CHAPTER 4

Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Eastern Thought in Gestalt Therapy

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DIALOGUE RESPONDENT: PETER PHILIPPSON

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GESTALT: A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Many threads make up the tapestry of Gestalt therapy’s theory and its methods, the most important of which are the psychoanalysis of Freud, Horney, Rank, and Reich; the holism of Goldstein and the Gestalt psychologists; Lewin’s humanistic development of field theory; the experimental and problem-solving approaches of the pragmatists Dewey and James; the philosophy of Aristotle and Kant; the phenomenology of Husserl; the existentialism of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Tillich, and Buber; and several important ideas from the Chinese nature philosophy/religion of Taoism and its elaboration in Zen Buddhism.

Theoretically, Gestalt therapy is an example of the Aristotelian paradigm, a way of understanding that focuses upon concrete and specific individuals, situations, and events, seen in their environmental contexts, and attempts to understand the nature of change and how things—particularly living things—come to be as they are and to behave as they do. This is a marked contrast to the more familiar Platonic paradigm, which focuses on unchanging universal essences that are imperfectly exemplified in the changing world.

Paul Goodman, who, along with Laura Perls, was the intellectual “powerhouse” in the development of Gestalt therapy’s theory, was well schooled in the philosophy of Aristotle (Stoehr, 1994). Goodman’s theoretical elaboration of Gestalt therapy in Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951, hereafter referred to simply as Gestalt Therapy) clearly shows the profound influence on him of Aristotle’s ways of thinking (see Crocker, 1999). Gestalt therapy’s point of departure—the field of the organism-environment—resulted from field considerations in physics and the biological focus of the pragmatists James and Dewey, as well as from Goodman’s interest in Aristotle’s biological and ethical writings.

INFLUENCE OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND EXISTENTIALISM

The phenomenology of Husserl (Spinelli, 1989) is concerned with epistemological issues rather than problems of living and acting in everyday life. Husserl’s point of departure is the Kantian-Brentano position that it is impossible to know reality as it really is, apart from our own organizing perceptions and understandings of it. All we can ever know are the appearances of real things because we are forever unable to break through our own peculiarly human ways of knowing. However, human beings cannot tolerate meaninglessness and will impose meaning upon all experiences, whether these meanings accurately reflect either the world “out there” or appearances. Although all humans, being of the same species, probably experience what is revealed to them in similar ways, every person has at least somewhat different perceptions and interpretations of the shared world. These idiosyncratic interpretive elements are routinely imposed on the data of experience.
Husserl developed the phenomenological method as a way of separating experiential invariants from interpretational elements that are imposed on experiential data (Spinelli, 1989). Phenomena show regularities that appear in repeated combinations and sequences. These can be described, and models can be constructed intellectually that offer explanations of them and often lead to prediction and control. Scientific knowledge deals only with the regularities of phenomena plus intellectually constructed models that attempt to explain those regularities. It is impossible to transcend our own ways of knowing and to compare the appearances (phenomena) with the things as they are in themselves (nommena). Modern research scientists essentially use the phenomenological method as they “operationalize” their theories by describing verification procedures in experiential terms so that their results can be replicated by other investigators.

Three rules operate in a phenomenological process (Spinelli, 1989). First, and most important for Gestalt therapy, is the rule of the epoche: Bracket the question of the truth or falsehood of any and all interpretations of reality. Second is the rule of description: Provide a dispassionate description of the immediate and concrete impressions of what happened, as opposed to any interpretations of that experience—in other words, “describe,” don’t “interpret.” Third is the horizontalization or equality rule: Avoid any hierarchical assumptions as to which described element is more important than any other. By separating as much as possible the experience from its interpretation, and by considering in detail the descriptions of a given experience, one can carefully weigh all of the evidence and entertain a variety of hypotheses that, in turn, will allow one to affirm the hypothesis that best explains all the data. If this method is followed, the explanations of experience will result from a close consideration of experience and thus be “experience near,” as opposed to interpretations that are “experience far” and/or merely speculative. By being open to our experience in this way, we also become theoretically flexible: We regard any theoretical

