

Uncovering An Inner Moral Compass: The Confucian Four Beginnings (四端) in AEDP Healing

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Abstract: This clinical–theoretical article examines a pivotal psychotherapy session with a 36-year-old Cantonese speaking man presenting with complex developmental trauma and disorganized attachment. Integrating AEDP’s four state transformational model with the classical Confucian framework of the Four Moral Beginnings and Seven Emotions (四端七情), the paper explores how AEDP’s transformational process can make experientially accessible an intrinsic moral orientation that becomes visible as defended self-states soften and Core State emerges. Drawing on translated session vignettes, the therapist demonstrates how the client processed deep moral disgust, grief, and relational longing through explicit somatic portrayals. Following a profound corrective emotional experience, he entered Core State, exhibiting spontaneous narrative coherence and the organic emergence of all four Confucian virtues: Compassion (惻隱之心), Moral conscience (羞惡之心), Relational attunement (辭讓之心), and Ethical discernment (是非之心). These capacities resonate with established Core State qualities— clarity, ease, vitality, self-compassion, coherent identity (Fosha, 2005, 2021), and transpersonal experience (Yeung, 2021) - and extend them by highlighting the moral-emotional dimensions that can arise through deep affective processing. These virtues did not result from cultural instruction or cognitive reframing; I propose that they express the client’s inherent moral-emotional capacity, unlocked through AEDP’s somatic/affect-first approach. This practice-based reflection suggests that experiential dynamic therapy can facilitate cross-cultural moral-emotional integration, illuminating how innate moral sense may become accessible within a contemporary Chinese meaning making context.

Keywords: AEDP, Core State, Four Moral Beginnings (四端), Seven Emotions (七情), Confucian moral psychology, moral sense, compassion for others (惻隱之心), moral conscience (羞惡之心), relational attunement (辭讓之心), Ethical discernment (是非之心), narrative coherence, affective transformation, trauma and moral emotion, dyadic regulation, transformational affects.

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Introduction

Can a psychotherapy reveal a person's deepest moral orientation — not by teaching right and wrong, but by helping them access the emotional truth that makes moral clarity possible? This article proposes that AEDP does precisely this. By privileging emotional experience as the pathway to truth, namely a client's emotional truth, AEDP orients clients not only away from symptoms but toward integration, connection, and moral–emotional capacities that become accessible when affect is fully processed, known in AEDP as the *truth sense*. (Fosha, 2021; Fosha, 2005).

The clinical material from Tim's Session 23 illustrates this claim with unusual clarity. Tim (a pseudonym) is a 36-year-old Cantonese-speaking man who carried a developmental history marked by chronic physical and emotional abuse from his father, early abandonment, and prolonged relational isolation. By Session 23—after twenty-two sessions of careful, experiential work—he was approaching a pivotal confrontation with the core relational injury of his life. Through Anger Portrayal and Reparative Portrayal, the session moved him from defended rage to compassion, from the fantasy of revenge to the genuine freedom of no longer needing it.

This article interprets Tim's transformation through a dual lens: AEDP's four-state model and the Confucian framework of the Four Moral Beginnings and Seven Emotions (四端七情). The Confucian framework articulates culturally grounded meanings of experience that Western psychological categories cannot fully capture (Hwang, 2012; Sue & Sue, 2016). Tim's Cantonese cultural world, shaped by the implicit moral sensibilities of a Sino–Hong Kong upbringing, reflects Mencian¹ thought, in which the Four Moral Beginnings (四端) are innate moral sprouts requiring the right conditions to flourish. This aligns strikingly with AEDP's assertion that the person's deepest capacities for compassion, courage, and clarity emerge when affect is fully processed and Core State becomes accessible (Fosha, 2000, 2021; Shun 1997; Van Norden, 2008).

Conceptual Frame

AEDP: Emotion as Pathway, Core State as Moral Awakening

¹ Mencian" refers to the thought of Mencius (Mengzi, 孟子), the fourth century BCE Confucian philosopher who taught that human nature is good. He is traditionally honored as the "Second Sage" (亞聖), second only to Confucius (Norden, 2024).

AEDP is a transformation-oriented model of psychotherapy that places emotional experience, dyadic safety, and the cultivation of positive states at the center of therapeutic change (Fosha, 2000). Unlike deficit-focused approaches, AEDP is explicitly concerned with what the person is moving toward—not only what they are moving away from. Core State, the model's deepest self-condition, is characterized by calm, clarity, wisdom, compassion, and a coherent autobiographical narrative (Fosha, 2021). These qualities describe a person who is, in a morally significant sense, more fully alive, more truthful, and more deeply themselves.

The four state model maps the pathway from defended self-experience to this integrated condition.

- State One: Defensive organization: inhibitory affects (anxiety, shame, guilt), formal defenses (humor, dissociation, intellectualization), and restricted access to core affect.
- State Two: Core affect—the primary, adaptive emotional experiences (grief, anger, fear, love, disgust) that defenses have been suppressing.
- State Three: Transformational affects—the emotions that arise from being deeply seen and from the completion of emotional processing, including mastery affects, mourning-the-self, healing affects, enlivening affects.
- State Four: Core State, reflects integrated self-experience, clarity, and the qualities described above (Fosha, 2000, 2021; Russell & Fosha, 2008).

I propose that AEDP's transformational process can facilitate experiential access to an **intrinsic moral sense** that becomes increasingly visible as trauma-based defenses soften and the client enters Core State. In this view, the spontaneous emergence of compassion, moral conscience, relational respect, and ethical discernment is not evidence of externally imposed morality. Rather, these capacities represent innate moral sense — the affective ground of moral life — clarified through emotional processing and expressed ethically once Core State becomes accessible.

AEDP does not produce moral virtue as an external outcome. Instead, it creates the relational and affective conditions under which the person's own inherent moral-emotional capacities can be felt, recognized, and lived.

