

The Spiritual Field in Gestalt

- Highlighted through Buddhist Thought -

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'Less apparently, and yet more significantly, the most distinctive features of Gestalt therapy are, properly speaking, transpersonal. By 'transpersonal' I mean that which lies beyond the 'person' in the sense of a conditioned and individual personality.'

(Claudio Naranjo)

The implications that a spiritual view and practice such as found in Buddhism might have on Gestalt therapy could be far reaching. Here we have a chance to expand on the theory of self, on field theory, the notion of the void and on clinical application in applying practices that enhance mindfulness. I believe that we are just at the beginning of an exciting and enriching exploration.

Psychological and spiritual development has everything to do with training the mind to look at itself and to explore the nature of thoughts. For this to happen we need to use the mind itself as a tool. We need the mind to experience itself in the here and now as a way of entering into its own dimension. Fritz Perls knew that 'only Presence is Relevant'. The whole of Gestalt therapy is essentially built on the notion of learning about presence, how to discover it, how we interrupt it and how to be in it; Gestalt is about learning how to be aware. Phenomenological exploration of experience can only be done from moment to moment.

PRESENCE

The state of presence happens in the here and now. It is the doorway to the experience of our sense of wholeness. Whenever we find ourselves in present

awareness, expectations deriving from future thinking, judgments arising from past experiences drop away, they dissolve like clouds in the sky. What remains is the undivided moment. Present awareness is a state used in Gestalt as well as in meditative practices to deepen contact with ourselves and our potential. The difference between the two disciplines lies in the recognition of the dimension of that potential. In therapy we call it our 'human potential'. In the meditative spiritual disciplines this human potential is infinite. Becoming aware of the state of presence is the key to our unmodified authentic inner world, which is inseparably connected to the outer world.

We use present awareness as much as possible in our work as therapists. Bringing the client back to their here and now experience and exploring that awareness of themselves in the present makes connections with deeper stratum of consciousness and refreshes experience of themselves spontaneously. In Gestalt remaining in the present awareness is referred to as 'following one's process'. Learning to observe one's process in the present moment is the way to develop the capacity for awareness. An experienced gestaltist can access the experience of

his or her process in the awareness of it as being always 'right', as it is. However, often we associate the present moment with a negative or even painful experience. Being present means to allow happy as well painful thoughts into our awareness, and since we habitually want to reject the pain, we avoid the state of presence. We tell ourselves that contacting life in the here and now hurts too much. We feel too raw, too vulnerable, even helpless. We avoid the pain by building mental constructs that take us forward into the future in hope for a better life or back into reminiscence of a lost past. This exposes a lack of trust in my capacity to cope with life as it is, I do not trust my process.

However, paradoxically it is not *being* present from moment to moment which causes the problems in our lives. But to *not* be present is the culprit. Because being distracted from the present I enter into judgment and concepts, I interrupt my process. Whereas following my process means embracing situations as they are, good and bad. We learn to 'suffer consciously' as Gurdieff would call it. And according to Naranjo this is an important creative aspect of Gestalt therapy: to learn to make the best of even a 'bad' situation.

So, in general we avoid the present to get away from the pain of these negative thoughts and feelings. These are the accumulation of habitual negative clusters of mental associations who block the experience of an awareness that is not holding on to judging or categorising. We need to learn how to cut through these negativities, cut through to a pure moment uncluttered by past/future worries. We need to train in reaffirming this pure moment again and again, so that it becomes a new, constructive and healthy habit.

This pure moment is the essence of our Being. We need to learn how to sink into the presence from moment to moment without discursive thought interrupting that experience.

AWARENESS

In Gestalt therapy we use our awareness function to explore our thought processes, their content, context, connecting emotions and physical sensations, and thereby finding meaning constellations. We are bringing our conditioned self, our self-script into awareness. 'Awareness for Perls is our human ability to be in touch with our whole perceptual field. Awareness is not just a mental process: it involves all experiences, whether they be physical or mental, sensory or emotional.' (Fritz Perls, Clarkson/Mackewn, p.44) Awareness in Gestalt means noticing, observing what is of interest. Following that interest we examine how we can fulfill that interest, desire, want or need.

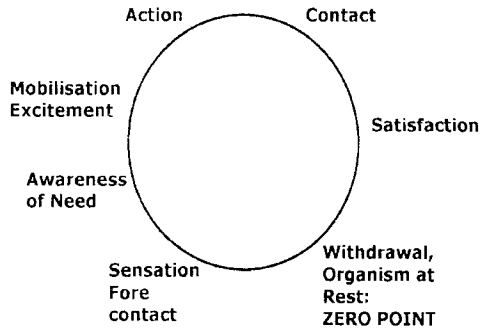
In Buddhist terms this interest creates attachment. And it is this attachment that is the cause of suffering. Even if we are able fulfill that need or desire. If we do fulfill it, we usually want to hang onto it, even after it was experienced as a lively figure. If we don't fulfill the want we suffer from frustration. So, following an interest leads to pain in any case, according to Buddhism. All we do is create more attachment.

