

# AWARENESS AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL

by Jonathan Stock

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It's a remarkable fact that in the western philosophical tradition (of which the science of psychology and the art of psychotherapy are recent offshoots) there has been almost no discussion whatsoever of the concept of the nature of human awareness. What is called 'consciousness', however, has been extensively considered and tends to be regarded as more-or-less synonymous with the operations of the 'thinking subject' or 'ego'. But the idea that the energy of awareness may be something entirely other than or prior to the mind is conspicuously absent; and likewise the more fundamental distinction between consciousness **as such** and the various objects appearing within that consciousness.

By contrast Buddhism and Hinduism (the two major religio-philosophic systems of the east) have placed this distinction at the very centre, even having a tendency in their unrealised phases to affirm consciousness (or 'the unconditioned', in Buddhist language) as the sole reality, and to relegate everything else to the status of an undesirable illusion.

## Perls

Ever since the turn of the century more and more westerners have been drawn to various kinds of eastern mysticism. Whether reception of these influences is going to result in a thorough and widespread re-evaluation of the western weltanschauung remains to be seen. (We may destroy ourselves before that happens). Nevertheless, within Humanistic Psychotherapy at least there is much evidence of a successful pragmatic application of techniques, attitudes and conceptions deriving from non-western sources.

"Now = experience = awareness = reality" is the formula used by Fritz Perls to characterise the basic standpoint of Gestalt therapy.

"The past is no more and the future is not yet. Only the now exists."

Parallels with Zen are obvious. Yet there is nothing overtly transcendental about this teaching. The focus of Gestalt is the immanent, the down-to-earth.

"Lose your mind and come to your senses",

says Perls. Another, rather revealing quote:

"Meditation is neither shit nor get off the pot".

It's important to understand that this use of awareness is perfectly compatible with materialism. After all, in empirical psychology awareness is assumed to be no more than a neurological process. Awareness is sentience, and sentience without inter-receptors is unthinkable.

### **Intentionality**

The Perls formula is really a crude restatement of the Principle of Intentionality, discovered by Franz Brentano, which may be stated as: "All consciousness is consciousness of *something*." This Principle underlies Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology, which in turn has been a great influence in the development of Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy. It has its counterpart in Buddhist psychology wherein it is stated that even consciousness is conditioned. Or more precisely, consciousness and the objects of consciousness are mutually co-produced: they arise together, as an undivided continuum.

But this view refers only to that aspect of consciousness which is involved with form. In all the mystical traditions there are reports of the 'experience' of consciousness-without-object (samadhi, jhana, metanoia) in which awareness 'turns upon' itself, and returns to its source, to the exclusion of all objects, gross or subtle, material or mental. In any case, even without such strategic inversion of attention it is possible to intuit the 'still point' within, from which all arising conditions are witnessed without involvement.

There is a further implication of the Principle of Intentionality: that we 'intend' objects: that is, the way the attention is directed both outwardly and inwardly is determined (though not absolutely pre-determined) by the particular type of individuality (or personality in the broadest sense) that we manifest. Attention is constantly moving. And presumably in the Natural or Enlightened state such attention would be free, harmonious, priorly transcended. Few of us are so fortunate. Therapy exists because we have got stuck. Energy and attention are in some way obstructed, and this is reflected on all the levels of our being - the somatic, the emotional, the mental.

### **How to do it**

Awareness in its pure as well as its modified aspect is the very energy of life that moves and animates us. It seems likely that if we could find ways of enhancing and balancing this energy we would be able to begin to undo the manifold patterns of unhappiness which bind us.

So the question arises: How to be aware? The anti-guru J. Krishnamurti was asked this question many times and always refused to provide an answer: on the grounds that the question was wrong. Awareness is uncaused. Neither will nor discipline nor ratiocination can bring it about. Krishnamurti's paradoxical teaching was itself a method, albeit rather unsuccessful. He himself became increasingly frustrated and his followers increasingly bewildered. And the question remains.

What can one learn from this is that the verbal injunction to "be aware", supported by sophisticated intellectual argument is insufficient. While it is true that awareness is uncaused, it is also true that there are certain conditions which may facilitate it and others which impede it. Furthermore it is simplistic to regard awareness as an all-or-nothing phenomenon - either present or absent, with no degrees in-between. There *are* degrees, as also modes and levels of awareness. I've heard people talk about *total* awareness but I fail to understand what that could mean. To be totally aware would be to be intimately acquainted with every process in the entire universe.

### **Therapy: a joint practice.**

As therapists we have a more modest aim: to relieve psychophysical distress. The array of psychotherapeutic techniques and styles of intervention is inexhaustible. All these are useless unless securely grounded in the client-therapist relationship. Ultimately what heals is mysterious and in the therapeutic dyad has to do with the specific and unique transaction taking place between two human beings.

Therapist 'meditates' client, and is constantly reflecting back and actively responding to those aspects of the client's process which seem to call for a heightened attention. One of the obvious advantages of therapy as a joint practice over a solitary sadhana rests on the intriguing fact that there are always features of our personal being to which - no matter how aware we may be - we are blind, and which can only be experienced by another. Conversely, there are aspects of our process which can never be shared with another: No-one can really know what it's like to be me. Our primary model of communication is that it is verbal. In order to speak to one another it is necessary to assume a common basis of knowledge and experience. Since each one's knowledge, experience and bodymind is different, the outcome of a unique course of development, we can communicate only by finding similarities (and differences), but never identities.


### **Love and Awareness**

Fortunately we can also *commune*, by which I mean we can enter into the common and identical experience of existing as conscious beings. This is the true ground, not only of Being, but relationship also. We can begin to communicate in a way which, while it acknowledges apparent separation, also transcends it. Whether we can feel beyond the sense of separation to the point where manifest differences are no longer a problem is a question I'm not qualified to answer.

If we seek to understand other persons in their suchness - exactly as they are - we have to understand the distinction between knowledge and awareness, and also the fact that we repeatedly confuse the two. To know *about* someone is not the same as to *know* them, in the sense of being directly aware of how they are in the present. Knowledge has its place of course, but should not be substituted for knowing. Understanding may be said to be the accurate (from Latin *cura*: care) response of knowledge in the context of awareness.

My experience as a client has been that even my need to be understood is not nearly so important as that I should feel safe, and loved. Again, awareness is the key-note. Love and awareness are the two wings of the spirit. The radiance of awareness is love.

Finally, awareness is not, properly speaking, a tool, but rather a recondition, and a goal, it is both the means and the end. Every therapeutic technique is directly or indirectly a technique of awareness and in this sense a tool. In the therapist's box of tricks there will be found the hammer, the scapel, the sword, the searchlight, the zenstick, the tape-recorder, the first-aid kit. Etcetera. But the metaphor I prefer is that of a bunch of keys. Each key is cut to fit a certain lock. The therapist must use a combination of guesswork, intuition, knowledge, experience and great sensitivity to find the right one. Once the door is unlocked it is up to the client to open it.



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