WHY AWARENESS WORKS AND OTHER INSIGHTS FROM SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

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What Do Spirituality and Psychotherapy Have to Do with Each Other?

There is an intermittent but lively stream of articles appearing over the past 30 years that identifies points of convergence between Buddhist teachings and the Gestalt approach to human behavior. In some, the authors put these two traditions side-by-side to highlight clear philosophical parallels. Others emphasize ways meditation and spiritual insights can be used to enhance Gestalt therapy. And there are opposing voices which assert that spirituality has nothing to do with psychology and has no business in our dialogue. In addition, there is autobiographical and biographical material on Fritz and Laura Perls and Paul Goodman noting that Eastern wisdom traditions influenced their thinking and work—Zen in the Perls’ case (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993), Taoism for Goodman (Stoehr, 1994).

The table below is a compact way of introducing readers to, or reminding them of, some main points of comparison between these two traditions. I hope it conveys the intriguing nature of the parallels and why interest in them continues. (I am relying on my training in the Theravadan school of Buddhism in developing this comparison.)

[Table 1 Placed Here]

Work focusing on the kinship of Buddhism and Gestalt is but one part of a growing interest in the relationship between Gestalt therapy and many different ways of addressing the spiritual. In 1999, John Kirti Wheway inaugurated an annual lecture, in honor of Marianne Fry, intended to explore the boundary between Gestalt and spirituality. His and a subsequent talk have appeared in this Journal (Wheway, 1999/Evans, 2000). This interest is flourishing beyond Gestalt and across psychological persuasions if we can judge by the explosion of writing and of conferences on the relationship between various psychotherapeutic approaches and spirituality, especially their compatibility or incompatibility.

One of the dilemmas faced by practitioners and theorists trying to bridge these two realms is the difficulty of comparing “religious” understanding, which is generally assumed to rest on faith, with psychological understanding, based to some degree on empiricism and experimentation. Moreover, spirituality is a notoriously difficult term to define, open to being shaped and molded to many purposes and to take on the coloration of many surroundings. It is often noted that it is not synonymous with religion, yet there is considerable overlap. Spiritual experiences can be tough to communicate because they are so personal or because they are so ineffable. As writers, finding ways to help others make contact with our deepest realizations about who we are and the nature of
reality is a challenge. As readers we can get caught between wanting to be respectful and open to something new, yet feeling put off by someone else’s heartfelt excitement for a fuzzy experience with which we cannot fully identify.

Like others, I am impressed by the consistency between how the Buddha understands human experience and the Gestalt view. My exposure to Buddhism

Table 1. Some Points of Similarity in Philosophy and Core Assumptions/Beliefs Between Gestalt and Buddhism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Gestalt Theory &amp; Practice</th>
<th>Theravadan Buddhism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key Methodology</td>
<td>Centrality of here-and-now awareness; practitioners and clients trained to be &quot;awareness experts&quot;</td>
<td>Present-time awareness through meditation is fundamental discipline and indispensable for development of true wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in System’s Own Phenomenology</td>
<td>Final arbiter of what to attend to and what is true</td>
<td>Buddha encouraged practitioners to pay close attention to actual experience—to see for themselves and to take nothing on faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliance on Physiological Awareness</td>
<td>Attention to breath, body sensation, physical process is key vehicle for enlarging self-awareness beyond familiar and habitual</td>
<td>Body is the first of the &quot;Four Foundations of Mindfulness;&quot; breath, sensation, sound are starting places for meditative practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mind-Body Relationship</td>
<td>Mental and physical phenomenon highly interdependent and profoundly connected</td>
<td>Mental and physical phenomenon highly interdependent and profoundly connected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of Change/Transformation</td>
<td>Becoming more fully who we already are</td>
<td>Removing impediments to understanding and accessing the wisdom and compassion that are inherently, already, our true nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Nature of &quot;Self&quot;</td>
<td>Continually defined and redefined at boundary between self, other and environment</td>
<td>No substantial, permanent, ongoing self; arises in each moment of contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual’s Relationship to Others and the Environment</td>
<td>We are who we are in relation to the field</td>
<td>We are not separate selves but wholly interdependent with others and our environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
has strengthened my confidence in the Gestalt perspective, and my Gestalt training has made the contemplative core of Buddhism more accessible to me. And I can understand that for those having limited experience with Buddhism, it might be hard to imagine how an ancient, exotic, non-Western belief system could contribute much to our work. It is customary to categorize it with other formal religions and assume that it only has relevance to adherents—those who are brought up with or choose to subscribe to a particular body of beliefs or doctrines. The non-theistic, phenomenological, even pragmatic nature of Buddhism surprises many who look more closely.

