

Exploring Consciousness: The Three Principles



IN CONVERSATION WITH IAN WATSON



Interview by Rachel Singleton

RS: Ian, can you begin by telling us about Sydney Banks, founder of the 'Three Principles', and the understandings he came to?

IW: Sydney Banks was born close to Edinburgh, adopted as a child, and left school at the age of 15 with little in the way of academic education. He emigrated to the west coast of Canada and ended up working in a pulp mill as a welder. According to those who knew him, he was an ordinary working man who had no interest in spirituality or psychology.

He considered himself to be an insecure person until, in 1973, aged 42, he had a spontaneous and extraordinary insight into the way his emotional experience was being created. He suddenly saw that his insecurity was coming from his own thoughts, and not from anything in his past or present circumstances. He was immediately freed from a lifetime of insecurity and found a confidence he never knew he had.

Further insights followed over the next few days culminating in a deep, mystical experience of the oneness of all life. In the midst of this time, he turned to his wife and said, 'What I have just realised will one day transform the fields of psychology and psychiatry.' He wasn't boasting or bragging: he simply realised that he had understood something that the whole field of psychology had overlooked.

RS: What was it that he realised?

IW: Well, there are two key things. The first was that experience is created through thought - specifically our felt experience. Everything that we can feel - or experience as a felt sensation - comes directly through what he called the Power of Thought. And it's only 'thought in the moment' that we can actually feel. He realised that all his insecure feelings were coming from the insecure thinking that he didn't know he was doing. So, this first insight related directly to his own experience.

But then, looking out through those new eyes, he realised that everybody else was in the same boat. Everybody else was feeling their own thinking as well - and couldn't see it. He saw the universality of it. The second insight this led to was that we are all perfectly ok on the inside at all times - but for our thinking. Everyone already has all the love, peace and wellbeing that we could ever wish for on the inside, but it gets obscured by the variations of thought and feeling that are being created without our realising it.

RS: So, to play devil's advocate for a moment, it sounds almost like a flaw in our design when I hear that description. If we have got all that peace, love and wellbeing inside, why do we also have the constant generation of something that obscures that?

IW: Good question! Here's what it looks like to me. If what Syd suggests is true, then that would mean, for example, that when we are having a dream, it would be a product of thought, too. What else could it be? And when we are having a dream, which is purely a thought creation, we tend not to know that it is a dream: we tend to experience it as a reality. It looks and feels like a reality for as long as we are in it.

The reason we experience it as a reality is what you are calling the 'design flaw'. We are feeling everything that we are thinking – that's what gives it its 'virtual reality' effect. If you have a dream tiger chasing you, you will feel afraid: your heart rate will increase; your blood pressure will go up. All of this will be happening because you are feeling your thinking. That's what makes the dream experience so rich and vivid - until we wake up and realise, it's just a dream. As soon as we see the unreality of it, we calm down and snap out of it. What is true in the dream world is also true in the waking state.

In order for us to have a full immersion experience of life in physical form, we have to fall for the illusion. We have to be willing to play along and to lose sight of the fact that we are creating it all from the inside, using the power of thought. Because, if we didn't do that, then the game would be up! So, rather than seeing it as a flaw, we can see it as the perfect set-up.

RS: The perfect set-up for what?

IW: For an embodied life-experience as a spiritual being.

RS: Because the trigger, the temptation to come back into the virtual reality, is absolutely constant, isn't it?

IW: Yes. And it is sufficient just to have an understanding of that. Once you have this understanding, you can essentially forget about it because, if there's anything this understanding does for people, it's to make life easier - not more difficult.

RS: George Pransky said that he felt that living the understanding of the Three Principles could make life harder. How does that fit in here?

IW: On the outside, the challenges will probably get bigger because you are no longer fooled by the easier ones! Let me give you an example: supposing someone is going along quite happily in every area of life except at work, where one person seems to have magic powers and can wind them up the wrong way. This person is the fly in the ointment in their life. It will look to them like there are two possibilities if they wish to have an easier life: either 'that person has to change their behaviour, or I have to leave this environment and go somewhere else.'

