting them from that place. It does not mean encouraging or pulling another person towards another place - towards where we are. It is not achieved by any sort of doing but by not-doing, by a surrender that allows us to go over to the side of the depressed person and meet them there. This does not mean that we ourselves have to be depressed in order to help a depressed person. For in going down to meet another person at the “basement” level of their psyche we overcome the sense of isolation that shrouds the inner Self. Instead of suffering from another person’s depression or leaving them to suffer we transform it into an opportunity to achieve core-relatedness. The practical and effective way of being with someone who feels depressed and isolated is not any form of positive action, thinking or talk but involves negative thinking and negative action - how not to think about and respond to depression, both other people’s and one’s own. I call these the Rules of Not-doing.

## Rules of Not-doing

. Not treating depression as a condition to be treated.

• Not reacting to depression as a threat but as an opportunity.

• Not asking ourselves or others to look on the bright side.

• Not analysing the “causes” of depression or seeking to avoid it.

• Not putting pressure on oneself or others to talk or act differently.

• Not plying oneself or others with questions, however well-meant.

• Not artificially promoting a sense of harmony or closeness.

• Not fearing to be alone with others in silence.

• Not fearing the intimacy of “core relatedness”.

## Being Alone with Others

Core relatedness is the capacity to be alone with others. People who are depressed often feel isolated and lonely in company and seem to want to be left alone. This is often because the only alternative is to be challenged to communicate and relate as if they were not depressed. What the depressed person needs is someone able to be with them and at the same to leave them be. Aloneness with others is not loneliness with others. Being with others in a way that leaves them be allows us and them to be ourselves - to be who we are inside. It is this that transforms the fundamental aloneness of the Self into a sense of inner at-oneness with the Selves of others. We can only be at-one with the Selves of others by acknowledging our essential aloneness as a Self. We cannot achieve this core relatedness by surrendering our inner aloneness to superficial communication or trying to fuse with others. At-oneness is not merger. It is an intimate communion and wordless communication from the Self. One problem is that many people have difficulty separating intimacy from sexual intimacy, or else see non-sexual intimacy as something that can only be achieved with the Self or with God, with nature or man-made objects. Thus a man may feel non-sexually intimate with his own children, with God or with his car - but not with other men or with women. A woman might feel non-sexually intimate with other women, but find that men invariably interpret moves towards intimate relatedness in a sexual way. In Freud’s time people were still intimidated by sexual intimacy. Today they are still intimated by non-sexual intimacy.

## Feeling and Feelings

Unlike the ego, the Feeling Self is never “angry” or “sad”, “hurt” or “disappointed”. It expands and contracts, reaches out and withdraws like an amoeba. It feels in the same way that our skin feels something - by simultaneously touching and being touched by it. Except that instead of making contact with things on their outer skin, the Self makes contact with them inwardly or “under the skin”. Paradoxically however, the more withdrawn the Self is, the more inward and intimate is its feeling touch. But few people have learnt how to reach out to - and from - the Self when it is in its withdrawal phase. For the Self, feeling is a verb not a noun. The Self feels. The ego “has” feelings. The Self makes direct inner contact with others and feels them out. The ego has feelings “about” or “towards” other people and the world which is why it is often caught between expressing or repressing these feelings, hiding them or acting them out.

## Black Bile

In Freud’s time the term melancholia was still used rather than the modern term “depression”. The root meaning of melancholia is “black bile”, implying a connection between melancholy and irritable moodiness. Today also, some schools of psychotherapy regard depression as a form of repressed anger or resentment. It is true that the “re-pression” of our emotional reactions to events means that these reactions are pushed down or “de-pressed”. More importantly, it is the ego’s emotional interpretation of the Self’s responses that are either expressed or repressed. As Selves we respond to events not with a pre-set range of mental emotions but with embodied motions - organic sensations. We do not feel “anger”, we feel our heart-rate increasing, energy rising to the head, and an impulse to physical action, including vocal expression. “Anger” as an e-motion is a situational interpretation of the meaning of these sensations - a set of phrases and behavioural rituals by which we interpret their meaning and act them out. We interpret our organic sensations as anger “about” something or “towards” someone. The ego does not want to have to bear these sensations in a bodily way - to embody the Self . Instead it seeks to offload them - to get others to feel them by getting angry with them and directing its anger at them. But getting angry with others - acting it out - can be a way of not having to feel and understand the organic sensations of the Self. Instead we act them out, getting them “out” of our system - “taking it out” on each other.