Meditation is a non-intentional discipline. Hence here we apply an awareness that is not concerned with following and grasping at our figure of interest as it arises in our consciousness. We purposefully watch it as it emerges from the 'ground of being' and then we watch it dissolve back into the ground. Our attention is

informed by a need to know the interest for its own sake but not to grasp at it. We let it be, just to make it part of knowing, not part of identification. In fact we purposefully practice non-attachment, a letting go of habitual clinging. And in any case there is no letting go into full contact without non-attachment. 'Buddhism offers a more radical approach: a deconstruction of all aspects of the field, even the individualistic wanting that Gestalt therapy maintains.' (Wolfert, P.83). What remains is an awareness of the ebb and flow of figure/ground formation. And slowly a sense of spaciousness emerges, the empty ground of being dawns, within which the construction and deconstruction of figures takes place. There is much scope in Gestalt to extend this awareness work from the recognition of needs and interests to the work of loosening the insistence on habitually following the dictates of those needs and instead to come back to oneself as presence. We make a U-turn. We look back at the one that has those needs and rest in that awareness.

According to Clarkson, Perls was particularly interested in the moment in the Awareness Cycle when the person is in balance, at the moment of rest, which he called the Zero Point. This is the place where Creative Indifference can occur. 'Although not aware of anything in particular, the person is alert and open to all possibilities. His interest could go in any direction one way or another. He is balanced, centred. He simply is. The field is as yet undifferentiated: figure and ground are one.' (Clarkson, Mackewn). In the Awareness Cycle the Zero Point can be found at the stage of withdrawal from the just completed contact; the cycle is at rest, a new sensation has not yet emerged:

The moment of Creative Indifference is the place where meditation can take its place. The gestalt is completed and no new gestalten are formed yet. At this stage the Awareness process becomes quite different.



Awareness in spiritual discipline is used to observe thoughts with the aim to quieten them and to find a thoughtless state - there are further levels of meditation and finding this state free of thoughts, is the foundation for them all - a state of calm. We gain peace from speedy and neurotic thought patterns that drive us. We slow our thinking down. We learn to quieten obsessive, judgmental, disturbing thoughts. By watching our thoughts, through the impartial observation of them, they change their charge. Their emotional impact is diminished. We learn how to disidentify with the stream of thoughts, also called inner dialogue, or chatter by just letting it pass by whilst we observe it. And then we may discover a space between our thoughts, the possibility of a thoughtless state which leads to the experience of being. 'Meditation traditions know a stage of awareness beyond the awareness of the here and now: an awareness retroflected unto itself, which devours itself and

dissolves into a condition of consciousness without an object - consciousness without a subject, 'nondual awareness' - sunyata -cognition of the 'ground of Being' (Naranjo, P.212).

The beginning of the spiritual path is to find an inner spaciousness within which thoughts can come and go. We do not grasp at them as a way of defining ourselves. The discovery of that space and the impact this has on our lives can be quite revolutionary. As a result habitual patterns relax their hold. New and more flexible field

We learn that we are more than our thoughts. We discover a sense of richness in the 'open field' as opposed to a fixed and inflexible one, one that is already outlined for us

perceptions will emerge. We learn that we are more than our thoughts. We discover a sense of richness in the 'open field' as opposed to a fixed and inflexible one, one that is already outlined for us. 'We start to let go of our surface wants and accommodations without a specific focus on their grounds. They begin to seem like means to ends that are no longer interesting to pursue. So, for example, seeking power or security often loses its lustre, as does feeling hurt, angry or fearful. As we start to be freer of our ceaseless wanting, we can focus more fully on loving and being.' (Wolfert, p.83/84). Not only that, but as Wolfert

points out, we are also capable of shifting our perception of reality by finding the empty space between contact sequences and making that the focus of our awareness. The openness this creates takes us into an awareness that lies beyond our ego and its content. 'We no longer have awareness of anything, just pure awareness.' (Wolfert, p. 84). I see a beneficial place in therapy to use the awareness of this openness in our work. We would introduce a shift in emphasis away from 'the individualistic wanting and seeking, and toward the full experiencing of being in the flow of life, where the flux is seen as an opportunity to meet the moment' (Wolfert, P.84)

THE SELF IN GESTALT AND BUDDHISM

Spend a few moments looking for where the 'Self' is:

Is it your thoughts, is it your feelings? If that, where would it be located in your body?

Are you going to take that 'Self' with you when you die?

