

## Chapter 10

### **Enchanting Dolphins: An Analysis of Human-Dolphin Encounters**

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#### **Introduction**

In the transnational community focused on dolphins that we consider here, the figure of the dolphin is permeated with love. Not only do people love dolphins, but the dolphins' anthropophilia belongs to their natural history as well: they rescue men at sea, play in the bow waves of boats, and sometimes develop enduring 'friendships' with humans. People who have encountered dolphins in the open sea regularly speak about 'falling in love' or feeling 'pure love' from the dolphin; others report telepathy, trance or mystic revelations. The emotions that people might experience in an encounter with a dolphin are very powerful. Although such experiences are clearly embedded in a cultural context (a system of beliefs, representations, tales and wondrous stories that shape the occidental vision of dolphins), they cannot be fully understood as long as we treat them as merely cultural constructs. Of course animals are socially (or culturally) constructed but the human/animal interactions cannot be described as the mere imposition of symbolic meaning on meaningless organisms (cf. Ingold 1988). As ethology has stated many times, animals are active organisms in an environment which is significant for them. Consequently, human/animal interactions are always double-sided interactions. In this chapter I attempt to describe human/dolphin encounters as an interspecies communication system that forms the interactional context in which the emotional experiences are to be understood.

## **Enchanted Encounters**

In occidental countries<sup>1</sup>, one can find various private associations devoted not so much to the protection of cetaceans as to the promotion of their ‘message’: a message of love, peace, and harmony. For this purpose, formal meetings such as conferences or cultural events are organised and newsletters published and circulated among members. Many marvellous stories about dolphins are told among members; most of them depict dolphins as deliberately *doing* something (good) to the humans and suggest that dolphins are conscious beings. The following story is recorded by Johan A. Bishop in *The Australian Dolphin and Whale Journal*:

‘[A] friend of mine was on a camping trip near Mexico and had decided to try catching a sea bass for dinner. After fishing for two hours with no luck, she gave up and was sitting quietly admiring the sea, when she saw a dolphin leaping and jumping, swimming back and forth very excitedly and chattering. It came closer and closer, and finally drove a big red sea bass right into shore at her feet! Amazed and delighted, she lifted the tired fish from the water, and sent her heartfelt thanks to the dolphin, who went off leaping joyfully’.<sup>2</sup>

For the most part, people attending those non-scientific conferences about dolphins are already ‘touched by the dolphin’s magic’ and want to hear more about the dolphin’s marvellous qualities. Their expectations are usually fulfilled. Most of the associations devoted to the promotion of the dolphin’s messages are, to one degree or another, connected with the New Age spirit. Among the people one encounters at the meetings of these associations are people dreaming of building twenty-first century utopias (places in the world where people and dolphins could live together in peace and harmony), an assorted collection of therapists, meditation teachers, authors expounding theories of dolphins as extra-terrestrial angels, and

practitioners of water birth in the presence of dolphins. Sometimes one hears about a new human species (*Homo delphinus*) which is said to be shaped by the growing intimacy of the human/dolphin relationships all over the world. Because of its large brain, the dolphin is figured as ‘closer to us’ than any other animal; but this animal is also *better* than us: ‘While we humans have devoted our creativity to the technological achievements possible when one has chosen thumb over flipper, they have devoted their vast intelligence to the realms of the heart: community, pleasure, play, touch...’ says the program of the association Delphys (N.Y) which offers seminars and workshops based on human/dolphin communication. The fin and the thumb: a metaphor for the *hubris* of man (contrasted with the grace of the dolphin) that I have often met in the ‘marvellous dolphin’ associations. In the occidental bestiary, the dolphin is probably the only animal whose animality is not figured as a regression from humanity but as a progression towards better humans.

From this perspective, dolphins should be our guides towards a better life and an opened consciousness ‘[Dolphins] are a message for humanity to show man how peaceful and wise an evolved creature should be’ says Laurent Pommès, a young biologist in a letter addressed to *Dolphin*, the newsletter of *International Dolphin Watch*.<sup>3</sup> He concludes: ‘if you really love dolphins you should not hesitate to work to become what they implore you to be: a completely realised being who resonates with higher dimensions of consciousness.’ Hence it is not too surprising to observe that the big meetings of those associations (like I.C.E.R.C.’s meetings)<sup>4</sup> sometimes closely resemble religious ceremonies devoted to the glory of the dolphin. On each page of the program of one such conference, the attendant could read: ‘May the spirit of the dolphin with you’. Undoubtedly, there is religiosity here, and the figure of the dolphin is sacred: the dolphin is not ‘like any of the other animals’, Dolphins and Whales are unique creatures in the animal kingdom.<sup>5</sup> This brief description of some of the ideas that are bound to the image of the dolphin in occidental countries shows how constructed and cultural

the image of the dolphin is. But I shall argue that this construction is not an arbitrary cultural imposition of meaning on an animal. On the contrary, it must be related to the interactional context of the human/dolphin encounters and to the emotions that are reported by the people who have met dolphins.