## The Need for Depression

People who grow up without a strong and embodied Sense of Self distinct from their own ego and personae may feel emotionally like infants inside. They need the experience of depression to gradually disidentify with their intellect and emotions and find a centre of gravity beneath them. It is through the depressive process that the energy of the Self begins to gather itself together and “nucleates” - forming a strong centre of inner awareness and identity - one independent of ego and persona, intellect and emotions, mind and the body. With the right sort of care and support - one that allows a person to be withdrawn and inwardly focussed - their Sense of Self may re-emerge. For their ego now becomes inwardly responsive instead of merely reacting outwardly. It becomes open to receiving spontaneous intuitions and impulses from the Self which in turn gives them new hope, a reason for living and taking care of themselves. As individuals, we grow by becoming inwardly fertile and creating a safe inner space - an inner womb - in which impulses and intuitions from the Self can be received and gestated. The Self as such is never fully born or incarnate, but is forever seeding and being conceived in the womb of the psyche.

## Depression and Infancy

The relation between ego and Self can be compared with the intimate relation between the mother and her infant. The function of the ego is to provide a nurturing womb for the Self. Before birth this is provided by the physical womb of the mother. After birth, by the mother’s protection and care-giving. It is the mother’s way of being with the infant and relating to it in word and deed that provides a blueprint for the child’s developing ego. But what if the mother is not able to be her-Self with the infant, not able to receive and respond to it in a relaxed and attuned way, acknowledging the infant as a Self and not just as an animated body or as a part of her own mental furniture. Then the child’s emergent ego may feel cut off from its-Self and begin to relate to it as a “something” - as an object. It does not learn to be its-Self and relate to others from this Self but instead relates to itself only as a body or mind - as a collection of needs, emotions and sensations or an internal object of introspection. The word “infant” comes from the Latin in-fans, meaning “not speaking”. The in-fant in us is the silent, wordless centre of our being - the Self. But many people do not experience the in-fant in them as the Self but instead experience the Self itself as an immature, emotional and “infantile” part of them - a bodymind which needs constant mothering from its own or other people’s egos and yet which receives no acknowledgement as a Self.

## The Self and the Breast

Child development is not only influenced by the mother’s ego. The child’s ego also learns to draw succour, strength and support from its own core Self in the same way that an infant draws nourishment from the mother’s breast. Both the mother’s ego-relation to the child and the child’s “core” relation to the breast become models for the child ego’s relation to its-Self. Every external object that provides us with satisfaction and nourishment in later life is not only a symbol of the breast, therefore, but of the Self. The breast is an object and other objects too can come to serve as a satisfying breast on which we feed, whether in the form of food, a good object, a hobby or a person from whose company we derive pleasure. But however hard the ego seeks to turn it into one - the Self is not essentially an external object, nor is it an internal emotional one. That is why psychoanalysts are right in linking depression with object loss in the most general sense and understanding the depressive process as a type of mourning.

## Mourning and Depression

Losing an object, whether a thing, a person or a form of activity such as a job, we lose an important link with the Self. This forces us to re-link with the Self in a more direct way - not by symbolising it with an object but by identifying with it. Similarly, in allowing ourselves to mourn the loss of a person we love we are not simply finding a way a “letting go” of that person. Instead we are replacing the ego’s external object-relationship to the person with a renewed and strengthened inner relationship - one in which they are no longer an object for us, even an object of memory, but “part of us”. The “depressive” phase of the Energetic Cycle, when the Self withdraws from the ego and its object-world, can give us the feeling that we can no longer find meaning in activities and objects that were important to us. Once again however, this process is no less natural than the process of regularly tiring of daily activities, finding no more meaning or joy in them - and going to bed. In sleep the ego is no longer active - we are identified with the dreaming Self. The problem is that we have not yet learnt to follow the Self in its phases of withdrawal during the day - to follow the depressive process.

## The Gynaecology of Depression

The depressive process can be understood as a gestative process, a type of psychological pregnancy. This can last anything from a few moments to many months or years. Then again, the Energetic Cycle can be compared to the female menstrual cycle and the Self’s withdrawal phase to menstruation phase, often preceded by pre-menstrual anxiety. This suggests a difference between two types of depression - menstrual and gestational. In menstrual depression the ego experiences the Self as hollow or fallow and infertile. It mourns the absence of a vital spark of life within it - a Sense of Self refertilised by meaningful relationships and the experience of relational intimacy. In gestational depression the Self has been seeded by events and experiences. But the ego may be unwilling to bear the ensuing pregnancy, which bears within it the seeds of a new Sense of Self that may not accord with the ego’s existing self-image. The Self is the original womb of the ego but it is the responsibility of the ego, in turn, to provide a nurturing womb for the Self - to reflect its transformations and give birth to its potentials. When the ego hinders this process to a grave degree it may suffer total breakdown and collapse, merging back into the womb of the Self. The Self then confronts the world nakedly and vulnerably, like a newborn baby without normal ego protection. In the normal depressive process only parts of the ego regress - to be bled and cast off. But this too opens the ego up in a way that eventually makes the Self fertile - able to allow impressions to implant themselves in it. When this happens a new Sense of Self begins its gestation through the depressive process reaching its apogee then in the birth of a new and transformed ego or part ego - one more in touch with the Self and better able to bring its potentials to expression.