So who are we, if we are not intimately defined by what we think (and feel and sense, etc.). The self in Gestalt terms is process in action, forever changing. This implies that we cannot find a fixed core anywhere. 'Equally important, neuroscience substantiates the Gestalt therapy view of self as process. There is no central processing in the brain, no place where everything comes together (Hardcastle, 1995). No location exists where the self could be said to exist as audience in what Bennett (1991) calls the Cartesian theatre of the mind. Thus there is no fixed entity or even power that could be called the self. The brain is a self-

organising whole.' (Wolfert, P. 79) This self, it being an organising process, organises experience at the contact boundary. 'When we say 'boundary' we think of a 'boundary between'; but the contact-boundary, where experience occurs, does not *separate the organism and its environment*; rather it limits the organism, contains and protects it, and

it is the openness, the space itself, carrying the process of figure/ground formation, which we can integrate as being our awareness-presence identity

at the same time it touches the environment.' (PHG. p.229, italics by author) The self and the environment are connected through those contact boundaries, they are two aspects of one whole field. The self is how we experience ourselves at the contact boundary of our environment. In Gestalt we say that the self is the I-in-process. The work in therapy focusses on becoming aware of myself as process, including the awareness of myself in relation to my environment. Hence this pure process view links man to the macrocosm. The self is inseparable from its surrounding, the interaction between each other happens at the contact boundary, which ideally is flexible and permeable. The self is thus the overall system of the person's contact and responses, necessary for adjustment and

orientation in the present field. Learning to align our perception to our on-going process 'as it is', free of any of the interruptions of projection, retroreflection, etc, is the aim in Gestalt therapy. Or more to the point, therapy takes care of building an awareness of how we interrupt our process unfolding, with the aim to govern this process so that we can heal the interruptions to our organismic figure/ground formation.

It is the aim of meditation to learn how to empty the mind of conceptual thinking so that that we can flow with our process unfolding without interruption, initially during the meditation session, and eventually in daily life. What remains is a sense of awareness of ourselves as being in and of an open field. Figure/ground formation happens within the womb of this field, which is of an empty nature. We are no longer identified with figure/ground as defining us. But it is the openness, the space itself, carrying the process of figure/ground formation, which we can integrate as being our awareness-presence identity.

FERTILE AND FUTILE VOID -

THE MIND AS SPACE

Perls (1969): 'And we find when we accept and enter this nothingness, the void then the desert starts to bloom. The empty void becomes alive, is being filled. The sterile void becomes the fertile void.'

In Gestalt we say that splitting off unwanted personality traits creates psychological holes in the psyche. When we are faced with those holes, we fear that there is nothing there. However, as we truly contact that fear

for long enough, usually always something emerges out of that experience of blankness. Something of our split off nature is re-emerging, it integrates with our overall field of perception and changes it into something more comprehensive for us. And as a result we feel more complete. Healing the splits brings about a renewed sense of wholeness. The truth is that mind is space. If we really look we might notice how we are surrounded by space. Our planet is embedded within the universe which consists of infinite space. Buddhist meditation technology has upheld and advocated for thousands of years the truth that mind also is infinite, inner space. To fear our inner void is often the cause for wanting therapy. Feeling empty inside is associated with a meaninglessness. When we no longer fear the void because we trust that we can emerge in process, we become truly creative and we can truly begin the spiritual work.

The Diamond Sutra says: Form is Emptiness - Emptiness is form.

Here the whole perceptual field is acknowledged as its ground to be the fertile void. The spiritual path offers an opportunity to go beyond all splits by finding a unifying field of experience which lies beyond the dualistic view of this and that. 'Buddhism offers a more radical approach: a deconstruction of all aspects of the field, even the individualistic wanting that Gestalt therapy maintains. It gives no concepts of self at all: just ceaseless movement.' (Wolfert, BGJ, p.83)

To enter into 'Being', we have to stop the flow of discursive thought. We have to be totally present to step through presence into that inner space, which reveals new and unaccessed inner

worlds of a more expansive, coherent and whole nature.

I want to end with a quote from Naranjo about self support in meditation which, when I read it first moved me; here it is:

'Gestaltists are not cognizant of the fact that meditative consciousness constitutes the deepest self-support. Most Gestaltists are familiar with the concept of growth as a movement from environmental support to self-support. While much has been said about the support that comes from being grounded in sensory awareness and more generally in awareness of experience, we may have to learn from the spiritual traditions about the support that comes from giving up support in anything and through that openness - developing the sense of existence beyond the awareness of content - an awareness of awareness, a pure presence or pure wakefulness (bodhi in Buddhism) that confers both a sense of invulnerability and an ability to be empty handed.' (Naranjo, P.285)

Further reading

Perls, Hefferline, Goodman. (1951, 1996). *Gestalt Therapy, Excitement and Growth in the human Personality*.

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