**PETER:** I would like here to focus on Husserl’s phenomenology, which interests both of us, where we make different aspects figural and then end up in a different area of thinking. Husserl’s hope was to follow in the footsteps of Descartes and find if there was something solid and indubitable from which to proceed with surety. Husserl’s method was to bracket, describe, and horizontalize, as you, Sylvia, described: first of all applying the method to the phenomena as they appeared and then going beyond Descartes to apply the method to the phenomenological process itself, to transcend the “I” who is bracketing, describing, and horizontalizing. His wish was to discover whether there is anything left. Why is this important for Gestalt therapists? I believe that Husserl has a great deal to say about our theory and method, and that it is precisely his second, transcendental, reduction that is most pertinent, as Gestalt theory of self similarly questions the “I” we think we know.

**SYLVIA:** I agree that how/when/if the self exists is an important question among Gestalt theorists, and that Husserl’s second reduction raises this question also, but that there is no consensus about whether the self does or does not endure through time. Goodman’s theory of the self owes, in my opinion, far more to Kant and Aristotle than it does to Husserl. Husserl can be understood as using his method to find out about what really exists, or he can be understood as looking at the evidence in experience for the beliefs we hold. The first is an ontological inquiry; the second is strictly epistemological. Both Kant and Goodman asserted that the self does not appear as an object; rather, each person has a subjective sense of agency and of possession of these experiences. From this view, the self is the subject of all awareness and has a subjective sense of itself as being present and owning all of its experiences, and it is this subjective sense that is the basis of our belief in the enduring life of the
construct as having only transitory validity—that is, being valid only as long as it is the most comprehensive and consistent explanation of the facts as they appear.

In Gestalt therapy, this method undergoes a transformation into Gestalt’s therapeutically fruitful phenomenological method. Whereas the goal of Husserl’s phenomenology is knowledge, the primary goal of Gestalt phenomenology is practical: the processes of healing and growth for concrete individuals, groups, and institutions. The therapist’s manner and responsiveness give evidence that the therapist actively welcomes the client’s revelation of his own personal truth, his own personal ways of being. The “descriptive” requirement of Husserl’s phenomenology thus takes the following form: The therapist observes closely how in particular the client reveals himself: his choice of words as he tells his story, his body language, changes in voice tone, manifestations of his emotional reactions to what he is saying, and so on. In response to what the client reveals, the therapist suggests several possible experiments and explorations that can amplify certain aspects of that revelation, can give a variety of perspectives to that aspect, and can bring to light some of its connections to other parts of the client’s experience.

The phenomenological principle of the epoché, or bracketing of interpretive elements along with questions of truth and falsehood, is the most important of the three principles, both in phenomenology and in Gestalt therapy. However, its Gestalt form is significantly different, especially with regard to questions of truth or falsehood. The Gestalt therapist’s concern is not to find out whether the client is telling the truth as she tells her story but to understand the meanings the client gives to the people and events in her life. The therapeutic task thus becomes, in part, hermeneutic.

Hermeneutics is a method of interpretation in which something is understood on its own terms, without having imported meanings imposed upon it. The process of hermeneutics in Gestalt therapy is one of discovering the meanings the client has given situations and people in her experience and tracing the impact of these meanings on how the client lives through time and circumstances.

self. I think Husserl’s influence is greater in the practicalities of the phenomenological method, not the theory of the self.

