



# The Mountain of Fire

By Nick Pole FwSS



**Nick Pole talks to Anthony Fidler about his trauma informed 'HeartTouch' approach for working with extreme mental states.**

Nick has over 25 years experience in integrating eastern and western forms of mind-body therapy and has also trained in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. Based in NW London, he integrates Shiatsu, Clean Language and various mindfulness-based approaches in his practice and teaching. His book, 'Words That Touch - How to ask questions your body can answer' (Singing Dragon, 2017), is a comprehensive guide to using Clean Language in mind-body therapy. [www.nickpole.com](http://www.nickpole.com)

**W**hen it's a struggle to live in your body and 'hell on earth' in your mind, where can you go? In Anthony Fidler's case, in September 1996 he chose to travel to India, which led to him practising Vipassana there, and then Tai Chi in China. His challenges continued to unfold. By 2001 he was experiencing what he calls 'spiritual psychosis' which was to continue intermittently throughout the next decade.

Over the years he also studied massage, aromatherapy, shiatsu, and various mindfulness approaches to learn how to navigate the raging storms within, and to find ways to stay grounded and present in the world of everyday reality.

Eventually he started teaching mindfulness workshops for people suffering with the same kind of traumatic mental states he himself experienced. Having for many years also been a student of Akinobu Kishi, the Japanese founder of Sei-ki, it was natural for him to incorporate touch into these workshops.

He now teaches his HeartTouch approach in several countries, inviting bodyworkers, psychotherapists, and people with mental health issues to share a safe space together through mindful breathing, movement and voice work, and then to find resonance and connection with each other through this simple human-to-human way of meeting through touch. In a Zoom interview I asked him about this long journey to turn his own self-healing into something that could help others.

**AF:** Teaching mindfulness, I found that the people with the most extreme emotions, or pain, or whatever you say, were the most interesting to work with. Maybe because of my own experiences, the connection and the feeling were deeper. I'd done a Breathworks course, learning a mindfulness approach for people (like me) with chronic pain, and I saw in their training guidelines, 'Don't accept people with bi-polar, don't work with this, this and this condition'. After reflection, during a Zen retreat, I knew I wanted to run a workshop that said, 'Only for people with this, this, and this condition'.

**NP:** You'd already started Vipassana before your first experiences with psychosis. Did that help?

**AF:** Yes, I would say it helped me survive the experiences I had in China in 2001, but when I got home, I didn't think I had the capacity to handle it all on my own. It's so difficult Nick - who's got the training to handle non-ordinary states or deal with having dark thoughts of hurting people? I ended up calling a psychiatrist but found no help there, only greater misery with all the medication and pathologising attitudes.

So eventually, I did learn to manage everything with my Vipassana mindfulness skills. I trained myself not to react to my 'inner darkness', to internalise it, soothe myself, keep smiling and continue the conversation in the outside world. This is part of what I call my 'Mindfulness for Psychosis'. The other part is about navigating live non-ordinary states. I got very skilled at doing this and have started to share it, but it goes beyond the HeartTouch work.

**NP:** When you say 'continue the conversation in the outside world' you mean...?

**AF:** It was often happening at the dinner table, while I was on medication and in a very difficult state. The outside world is like the surface of the ocean - a reality we're sharing - but it's like you're also being dragged by your feet down into an inner underworld. Some of the stuff happening there was traumatic and seriously unpleasant for me. I didn't want that inner world to steal my outer reality, where there's a conversation going on about the blue tits on the bird feeder or something. My family had some awareness of what was going on, but we couldn't

really speak about it. It was a terrible, lonely experience processing the inner darkness and keeping my body relaxed enough to continue with our outer conversations.

So yes, this is extreme mindfulness applied when life offered no obvious options to me other than suicide. It was tough but it worked and, over time, I found my way out of the mess.

**NP:** When you were in China, did you talk to your Tai Chi teacher about what was happening for you?

**AF:** No, I never discussed things explicitly with my Chinese teachers, but they knew. Our focus was on the body, the Tai Chi movement and 'cleaning my Chi'. Tai Chi, as a form of embodied mindfulness has got to be one of the ultimate therapies for supporting good mental health. I love it and do it every day!