Confucian: The Four Moral Beginnings and the Seven Emotions (四端七情)

In the Confucian tradition, particularly as articulated by Mencius (孟子), The Four Moral Beginnings (四端) refers to the four innate moral–emotional capacities present in all human beings. These beginnings are not fully formed virtues but early moral sprouts that require cultivation to reach mature expression (Shun, 1997; Van Norden, 2008; Lu, 2018):

- The heart of compassion (惻隱之心) — the beginning of benevolence/humaneness (仁)
- The heart of moral conscience (羞惡之心) — the beginning of righteousness (義)
- The heart of deference and relational attunement (辭讓之心) — the beginning of propriety (禮)
- The heart of discernment and truth-sense (是非之心) — the beginning of wisdom (智)

Complementing these are the Seven Emotions (七情)—which name the classical affective repertoire of human life: joy (喜), anger (怒), grief (哀), fear (懼), love (愛), dislike (惡), and desire (欲) (Hwang, 2012). In this framework, the Seven Emotions (七情) corresponds to the core affects processes in AEDP's States One and Two, while the Four Moral Beginnings (四端) refers to what becomes visible in States Three and Four once emotional processing has been completed.

The central Mencian claim is that moral-emotional capacity is innate, not externally imposed (Shun, 1997). The Four Beginnings do not need to be taught; they require the right relational and emotional conditions to emerge and grow. AEDP's emphasis on the primacy of emotional experience as the pathway to truth resonates deeply with this position. When core affect is fully contacted, regulated, and processed, emotional experience becomes the medium through which innate moral orientation is embodied, clarified, and strengthened (Lu, 2018; Fosha, 2021).

Taken together, this convergence between AEDP and Confucian tradition suggests that transformational emotional processing may reveal dimensions of human nature that are both universal and morally significant. When trauma-based defenses soften and core affect is fully engaged, clients often experience not only psychological integration but also a renewed sense of compassion, conscience, relational humility and ethical clarity. These capacities do not arise from therapist instruction or cultural teaching; they

emerge as intrinsic moral-emotional dispositions that become accessible once emotional truth is safely and deeply processed.

In this light, the appeared of the Four Beginnings in Core State can be understood as the unveiling of what AEDP 2.0 describes as the person's innately good core (Fosha, 2021). Rather than adding moral content to psychotherapy, AEDP's transformational process appears to clear the conditions through which humanity's inherent moral orientation can be felt, recognized, and lived.

Client Overview

Tim (a pseudonym) is a 36-year-old single Cantonese-speaking man, employed as a sales manager and holding a master's degree from a prominent Hong Kong university. Referred by his church, he presented with hypertension, chronic insomnia, frequent nightmares, low mood, persistent high stress, and significant interpersonal difficulties. He described longstanding patterns of mistrust, difficulty sustaining relationships, and a pervasive sense of being fundamentally unlovable.

Developmental and Family History

Tim grew up experiencing chronic, complex trauma. From his earliest memories, his father physically and verbally abused him—he recalls being treated “like a punching bag” in kindergarten. By age five or six, he was already parentified, stepping between his parents during violent fights and pulling his mother to safety. After his parents divorced when he was six, he lived with his paternal grandmother for nearly a decade, where he faced further rejection and bullying from his extended family.

Throughout childhood, Tim's mother required him to visit his father at the market to collect money for the household. He remembers these visits as deeply humiliating and filled with resentment. As an adult, his relationship with his mother remained enmeshed; he was expected to manage her emotions and continually validate her views.

At eighteen, Tim changed his surname from his father's to his mother's—a decisive act of separation and self-definition. He also shared that he had dyslexia and carried shame from early academic struggles, which he later transformed through earning a postgraduate degree.

Case Formulation and Attachment

Tim's internal working model reflects the enduring impact of early relational trauma: a compromised self-image organized around beliefs of unworthiness and fundamental inadequacy (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). His attachment style is best conceptualized as disorganized (fearful avoidant), arising from the developmental paradox of caregivers who were simultaneously sources of needed comfort and profound threat (Main & Solomon, 1990). This disorganization contributed to chronic shame, dissociative self-states, and a compulsive relational strategy of seeking external validation while avoiding the emotional intimacy that might expose his feared core (Fosha, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

At the outset of treatment, Tim occupied what AEDP describes as the "Self-at-Worst" position (Fosha, 2021): pervasive defensive organization, severely restricted access to adaptive primary affect, and a relational stance oriented toward protection from further injury.

Treatment Course Prior to Session 23

Sessions 1–10 focused on establishing foundational trust through patient coregulation and repeated affirmation of Tim's emotional experience. A pivotal moment occurred when the therapist's tears emerged in response to Tim's account of paternal abuse—an instance of explicit therapeutic attunement that deepened relational safety (Lipton & Fosha, 2011).

Sessions 11–20 introduced Intrarelational AEDP, facilitating contact between adult Tim and his inner child and initiating the restoration of internal compassion (Lamagna, 2021, 2022).

Session 21 completed a Reunion Portrayal, allowing Tim to experience a felt sense of safety and companionship between his adult and child selves.

Session 22 employed a Healing Portrayal to mourn the loss of his father and begin differentiating his identity from his father's failures.

By Session 23, Tim was showing visible enlivenment outside therapy—visiting the waterfront, photographing sunsets, and allowing himself simple pleasures. This expansion of vitality opened the session and, paradoxically, activated the affective flash that led to the session's central transformational work.

State One: Defense as Protection — Annotated Vignette

Session 23 opens with Tim describing a recent and unfamiliar experience of enjoyment—visiting the seaside, watching sunsets, taking photographs. As he speaks, a subtle micro expression (a brief pursing of his lips) signals the presence of an affective flash beneath the surface of his joy. This moment marks the first indication that transference energy and defensive organization are coexisting in the room.

The annotated exchanges that follow illustrate this tension. They show how Tim's newfound vitality is accompanied by a protective contraction, and how my interventions work to create the relational safety necessary for him to access the underlying emotional material. In AEDP terms, the work in this segment involves recognizing the early signs of State One activation, tracking the defensive swell with precision, and offering the dyadic regulation required for Tim to move toward the core affect waiting beneath.

Transference and the Affective Flash

Vignette 1 — Opening: transference amplification and tracking the glimmer

Ct: "I feel so alive!" (*excited tone*)

Th: (*Slow, accepting, curious tone*) "Do you?"

Ct: "Yeah!" (*smiling, confident*)

Th: [**Slowing down, amplifying transference**] "Where do you feel it?"

Ct: "Uh... it comes from the heart... like something surging up... so much energy... wanting to try anything!"