Many human-dolphin encounters may be read under the rhetoric of Revelation. When they meet a dolphin at sea, people seem to experience something totally new, something they had heard about but that perhaps they did not dare to believe; they seem to discover a part of themselves they did not know about. Through the encounter they learn something about themselves. Thus the often held belief that dolphins ‘deliver messages’ to the human beings, that they ‘speak’ to them. Such an encounter with a dolphin – in which some kind of ‘revelation’ is experienced – is what I call an enchanted encounter.<sup>6</sup> Of course not all dolphin encounters are enchanted. From 1989 to 1993 I have attended many conferences and gatherings of associations devoted to the promotion of the dolphin’s message. There I have gathered data about human/dolphin encounters. Many were first-hand accounts of encounters, and many referred to personal transformation following the encounter. But those data proved hard to analyse. As soon as it was taken for granted that the testimonies should not be considered as ‘mere beliefs’ – or, worse, as mere anthropomorphic illusions – a particular conceptual framework had to be constructed to make sense of them. A modernist (or dualistic) point of view that would try to separate the nature (‘real’ facts) from the social (‘constructions’) (cf. Latour, 1997) is clearly inadequate in the analysis of interaction and communication. It is thus necessary to resist any temptation to separate, from the testimonies, what would be ‘real facts’ from what would be ‘beliefs’ or ‘illusions’. The temptation might be hard to resist, because of the supernatural flavour of many accounts and because they are obviously anthropomorphic interpretations of the animal’s behaviour. But the testimonies must be taken at face value and as true transcriptions of the emotions experienced if they are

to be used in an ethnography of the emotions that people experience in their contact with the animals.

The emotions described must then be related to the *broader context* of the human/dolphin encounter in which they appeared. There is no conceptual kit available for the description of human/animal interaction and communication. Here I tentatively suggest a three-levelled description: patterns of interaction, ethological signals and representations. Note that in any case, no information *about the dolphins themselves* will be obtained. This is the approach that I shall use in order to provide an ethnographic description of enchanted human/dolphin encounters. Relating the emotions reported to the broad communicational context in which they occurred will allow us to speak about ‘enchantment’ without assuming supernatural power or telepathy – i.e. without adhering to the specific beliefs that sustain it. This will also allow us to understand the many attributes that dolphins are credited with (consciousness, intentionality, intelligence, healing power and so on) not as pure cultural constructs, but as the products of specific communication and interaction patterns as well.

### **An Emotionally Powerful Experience**

Many first-hand accounts of ‘enchanted’ dolphin encounters refer emphatically to Love. ‘Allowing a dolphin to touch your heart is like falling in love’ says Joan Ocean, psychotherapist in New York. ‘The experience was one of mutual and unconditional love and trust which perhaps only another intelligent species like the dolphin can provide’<sup>7</sup> explains Jemina Biggs, an anorexic girl who has met the solitary dolphin Dorad.<sup>8</sup> The experience is intimate, moving, and unique. Sometimes people find it difficult to translate their experience in words: ‘I experienced something that cannot be transcribed on paper’ says Scott, who works on a taxi-boat in Hawaii. It is ‘the feeling of sitting in a boat surrounded by 40-50 dolphins of all ages, babies to full grown males, happily laying in our bow wave, stern wake

and along side, so close you could touch them.’<sup>9</sup> ‘There are no words to explain it’ says Hall when he gets out of the water after a swim with wild dolphins. ‘It is so natural. It’s like what you’re supposed to do.’

Often the encounter is described as a unique, lifetime experience. ‘The grace and flow of the ballet they performed in natural harmony will stay with me until I die’ concludes Scott. And even if the contact is not as moving as wished, it is still unforgettable. Paul Spies has lived such a mitigated experience with the solitary dolphin Fungie at Dingle in Ireland. ‘He soon came over to me and watched me very intently under water. Unfortunately I couldn’t enter wholeheartedly into the exciting mood as my face was burning from the cold.’ He nonetheless begins his letter stating that he ‘recently had the experience of a lifetime’<sup>10</sup> More emphatic is the mother of a handicapped child she took to Eilat (Israel) to meet captive dolphins. Writing to *Dolphin*, she says that she feels she ‘must share the most exhilarating experience’ of her life. ‘It has no doubt been said before but I must say it again. Swimming with dolphins has to be one of the most unique experiences in the world’ says Karen Steele<sup>11</sup>; ‘those few days [in Dingle] are probably the most memorable of our lives’ told me a couple in Brussels.