What I want to try to do in this article is emphasize the potential psychological contribution of Buddhism. The challenge, as I see it, is to provide an opportunity for Gestaltists to see the practical (not just the philosophical) relevance of a spiritual tradition they may have little or no understanding of or prior interest in.

I will begin by telling a personal story that captures the power of the linkage between these two worlds for me.

What Is It About the ‘Here and Now’?

More than 20 years ago, I went to my first human relations workshop offered by NTL* in Bethel, Maine. [The NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, formerly the National Training Laboratories.] At its core was a classic T-Group experience. I had scant training in psychology, little prior exposure to human development labs or experiential learning in this style, and I had only a vague idea of what to expect. The workshop was a pre-requisite to other NTL training for organizational consulting, and I told myself that this was my reason for signing up. Likely story!

Some years later I heard a veteran consultant and trainer refer to his first T-Group as an “incandescent experience.” This radiant image fits for me. I spent that week in an altered state, semi-ecstatic, deeply touched by the smallest things, with heightened awareness of all my senses, highly energized, cycling and recycling from peaks of elation to troughs of self-judgment. This was an experience unlike any I had known, and it seemed like magic. The event led to a big change in the direction I took professionally, and had profound impact on my personal life. I worry about the loose way behavioral scientists use the term “transformational,” but I do not hesitate to use it about this experience.

I have often wondered exactly what it was that produced these effects, which I also experienced, if a little less dramatically, in many of the Gestalt training programs I subsequently attended. It is only more recently, through my meditative ‘spiritual’ experience that I have come to understand that they arose simply because I was intensively present with my own experience. The structure of the T-Group had me spending a large number of hours each day pretty exclusively attending to what was actually going on—both internally and what I was observing about my colleagues—and reporting this to myself and to
others. Everyone in my group was engaged in the same process, and together we gave support, inspiration and even more momentum to our individual and collective awareness.

I realize that being present with one's experience is a commonplace goal of Gestalt work. Indeed it is so fundamental that it is now implicit, and we don’t think about it much. Its efficacy seems self-evident. On the other hand, it is not self-evident why being present should have such powerful effects, including those I experienced and describe above. Why, exactly, does being in direct relationship to “what is” simultaneously heighten our delight at what is pleasant in our experience and allow us to be more available to and less defended against what is unpleasant? Why does the here and now have such healing potential? I don’t believe the Gestalt literature provides a clear theory of why awareness “works.”

Insights from Spiritual Practice

In recent years, I have spent a number of extended periods doing what is called vipassana meditation. This particular contemplative practice is associated with the Theravada tradition of Buddhism, practiced extensively in Southeast Asia. Other Eastern contemplative and wisdom traditions have similar or parallel practices. Some fresh ways of understanding the impact of my first T-Group and some new ways of looking at Gestalt theory and practice have emerged for me out of this experience.

One of the Buddha’s findings from his own meditative experience, which then became part of his teachings, is as follows. When human beings are present with our actual experience from moment to moment—when we are being fully mindful—the fundamental sources of all human suffering do not arise. The sources of suffering, as he identified them, are three—(1) desire (wanting, clinging, a wish for pleasant experience to arise or to continue); (2) aversion (enmity, fear, a wish for present experience to be different than it is); and (3) delusion (spacing in or spacing out and thereby losing touch with our reality). To the degree the meditative practitioner can be successfully mindful—present for the exact experience of each succeeding moment and not lost and distracted in thought of past or future—then for that interval there is no suffering. This applies whether the experience is pleasant or unpleasant or just neutral (neither good nor bad). Indeed the Buddha observed that the very knowing of our experience is in itself a source of joy, exhilaration and fulfillment even when the content is, in our common way of understanding, negative.

So being present provides a sanctuary from mental afflictions, the secondary thoughts and emotions that we layer onto the joys and sorrows, pleasures and pains of all human existence, and which then cause us to suffer.

A quality of mind that develops in meditation practice particularly relates to our ability to stay with the unpleasant side of experience. As the Buddha reported and many followers have discovered, one effect of sustained presence is to make
it more difficult to deceive oneself, to bend the truth, to rationalize away, reinterpret favorably or deny what is. So, as mindfulness grows, there is greater capacity to be steady and non-defensive with the truth, especially the truth about oneself, to see oneself more wholly and with less illusion, to face one’s past unskillful actions and the unskillful patterns in one’s life and to see them for what they are. Called ujjujukata in the the original Pali of the Buddhist texts, this mental state is translated as rectitude, and even better as straightness of mind, a lovely metaphoric descriptor in English.