## Depressive States and the Depressive Process

Depressive states, symptoms and illness represent the ego’s interpretation of - or resistance to - the depressive process. Essentially, the depressive process is itself a healing process by which the ego comes to feel and accept how events have really affected or impressed the Self, allowing these impressions to gather and the Self to gather itself together through this process. There is no “cure” for depression beyond allowing the depressive process to take its course without interfering resistances and misinterpretations of this process. Eliminating the “negative thinking” which accompanies the depressive process does not eliminate the process itself - nor should it. It can only help to eliminate intellectual and emotional misinterpretations of this process. Left to itself the depressive process allows the individual to recollect and meditatively play with inner impressions absorbed by the Self. “All work and no play” is the motto of our global and competitive capitalist culture, which identifies “play” only with entertainment or sport rather than the play of the Self with its own experiences and experiencing. In one sense, then, depression is capitalist culture’s substitute for active playful meditation and contemplation - an enforced holiday from “all work”. That is also a reason why it is often accompanied by physical fatigue on the one hand, and loss of meaning on the other. Together these “symptoms” prevent the individual from hampering the depressive process by once again channelling energy into habitual forms of “positive” activity and thinking such as work or physical “work-outs”. This is precisely what makes depression threatening to the capitalist work ethic, for it is seen to encourage sloth and “the devil makes work for idle hands”.

##  “Manic Depression”

Paradoxically, in our competitive culture of positive “self-advancement”, “self-responsibility” and “self-expression”, establishing an authentic intimacy with the Self by allowing depressive processes to take their course is regarded as “selfish”. That is because “self-advancement” in our culture actually means ego advancement. The ego regards the Self as an object, its private property. Because of this it experiences the Energetic Cycle as a cycle of inflation and deflation, boom and bust. In the expansive phase of the Energetic Cycle, the ego inflates. In its withdrawal phase the ego feels “deflated”. The transformation of the Energetic Cycle into a cycle of ego-inflation and deflation is experienced subjectively as “manic depression”. In the inflationary phase of the manic-depressive cycle the ego feels a strong Sense of Self but is incapable of maintaining this sense by relating to others from the Self. Instead the individual desperately seeks to cling onto and possess the Self as an object - by buying things or controlling its inner and outer world. Things and people become mere symbols of parts of the Self that it needs to own and control. The ego is like a bubble inflating itself to the dimensions of the Self - identifying the outer world with the Self and seeking to omnipotently absorb the world into its inflated realm. In the deflationary phase of the manic depressive cycle the bubble bursts. The ego experiences a loss of omnipotent control over events and at the same time loses its possession of the Self. As a result it feels alienated from the Self, abandoned by it, or possessed and controlled by it as by an alien being. Where there was the Self and its energy, there is now a black hole of “depression” and fatigue. The ego no longer rides on waves of euphoria but is wholly dysphoric. We all have our ups and downs of course, but the pressure of ego-culture is to maintain the ups and the “boom” of the energetic cycle as long as possible and whatever the consequences for our minds and bodies. Manic depression or “cyclothymic disorder”, like other mental “illnesses”, can not be limited to a statistically measurable number of sufferers, nor is it something restricted to creative poets and artists with their “black” phases. Like clinical depression, those who suffer it are experiencing in an intense, personal way a sickness of society - a social madness that is hidden only because it is so taken for granted.

##  Depression and Relationships

The question of how to respond to people who are depressed, schizophrenic, paranoid or manic is therefore not just a question for psychiatrists and psychotherapists, partners and care-givers. It is a question which bears on our whole attitude to relating and relationships. It seems a truism to assert that the whole of social and economic life is built upon human relationships, and is shaped by the quality of those relationships. That the lives of families and communities, corporations and nations is not a product of their collective value systems or institutional structures but of the way in which individuals relate to one another within the group - whether this be a group of two, the couple, or a group of two hundred or of two thousand. Relating is not the same thing as “having relationships”. All too often people seek relationships as a sanctuary in which they are protected from the need to actually relate. Although relating is the very life of relationships, relationships are all too often the death of real relating. Behind the extra-marital affairs and disrupted “relationships” that daily confront the marriage guidance or couples counsellor is a once “stable” relationship in which there was no real relating - a point disguised by references to a history of poor “communication” between the partners. On the one hand the term “poor communication” here becomes a euphemism for a much more serious and thought-provoking lack - a lacking capacity to relate. But the identification of relating with “communication” ignores the fact that people can communicate without truly relating to one another.