Most enchanted encounters take place at sea, either with solitary or truly wild dolphins. ‘Two years ago, I had the great privilege of swimming with a group of bottlenose dolphins near Coffs Harbour’ writes Rita to the *Australian Dolphin and Whale Journal*.<sup>12</sup> ‘This powerful, yet gentle creature towed me around as I held on his dorsal fin. He then allowed me to stroke and tickle him as I admired his beauty. [...] I will never forget the feeling of euphoria as I swam and frolicked with these magnificent sea creatures and for this I thank them.’ Uncommon euphoria, happiness, beauty and love – these are what the human being sees and feels when meeting friendly dolphins at sea. The experience may be intimate

and soft or more active, but it is always embedded in powerful emotions. For Karen Steele, who found herself in the middle of a dolphin pod, the experience was full of sweetness:

‘There I was with dolphins above me, beneath me and all around me. .... I was so exhilarated I felt I could leap as high as the Dusky dolphins, who are renowned for their acrobatics, and I think perhaps I even tried. I felt like a child in a snowstorm of sweets, with dolphins as far as I could see.’<sup>13</sup>

When the experience is a success, i.e. when some enchantment is at work, the human being is generally surprised by the upsurge of emotions he had rarely, if ever, experienced before. As a photographer, Michael McIntyre has spent a lot of time travelling and searching for dolphins. On one particular morning on an Ulludulla beach he was contemplating the surf when, to his right, appeared a pod of dolphins.

‘Without even thinking I was paddling out to them. .... What happened in the next 30 minutes reduced me to tears. As they reached me, I was struck by their size and blackness, overwhelmed by their mastery in the water .... The air was alive with activity and love. Two smaller dolphins swam slowly towards me, stopped for what seemed like 10 minutes to check me out, then disappearing at breakneck speed.’<sup>14</sup>

Some people feel they will never be the same again after their encounter with a dolphin. ‘I am writing you as a changed person!’ writes Aimée Skerrat, who has swum with Freddie. ‘Have you swum with a friendly dolphin?’ asks Kate Carr in a poem.<sup>15</sup> She has, ‘And my life will never – I know full well – be the same again.’ For the anorexic girl Jemina Biggs, meeting Dorad proved to be the first step towards her recovering ‘I am still fighting to extricate myself from the grasp [of anorexia] but I am convinced that the reason I continue to fight it after nearly seven years, and have not given in to it, is that I have been swimming with a wild dolphin’.<sup>16</sup> What happened?

‘Dorad approached me from behind and below. Slowly and gently he nudged my feet, then my knees, then my stomach, and then he swam up to within six inches of my face. Turning to the side to look into my face with one eye he then gazed deliberately into my eyes. There was nowhere to hide. This wild creature was looking not at my body nor even at my expression, but right at the pain in my soul .... Dorad taught me how to look at and truly face my pain’.

Many people report that their life has been changed by their encounter with a dolphin. ‘I have been unwell for 7/8 years’ says Wendy Huntingdon, an English woman who has suffered from bouts of depression since her early twenties. ‘Last year I sought the help of people in the fields of various natural therapies and the culmination was the dolphin trip this year .... Since my return, I feel lighter, have more energy .... I feel in love with the universe’.<sup>17</sup> In some extreme cases, people divorce, change jobs or go and live abroad. Many associations are indeed set up by individuals who, after their encounter with a dolphin, feel an urge to *do* something. That is what happened to Horace Dobbs.

A former physician, Dobbs once had a great experience with a dolphin at sea. Years later, we find him taking depressed persons to solitary dolphins around Great Britain. The way he tells the story of Bill, an Englishman who has suffered from deep depression for years, is a digest of many dolphin stories.

‘The next day, in the company of Tricia Kirkman, who was totally under the spell of the dolphin Simo<sup>18</sup>, we took 52 year old Bill to see the dolphin. Tricia told him of her experiences with Simo and how the dolphin wouldn’t harm him if he got in the water. She told him how she experienced a great feeling of what she described as ‘pure love’ coming from Simo when she was with him. Furthermore, she explained how the dolphin reacted to what people feel inside. It did not matter in physical terms whether they were fat or thin, old or young, ugly or beautiful, rich or poor. If they were gentle

and sensitive inside, the dolphin would respond accordingly. The dolphin would not judge them by human standards, but by the standards of an intelligent being without possessions living in harmony with the environment.’ When Bill goes into the water, ‘The dolphin loves him. As we watched the man change from being apprehensive, scared and withdrawn to a smiling, joyous person who became totally involved with the dolphin and forgot everyone and everything around him ‘He has blossomed – just like a sunflower’, Tricia commented to me.’<sup>19</sup>

Well aware of the impossibility of taking many patients out to sea to meet a dolphin, Horace Dobbs later undertook the ‘Operation Sunflower’, an investigation of how to ‘capture the essential emotion-changing quality that dolphins have onto film and music’.