Th: "Wow, I hear how happy you are."

(*Therapist notices the subtle pursing of lips — an affective flash — and gently shifts attention.*)

Th: [**Tracking the somatic glimmer, gentle redirection**] "With this energy, I want to check in about your mouth earlier... you said something looped inside. What did you notice happening there?"

The lip movement is the clinical pivot. Without tracking this micro expression, the session would likely have remained in the register of positive affect, and the underlying material—decades of unprocessed

relational injury—would not have become accessible (Hanakawa, 2021). My intervention, *"I want to check in,"* serves two essential functions. First, it names the observation without pathologizing it, maintaining Tim's sense of safety and dignity. Second, it frames the shift from transference energy into deeper work as a natural continuation of the same curiosity, rather than a departure from or diminishment of the joy that preceded it.

Defense, Shame Emergence, and Dyadic Invitation

Vignette 2 — First defense: tactical deflection, dissociation, shame, and the green light

(Tim acknowledges "unhappy things about my dad" — a flash, lasted a split second." When invited to stay with the feeling, he deflects:)

Ct: "He's terrible!" *(sudden awkward smile — tactical defense mixed with core affect glimmer)*

Th: [Mirroring with empathic facial expression] "He's terrible..."

Ct: "But that's him, not me." *(Formal defense: Splitting or Disidentification)*

Th: [Tracking the deeper layer beneath the deflection] "When you say 'he's terrible,' I sense there's a feeling underneath."

Ct: "I'm terrible too..." *(accessing toxic shame)*

Th: [Validating, "we-ness," permission-seeking] "It's okay... Abraham is here with you. Would you like to explore this together?"

Ct: "Okay." *(green-light affect — openness to deepen)*

Three State One phenomena emerge in rapid succession: Tim first directs condemnation outward (*"He's terrible!"*), a tactical defense; then distances himself from the qualities he condemns (*"That's him, not me"*), formal defense of disidentification (or possibly splitting); and finally turns the condemnation inward (*"I'm terrible too"*), expression inhibitory shame. Each marks Tim's shifting distance from core affect. I meet these moves with nonconfrontational accompaniment: mirroring to restore right brain resonance, naming the implicit affect beneath the defense, and invoking *we-ness* to counter shame's

isolating pull. I also seek permission before deepening, a crucial attachment intervention given Tim's disorganized attachment, where emotional pursuit can feel threatening (Pando-Mars & Fosha, 2025). Inviting agency preserves safety and coherence.

Affectively, seven emotions are active: moral disgust (惡) toward the father, fear (懼) beneath the defensive smile, and a latent grief (哀) visible in the pursed lips (Hwang, 2012). The Four Moral Beginnings remain protected by the defensive organization, not yet accessible until regulation and dyadic safety deepen.

Scene Reconstruction: The Five-Year-Old Self

Vignette 3 — Deepening : access to childhood memory and the body

Ct: "He's someone I can't respect." (*mouth tightening — deeper layer accessed*)

Ct: "I see... my dad and mom arguing." (*spontaneous image emerging*)

(*Therapist leans forward, attunes posturally, invites sensory detail — distance, volume, position of the child.*)

Th: [Somatic and relational deepening, anchoring into the child self] "How did little Tim feel seeing them like that?"

Ct: "Very unhappy... they were so loud... so annoying... again!"

The invitation to **sensory and spatial detail**—the distance from the car, the volume of the voices, the smallness of the five-year body—supports the **somatic reactivation** of the original experience, making it available for processing rather than remaining a purely narrative account (Ogden et al., 2006). This is a **carefully tracked, dyadically regulated reentry** into the affective reality of the childhood scene, held within the safety of the therapeutic relationship.

State Two: Core Affect — Annotated Vignette

State Two in Session 23 unfolded in two distinct waves. The first wave—moral disgust and anger—was

processed through the Anger Portrayal. The second wave—pity, sadness, and relational longing—emerged through the Reparative Portrayal, culminating in the pivotal corrective emotional experience of the father's silent tears. Both waves are presented in the annotated vignette below.

First Wave: Moral Disgust and the Anger Portrayal

Vignette 4 — Anger Portrayal : somatic tracking through embodied action

Ct: "Ugh... I really hate him!" (*eyes closed, frowning — core affect: moral disgust, entering Anger Portrayal*)

Th: [Attuned tone, slowing, dyadic presence] "Hate... mm... mm... Slowly... I'm right here with you... This hatred — where in your body do you feel it?"

Ct: "In... my blood."

Th: [Somatic tracking, moment-to-moment following] "In your blood... and your mouth moved earlier... what was happening there?"

Ct: "My dad is horrible!" (*core affect: moral disgust*)

Th: [Tracking adaptive action tendency] "Your dad is horrible... mm... Notice this hatred... what does your body want to say or do?"

Ct: "It's gathering in my hand... hot... like boiling blood."

Th: [Following the somatic signal] "Notice your hand... what does it want to do?"

Ct: "I... I want to hit someone."

Th: "Who do you want to hit?"

Ct: "Of course my dad!"

Th: "How do you want to hit him?"

Ct: "A punch — straight to his face!"

Th: [Welcoming and grounding the Anger Portrayal] "A straight punch... ok... notice how your hand wants to do it."

(Tim lifts his right hand, makes a fist, punches in the air.)

Th: [Co-regulating, tracking force and completion] "Yes... ok... do you see him? Are you punching him? Keep noticing... the force... mm... yes... do you need to hit harder?"

Ct: "Yes!"

Th: [Following the body's lead] "Yes... follow what your body wants... is one hand enough?"

Ct: "Enough!" *(continues punching, then slowly stops and smiles)*

Each therapist utterance functions as a minimal, attuned prompt that follows rather than leads. This pacing allows the client's body to set the tempo of the work, a core AEDP principle for State Two processing (Fosha, 2000, 2021). The Anger Portrayal does not evoke reactive aggression; rather, it enables the completion of an adaptive action tendency—the somatic resolution of a violation the child's body registered but was never permitted to act upon (Medley, 2020; Levine, 2010; Ogden et al., 2006).