**NP:** Can you say more on what happened in 2001 and afterwards?

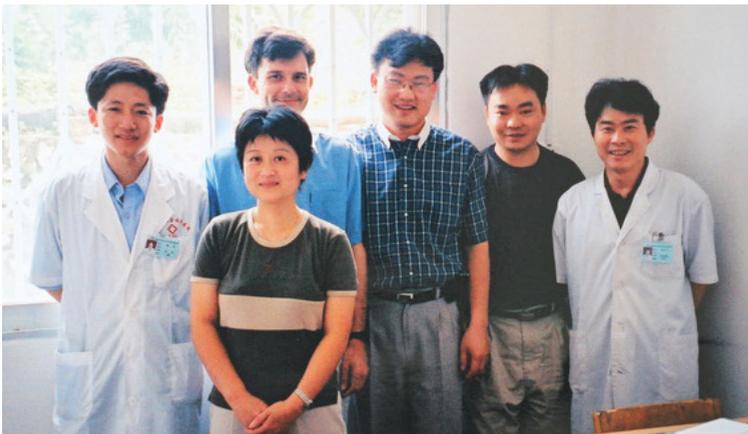
**AF:** I don't really want to say more about what happened in China. I'm writing about that elsewhere. I was released from



hospital in China just before my 30th birthday and returned to the UK to face eight months as a psychiatric outpatient. I very nearly committed suicide while coming off their medication which had caused a suicidal depression.

I guided my own recovery after this. It was such a beautiful time. An occupational therapist suggested shiatsu as a way for me to return to working life. I did a weekend with Chris Jarmey in Wales and found this healing touch suited me. I continued with a foundation training.

To re-establish my meditation practice, which I felt instinctively was important for my recovery, I returned to India in 2003 to study yoga and this went well. Early 2004 though, I entered a Thai Vipassana retreat in Thailand, and it triggered a second spiritual psychosis. It was very difficult still, but I noticed that with my growing mindfulness capacity, there was less overwhelm happening, and a growing confidence to navigate the experiences without causing problems for others. There was no interaction with the psychiatric system.





When I came back to the UK, I trained with Gabriel Mojay in massage and aromatherapy for mental health. I also read an article about Sei-ki by Alice Whieldon and went along to her workshop. I was feeling a bit empty in terms of connection in my touch work, and I liked what she was doing. Kishi was in London, and she suggested I see him for a treatment. That would have been August 2004. It was a difficult first session, because what he did opened the trauma within me somehow. I couldn't stop shaking and ended up having a person in the house talking to me afterwards to ground me. So, it was difficult, and I wasn't sure I was comfortable with it.

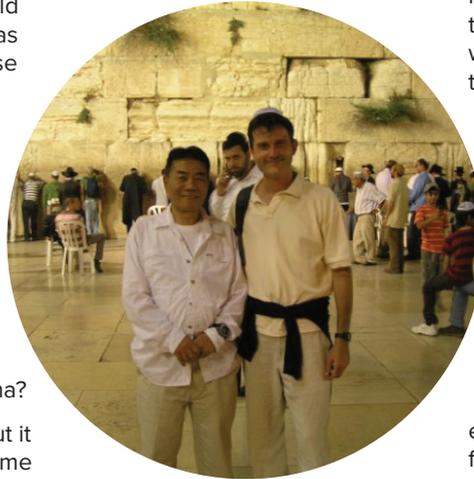
**NP:** Were you surprised that Sei-ki could release the trauma?

**AF:** I'm grateful to him now but it was a shock at the time. In some circumstances you need the human bit afterwards, and a lot of holding. On that occasion some things could have been gentler. I returned to India and, during a one-night full on 'episode', I reflected on that session with Kishi. I gained some insight into what he had done and felt excited about the possibilities for growth and freedom. On my return to the UK, I immediately signed up for a workshop that started the whole journey with him.

**NP:** How long was that journey?

**AF:** The period was about 7 years, but this isn't the answer. I went to all the workshops I could, usually two a year of varying lengths, from 2 days in Brighton to 2 weeks in Japan and I participated with total focus. I was generally the dramatic

person in the group - the demon roaring. I'm still depleting this mountain of fire that's in here, but in the early years it was off the scale. I lost my voice each time on the 5-day retreats - I'd leave unable to speak. Training as a Sei-ki therapist became irrelevant. I realised this was a survival space for me.



