

# GESTALT THERAPY AS A TRANSPERSONAL APPROACH

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*In this chapter Claudio Naranjo presents the ways in which he believes Gestalt therapy is transpersonal both in technique and philosophy. He sees two major aspects of Buddhism - the awareness, or mindfulness, practice and morality - as strong links between the two approaches.*

*For Naranjo, awareness is "the ultimate treasure"; it lies at the very foundation of the transpersonal and flows through all Buddhist and Sufi philosophy and practice. In exploring the meaning of awareness in each of these practices, the author recognizes the temptation "to value the manifestation above the awareness". But he sees a shift in understanding toward the true nature of awareness and thinks it may be "the most significant feature of today's humanistic and transpersonal therapies."*

*Naranjo further presents a strong counterargument to the frequent assertions that Fritz Perls, founder of Gestalt therapy, was antiritual in both his work and his life. He also presents sound reasons for Gestalt therapy's being akin to Buddhist concepts of morality - morality being seen as "the interpersonal work of traditional spirituality." While Gestalt therapy rejects any moralism, it does not reject morality; in fact, it encourages authenticity and courage, "the gist of moral development." Furthermore, while the Gestalt approach is open to all forms of expression, it also encourages voluntary inhibition. This, Naranjo asserts, indicates that "the therapeutic process... involves an element of austerity" similar to spiritual traditions.*

*A further connection between Gestalt Therapy and Buddhist practice is the requirement for openness, "to be aware of what is given here and now in our experiential fields." Naranjo sees three ways of expressing openness in Gestalt therapy: being aware without self-manipulation, being creatively indifferent, and accepting nothingness. The Gestalt therapist compares the psychological explosion that can follow the acceptance of nothingness to a transpersonal death and rebirth experience.*

*A student and associate of Perls at Esalen, Naranjo likens Perls to a "fierce guru" or a shaman. "Even more than a Zen master," he says, "Perls approximated the earliest transpersonal individual and therapist, the shaman."*

*Gestalt therapists and other practitioners alike will find Naranjo's interpretation of Gestalt philosophy and his linking of it to Buddhism fascinating, enlightening, and probably new to their thinking.*

ALTHOUGH TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY HAS BECOME differentiated as a particular stream within that "third force" that came to be called humanistic, there is no doubt that humanistic psychology - which Maslow pointed out as an alternative to the mechanistic psychologies of Freud and Pavlov and their heirs - was transpersonal from the beginning. The word *humanistic*, as opposed to *mechanistic*, referred to what is properly human in human beings, and thus implicitly to values, meaning, the development of consciousness and, generally speaking, "the farther reaches of human nature." It was an ambiguous word to use for a psychology implicitly or explicitly appreciative of the place of the spiritual in human life, for *humanism* has in the past served to describe a secular philosophical orientation, the word alluding in that context to an opposition between a human-centered view and a theocentric perspective. Indeed, it is possible to distinguish within the broad stream of humanistic psychology the more humanistically oriented individuals (in that traditional sense of the word) from the more transpersonally inclined.

Yet commonly accepted labels may be misleading, and so it is not generally understood that-in spite of its psychoanalytic origins and the influence of general systems thinking - 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. "Instead of impersonal" writes Rudhyar, who started using the term in 1929 (probably earlier than anybody else), "let us use another word more telling - transpersonal. A personal type of behavior (or feeling, or thought) is one rooted in the substantive and conditioned form of the personality. A transpersonal form of behavior is one starting from the universal unconditioned Self in Man and using the personality merely as an instrument" (1975).

Jung, who is said to have used the word (*ibid.*) sometimes, must have surely meant with it the contents of the collective unconscious, in opposition to those of the *personal* unconscious and consciousness. In the form of archetypes, Jung smuggled the spiritual into an overly mechanistic psychology just as transpersonal psychology does today. Yet that Gestalt therapy has been regarded a humanistic rather than transpersonal approach - in these days when both terms are dominant in our system of psychological packaging - reflects a tendency (at least in past years) to associate the transpersonal more with the visionary realm, altered states of consciousness, and the paranormal than with the basis of all these: awareness itself.