The moral quality of Tim's disgust is clinically significant. He is not merely angry; he is experiencing the affective recognition of wrongdoing. In Mencian terms, this marks the first stirring of the heart of moral conscience (羞惡之心), the precultivated "heart of moral conscience"—the innate capacity to respond with appropriate emotional force to moral violation (Shun, 1997).

Release: The Somatic Pivot

Vignette 5 — Post-Anger Portrayal: somatic release and State Two to Three transition

Th: [Metaprocessing somatic shift] "Now... after hitting him... how is the hatred? What's different?"

Ct: "It feels... 爽... relieved! The hatred is gone. It's released." *(smiling)*

(爽: a Cantonese word carrying connotations of physical satisfaction, liberation, and rightness that no single English word fully captures.)

Th: [Somatic tracking of transformation] "Released... where do you feel that?"

Ct: "I don't hate him as much now. My heart... feels lighter."

Th: [**Tracking small bodily changes**] "Notice that lightness... what small changes do you feel?"

Ct: "My breathing is smoother."

Th: "Smoother breathing..."

The sequence—heat, fist, punch, 爽, lightness, smoother breathing—maps the State Two to State Three transition at the somatic level. My question, *"What small changes do you feel?"* keeps the focus on bodily shifts rather than cognitive meaning. This is intentional: premature meaning making would pull Tim into top-down interpretation and interrupt the bottom-up integration already underway (Ogden et al., 2006). The clinical principle is to stay with the body until the body reports the change, and only then follow its lead.

Second Wave: Pity, Sadness, and the Reparative Portrayal

Vignette 6 — Second wave : pity, sadness, relational ambivalence

Th: [**Inviting awareness of the imagined scene**] "Relaxed... And now that you've given the hatred back to your father... how is he now?"

Ct: "He... he... looks... pitiful." (*second wave of core affect: sadness emerging*)

Th: [**Staying with, not rushing**] "Pitiful... notice that feeling... where do you feel it?"

Ct: "In my heart. The 爽 feeling is gone."

Th: [**Deepening into complexity, tracking ambivalence**] "Ok... you feel pity for him... let's stay with that... what does this feeling want to say or do?"

Ct: "He brought it on himself... but... another part feels pity because... he got hit by his son."

Th: [**"We-ness," dyadic regulation amid complexity**] "Mm... something is happening inside... I'm right here... it's ok..."

Ct: "He's actually quite 苦... suffering." (苦: *a Cantonese word carrying connotations of bitterness, suffering*)

Th: [Following the affect, not directing it] "He's suffering... what do you feel for him?"

Ct: "He did wrong... and now he has to face the consequences."

Th: "So seeing him face the consequences... what do you feel?"

Ct: "Pity."

Th: [Therapist self-disclosure, co-regulation] "Pity... Abraham feels that too... is there also some sadness?"

Ct: "Yes... some sadness."

Th: [Tracking action tendency of sadness] "Stay with that... what does this sadness want to say or do?"

Ct: "I don't want to walk away... but I also don't want to talk to him... but... I think I would talk to him."

Th: "What would you say?"

Ct: "I'd walk 3–5 meters toward him... and say: 'Why did you have to do that in the first place?' (咁又何必當初?)"

The second wave illustrates the multilayered complexity of core affect. Tim holds both the father's accountability (*"he brought it on himself"*) and his vulnerability (*"another part feels pity"*) at the same time—a significant shift from the splitting that typically organizes traumatized relational experience (Fosha, 2000).

My intervention, *"I feel that too,"* is a precisely timed moment of therapist self-disclosure, offered to normalize the complexity and deepen the dyadic "we" (Fosha, 2021). The movement from *"I don't want to walk away... but I think I would talk to him"* signals the early emergence of the heart of compassion (惻隱之心) and the heart of moral conscience (羞惡之心). These moral emotions arise from within the processed affect, not imposed from outside—an organic unfolding consistent with Mencian moral psychology (Shun, 1997; Van Norden, 2008; Lu, 2018).

The Father's Tears: Corrective Emotional Experience

Vignette 7 — Reparative Portrayal : father's silent tears and the pivot of transformation

Th: "What does he look like?"

Ct: "Sad."

Th: [Tracking shared affect] "And inside you?"

Ct: "Also a bit sad."

Th: ["We-ness," bearing witness] "Mm... I'm here with you... what is this sadness?"

Ct: "He has to face his ending."

Ct: "I can only ask him: 'Why did you have to do that?'"

Th: "Does he hear you?"

Ct: "Yes."

Th: "How does he respond?"

Ct: "He's speechless."

Ct: "He's crying."

Th: "Crying... loudly or softly?"

Ct: "No sound... just tears."

Th: [Deepening into the meaning of the tears] "What are his tears saying?"

Ct: "He feels heartbroken about what he did."

Th: [Following the inner reaction, not the intellectual defense] "And when you see his heartbreak... what happens inside you?"

Ct: "I... don't feel much... because what he did... has no meaning to me." (*red signal: emotional isolation defense*)

Th: [Bypassing isolation defense — gently, persistently — to the real reaction] "But he reacted... he heard you... he cried... when he reacted, what happened inside you?"

Ct: "There was... something... a feeling."

Th: "Did he take it in?"

Ct: "Yes."

Th: [Inviting full contact with the corrective experience] "And when he takes it in... what happens inside you?"

Ct: "I feel... something again... from cold to... some reaction... but it disappears quickly."

Th: [Welcoming the real experience] "Can you allow yourself to notice that real reaction?"

Ct: "He has... feedback... for me."

Th: "Feedback... and when he gives you feedback... how do you feel?"

Ct: "I feel... cherished." (*begins to tear up*)

Two critical clinical moments warrant special attention. First, Tim's "*I don't feel much... because what he did has no meaning to me*" is a red signal affect—an isolation of affect defense that often appears precisely when the corrective experience is reaching its peak intensity. I bypass it by redirecting attention to what the body knows beneath the defense: "*But he reacted... when he reacted, what happened inside you?*" This is a classic AEDP intervention for State One-isolation of affect: anchor the work in the felt response rather than the defended interpretation (Fosha, 2000).

Second, the micro sequence from "*There was... something*" to "*from cold to... some reaction*" to "*I feel... cherished*" captures the corrective emotional experience unfolding in real time. The father's tears—(佢嗰下眼淚溶咗我入面嘅仇恨) "*his tears melted the hatred inside me*"—serve as the affective catalyst that reorganizes Tim's relationship to his father and to his own life.