Anthony with Kishi in Israel

**NP:** And you had more one-to-one sessions with Kishi?

**AF:** Yes, many. After one major episode we shared a private session and I seemed to be working with a demonic hydra coming out of my hara. It expressed through me in a way that would freak out most people, but he was really chilled - remained warm and relaxed with me. We developed a very close feeling from this somehow. I felt accepted. If the whole planet feels judgemental and won't accept you and you're living a 'secret life' and you find someone who is able to meet you and accept you then it becomes a precious thing. I try and offer this to others now.

**NP:** There is a big focus now on 'trauma-sensitive mindfulness' thanks to David Treleaven's work, and the recognition that meditation, especially long intense retreats, can trigger psychosis. Has that ever happened to you?

**AF:** Yes, this is interesting. In a way, my whole work is a response to this - creating a trauma-sensitive mindfulness which allows people with trauma to get to a safe, resourced space first before meeting themselves. Just going in direct is like saying, 'Go and face your death and be relaxed while doing so'.

I would say in my own case originally, 1997-2000, the Vipassana was purely beneficial. I was able to follow the body scan practice, so the whole experience was extremely embodied and this, for me at least, did not cause a 'psychosis'. I developed a strength of mind which served me well later, so I consider my Vipassana time to have been a gift. But I have experienced other meditation practices which caused episodes. Now when I go on a retreat, I make sure with the organisers that I can do it in the most trauma-sensitive way possible.

**NP:** This brings us to your own 'HeartTouch' approach - group work specifically for mental health issues. How did that begin?

**AF:** I was organising a summer retreat in England for Kishi in July 2012 when he became seriously ill. It was terribly sad announcing it to people. I did two Vipassana retreats after he died, processing it all, and then found myself in a yoga school on a beautiful island

in Southern Thailand. I was there to teach Tai Chi, but the project collapsed, and the manager said, 'Can you do anything else?'. I did a Sei-ki session with him, and he immediately said, 'This is great. Can you teach others?' A day later, I shared Sei-ki with twelve people - who had no experience of touch work - and they liked it.

I started teaching mindfulness courses soon after and included some simple Sei-ki, a little Katsugen and some Kototama voice work. HeartTouch evolved from there. I wasn't attracting therapists; I was attracting people with similar experiences to mine. For example, we did a weekend on 'Despair' - supporting people when their baby's just died, they're addicted to benzo-Valium, they're coping with cancer, they're the child of an alcoholic, they go into psychosis every day, live a completely fake life - or just have burnout trauma and anxiety about the future. It was so beautiful we carried on the following weekend.

**NP:** In your current work you're keen to have health professionals and people with mental health issues sharing the space. Why is this?



Anthony working



HeartTouch group session

**AF:** I want them to really meet and understand each other. For the professionals, it helps them to free their mind from the whole hierarchy delusion that's built up, especially in the psychiatric medical profession. They learn more compassion and develop the capacity to relate with their patients.

For the people with lived experience, I like the idea of them having people with different backgrounds and life experiences in the room around them. It creates a more grounded resonance. When you work in resonance with someone, there is communication between the

bodies. Each has something different to teach. My feeling is that straightforward, grounded, emotionally warm people have the most to offer people experiencing extreme states - they just need a little training. In return they are touched by the realities that the people with lived

experience are moving through and can grow from this.

**NP:** You also emphasise a collaborative approach in the workshops?

**AF:** Yes, if the touch doesn't feel welcome to the receiver, they're also responsible and empowered to say that; to set a boundary, communicate, co-create, hold that power and break away, if necessary - to say, 'Oh the session is done now, thank you very much.'

**NP:** Group work can itself be traumatising, do you have any kind of filtering process?

**AF:** I've got quite a detailed application form - a process for me to get to know people. I want some information from people and filling in the form also helps them reflect on why they want to join the workshop. I also do one-to-one sessions with people, so they're my clients first and I can let them into the groups.

**NP:** We've had a few phases of 'anti-psychiatry' since the '60s and there are current debates in clinical psychology about working with psychosis. How do you think your work might be received by mental health professionals?