## The Quest to Relate

The quest to relate is the quest for core-relatedness as opposed to ego-relatedness. This means relating to the other person as a Self - as a You - and not just as an object, a He, She or It. As egos we “have” relationships” with other human beings, and “manage” these relationships. As Selves we are relational beings - we inherently quest a sense of core-relatedness with other beings. This is what I call the Quest to Relate. The Quest to Relate is more fundamental than either sexual drives or “spiritual goals”. The drive for physical intimacy with other human beings is the sexualisation of the quest to relate - but sexual relations do not necessarily fulfil the desire for core-relatedness. The quest to relate can be spiritualised in the search for an intimate inner relation with God. But this does not automatically bring a capacity for core-relatedness to other human beings. The latter may be sought through religious communion and communities. But a sense of Community can easily become a substitute for a true Sense of Self, community symbols can become a substitute for the Self, and community rituals and activities can actually diminish the capacity to relate to others, one-to-one, from our core Self. Whilst depression may be a modern substitute for contemplation and meditation in the West, neither Christianity nor Buddhism have much to say about non-sexual intimacy and intercourse - a spiritual intercourse not with God alone but with other human beings. Spiritual intimacy and intercourse with others does not mean talking about spiritual matters. Essentially it is not about talking at all - it is a listening contact with others.

## Negative Listening

Since Freud there has been much debate about the efficacy of therapy and psychoanalysis as “talking cures”. Very little has been said or written about the nature of listening. It is in the withdrawal phase of the Energetic Cycle that we are best able to listen to ourselves and others in a more intimate way, suspending our habitual intellectual and emotional reactions and listening with the ear of the Self. Though the ego may try to listen and react in a positive “helpful” way, only the Self truly hears. For the Self, hearing is not a prelude to giving others an understanding or empathic response. It is itself a form of inner contact and communication, inner responsiveness and relatedness. It is not a means to an end but an end in itself - a fulfilment of the Quest to Relate. But we cannot hear with the ear of the Self without listening in a new and deeper way. Counselling and psychotherapy are both largely based on “positive listening” - listening that seeks to help others to clarify and bring things out into the open, to express and explicate, verbalise and articulate their concerns. The depressive process both demands and facilitates a different type of listening - a negative listening. Positive listening is open and attentive. But attention is always directed at something - a word or remark, a gesture or mannerism, an overt or concealed expression of emotion. Negative listening attends to nothing - to no-thing. Instead of attending to some-thing, an “It”, it intends someone - a You.

## Ear Contact

To make inner contact with another person through our hearing is not just to be attentive and sensitive to their meaning. It is to listen in a way that really means them - that intends them as well as attends to them. This distinction is less obscure than it sounds. There is a very tangible difference between someone looking at your eyes (examining them like an optician) and someone looking at you - making “eye-contact”. There is a very tangible difference between touching someone’s hand in the way you might in helping an old lady cross the street, and touching their hand in order to make intimate contact - to touch their inner being. A doctor may handle my body in order to feel for a swelling, in the same way he may attend to my words in order to get diagnostic clues. But the fact that he touches my body does not mean that he touches me. Similarly, though a counsellor may attend carefully to my words, hear and “understand” them empathically, this does not mean that she hears me. Because it has no objects of attention, negative listening does not depend on eliciting overt communication from others. We can listen negatively to someone who is completely silent and still, passive and withdrawn. It is the listener’s intent that reaches out, making “ear contact” from the Self.

## The Third Ear

Negative listening is what makes positive, attentive listening fruitful. And yet it is easily foreclosed by habitual patterns of positive listening. Only when they are combined does the ear of the ego unite with the ear of the Self to create a “third ear”. But in order to cultivate this third ear listening it is necessary to practise the discipline of negative listening - to suspending our normal patterns of positive listening.

## The Disciplines of Negative Listening

• Not just listening outwardly to others but listening inwardly to ourselves - and from our innermost Self.

• Not focussing on a person’s words but on silence beneath them – on what they are communicating through the words (*dia-logos*).

• Not “understanding” them - for when we think we understand we stop listening.

• Not responding when they finish speaking, but continuing to listen to them in silence - staying inward listening contact with them.

• Not identifying with our thoughts about another person or emotional reactions to them but staying centred in our Self.

• Not mentally analysing another person’s feelings, but feeling them with and our self and body as a whole.

• Not putting our own questions to others, but experiencing them in ourselves.

• Not seeking answers from others, but waiting for those answers to come without asking.

• Not interpreting a person’s inner meaning but meaning their inner being – hearing a being or ‘You’ and not just a meaning or ‘It’.

Practising these disciplines of negative listening with others is open to misinterpretation by observers not directly involved. To them it may appear that we become silent, morose and withdrawn - “depressed”. This only shows how little appreciation there is of how the depressive process itself can deepen and spiritualise our listening contact with one another.