### **[Figure 1]**

The stories told here are not isolated ones. Many people experienced some kind of ‘magical moment’ with dolphins. But not all dolphin encounters are enchanted. Some people hunt dolphins, others work with them at aquariums, and many people enter into some form of contact with dolphins when attending shows at sea parks. Very few of them come back ‘changed’ after their visit. They have not discovered anything new about themselves, they have not learned anything of profound urgency. Here the figure of the human/animal interaction is a redundant one, as it has been patterned by one century of zoo visits. No revelation at the zoo visit, no elation, no euphoria. But even at sea, many dolphin encounters are not enchanted. One afternoon in November 1996 in Nuweba, a small Bedouin location on the Red Sea in Egypt, a dozen people had the privilege of swimming with ‘Oline’, the friendly female dolphin who has stayed there since the early 1990s. There were women, children and men, tourists coming from occidental countries brought there by some local tour

operator. Only one of them, a young French man, got out of the water shouting his happiness: ‘C’est fabuleux! formidable!...’ He did not want it to stop and spent a long, long time in the water. The others were getting impatient with him, waiting for him to go back at their hotel. For me, swimming with Oline had been a nice moment, not much more. She was a nice, indolent animal and I had not read anything special in her eyes.

As it is obvious that not all dolphin encounters are enchanted, the question arises as to what the ingredients of the enchantment effect are. What must happen if the human being is to learn something about himself or herself from the contact with the animal? What kind of interactional context makes it possible? What kind of signals are emitted by the dolphin and perceived by the human being? What kind of representations help the people to find meaning through the interactional process?

### **The Context of the Encounter: Patterns Of Participation**

*An inverted asymetry.* When someone goes at sea to meet a dolphin, he knows that he’s going to meet an animal whose anthropophilia is known since the Antiquity. One jumps into the water and then faces an animal obviously much more powerful than oneself. Even the most accomplished swimmer is a beginner compared to a dolphin. The muscular power of the dolphin, his ease, agility and grace in the water are often underlined by poor ‘splashing around’ human beings. ‘My senses were fully aware that this dolphin could kill me such with one blow – if he had wanted to’ said Rita. In a way, the human being is ‘at the mercy’ of the animal. He has no other choice than leaving it up to the dolphin to decide. Moreover, in mammalian communication, the act of showing his/her strength and not using it can function as a signal of appeasement, a message which can be translated as ‘I shall not harm you’. In

human/dolphin encounters, the whole situation seems to be understood as such a message from the dolphin.

The asymmetry of the interaction (the human being for once the impotent one) is further reinforced by the widely held belief that a dolphin can ‘see through us’. As Tricia was telling Bill: ‘the dolphin reacts to what you are inside’. Many times I heard that ‘thanks to their sonar, dolphins see directly the emotions of people’, ‘people are transparent to them!’ That is what Jemina experienced and, when ‘there is no place to hide’, as she said, the best action to have is to let go. Even when the encounter is not as deeply involving as Jemina’s, as in the case of Scott, the interaction is the dolphin’s, not the human’s, choice. This relational asymmetry is echoed in the numerous discourses which say, in one way or another, that ‘we must be humble enough to learn’ from the dolphins, as was said again by Jemina. It is further echoed in most of the (non-scientific) discourses about dolphins (including mass media discourses): dolphins have something to teach us, they have messages for us. It is also in this context that we can understand that solitary dolphins, who stay for a while at the same location near a coast and interact closely with humans, sometimes with one individual in particular, are constructed as ‘ambassador’ dolphins. When the metaphor is pushed a little bit further, it says that the dolphin people sent ambassadors to the humans because they have important messages to deliver to them. The content of the messages have to do with ecological wisdom and survival.

***A true social bond.*** Another feature of our enchanted human/dolphin encounters is the fact that people succeed in interpreting the dolphin’s behaviour as responses to their own behaviour, feelings or emotions. And this is, according to G. Bateson (1936) the simplest definition of a social bond: ‘the response of A to the behaviour of B towards A’. It is probably in Aimée Skerrat’s report that we find the most explicit illustration of a social bond. She is

surprised (and delighted) to see that Freddie reacts to her behaviour towards him. She immediately has the feeling of being understood, and there she is gone:

‘As the shock of the cold water on my bear head and hands subsided I was able to float and look around the water surrounding me, just then Freddie as if from thin water, appeared next to me. I did as Gordon<sup>20</sup> had said and scratched his side. Freddie’s enjoyment as *next he turned over* on his back right beside me and lay practically motionless *waiting for more*. [...] The next ten or so minutes were possibly the most wonderful ten minutes of my life. It consisted of me scratching Freddie’s back, head, chin and chest and *in return* giving me long rides to and from the boat – pure joy ! It was as though he *responded* to my smiles and laughter by flapping his flippers out of the water .... I think also that he understood me as once he gave me a long ride away from the boat and realising my position I asked him to transport me back and he did !’<sup>21</sup>

When someone discovers that the dolphin responds to him/herself, (s)he is filled with wonder.