We all know that trying to make someone else change their behaviour never works, and we are likely to encounter a new version of the same problem if we simply run away. Life is relentless like that. Until we understand what is really going on here, we get the same kind of circumstances showing up over and over again, in different forms.

All someone needs to realise is that they are not feeling frustrated because of anything the other person is doing: they are feeling frustrated because of their own unconscious thoughts and expectations. They haven't made the connection that those distressing feelings are coming from within. Once they get a glimpse of that, it's going to look like that other person changes in the blink of an eye.

In that area of life, there is ease, now, instead of struggle. That's nice, but it's not how we grow. So, life is going to have to present us with some other challenge, now, that also looks like it is *the* problem! You get the idea? And now, I am going to go through a similar cycle of trying to fix it on the outside - and eventually wake up to the fact that the problem doesn't exist on the outside: it exists inside of me.

It seems to me that in order for us to grow and evolve, there has to be this incremental and sequential upping of the stakes. We're not going to get fooled in the same way as we did before, so it has to be something bigger and better. I am not sure if that is good news or bad news!

RS: (laughs) Does it mean that the road ahead is an uphill struggle?

IW: No: because, in equal measure, as the challenges get greater, your understanding continues to deepen, which means you are only ever getting challenged to the level you have the capacity to meet. Even though your life might have all kinds of things appearing in it that you wouldn't necessarily wish for, your ability to have equanimity, peace of mind and trust that you

can meet those challenges, will always be sufficient and - more. In many respects, your life is getting richer and better: less fearful and more loving.

RS: Yes, I see that. Earlier, you spoke of having an ‘embodied life experience as a spiritual being’ which is a very different relationship to life, isn’t it: far from the everyday reality for so many of being up in our heads, tense and anxious, trying to impose a solution onto an external set of circumstances?

IW: Yes. The problem with trying to impose a solution onto a set of circumstances in order to feel better is that it can never work because that isn’t where the feeling is coming from. This simple misunderstanding is the primary source of stress for all of us.

RS: So, on a practical level, when someone is caught in that head-space and they have all those cyclical thoughts going on which they can’t seem to switch off, what can they do? How can they use the Three Principles?

IW: Let me answer the last part of your question first. There is never a moment when you are not using the Principles. They are not a technique that we decide to apply - they are a description of how all experience gets created via thought. The problem is that, without an understanding of how thought works, we are liable to use that power against ourselves.

Sydney Banks had a beautiful phrase for that. He called it ‘the innocent misuse of the gift of thought’, and it is innocent because we don’t know that we are doing it. The solution comes not through intellectual understanding, but via insightful understanding - and this is a really important distinction. Intellectual understanding is when we use the mind in an analytical way, going into the storehouse of what we already know to try to find a solution to a problem. This is when we go around in circles. Insightful understanding is when our mind gets quiet enough, or clear enough, so that something fresh and new can come in. We call it an ‘a-ha’ moment: an insight, an intuition, a shift in perspective. And this is how the mind is designed to work. When we are not innocently misusing the gift of thought, we’re designed to have insight and fresh thought which is helpful to us.

RS: I love that! I love that that is how the mind is designed to work. Looking around, I can see that this really is not what we are all doing but it makes so much sense.

IW: Yes, this is built into us. It is an innate faculty we have from the moment we are born. We don't have to learn how to have insights. We have only to see that, when we get into a tangle or a struggle, it is only insight that will help us. You can't gain insight by overuse of the intellect. It is the wrong direction to go in. Trying to think yourself to a quiet mind is not possible! What you can do is learn to leave yourself alone. Because it turns out that the mind is self-correcting and self-regulating, just like the body is. We see this in babies, but we assume it works differently for adults and, as soon as we get upset or distressed, we think that we have to do something to correct that or make it better.