The fact, however, is that awareness is transpersonal. Or, to use the earlier term, spiritual.

The most articulate spiritual traditions make this very clear. Buddhahood (from the root *bodh*, "awake") is not a particular state or content of the mind, but mind as such, the container. Perhaps even more explicitly Sufism makes clear that the goal of awakening from the state of restricted awareness that is ordinary consciousness lies beyond "spiritual states." These are derivative manifestations of consciousness itself and the result of an impingement of the transpersonal on the personal (or, in the traditional terms, of the spiritual on the ego) which is the explanation usually given for the novice "getting drunk on little wine" (that is, manifesting an abundance of ecstatic and visionary phenomena on little *baraka*, or "spiritual force").

The beginner's usual tendency to get more excited about the productive phenomena of "spiritual drunkenness" than about the awareness that makes them possible is suggested by a teaching story collected by Idries Shah in *Tales of the Dervishes*. It tells of a young man who was guided by a dervish to a place where he conjured the earth to open and instructed him to descend and fetch a candlestick of iron. As soon as the young man descended into the vault thus exposed, he saw such dazzling treasures that he filled his arms with jewels and gold. Then he saw the candlestick and decided that he might as well take it along, too. When he came out, however, the dervish was gone and his treasure had disappeared. Only the candlestick remained. This is only the beginning of the story, which proceeds to tell how this candlestick was magical and could be used in a certain way to yield treasures, and how the young man, due to his greed and lack of knowledge, lost it. Yet this brief outline can serve to illustrate the relation between awareness and the "glittering" states of consciousness. Awareness, like the well-known goose of the golden eggs, is the ultimate transpersonal treasure, but we are not likely to value it for itself.

I think that a shift in emphasis from mental contents to awareness itself may well be the most

significant feature of today's humanistic and transpersonal therapies; yet this leap in psychotherapeutic practice, as usual, has antedated the corresponding leap in theory, and thus (in spite of a growing interest in meditation) the transpersonal nature of awareness has not been properly underlined.

That Gestalt therapy is commonly regarded as humanistic rather than transpersonal is a reflection of this lack of conceptual precision, though a most understandable one if we consider that the spirituality of Gestalt therapy is, in a sense, disguised. With this "in a sense" I refer to Perls' rejection of ordinary religiosity. His usual practice of responding to "spiritual" talk (and most talk anyway) as to a neurotic symptom was generally appropriate, however, and even highly spiritual in that it challenged the patient to relate to him beyond symbolic and ideological crutches. I remember the perplexity of a minister, for instance, to whose religious statement Perls answered, "I feel separated from you by your God." He clarified: "You're putting God between you and me." Of course he was addressing himself to the quasi-universal tendency to complicate direct and spontaneous action in the moment with ideology-bound ways of relating. There were many, to be sure, who failed to give him credit as a spiritual authority as soon as they were wounded in their sacrosanct beliefs, and this contributed to the view of the man and his work as antispiritual.

Spirituality is not a matter of ideology, however, and the transpersonal nature of an approach is a fact that overrides statements about it. Perls' personal experience of *satori*, or awakening, as described in his autobiography, and his experience with meditation (he once told me, while living in Esalen, that he practiced at least an hour a day) undoubtedly served as a background to his shaping of Gestalt therapy as a modern equivalent of Buddhist practice. This occurred particularly in his California year and perhaps without his knowing it.

Buddhist practice is essentially awareness training plus morality. So is Gestalt therapy, even though the word *morality* may seem as far from it as *spirituality*. Inasmuch as the therapeutic process in the Gestalt approach attempts to debilitate what Karen Horney (Perls' analyst) called the "tyranny of shoulds" (1950) with which ordinary morality goes hand in hand, the approach may at first seem not only antispiritual but antimoral. More deeply considered, however, it creates a context (particularly in its group form) for the practice of virtues such as courage and authenticity, which are the gist of moral development -beyond specific rules of behavior. Indeed, as I have expressed elsewhere, the therapist's actions may be understood, from one point of view, as a systematic negative reinforcement of phoniness and support of genuine self-expression.