‘Amazing Freddie’ cries out John Nolan. He has seen the dolphin adjusting his behaviour to the cries of the little girl Kara: ‘Freddie was having a great time rubbing himself against Dave and the boat, but when Kara started to cry, he instantly stopped all movement and lay perfectly still. No amount of soothing by Dave or myself could calm Kara so Freddie himself decided to have a go. Without moving the rest of his body, Freddie lifted his head clear of the water and tried to reassure Kara with squeaking and clicking sounds. This, too, was to no avail so we lifted Kara back into the boat. Upon doing so, Freddie immediately started his boisterous antics once again, playing and frolicking with Dave and myself.’<sup>22</sup>

Such bouts of interaction make the human being have the feeling that the creature that faces him is a sentient, intelligent and intentional creature. The premise that we are the only

conscious creatures on earth is suddenly challenged. This is never as convincing as when the human is *surprised* by the dolphin, and this can be the case when the animal spontaneously *imitates* the human being. Wade Doak tells such a story, when a male dolphin named Jagged imitated the slow vertical fall of the divers on the sea floor, then their position on the sea floor.<sup>23</sup> Seeing later this sequence on film, a radio-astronomer recognised that if such a response had been received from space it would indicate that we have found another intelligent creature in the universe. But for our purpose, the main lesson of this story is elsewhere – because at the time the divers did not notice anything. Ironically, they were in a mission to install material for human/dolphin communication (a pneumatic piano, etc.) but they were busy working and the dolphin's behaviour did not mean anything to them. It was simply 'strange'. This means that for the human being to find meaning in the dolphin's behaviour, he must be socially bonded, i.e. prepared to see in the dolphin's behaviour a response or a comment to his own behaviour.<sup>24</sup>

When the persons which come to meet a dolphin are convinced that 'a dolphin never does anything by chance', as told me an Australian seaman and that 'thanks to their sonar, dolphins can read our emotions', the social bond may be constructed (but not perceived) even in the *absence* of any reaction from the dolphin. When John Bolwell swam out twice for long periods in the Amble port, Dougal did not appear. Trying to figure out what could have happened, John Bolwell said that 'maybe he sensed that I wasn't ready to meet yet'. We all know that in an established social bond the absence of a reaction is in itself a response. *Inside* an interactional frame, there is no 'no response' and any behaviour of the dolphin becomes capable of 'telling' something. The position of a human being in an enchanted encounter with a dolphin is one of deep involvement. Because the encounter is up to the animal (they 'choose' to meet humans) and because the human beings are able to perceive the dolphin's behaviours as responses to their own behaviours, feelings or emotions, they cannot escape the

conviction that the dolphin is *aiming* his behaviour *at them*. In the process, people have the strong feeling that they face a conscious, intelligent and intentional animal. The human/animal boundary is subjectively crossed and suddenly, like in our occidental tales of magic communication with animals, a new world seems to open.

**Play.** Another kind of human/dolphin interaction is play. In order for two mammals to play together, they need to be able to exchange metacommunicative signals stating that the behaviours framed as play are not ‘real’ in the sense that a bite for example is not a real one. In many mammalian species, the signal ‘this is play’ has evolved by ritualization and has become a fixed display of the body and/or the face. Dogs have a particular posture and display of the face and monkeys have an unmistakable ‘play face’. In humans, metacommunicative signals framing a statement as ‘not real’ can be very subtle and elusive, but we still have (children at least) the play face of the other primates. We don’t know what the ‘this is play’ signal is in cetaceans. They have lost most of the mammalian means of communication and we don’t even know if they have such a ritualised signal. Nevertheless, it appears that human beings are able to build what they experience as playful interactions with dolphins. As Aimée tells *Dolphin*:

‘Another of his games was to vanish into the depths for a while and suddenly from nowhere, spring up behind me nudging me on the way past as if it was a game of hide and seek and he was teasing me notwithstanding he had more places to hide. It was loads of fun though because it seemed we were both laughing about it’.

Michael McIntyre was also able to ‘feel’ play in the behaviour of the dolphins who ‘appeared to take great delight in catching the waves, often surfing straight towards me on collision course only to veer away at the last moment, and often swimming right underneath me to surface 50 feet away.’

## **The Pragmatics Of Human-Dolphin Communication**

In the enchanted encounters, the dolphin ‘answers me’; she aims her behaviour ‘*at myself*’. But the self the dolphin is ‘talking’ to is not a conventional social self: it is a deep emotional self that is only called upon in the most intimate relationships. The emotional involvement of enchanted dolphin encounters cannot be understood outside the pragmatics of communication. Two main functions of non verbal communication can be retained. First, the interaction could not be sustained without a continuous, two-way communicational process. This kind of communication has been called ‘integrative communication’ by Birdwhistell (1970:14). Its function is to maintain the interactional system in operation and to regulate the interactional process according to the timing, spatial structure, intensity and direction of the behaviours. In the case of enchanted human/dolphin interactions, we can assume that messages that maintain the interactional process are exchanged. But one specific feature of human/dolphin interactions should be mentioned: contrary to human interaction, a distant observer does not necessarily perceive the behaviours of the human and the animal as structured in an interactional system. He might merely see a dolphin swimming in the vicinity of a human being while this human being is experiencing a close and intimate relationship.