A Contribution to Behavioral Science

Straightness of mind is but one illustration of the impressively fine-grained explication of the range of human moods and mental conditions that have developed in this wisdom tradition. Another example is malleability, pliancy or non-rigidity of mind (muduta). I believe we can credit this mental factor for our ability to reframe, to see alternate ways of understanding the same phenomena, to entertain that there are multiple realities. In consulting to teams involved in inter-departmental conflict, for example, it is only when pliancy of mind develops that members are able to put themselves in the shoes of another group that is seen to be in opposition. Similarly, tranquility of mind (passadhi) is a powerful factor that supports careful and considered exploration of options in emergencies and crises, when much is felt to be at stake.

Other states that are identified point more to prevailing emotional tone than to a particular quality or texture of consciousness. Mudita, for example, is appreciative joy, the capacity to take pleasure in the happiness of others, to wholeheartedly join in embracing another’s good fortune. It is a condition of mind that stands in sharp contrast to jealousy and envy. Closely related is compassion (karuna), classically referred to as the trembling of the heart in the presence of suffering. It is a mental state which allows us to hold our own distress or the distress of others with steadiness, not retreating and not numbing out in indifference. Its development must be a universal goal of spiritual traditions, but it has manifold benefits in psychological realms, not the least being the ability to experience our own imperfect humanity free of self-judgment and the capacity to stay fully in contact with others even as they experience extreme emotional pain.

A number of other wholesome factors of mind are understood to arise when there is great momentum and continuity in mindfulness. There are altogether 25 of these identified in the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist teachings on psychology. What I find most stunning is to understand that these wholesome qualities of mind arise on their own—they are a direct function of being thoroughly in the here and now. They do not have to be, indeed they cannot be, willed, taught, or induced in some deliberate way.

As I reflect on my meditative experience—becoming quiet and still enough to begin to see and know the subtle, distinctive texture of different factors of mind as they arise—I recognize them as more powerful and profound versions of what I experienced in that T-group, and what happened for me as a student in a broad
array of Gestalt training programs. It is also what I see occurring in my client systems when, with my support, they are able to, sustain their attention on what is. My meditative experience has led to the thought that with all our appreciation of awareness and contact in Gestalt theory and practice, we still have underestimated their attributes and range of manifestations, as well as their power and utility.

Take for example the description of my T-Group experience on p.__, written out much as I have spontaneously described it to friends over the years. I have been startled to see that this “magical” experience is well-known and well-mapped terrain from the perspective of Buddhist mindfulness practice. The Abhidhamma would interpret “semi-ecstatic” as piti—zest, elation, filled with excitement. When there is interest and continuity of attention, the mind takes great delight in knowing and becomes very, very enlivened. “Heightened awareness” is another way of describing mindfulness or sati, which is attentiveness to the present, not wobbling or floating away from the object of perception. Viriya is vigor of consciousness, which in my language is “highly energized.” Being “deeply touched by the smallest things” can be understood as a consequence of non-attachment (alobha, the capacity of appreciation and acceptance of things just as they are) coupled with concentration (vicara, which sees more detail, as through a magnifying glass, and so the ordinary becomes special). And so forth.

This meditative glossary, an empirical product of 25 centuries of dedicated awareness practice, allows for an extraordinarily rich and differentiated discussion of the mental, emotional and physical phenomena which arise in our own and our clients’ experience. And it points to human capacities richer and deeper than I had before imagined. What I had explained to myself as the consequence of an “altered state” (plus the alchemical skill of the workshop leaders) is here understood as the natural, unaltered state of human consciousness when not distorted by the hindrances of attachment, aversion and delusion, and therefore possible to access through sustained presence of attention during which these hindrances do not arise. (Using this vocabulary, enlightenment can be understood as the incremental or spontaneous eradication of these hindrances so that the mind and heart are unimpeded in their ability to rest in present awareness—full contact in Gestalt terms.)

Hindrance and Resistance

The Buddhist “hindrances” have their counterparts in the Gestalt “resistances.” The hindrances are those mental and emotional activities that take us away from the present moment, just as the resistances are those factors which modulate our ability to stay in contact with what is, in respect to ourselves or our environment. The Buddhist list is more comprehensive and more universal, identifying all those things which “assail” the meditator and distract her/him away from moment-to-moment experience. Indeed much of the art of mindfulness meditation is learning how to recognize the hindrances when they arise and then how to work with them so as to maintain present-time awareness.
So, if I were to translate this meditative lesson into Gestalt terms, it would look like this. To the extent that awareness is full and steady and our habitual resistances (those outside of our awareness) are not interrupting and distracting us from contact, we are able to see ourselves and our lives more clearly, to be more available to what is, both in the immediate sense of what is true in the given moment, as well as in the larger sense of “the truth of things.”