RS: That's our training isn't it? It's what we see all around us and it's what everybody does. We've been trained away from a natural way of being within ourselves. We try to think our way through life, rather than allow space for the insights to arise.

IW: Exactly, and, as a result, most people have become normalized to living in a state of chronic mental stress which has a huge impact on their physical and psychological wellbeing.



RS: I'd like to talk about your journey with this. What has Syd Banks' work given you personally? I feel that you already had this understanding anyway.

IW: Yes, of course I did! So do you. And everybody else too! I recognised the truth in Sydney Banks' work when I was already 25 years into my healing journey. I'd started by working with homeopathy and essences, then went on to spend another nine years - using every psychological and emotional healing technique I could find - both for my clients and for myself. I was aware of looking for something that was still missing, but I wasn't sure what that was.

The way this showed up in my practice was that there was no consistency about whether a person got better or not. I could do what I thought was my best work, and it would sometimes have very little impact. At other times, it seemed like I did hardly anything - yet a person would experience a shift and their life would change.

It seemed to me that, if people were still struggling after I had worked with them, then there were only three possibilities: I was using the wrong technique so I needed to try something else; the client hadn't done the technique properly and they needed to dig in and really do the work; or maybe there was a deeper issue, something we still needed to unearth. But none of these felt completely right. I wasn't happy with the fact that I seemed to have good techniques that didn't work consistently. I wasn't happy with blaming the client and making them work harder - they were already struggling, I didn't need to make it harder for them. And I wasn't happy going into their painful past because they were, quite rightly, trying to move on from that and put it behind them. I was doing the best with what I knew but I wasn't satisfied.

When I came to Sydney Banks' work, I had an insight about insight. You know, he was very astute. He saw that the only thing that had changed him was the realisation he had about the nature of thought. He saw, very quickly, that he couldn't give that away to anybody else. He could tell them about what had happened to him, but it wasn't the same as it happening for them. The only way for them to get the benefit was for them to have their own insight.

When I heard him say that, I had an insight! I realised that the only thing that had ever helped my clients was their own insight! It has nothing to do

with the techniques or the processes: I just thought it did. That was a game changer for me. I understood that the sole agent of change is an insight or shift in consciousness.

As practitioners, we can't make it happen - but we can create a shared, open and engaged space that is conducive to insight. It is beautiful work which benefits both parties – always. It is not stressful for you as the practitioner, and it's not painful for the client either. Once a person gets a glimpse of the power of thought, it's not only helpful with that one issue. They are learning about the nature of experience itself, and that is fundamental to everything in their life.

RS: How has this impacted on your life? It sounds like it has made sense of a lot of things for you?

IW: Yes, it brought me a feeling of joining the dots and coming home. A big part of my life has been a spiritual quest, a search for meaning and purpose. The work of Syd Banks settled something down in me around that whole area. It ended a search. It continues to bring a recognition that the only place to look is within, which, of course, all the good teachers have recognised.

It hasn't stopped me getting fooled by the illusion of life – that still occurs on a daily basis. If someone drives like an idiot on the streets of London, it can look to me like that's why I'm feeling annoyed. But the recovery period is way shorter than it used to be. I get caught, I get reactive, then I see what I'm up to: I am experiencing my own thoughts about this – that's all. The challenges of daily life become opportunities to deepen your understanding.

I can't tell you how helpful this has been as a parent. It is so helpful to know that you can be in a low mood, but you can get over it really quickly, and you know that your kids can do that too. You are less reactive. And also, if we all have wisdom and wellbeing, then my kids have it too - and so I don't need to have all the answers on their behalf: I can help them find and trust their own answers. That's a relief!

It's the same if you are doing client work. We can subtly become 'the expert' and take responsibility for someone's wellbeing, which then quickly turns into a burden. It is very freeing to know that my clients are already psychologically healthy on the inside, and I don't need to fix them or to find answers on their behalf.