Seven Emotions are active in this wave:

- Adaptive anger (怒) now fully resolved
- Grief (哀) for both the father and himself

- Love (愛) in its longing form, now meeting a tentative response (Hwang, 2012)

These affects mark a profound shift: the emergence of integrated emotional truth in the wake of dyadically held transformation.

State Three: Transformational Affect — Annotated Vignette

State Three in AEDP marks the “upward spiral”—the phase in which the client steps back from the emotional experience and, from within the processing, begins to generate new meaning, narrative coherence, mastery affects, and healing affects (Fosha, 2000, 2021). In Session 23, this phase yielded mastery, mourning-the-self, nature imagery, and the emergence of a playful child self—each development preparing Tim for the Core State that followed. It is here, for the first time, that the Four Moral Beginnings become clinically visible in their cultivated form, arising organically from the completed affective work.

Mastery Affects and Coherent Narrative

Vignette 8 — Entry into State Three: mastery and autobiographical coherence

Ct: "I really enjoy it." (*eyes closed — mastery affect: pride, delight*)

Th: [Metaprocessing positive affect, amplifying mastery] "You enjoy it? Yes! What are you enjoying?"

Ct: "The noisy fighting from before is gone. Finally... it's peaceful." (*以前個種吵吵鬧鬧冇咗! 終於落得清靜 — coherent autobiographical narrative*)

Th: [Somatic tracking in positive state, sustaining the spiral] "Peaceful... very good... I saw your head move — something is happening inside. What do you notice?"

“The noisy fighting from before is gone” marks the emergence of a coherent autobiographical narrative—Tim integrating the emotional work into a newly organized story about his inner life (Russell & Fosha, 2008). My intervention, *“What are you enjoying?”*, invites him to inhabit and expand the positive experience rather than move past it too quickly. The subsequent tracking of his head movement

demonstrates that I maintain the same level of somatic attunement in the upward spiral as in the difficult material: throughout the session, the body remains the primary register of transformation.

Nature Imagery and the Playful True Self

Vignette 9 — Third state transformation: tranquility, nature sounds, and childhood play

Ct: "Mm... that quiet feeling... Not hearing people arguing anymore... instead hearing nature's quiet sounds."

Th: [Gentle inquiry, following the interior landscape] "Inside... is there still the earlier irritation? The disgust? No? So now inside is...?"

Ct: "The sounds of nature... I feel very comfortable."

Th: [Tracking the emerging image, noticing somatic signal] "Comfortable... can you see the image? Your mouth smiled just now."

Ct: "Ah... I'm at my grandma's house... outside in the open area... hearing the leaves... birds... wind."

Th: [Inviting identification with the child self] "And the Tim who is there — what is he like?"

Ct: "Very happy!" (好開心㗎)

Th: [Expanding the new self-state] "Yes! What is happy Tim like?"

Ct: "Playing!" (喺度玩緊囉)

Th: "And how do you see this playful Tim?"

Ct: "Mm... very comfortable... more comfortable than me." (好舒服囉... 即係舒服過我囉)

Th: [Consolidating the new identity — "This is me" experience] "This is the real comfortable you. How do you see yourself now?"

Three clinical achievements unfold in close succession. First, the spontaneous replacement of the internal noise of conflict with nature sounds—leaves, birds, wind—indicates that the transformation has reached the somatic and perceptual levels. Tim's entire relationship to sensory experience has been reorganized by the processing, not merely his cognitions about his father.

Second, “*more comfortable than me*” reflects a classic AEDP “*This is me*” experience—the recognition of a more authentic self that exists beyond the trauma burdened identity he has long inhabited (Medbo, 2024; Fosha, 2013).

Third, my response, “*This is the real comfortable you,*” helps anchor the new state as identity rather than a transient mood, consolidating the emergent self experience.

The Four Moral Beginnings also become visible here in cultivated form. The heart of relational attunement and modesty (辭讓之心) appears in Tim’s gentle, undefended recognition— “*more comfortable than me*”—a stance of honest self-knowledge without grandiosity or shame (Shun, 1997). The heart of compassion (惻隱之心) begins to soften toward both himself and his father: the playful child he sees is met with tenderness rather than grief.

State Four: Core State — Annotated Vignette

Core State in AEDP is characterized by calm, spaciousness, clarity, “*This is me*” identity, wisdom, and a coherent autobiographical narrative (Fosha & Russell, 2008). Tim enters Core State with a statement of striking beauty and then, across a sustained exchange with me, demonstrates all four of the Confucian Four Beginnings in cultivated, stabilized form. The annotated vignette below serves as the primary evidence for the paper’s central thesis.

Entry: Unity with the Environment

Vignette 10 — Entry into Core State: unitive experience and self-recognition

Ct: "I feel... like... I'm becoming friends with the environment again." (*opens eyes — unitive transpersonal experience; enlivening affect*)

Th: [Metaprocessing the Core State experience] "Wow... really? Becoming friends with the environment — what does that mean for you?"

Ct: "I'm enjoying the environment... yes... enjoying it." (*Core State: unity, clarity, "This is me" experience*)

Th: [Inviting full reflection on the journey and the shift] "Yes... good! Today's experience — walking through it together — how do you feel? What stands out? What feels different? What is this feeling telling you?"

Ct: "Enjoying... enjoying myself... enjoying the moment. I think... I didn't know how to enjoy myself before. There were happy parts, but I didn't know how to enjoy them, so... I wasted them. But now, looking back... I think... I want to make myself more comfortable..."

"Becoming friends with the environment again" is a recognized Core State phenomenology: the dissolution of the defensive boundary between self and world, replaced by a felt sense of belonging and ease (Yeung, 2024). The word *"again"* is clinically significant—it implies that this relational openness to the world was once available to Tim and has now been recovered rather than newly constructed.

His subsequent reflection on "wasting" past joy contains both accurate mourning-the-self—grieving what was previously inaccessible—and a forward oriented intention: "I want to make myself more comfortable" This marks the heart of compassion (惻隱之心) turned inward: a genuinely felt, self-directed care that had been unavailable to him prior to the transformational work.