Mindfulness meditation is a method (often termed a "skillful means") for noticing and dwelling in our actual experience before labeling and meaning-making set in. It supports observation of our internal process without interpretation and relies on insight and intuitive knowing rather than analysis and figuring out. Yet the level of self-insight, even in my limited experience, is penetrating and deep and fundamentally arises on its own, though not without a large measure of discipline. I am re-impressed, at a deeper level than ever before, with the cleansing and healing power of simple, bare awareness, with no need to do anything more than just rest in it.

Revisiting The Purpose of This Article

I appreciate the increased attention to the spiritual in Gestalt circles, making space for spirit in a practice so influenced by the existential atheism of Perls and the intellectual currents of his times. However, the thrust of this article is not an appeal to be "more spiritual" with our individual and organizational clients. Nor is it primarily an endorsement of much valuable experimentation using meditation in therapy (and even in business settings). And, it has only briefly summarized the many philosophical parallels between Buddhism and Gestalt, as thought-provoking and theoretically validating as these can be.

My chief purpose is to point to a rich body of interior science on human thought and emotion that, to my knowledge, has not been directly mined for its contribution to our theory and practice. This science is embedded in a worldview that has much affinity with Gestalt, thereby making it particularly accessible to and usable by our community. I think it has the potential to give us a richer language, a more in-depth mapping of mental-emotional phenomena, and new ways of understanding bedrock principles in our theory and practice.

I have chosen to highlight the Abhidamma, which could be likened to a "periodic table" of the states of human consciousness, because of its concreteness (in contrast to the "vagueness" many in the West associate with the "spiritual"). And because of my own delighted surprise at how much it revealed about a particularly powerful experience in my own life. In addition, there is the uncanny accuracy it continues to have in predicting and describing the unfolding mental and emotional terrain of my ongoing experience with meditation. There are, however, other potentially revealing juxtaposition of these traditions. I want to briefly sketch out just one of these.
The Nature of the “Self”

According to the teachings as well as the reports of spiritual practitioners, one of the ultimate realizations of sustained presence of mind is that the practitioner’s sense of a separate self falls away replaced by the sense of being one with the experience. There are no longer two entities—the experiencer and the thing being experienced—only experiencing itself. It is this realization that gives rise to the Buddha’s famous teaching of no-self or emptiness of self. I find this a most difficult proposition to grasp through thinking about it, because it runs so counter to the most fundamental way in which we conceptualize our experience—as happening to a self. It is only accessible intuitively through continuous, disciplined awareness, initially as a momentary or briefly sustained realization and ultimately as a radical reframing of human nature and consciousness (enlightenment).

It seems to me that our Gestalt notions of self being the organizing principle of contact and arising at the boundary push, in a less radical way, towards a similar understanding and towards a profoundly relational view of human experience. We are not separate selves but only “exist” interdependently with others and our environment. Our sense of a permanent ongoing “self” is only an artifact of our reification of having an experience and the fact that we remember having had other experiences. I think of a number of conversations with colleagues and co-consultants in which we have reflected on the magic that periodically but unpredictably arises in our work, moments in which our clients seem to transcend “them-selves.” These are moments of marveling at the power of human process in which we feel little sense of having “done” anything. When these moments are at their best and fullest, we are not in a separate role, taking credit for the outcome, but rather being awed by it, feeling that special sense of presence of being a witness—being in and with the experience rather than having the sense of being the author of it. I am beginning to believe that these moments—which are moments of the purest contact—are the spiritual windows in our practice. They point to realizations about our nature as human beings that we may fail to take in fully with our minds but that we find hard to deny in our hearts.

Other Connections Between Gestalt and Spiritual Practice

Mindfulness meditation and the range of practices that are part of this and other spiritual paths are not therapeutic in aim or purpose, nor intended to bring about any particular kind of personal change. Their goal is not psychological understanding or more effective functioning, but rather the realization of the ultimate nature of things and through this the attainment of happiness through the cessation of suffering. Nevertheless, it is the case that spiritual practitioners experience powerful working through of emotional knots and past trauma, and there is abundant testimony to deep psychological cleansing and individual and collective change. There is now early scientific evidence that adept and
dedicated meditators are dramatically less subject to negative emotions of any sort than the rest of us (Goleman, 2003).