Morality may be understood as the interpersonal work of traditional spirituality. The early masters of different cultures must have clearly realized how mental development may be self-deceptive if contemplative practices are pursued without the foundation of a practice directed as the transcendence of such compulsive appetitive and aversive behaviors usually called passions. No lying, no stealing, no killing or harming are in the Eastern ways of growth not mere morality, as they have come to be in our watered-down Mosaic tradition, but, as in Patanjali, preliminaries to Samadhi and, as in the Buddha's "Eightfold Noble Path," aspects of right livelihood and right effort, which follow from right view and prepare the ground for right mindfulness and concentration. It is hard to imagine a successful attempt to lead a pure life in this traditional sense without a process of personality change involving a diminution of deficiency needs and a decreased reliance on deceptiveness. In the absence of an appropriate mental context and in a climate of authoritarianism (both, conditions of

our cultural background), morality becomes moralism, however, which leads not to increasing transcendence of deficiency (that is, nonattachment) but to repression.

The greening of our once puritanical America has been characterized by a breakdown of repression, and the many therapies conducive to this - heralded in by psychoanalysis - are characterized not by the control of behavior but by the surrender of control; not by inhibition but by expression.

Like other contemporary therapies, Gestalt therapy is to a considerable extent a way to awareness through expression - not only verbal but motor-gestural, imaginal, and broadly speaking, artistic. What is often forgotten, however, is that the Gestalt approach involves a no less important but subtler and less explicated element of voluntary inhibition: inhibition of obsessive conceptualization, of manipulation, and of inauthentic behavior ("games"). True, "everything goes" in the Gestalt framework as far as experience is concerned and its expression, but acting out, dramatic as it may be in the context of a guided experience, is not anything that we might call a Gestalt rule. Precisely because the manipulative and inauthentic behavior characteristic of the neurotic modes of being-in-the-world involve an attempt to *avoid* certain experiences, the attitude of the therapist is to invite an undoing of such avoidances, a "staying with it," however painful or confusing. In Perls' view, our awareness is constricted because we have not accepted our suffering, and thus the therapeutic process necessarily involves (like the spiritual traditions, we might add) an element of austerity. The basic austerity, we can say, is the nonindulgence of what the spiritual traditions call the ego, and Perls called character and equated with a system of obsolete fixed responses that interfere with organismic function. To him (and this was an unpopular view at the time) the ideal human being would be beyond character - a statement that we can translate into: "would function at a transpersonal level."

Since Perls was a fervent nondualist - in the sense of denying "the superstition that there is a separation, yet inter-dependency of two kinds of substance, the mental and the physical" (Perls, 1969, p. 2) - he preferred the word *organism to soul or Higher Self* To him "matter-mind as unity is truly organismic." His choice of terminology (borrowed from Smuts [1926] and Goldstein [1939]) has no doubt contributed to the generalized impression that his view was materialistic rather than spiritual (that is, transpersonal). This assumption is easily dismissed if we consider his view of awareness - together with space and time - as a fundamental aspect of the universe throughout its different levels of organization. Furthermore, the integration of the materialistic and spiritual views in his thinking is conveyed through statements such as:

Thus matter seen through eyes of mine  
Gets god-like connotation  
(Perls, 1969)

and (referring to time, space, and awareness)

The triple God is ultimate  
He is creative power  
Of all the universal stuff.  
(Perls, 1969)

if the morality of Gestalt therapy is one of authenticity and nonmanipulation (of self or other), its

awareness training may be summed up in the statement that J.S. SImkin proposed as a capsule definition of the approach: "I and thou, here and now." In other words, it is a practice of awareness in relationship (though this may at times be an internalized relationship). In this it differs from the Buddhist practice of awareness in isolation. Just as this awareness training, the seventh item in the Buddhist Eightfold Path, is a transpersonal process, the practice of awareness in relationships may be described, like Gestalt therapy in general, as bringing the transpersonal into the interpersonal.