The second kind of signals are ethological signals which can be related to the emotions and feelings experienced by humans. We are here concerned with what the dolphin *does* to the human being, the effect that the dolphin’s behaviour has on him. According to G. Bateson, mammalian communication is first of all concerned with social relationship:

‘The wag of the dog’s tail which for individual psychology signifies an inner state of the dog becomes something more than this when we ask about the functions of this signal in the relationship between the dog and his master. I want to suggest to you that

it becomes an affirmation or a proposal about what shall be the contingencies in that relationship'. (1963:230)

It was Warren McCulloch who pointed out that every message has a report aspect (it is a report on what previously happened) and a command aspect (it is a stimulus for the next behaviour). For Bateson, the 'command' aspect of a message is responsible for the creation of order and patterns in interactional systems. It is also linked to the emotions that are released by the stimulus aspect of the message. In fact, Bateson has gone as far as stating that emotions and feelings are the subjective equivalent of patterns of relations.

'In the language describing relationship many words which are commonly used to describe individuals now become technical terms for systems of contingency in the interchange. Such words as *dependency*, *hostility*, *trust*, and even the names of feelings or emotions such as *fear* and *anger*, can be translated by the formal characteristics of the sequences in which they occur'. (1963:130)

**Eye contact.** 'A dolphin looks at you in the eye' – this was told me in 1990 by an anonymous attendant at the 2<sup>nd</sup> ICERC Conference in Australia. Eye-to-eye contact is indeed a powerful ethological signal in humans. In most mammalian species, direct stare is a threat and is linked to aggression and dominance. In humans, a direct stare might be enough to trigger a fight as well, but according to Ellsworth and Langer (1976), it does not release any particular behaviour pattern. The authors suggest that stare has the more general function of acting as a releaser for emotional arousal, which must be interpreted or altered according to its context. The signal still has its mammalian aversive function (think of the stare of an adult who want to discipline a child), but the frequency and duration of eye contact is correletat with feelings of love in courting couples (Weitz, 1979). No other human signal is as closely associated with both negative and positive feelings than gaze. As a sign and a signal for emotional arousal,

gaze and mutual gaze must be carefully patterned by cultural rules in order for the interaction to be sustained. Those are the rules governing involvement, as E. Goffman has termed it. For example, a certain amount (not more than 30 per cent) of mutual gaze is necessary for a conversation to take place between American subjects. In human interactions in public places, a visual contact is also the first necessary step towards the establishment of social interaction (people unwilling to get engaged in an interaction simply avoid the gaze of the other).<sup>25</sup> Eye contact is probably a powerful signal in human/dolphin communication as well. Besides its emotionally arousing function, the first eye contact signals the beginning of an interaction. Consequently, all the subsequent behaviours of the dolphin are perceived as part of the interaction. 'Almost immediately Fungie swam close to me and gave me a look that has stayed with me ever since – a look of great intensity, knowing and acceptance .... It was that first look of unqualified acceptance that will stay with me forever.'<sup>26</sup> 'Eye contact with wild dolphins is magical', according to Kim Rosen, a psychotherapist at the same conference. 'I have often read descriptions of the feeling one has when looking into the eye of a dolphin', says Lisa Sill,<sup>27</sup> 'and it truly is indescribable – like looking deep into one's soul; an understanding of equally intelligent beings'.

**[Figure 2]**

**[Figure 3]**

When associated with positive emotions, close distance (less than 50 centimetres) and eye contact are the mark of a loving and intimate relationship. Intimacy in human-dolphin encounters is also triggered by touch, as it was for Bill:

‘From the moment I leant over that but and put my hand on Simo’s head, I was gone. Out of this world. In the water he never left my side. I felt he wanted to show me his world, that he was as isolated and alone as I was, that he needed me as much as I needed him. It was the same with Dorad. He seemed to be saying: ‘Don’t worry, I’m with you’. So much love, so much tenderness seemed to be coming from him.’<sup>28</sup>

But intimacy does not rely only on close contact. ‘Being in the pod’ is another kind of intimacy which is sometimes offered to humans. When Scott and Karen Steele find themselves surrounded by dolphins, they are suddenly put for a while in the intimacy of a dolphins’ everyday life – a privilege for which primatologists are ready to fight for years if they have to!

***Appeasement signals.*** The message ‘I shall not harm you’ is clearly perceived by the human being who meets a dolphin. First, the animal is powerful and it is obvious that he could easily harm seriously any swimmer.<sup>29</sup> But instead, the animal comes by, tilts the head, and searches for eye-to-eye contact. Since the work of Blurton-Jones (1972) and Montagner (1978), we know that leaning the head aside, looking in the eye and smiling is an appeasement posture of the non-verbal repertoire of occidental children. We find all those signals on the dolphin’s face when he makes contact with a swimmer. Even the picture of a dolphin’s head is enough to make us feel that this animal is friendly. Oddly, the famous dolphin smile is never explicitly mentioned in our enchanted encounters, although it is mentioned in more casual contacts. But this purely anatomical smile has certainly its part in framing the dolphin’s face as friendly. Smiling is an appeasement signal of our primate’s heritage.