**AF:** The problem with anti-psychiatry is that no one so far has offered an alternative. I am, but new ways take time to be accepted. Twenty psychotherapists joined me for a 5 day trauma-sensitive retreat in Switzerland in '17, combining sitting practices with Katsugen, Sei-ki, evening sharings and one-to-ones.

I talked with doctors in Switzerland, and they all know there's something wrong – fewer and fewer young doctors want to train as psychiatrists. The system is failing - like a Berlin wall collapsing; it's a structure involved with lots of money, vested interests, and with prejudice and fear about 'mad people'. But many quietly know that it's time for change now and are looking for alternatives.

From my own experience I know that 'hell on earth' is a place our society creates. Medicating someone and leaving them with a mountain of emotional pain and trauma inside heals no one. Our society is obsessed with identifying psychosis as pathological and meaningless, rather than accepting that when we work with it in a trauma-sensitive way there is the potential for evolutionary growth. Sometimes the forest needs to burn for new growth to come.

**NP:** The language around mental health - you're not comfortable with a lot of it?

**AF:** When someone says, 'I've got psychosis', I say, 'Forget that word, it's a cognitive label, a sticker to put on something and then forget what's behind it.' I immediately ask,

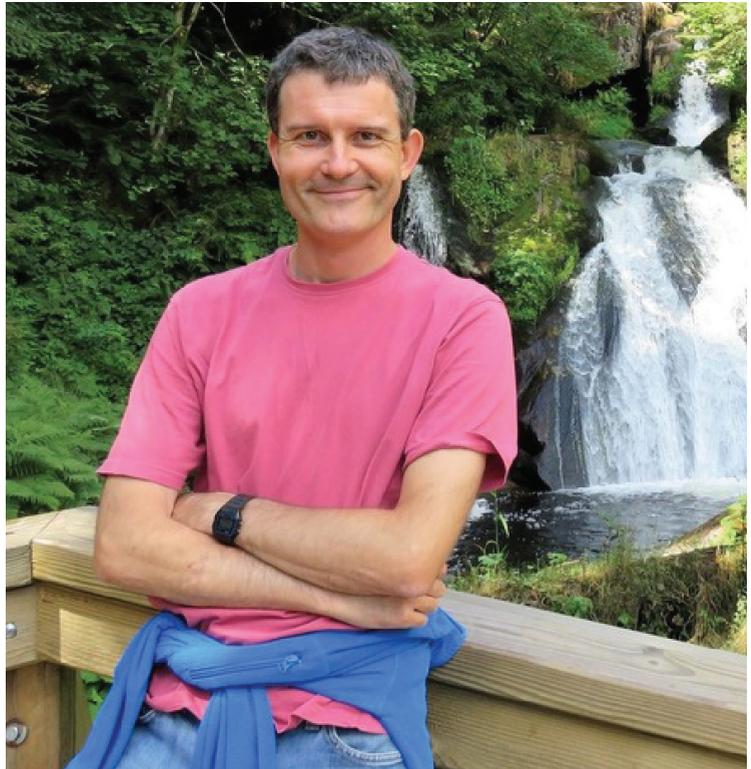
'What do you experience? Are you hearing voices? What are they saying? Are you in other states? How do you experience reality around you? How do other people feel to you? What's happening? What happened?'. I'm interested in the whole texture and colour of the universe they're experiencing; then you can see human patterns and can work with them.

**NP:** And your vision for the HeartTouch approach?

**AF:** I've been invited to a GP practice. If every GP practice

had a space for this kind of work, that would be a good step. It would also be good to have community groups, away from the medical world, where people can train to teach this and create lots of little groups with their own personalities. That's not necessarily for me to control - maybe it's for society to work out. Everyone can do this, but you have to do the work on yourself first.

For articles and videos on Sei-ki and HeartTouch, see Anthony's website: [www.easternpeace.com/heart-touch](http://www.easternpeace.com/heart-touch)



### References

- 1 'Principles Of Holotropic Breathwork' By Stanislav and Christina Grof
- 2 Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness at [www.davidtreleaven.com](http://www.davidtreleaven.com)
- 3 'My Secret Life' by Leonard Cohen