One way to view the relationship between Gestalt and spirituality is to recognize that there already are elements of a powerful spiritual practice in our core methodology. My Gestalt training (which more or less began with that T-Group) has aided me substantially in the development of meditative skills—in accessing my here-and-now awareness, in identifying what is figural in my consciousness, in “remembering to remember” to be present. So it is not so big a step to get interested in how the fruits of systematic meditative and spiritual practice might deepen our consulting and therapeutic work with our clients.

I am impressed by the discovery that capacity for penetrating self-insight is a natural result of sustained awareness and being in contact with current experience. Important results that I attributed to our methodology and our professional presence happen without them. This stimulates my interest in understanding our contribution in new ways. What is it that we add? I remain convinced that we consultants and therapists play an important role. These factors continue to be real to me: the impact of our emotional competence and relational skills, the support we provide, our non-judgmental presence. It just that now I do not know how to integrate these factors with my new appreciation of simple, bare awareness. I am interested in the healing power of just being with what is and intrigued by this as a form of experiment, indeed a less activist, less-expecting-that-something-be-learned kind of experiment. I am inspired by reports from spiritual teachers about bringing pure contemplative experience— without OD, process consultation, or explicit meaning-making—into traditional business organizations. And at times, I sense myself struggling to redefine or re-envision my work as not just psychological or applied behavioral science, allowing that it touches on the great mysteries of human nature and life, for, at times, that is my felt experience.

On the other side, I am struck by how much experienced contemplatives in the West are debating the relationship between therapeutic interventions (including psychotropic drugs) and meditative practice—struggling to understand if and how Western psychology can contribute to spiritual practices based on Eastern understandings of the mind and emotions. Additionally, there is the fertile and largely unexplored question of how Western psychological understanding of the behavior of more complex systems can contribute to the health of spiritual organizations and communities, and more generally of how solitary mindfulness practice might be broadened and adapted to a more relational or communal context, how both spirituality and psychology can become more socially engaged.

Some Challenges to Accessing Another Tradition

Gestalt and Buddhist teachings are alike in at least one more respect, they are highly experiential—based on “seeing for yourself” and therefore resistant to being communicated in abstract, cognitive form in the absence of that experience. While A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidamma (Bodhi, 2000) is available in
English, its 393 pages are at least as daunting to the uninitiated as Perls, Hefferline and Goodman. One needs some depth of meditative experience or at least deeply experienced guides to help penetrate and make the text come alive. Other efforts to support creative dialogue across traditions are examples of ways to bridge what on the surface will seem like foreignness of concept and language as well as difference of purpose and intention.

Daniel Goleman’s *Destructive Emotions* describes a meeting in 2000 among the Dalai Lama, other Tibetan masters, and a select group of Western scientists doing the most advanced research on human consciousness (Goleman, 2003). What emerged from the contact between these two distinct perspectives, among other things, were new research directions, apparent scientific validation of some ancient Buddhist teachings, and questioning of some fundamental Western assumptions about human emotions. (For example, Western science understands afflictive emotions such as anger to be inherent in our makeup, a view challenged by Buddhist understanding of the nature of mind.) This meeting was just one of an ongoing series between practitioners of this particular Eastern spiritual discipline and Western researchers in various fields (there have now been eleven meetings of this sort with the Dalai Lama since 1987, each focusing on a different area of inquiry). In addition, in the last decade there have been a number of conferences bringing Western psychological practitioners into dialogue with Eastern and Western contemplatives. I am not aware of an extended dialogue of this sort involving the Gestalt community. I believe such a dialogue would be valuable.

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**Notes**

1 There are three seminal chapters in W.L. Smith’s collection, *The Growing Edge of Gestalt Therapy*, published in 1976. More recently, there is Ruth Wolfert’s “Self in Experience, Gestalt Therapy, Science and Buddhism” which appeared in this Journal in 2000, along with responses by John Crook and Bud Feder.


3 While Buddhism is often categorized as a “religion,” at its core it is not monotheistic. There is little emphasis in the original teachings on doctrine, belief or devotion, except that which arises out of an individual’s own experience. The Buddha proposed that we sit and pay close attention to our actual experience and see for ourselves, not take his word for it. Do not believe anything, he said, “on the mere authority of your teachers or priests,” but instead accept as true “whatever agrees with your own reason and your own experience, after thorough investigation, and whatever is helpful to your own well-being and that of other living beings.”

4 See, for example, Essay IX in Crocker (1999).
References


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