***The dolphin’s impassiveness.*** Because of their adaptation to sea, cetaceans have lost all the classic mammalian devices for social communication. They have no ears to move, no hair to

erect, no arms to wave, no place to deposit odoriferous substances and very few body postures available. Their whole body is encapsulated in a compact hydrodynamic shape. This undoubtedly favours the projection of thoughts, emotions and feelings, and it might be necessary, in order for the human/animal interaction to follow its course, that the human be not disturbed by the animal's expressions.<sup>30</sup> This in turn favours a very focused interaction in which concentration is high. During the course of the interaction, the human perception is not distracted by the constant flow of gesture, facial expressions and changes of body postures that characterise human interaction. Except for a few postures, the communication system is restricted to the observation of behaviour.

*A slight trance.* Through our reports, we can see some evidence for a slight trance on the human side. Many people lose the perception of time, others are so focused on the animal that they forget the world around them. One evening, Helen Kay was walking on the beach with her dog Jess. Suddenly, a pod of dolphins appeared. Then they came closer and Helen felt 'an instinctive urge to try to communicate with these lovely creatures.' She then began singing 'Amazing Grace' and

'they came in as far as they could in the white water about 20 feet away .... I started walking back up the beach and they all came with me, swimming quietly now, but still surfing into the white water at times. We went about 500 metres like that. I was getting bored with 'Amazing Grace' by now and I'm sure they were too, so I tried something different, but it wasn't right – it just did not sound right. Perhaps it was just a coincidence, but at this point communication stopped. It was a strange thing to know that it had, even though they were still there. Shortly afterwards, they were gone, quietly, with no more leaping .... I was so euphoric about the whole thing – I don't know how long they were with me. At least half an hour; probably longer.'<sup>31</sup>

Wade Doak had a similar experience. While he was contemplating the sea from a cliff, a pod of dolphins appeared. ‘Then’, said Doak, ‘began the most accomplished human/dolphin communication I ever experienced. They were leaping and surfing in exact accordance with my thoughts. I don’t know how long it lasted, several hours’.<sup>32</sup>

In these two last examples human and animals are not engaged in true social communication. But the behaviour of the dolphin is nevertheless timed and spatially structured in a way that fits with a meditation state in the human brain. The contemplation of the sea may also play a role in the establishment of a meditation state and we can compare it to the relaxing effect that fish tanks have on blood pressure in humans (Katcher *et al.* 1983), although the timing is different.

Taken together, the signals that humans perceive favour a deep involvement and a very focused interaction. Prolonged eye contact is probably responsible for an emotional arousal which is affiliative rather than aggressive thanks to, among others, appeasement signals. The pattern of eye contacts is also very significant: they signal the beginning of the interaction and their duration is more typical of a loving intimacy than of a casual social encounter. The impassiveness of the dolphin might facilitate the interactional process as well as high concentration on the behaviour of the animal. The powerful emotions of love, happiness or euphoria mentioned above probably originate in these very basic ethological signals. Surprised by the upsurge of emotions they sometimes did not know about, people discover a new side of themselves.

### **Occidental Figures of the Dolphin**

In occidental discourses about dolphins, the patterns of human/dolphin interaction and communication are constructed as special attributes *of the dolphins*. What is perceived or experienced during the encounter is ascribed to the dolphin. Dolphins are consequently

constructed has having special qualities that in turn ‘explain’ the experience of the encounter. The first of these qualities is the ‘power to heal’<sup>33</sup> – dolphins are said to be miraculous healers. Every newspaper article that I have read about children having ‘therapeutic sessions’ with dolphins uses, in one way or another, the rhetoric of the miracle. One autistic boy gave *for the first time* a kiss to his father after a few sessions in Eilat. Recently, a young Belgian girl taken to Panama City to meet dolphins was reported to be ‘in a remission since 8 months’. The dolphin by himself is always considered as the one who triggered the changes observed in the child. The animal must therefore possess some kind of ‘healing power’.<sup>34</sup> The second attribute is a will to save mankind from the ecological disaster. Many pilot whales are slaughtered each year at the Feroë Islands. ‘Why don’t they escape if they are intelligent?’ asked an ingenuous attendant at a conference organised by *Delphus* in Brussels in December 1993. ‘It is a sign of intelligence’ answered the orator. ‘They could flee if they wanted. But they don’t. How could they better deliver a message of love to us? They love us and we kill them in return.’ Dolphins offer their life to human beings in order to teach them something about love and respect of animal life. If the dolphin is an intentional animal, then not only do people perceive message, but the dolphins *want* to deliver them messages as well. Hence the dolphin appears as a saviour for humankind. The last prominent figure of the dolphin in occidental discourses is the telepathic animal. ‘The communication process will not be a vocal one; enough is known now already to appreciate that cetacean communication is at a mind level’, according to Kamala Hope-Campbell, founder of the ICERC, in her opening address at the 2<sup>nd</sup> ICERC conference in Australia. ‘If man wants to communicate with dolphins, he certainly is the one who has to change, to engage himself in a transforming personal and transpersonal development to try to reach these creatures’ world of telepathy’ writes Laurent Pomes to *Dolphin*.<sup>35</sup> These three occidental figures of the dolphin can be read as non reflexive (in the anthropological sense) transcriptions of what is experienced at the contact of

the animal. In return, they give shape to the encounter and help to interpret the behaviour of the animal. The belief in the telepathic power of the dolphin for example favours the perception of the behaviour of the animal as a response to the human's emotions, feelings or thoughts and the establishment of an interactional system on the human part.