Coherent Narrative: The Renunciation of Revenge and Emergence of Forgiveness

Vignette 11 — Core State narrative: the pivot of transformation

Th: [Inviting explicit reflection on the journey] "Which parts do you feel were wasted? When you look back — going to your father, the fighting — what do you reflect on?"

Ct: "I think I wasted a lot of time being angry at my dad... I spent so much time... preparing to take revenge... I didn't do it, not because I couldn't... but because it was painful. Today's change is... I found happiness. This happiness is... I don't need revenge anymore. I don't need it. I just want to do what I love."

(我唔再需要報仇... 而係我真係想做我鍾意做嘅嘢 — *I no longer need revenge... instead, I truly want to do what I love.*)

Th: "Really!"

Ct: "Earlier... hearing the leaves, the wind, the birds... that's my grandma's house — surrounded by forest. When the wind blows the leaves... it's amazing. But when I was small, I only focused on turning a football into a bomb to kill my dad. But actually... those sounds... many people dream of hearing them."

Th: [Shared affect, co-witnessing the transformation] "Yes! Yes!"

Ct: "When I heard them just now, I felt... excited."

Th: [Metaprocessing the precise pivot] "I saw that! I felt it! At which moment today did this change happen — the moment you no longer needed revenge?"

Ct: "When my dad cried. I soften easily. I didn't feel for him as a person, but I felt something when I saw his tears. Because he had to take responsibility. His tears melted my hatred. When it melted, suddenly the arguing noise disappeared."

(佢嗰下眼淚溶咗我入面嘅仇恨... 嗌交嘅嘈吵聲都有晒 — *his tears melted my inner hatred... the arguing noise completely disappeared.*)

Th: (Claps) "Yes!"

Ct: "So suddenly... I remembered the leaves at my grandma's house."

"I didn't do it, not because I couldn't, but because it was painful" is the *heart of discernment and truth sense* (是非之心) in precise clinical form. Tim differentiates between two distinct interior states without collapsing them, demonstrating an emergent capacity to perceive truth rather than perform virtue (Shun, 1997). He is not claiming moral credit; he is reporting a newly discovered inner reality.

His subsequent identification of the exact pivot— *"when my dad cried"*—and the mechanism of change— *"his tears melted my hatred... suddenly the arguing noise disappeared... I remembered the leaves"*—is not a cognitive insight. It is the description of an affective event: a somatic, relational, and perceptual reorganization that occurred at the moment the corrective emotional experience was received (Fosha, 2000). This is transformation documented from the inside.

Mastery, Courage, and the Relational Gift

Vignette 12 — Mastery affects, Tremulous affects, the Four Beginnings in full form, and the relational acknowledgement

Ct: "But I'm also surprised at myself... I haven't accepted him yet, but I could still talk back to him. Strange." (*Tremulous affects; the heart of discernment and truth-sense [是非之心]) and the heart of deference and relational attunement [辭讓之心]: honest self-recognition without grandiosity*)

Th: [Inviting self-evaluation] "Is that so? How do you think you did today?"

Ct: "I think I improved a lot!"

Th: [Affirming, amplifying mastery] "A lot!"

Ct: "Yes. Before, I wouldn't talk to him at all."

Ct: "Today I talked back — a bit sarcastic — but... I'm clear now: he must take responsibility. I can only say: what do you want me to do? I won't walk away if he cries."

Th: [Validating growth] "Very good. You've improved a lot."

Ct: "Saying one sentence and leaving — that's a breakthrough."

Th: "A breakthrough. How so?"

Ct: "Before, I would have said: 'You die your own death, I'm leaving.' So earlier, I was struggling whether to say the first sentence."

Th: [Naming and honoring the scope of change] "So much change today."

Ct: "Yes."

Th: [Metaprocessing the mastery affect] "How does it feel to say all this?"

Ct: "I think I'm quite capable!"

Th: "Yes!"

Ct: "Before, I couldn't. With him, never."

Th: [Deepening the mastery experience] "And now? How does it feel to say 'I'm capable'?"

Ct: "爽呀 — 爽! (It feels great!)"

Th: [Tracking the meaning of mastery] "Great! What is this 'great' telling you?"

Ct: "I think... it's courage. Courage to break through."

Th: [Inviting the relational dimension of Core State — the "I and You" experience] "Yes! And what did Abraham give you today?"

Ct: "Hard question... I think... today... you gave me freedom. The feeling of freedom — fully supporting me to do anything." (俾咗我一種自由... *fully support* 我做去 *anything*)

Tim's statement, "*I haven't accepted him yet, but I could still talk back to him. Strange.*" demonstrates the *heart of discernment and truth sense* (是非之心) —in its most mature clinical form. He holds honest limitation and genuine achievement simultaneously, without collapsing (Shun, 1997; Van Norden, 2008). He does not claim full acceptance; he reports, with equanimity, exactly what he could and could not do.

The contrast Tim himself identifies—between the old response ("*You die your own death, I'm leaving*") and the new response (one sentence of moral truth, followed by departure without abandonment)—captures the shift from unprocessed reactive affect to conscience informed, grounded ethical action. This is the *heart of moral conscience* (羞惡之心) in its cultivated form.

My question, "*What did I give you today?*", serves a specific AEDP function: it invites Tim to claim the positive experience of the therapeutic relationship as his own, rather than receiving it as a therapist defined interpretation (Fosha, 2000). His answer—"*freedom... fully supporting me to do anything*"—is the heart of deference and relational attunement (辭讓之心) at its most relational: the capacity to gracefully receive another's care, to name it precisely, and to hold it without shame or deflection (Shun, 1997). For a man whose attachment history taught him that closeness meant danger, this capacity represents one of the session's most significant achievements.

The Four Moral Beginnings in Core State: Clinical Analysis

This section maps each of the Four Moral Beginnings to their specific clinical manifestations in Session 23. The central argument is that these qualities emerged as the natural expression of Tim's innate moral-

emotional capacities—capacities made accessible through AEDP’s deep affective processing—not through moral instruction, cultural prompting, or cognitive reframing.

Compassion for Self and Other (惻隱之心)

Mencius describes the heart of compassion (惻隱之心) as an innate moral sense: a spontaneous, involuntary affective response to another’s suffering — that signals the presence of 仁 (humaneness) and arises prior to deliberation (Shun, 1997; Van Norden, 2008). Tim’s compassion for his father appeared in precisely this form.