The cultivation of here-and-now awareness in Gestalt therapy goes hand in hand with another issue underlined by traditional psychologies, Buddhism in particular. Let us call it openness: to be aware of what is given here and now in our experiential field. This involves a basic gesture of allowing - an indiscriminate acceptance of experience, which may be said to involve in turn a relinquishment of standards and expectations. Inasmuch as openness cuts across mental content, it lies, again, in the transpersonal realm. It is expressed in Gestalt therapy in a number of ways, other than the injunction of being aware without self-manipulation.

One of these is what Fritz Perls called, after S. Friedlander, "creative indifference" (1966). By this he meant the ability to remain in a neutral point, disengaged from the conceptual or emotional polar opposites at play in every moment of awareness. Perls displayed a striking measure of creative indifference as a psychotherapist by being able to stay in the zero point without getting caught up in his patients' games. I think of the zero point as a refuge of the Gestalt therapist in the midst of intense participation - not only a source of strength but ultimate self-support.

Another aspect of openness in Gestalt therapy is the acceptance of nonexperience; the acceptance of nothingness. To this Perls gave so much importance that he described the successful therapeutic process as one leading "from the sterile void to the fertile void" (Perls, 1969). By nothingness he meant no-thingness - that is, nonarticulate undifferentiated awareness - and in speaking of a fertile void he implied that being at home in this undifferentiated awareness is the foundation or ground for a healthy figure formation of articulate awareness in the here-and-now. Not infrequently the Gestalt therapist can observe the sequence of nothingness - psychological explosion, much as a partial death-rebirth, and even though Perls knew well that "to die and to be reborn is not easy" (Perls, 1969), he saw this eminently transpersonal process as the gist of therapy, and even life. His wholehearted involvement in it is reflected in one of the oil paintings he left behind: a self-portrait in which he is seen embracing his own skeleton.

Not only does Gestalt therapy share with Buddhism (and other spiritual paths) its prescription of virtuous relationship and cultivation of awareness, the awareness of pain and death in particular; it also shares with ancient prototypes its embodiment of the fierce guru, who pierces and tramples on the human ego. Hesse has remarked that there are outwardly compassionate teachers and teachers whose compassion speaks through the blows of a stick. Perls, like the archetypal Zen master, was a wielder of the stick; he was a master of ego-reduction before Oscar Ichazo introduced the term in the "Arica Training." His tribe has cultivated this ability, taking it so much for granted that we do not think of regarding it as a technique.

More than a Zen master, however, Perls resembled the earliest transpersonal individual and therapist, the shaman; and shamanistic, too, is the precedent of the Gestalt therapist's role as an experience-guide, a consciousness conductor. This is also the role of those who work with body

awareness, with fantasy, or who offer the experience of guided meditation; and it may be said that contemporary therapy is becoming increasingly shamanistic in style, in this as in other regards. What makes the role of the Gestalt therapist particularly shamanistic, however, is its versatility in moving organically between the sensory, affective, cognitive, interactive, and imaginal domains and, potentially at least, the domain of consciousness as such.

Beyond his role as an experience-guide, however, the Gestalt therapist is likely to carry, to a greater or lesser extent, the imprint of Fritz Perls in his being; and Perls was a shaman in more than his role: in his reliance on intuition, his scientific-artistic orientation, his combination of power and ordinariness, his unconventional ways and defiance of tradition, his familiarity with heavens and hells, and perhaps most importantly, his dionysian-mindedness and appreciation of surrender. I think, too, that he was not unlike a true shaman when he described himself as "50 percent son of god and 50 percent son of a bitch." The transpersonal in the interpersonal.