## **Conclusion**

In occidental tales and stories, when human beings are reputed to be able to communicate with the animal world, it is because they possess 'special powers' or because some kind of charm or spell is at work. In such stories as in Maeterlink's *L'oiseau bleu*, the human being has suddenly access to a totally new world, a world of which he did not previously suspect the existence. Our 'enchanted' dolphin encounters share some feature of those tales. Outside any arbitrary code or language, humans seem to receive clear messages from the dolphins, and they learn something new about themselves. Having related the emotions experienced during enchanted encounters to some of the signals perceived and to the patterns of human/dolphin interaction, it is now clear that what is experienced in the human/dolphin encounter (love, euphoria, happiness) is both perceived and believed.

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- <sup>1</sup> Dolphins are enchanted beings in many Brazilian Amazon folktales as well (Slater, 1994).
- <sup>2</sup> Joan A. Bishop, *The Australian Dolphin and Whale Journal*, 1990, 40.
- <sup>3</sup> *Dolphin*, 27, 1992.
- <sup>4</sup> International Cetacean Education Research Centre, based in Nambucca Heads, Australia. The last I.C.E.R.C. huge conference was held in Paris, 1998.
- <sup>5</sup> I understood that the dolphin is truly sacred when, attending a Conference in Brussels, I made a casual remark implying that the dolphin *is* an animal. Instantly I was stared at angrily by my neighbours. In a way I had committed the sin of breaking the charm.
- <sup>6</sup> The word ‘enchanted’ has been chosen because it refers at the same time to the positive emotional content of the experience and to the charm which, in occidental tales and legends, is usually at work when animals speak to humans.
- <sup>7</sup> *Caduceus*, 8, 1989, 13.
- <sup>8</sup> Solitary dolphins are dolphins who stay for a while (a few months, a few years) at the same location near the coast, and usually interact closely with humans. All of them are given one or several names. They are called ‘ambassadors’ by the people who believe that dolphins send us messages.
- <sup>9</sup> *Dolphin*, 26, 1992.
- <sup>10</sup> *Dolphin*, 18, 1988, 6.
- <sup>11</sup> *Dolphin*, 24, 1991.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Australian Dolphin and Whale Journal*, 1990, 11.
- <sup>13</sup> *Dolphin*, 24, 1991
- <sup>14</sup> *The Australian Dolphin and Whale Journal*, 1990, 36.
- <sup>15</sup> *Dolphin*, 22, 1990.
- <sup>16</sup> *Caduceus*, 8, 1989, 13.
- <sup>17</sup> *Dolphin*, 25, 1992.
- <sup>18</sup> Another solitary dolphin.
- <sup>19</sup> *Caduceus*, 4, 1988.
- <sup>20</sup> Gordon is the fisherman who accompanies people on his boat.
- <sup>21</sup> *Dolphin*, 25, 1992.
- <sup>22</sup> *Australian Dolphin and Whale Journal*, 1990, 42.
- <sup>23</sup> Doak, Wade. 1993. *Ambassadeur des dauphins*. Paris, Jean-Claude Lattes.
- <sup>24</sup> It should be noted that the feeling of facing an alien consciousness might happen to dolphin trainers as well, when animals use the communication system of operant conditioning to ‘question’ the trainer about what they are exactly supposed to do. Karen Pryor (1986) gives several examples of such two-way human-animal communication.
- <sup>25</sup> for a review of visual interaction see Cook (1979).
- <sup>26</sup> Sarah Anderson, *ADWJ*, 1990, 7.
- <sup>27</sup> *ADWJ*, 1990, 40.
- <sup>28</sup> *Caduceus*, 4, 1988.
- <sup>29</sup> It happens sometimes. We know of three recent reports. One in captivity where an orca dove to death one of her trainers; another one at the Canary Islands, where a pilot whale nearly dove to death a woman being filmed by her husband; a third one in Mexico, where a man was blown to death by a solitary dolphin he had tormented.
- <sup>30</sup> The projection goes, of course, as far as gross perceptive distortions. Many people see a joyous welcome when a dolphin opens his jaws at them, a signal which is indeed a threat.
- <sup>31</sup> *ADWJ*, 1990, 19.
- <sup>32</sup> Doak, 1993, 187

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Cochrane and Callen (1992).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Servais (1999 a, b).

<sup>35</sup> *Dolphin*, 27, 1992.