In Vignette 6, Tim spontaneously generated pity— *“another part feels pity because... he got hit by his son”*—from within the processed affect of the second wave. He was not guided toward compassion; he was simply asked what his sadness wanted to do. Once the emotional material was met without deflection, compassion merged naturally as an expression of his innate moral sense (Fosha, 2021, p.396).

Importantly, this compassion did not erase accountability. Tim remained clear that *“he did wrong... and now he has to face the consequences.”* In its cultivated form, the heart of compassion (惻隱之心) holds compassion and moral clarity together: neither fusion with the other’s pain nor the absence of accountability, but both simultaneously (Shun, 1997). This simultaneous holding was made possible by the Anger Portrayal allowed Tim to fully expressed his legitimate rage, rather than suppressed it.

In Core State (Vignette 11), the heart of compassion (惻隱之心) extended inward: *“I think I wasted a lot of time... I want to make myself more comfortable.”* This embodied self-compassion—previously unavailable to him—emerged naturally in Core State, marking the depth of the transformation (Russell & Fosha, 2008).

Moral Conscience and Accountability (羞惡之心)

The heart of moral conscience (羞惡之心) is not the inhibitory, self attacking shame of State One (*“I’m terrible too”*). In Confucian terms, it is an innate moral sense that allows a person to perceive moral violation, name it accurately, and hold another accountable without attacking or abandoning them (Shun, 1997).

Tim's confrontation in the Reparative Portrayal— "*Why did you have to do that in the first place?*" (咁又何必當初?)—is the embodied expression of the heart of moral conscience (羞惡之心). He was not retaliating; he was naming a genuine moral failure with clarity and simplicity. This ethical expression of conscience arose not from righteous indignation but from fully processed affect.

In Core State (Vignette 12), Tim articulates the distinction explicitly: "*Before, I would have said 'You die your own death, I'm leaving.' Today I talked back... I'm clear now: he must take responsibility.*" This shift—from reactive abandonment to grounded moral confrontation—illustrates the movement from immature, defensive the heart of moral conscience (羞惡之心) to its cultivated, ethically expressed form (Shun, 1997; Van Norden, 2008).

Relational Attunement and Modesty (辭讓之心)

The heart of deference and relational attunement (辭讓之心) reflects an innate moral sense of relational humility: the capacity to receive care gracefully, acknowledge limitation without self-attack and hold one's complexity with equanimity (Shun, 1997).

Tim's "*more comfortable than me*" (Vignette 9) is the heart of deference and relational attunement (辭讓之心) in its most intimate form: a gentle, undefended recognition of a self more at ease than his habitual identity, held without pride or shame. His later reflection— "*I haven't accepted him yet, but I could still talk back to him. Strange*"—continues in the same register: honest about limitation, honest about achievement, lightly curious about his own complexity.

Most striking is Tim's receipt of my care: "*You gave me freedom... fully supporting me to do anything*" (Vignette 12). For a man whose attachment history encoded closeness as danger and dependence as vulnerability, the ability to accurately name, receive, and hold another's care without deflection is extraordinary (Main & Solomon, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). This is not performative gratitude; it is a felt recognition of the therapeutic relationship's contribution, held with grace rather than inflation or minimization. In Confucian terms, this is the heart of deference and relational attunement (辭讓之心) as ethical expression: relational humility made visible through emotional transformation.

Ethical Discernment and Truth Sense (是非之心)

The heart of discernment and truth sense (是非之心) is not abstract moral reasoning. It is affectively grounded ethical perception—a felt clarity about what is real and what is right. In Confucian terms, moral sense is innate, arising spontaneously when affect is fully contacted and integrated (Shun, 1997; Van Norden, 2008). When this innate moral sense becomes clarified through emotional processing, it expresses itself as ethical discernment: the ability to accurately perceive and apply moral truth in lived experience.

Tim's Core State narrative (Vignette 11) demonstrates the heart of discernment and truth sense

(是非之心) throughout. *"I didn't do it, not because I couldn't... but because it was painful"* is a precise, honest discrimination between two interior truths: the capacity that was present (he could have taken revenge) and the constraint that prevented it (the pain it would have caused). He neither conflates them nor uses one to obscure the other. This is the heart of discernment and truth sense (是非之心) as self-knowledge grounded in moral sense.

"I'm clear now: he must take responsibility" shows the heart of discernment and truth sense (是非之心) as ethical perception—a simple, unequivocal moral truth arrived at through the full processing of the relevant affect, not through reasoning, instruction, or cultural prompting.

"Saying one sentence and leaving — that's a breakthrough" illustrates the heart of discernment and truth sense (是非之心) as accurate self-evaluation. Tim assesses his growth without exaggeration (he has not reached full acceptance) and without minimization (he spoke moral truth where previously he had only reactive abandonment). This capacity for balanced, reality based appraisal is a hallmark of cultivated the heart of discernment and truth sense (是非之心) (Shun, 1997).

Taken together, Tim's emergence of the heart of compassion (惻隱之心), the heart of moral conscience (羞惡之心), the heart of deference and relational attunement (辭讓之心), the heart of discernment and truth-sense (是非之心) illustrates how AEDP's transformational process can uncover the innate moral sense described in Mencian Tradition. In each case, the moral capacity did not arise from instruction, cognitive reframing, or cultural prompting. It surfaced only after core affect was fully contacted, regulated and integrated within dyadic safety. Once emotional truth was clarified, these moral senses expressed themselves ethically – as compassion balanced with accountability, conscience expressed without attack, relational humility held without shame, and truth-sense articulated with precision. In Confucian terms, this is the natural maturation of the Four Beginnings: innate moral sprouts becoming visible when the

right relational and affective conditions allow them to unfold. In AEDP terms, it reflects the emergence of the person's "innately good" core in Core State (Fosha, 2021). The convergence suggests that transformational emotional processing may reveal dimensions of human nature that are both universal and morally significant- capacities that were present all along, waiting for trauma to loosen its grip so they could be felt, recognized, and lived.