RS: Yes, I have experienced something similar. I can see that when I get stressful thoughts this is just what my mind does. That doesn't mean I have to be ruled by this and react to that - I can let it be, settle back within myself, and it will change.

IW: I love what you said there: 'this is just what my mind does.' That's understanding. When you know something about the nature of thought and the built-in, self-correcting tendency of the mind, you can relax - because it's not your job to fix it anymore.

It was very helpful for me to see that giving attention to something holds it in place. The only reason I wasn't coming out of a mood or an unpleasant feeling state was because of all the attention and extra thinking I was adding to it. And you always get the feedback that helps you to realise when you are doing this, in the form of a stressful feeling. That is how we can know what to trust in our own thinking – the answer lies in the feeling that goes with it.

RS: One of the things that troubles me about some of the therapies we have is that the therapy space can feed the focus on the problem instead of enabling a space for insights to come and problems to be seen as a thought-process.

IW: That is what Syd Banks saw in those very early days. He saw that once practitioners had this understanding, it would not make sense for them to take their clients back into painful events and re-traumatise them, nor would it make sense to treat people as if they were broken or damaged. It cannot make sense if we understand the truth that these principles point to: everyone has 100% wellbeing and access to a deeper wisdom, whether they can see it or not, which means that everybody has perfect mental health available to them at all times.

RS: Just the energy of those words – 'everybody has perfect mental health available to them at all times' – is deeply empowering and relaxing. It gives you back to yourself.

IW: And the power is not in the words! *The power is in the fact that it is true.* When people recognise that truth for themselves, they feel its power and it wakes them up. I have seen people wake up out of a thirty-year depression, in the space of an hour, when they get that. They've recognised this truth that I'm pointing to; they've seen it in their own way, and gone straight back to their mental health. That's not supposed to be possible according to the traditional models – at least not that quickly or easily. But I have seen it repeatedly with people in chronic states of distress, and I have colleagues who have seen the same thing with every kind of diagnostic label you can think of.



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The understanding behind this work is very simple, but the implications are profound. It is these implications that we are now in the process of exploring. I have colleagues working in prisons. I am currently engaged with the Pret Foundation, helping homeless people, and I've been working in schools with children and also in businesses. It is filtering out everywhere.

RS: To rediscover that you can trust your own being, that you can trust the very core of who you are, and that you can trust the universe, is essentially what all of us sense but haven't always known. How differently we live when we connect back to that knowing! We look at life through a completely different window. Our entire outlook and response is different.

IW: That's right. And even though you will lose sight of it – we all do – you can always fall back on it because 'it' hasn't gone anywhere. This is very reassuring. Once you have 'run the experiment' a few times and have found that it is always there to fall back on, a deeper trust begins to emerge, which is our birthright. We have been conditioned to look outside, to look to experts and authority figures, and have lost sight of what has always been available to us. Syd Banks called it 'the missing link': linking together the psychological with the spiritual gives us a practical spirituality. I love that!

RS: Yes, me too. I love it! I love the sense that you just know your thoughts are going to keep doing their thing - and that you don't need to worry about it: it's just there. And these thoughts don't have to be such weighty, dictatorial, forces in your life anymore. Because the moment you get back to insight, and you see you have been caught up in thought, then that in itself is such a moment of lightness and liberation. The more times you do that, the more you have that to fall back on, the more you live by insight rather than intellectual thought - and the easier and lighter it gets.

IW: Absolutely. I call it 'Incremental Enlightenment'. It is attainable and accessible for all people. It is not 'all or nothing enlightenment'. This work points to a more gentle way that is more accessible. In our daily life, we can all have incremental insights which help us, and each one builds on what we have already seen. None of it is ever wasted, as far as I can tell. The capacity to continue to see more and to see more deeply seems to be limitless. So, it is a very interesting journey to be on.

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