Discussion

AEDP and the Emergence of Innate Moral Orientation

The annotated vignette excerpts in Sections Five through Nine provide the clinical foundation for this article's central proposal: AEDP's Transformational process can reveal an intrinsic moral orientation that becomes experientially accessible once trauma-based defenses soften. The microprocess show how AEDP guided Tim from defended self-states—tactical humor, inhibitory shame—through the full embodied processing of core affect—moral disgust, sadness, pity, relational longing—into an integrated Core State marked by self-compassion, coherent sense of identity, (Fosha, 2005) and at times transpersonal experience (Yeung, 2021).

Crucially, this integrated state also included moral clarity, relational humility, ethical discernment, and compassion for others, — capacities that emerged spontaneously once emotionally processing was complete. These moral capacities did not emerge through moral instruction, cognitive reframing, or cultural prompting. They appeared as the natural expression of Tim's innate moral sense, clarified through affective transformation.

This is precisely the Mencian claim: the Four Moral Beginnings (四端) are not taught; they are cultivated (Shun, 1997; Van Norden, 2008; Xu, 2018). When the right relational and affective conditions are present, they arise spontaneously. AEDP creates exactly these conditions: dyadic safety, attuned coregulation, the privileging of affect as the primary pathway to truth, and the therapeutic conviction that a person's deepest capacities emerge when they are no longer required for self-protection (Fosha, 2000).

The Role of Cultural Resonance

The Confucian interpretive framework contributes what a purely Western psychological account cannot: it situates Tim's transformation within the moral philosophical tradition that has shaped the cultural meaning-making of the Cantonese and broader Chinese world (Hwang, 2012).

For Tim, the father's tears "*melting his hatred*" is not only a corrective emotional experience in the AEDP term; it was, in culturally resonant terms, the partially restored of a fundamental relational order disrupted by violations of parental obligation. (Hwang, 2012). The language of the four moral beginnings (四端) names this moral relational dimension of healing in a way that purely clinical terminology cannot fully capture.

This cultural resonance matters clinically. The moral emotions named in Confucian thought are universal human capacities, but the meanings through which people understand and organize these emotions are culturally shaped. When the therapist uses language that reflects the moral affective textures of a client's world, integration deepens (Lu, 2018).

In Tim's case, articulating his emergent compassion, conscience, relational humility, and ethical discernment not only through AEDP's clinical categories but also through the moral-emotional vocabulary of his cultural inheritance does not impose culture; it locates the transformation within the narrative of who he is and where he comes from. This culturally attuned framing allows the change to settle more fully into his identity, making the transformation both personally coherent and culturally meaningful.

The Non-Interpretative Principle²

A critical clinical clarification is required: at no point in Session 23 did I say, "*What you are experiencing is the heart of compassion (惻隱之心)*." The Confucian framework is the writer's reflective lens, not a therapeutic intervention. It is a way of understanding what unfolded— not a set of concepts to be introduced to the client.

² "Noninterpretative" means the therapist does not explain, labels, or interpret the client's experience using theory. Instead, the therapist tracks affect moment-to-moment, and helps the client feel the emerging compassion, clarity, and steadiness as their own. The Confucian framework used in this paper is therefore a reflective lens for the author, not something introduced in the session.

In AEDP, and especially in Core State, the therapist's task is not to name the Four Beginnings but to help the client feel, with full embodied conviction, that the compassion, clarity, and steadiness arising within them are real and belong to them (Fosha, 2000, 2021). My interventions— "*This is the real comfortable you,*" "*Very good. You've improved a lot,*" "*What did I give you today?*"—accomplish this emergence without theoretical language. The theory belongs to the AEDP therapist; the experience belongs to the client.

Limits and Cautions

This article is a practice based clinical reflection, not a claim of philosophical equivalence or universal proof. Three cautions are essential.

First, the interpretation of Tim's experience through the Four Moral Beginnings and Seven Emotions (四端七情) is the therapist's framework, not Tim's. He did not speak in Confucian categories; he spoke from his embodied experience. The theoretical lens is applied retrospectively.

Second, the emergence of compassion, conscience, relational modesty, and discernment in Core State is consistent with multiple philosophical and spiritual traditions, not uniquely Confucian. The claim here is one of cultural resonance and clinical utility within a specific cultural context, not exclusive philosophical truth (Hwang, 2012; Sue & Sue, 2016).

Third, a single session cannot demonstrate the durability of these emergent capacities. Core State is a state, not a trait. What this article documents is a moment of Core State achievement and the conditions that made it possible; consolidation into stable characterological patterns requires—and continued in—the sessions that followed (Fosha, 2021; Russell & Fosha, 2008).

Conclusion

Through close analysis of annotated exchanges from Session 23, this article has proposed that AEDP's transformational process can reveal an intrinsic moral orientation- not because the therapist supplies moral content, but because emotional truth, once fully processed, uncovers the moral sense inherent in human nature. The four state transformation process guided Tim from defended self experience into an integrated Core State, where the Four Moral Beginnings and Seven Emotions (四端七情) surfaced as cultivated

expressions of his innate moral-emotional capacities (Fosha, 2000; Shun, 1997). These capacities were not introduced; they were already present, waiting for conditions that allowed them to unfold.

Tim's journey—from the defensive smile masking an affective flash, through the embodied rage of the Anger Portrayal, through the unexpected pity evoked by his father's silent tears, through the restoration of a childhood landscape of wind and leaves, to the clear recognition, "I don't need revenge anymore. I just want to do what I love"—is a clinical demonstration of a Mencian truth: moral-emotional capacity arises from within when the right relational conditions allow it to emerge (Shun, 1997; Van Norden, 2008).

AEDP provides precisely those conditions: dyadic safety, attuned coregulation, the honoring of affect as the pathway to truth, and the therapeutic faith that a person's innate capacities for compassion, conscience, relational grace, and discernment will surface when no longer required for self-protection.

Tim did not need to be taught compassion. He needed the emotional processing that allowed his own compassion—always present, always waiting—to become visible, livable, and his own.

Ultimately, AEDP does not function as a moral compass in the sense of guiding behavior; rather, it reveals the moral orientation already inherent in the person. In Core State, Confucian the Four Moral Beginnings and Seven Emotions (四端七情) may emerge as naturally cultivated expressions of humanity's innate moral-emotional capacities.

Author Note

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