PETER: I agree there are all sorts of ideas in the Gestalt community about “self.” Yet on any reading of Gestalt Therapy, the theory of self as arising from contact comes out as central to both the theory and the therapy. This is explicitly stated in Chapter 11, Section 1: “Thus the theory of the self develops directly with the therapy of the self” (Perls et al., 1994, p. 166). It is precisely in bracketing the tired “known,” describing the experience in the moment, the here and now, and moving beyond our standard hierarchy of what is important (horizontalization so that the new can come about. I do not take the epoché to be merely about bracketing my assumptions and meaning making to find the meaning the client gives. I would want, along with the client, to put aside for the moment all the assumptions both of us make about what is here, to face together the void, and to find something whose meaning arises out of our present contacting, the co-creation of self and other in the field. If self is, as in Gestalt therapy, the contacting process itself, then we are interested in the client’s truth, not in an interpretative way, but as it arises in the truth of our contact.

SYLVIA: The meaning the client has given a situation and experimenting with other ways of approaching it can occur in the therapeutic practice of exploration. What I would not do is tell the client to put aside his or her understanding of the situation, but I myself would regard it as “true for the client”—a version that is highly mutable through the therapeutic processes.
The phenomenological method in Gestalt therapy involves a process that seeks to discover how the client’s beliefs, and her understanding of the events and persons in her life, function in the client’s own organization of experience, and therefore how they function as the ground of her cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to current and ongoing situations. As these things come more clearly into the client’s awareness during the therapeutic process, and as she experiments with and explores aspects of life that had seemed fixed (though, in fact, they were intrinsically dynamic and mutable), her internal organization begins to “loosen,” to become less stuck and more fluid as she begins to rethink old beliefs and try new behaviors. As this process goes on over time, healthy change becomes possible. Whether a person’s father was just as the client has internalized him or whether the father has remained the same or has become a different person is not of primary importance in the therapy. What matters most is the how percieved and understood “father” affects the client’s ongoing life, apart from what the father was “really” like or how he is now.

How Gestalt therapists employ the phenomenological principle of “horizontalization” or “equality” is more problematic. As we have seen, in Husserl’s phenomenology, the phenomenological data are to be given equal importance, but although it may be possible, at least to some degree, to do this in the pursuit of scientific knowledge, it is neither possible nor desirable in a therapeutic process. If the therapist gave equal importance to every aspect of the client’s (verbal and nonverbal) revelations in therapy and made no discriminating evaluations, she would not be able to make sense of what was happening with the client or to fruitfully intervene. Therefore, although a Gestalt therapist employs the principle of horizontalization, she does so with an interesting therapeutic twist.

A Gestalt therapist brings to the meeting with a client a ground of personal and professional understanding, experience, and skill that greatly influences responses to the client. The therapist

**PETER:** Husserl started his exploration with a critique of what he called the “natural attitude,” the sense of a continuing human being in a known and continuous world. In Gestalt therapy terms, we could see this as an activity of what Goodman called “personality function,” a relatively fixed set of attitudes and ways of being that would form the basis for our description of ourselves. This fixity can be used to support ongoing contact if it is open to modification when the situation we are in changes; it can also be a defensive fixation, used to prevent contact in areas that we fear through either their associations or their unknowness.

**SYLVIA:** This also ties in with Taoist and Buddhist ideas that fixity is only an illusion, that what-is is dynamic, fraught with constant change. Many people believe that at a certain point in their lives their “character” is basically fixed—“you can’t teach an old dog new tricks”—when in fact such fixity involves only an unwillingness to change. Gestalt therapy rejects the idea of fixity, and it does not move the client toward fixed goals. The goals that are achieved are discovered improvisationally in the dance between client and therapist.

I do agree that it is important to bracket, as you stated earlier, “the tired ‘known,’” describing the experience in the moment, the here and now, and moving beyond our standard hierarchy of what is important (horizontalization) so that the new can come about.” However, Peter, here is where I think we have a significant difference. I do not believe that all of a client’s patterns of contacting can be replicated in the relationship between client and therapist. Therefore, I think it is important for therapist and client to look together at the problematic situations in the client’s ongoing life that have brought him into therapy, paying attention not only to the content but to the nonverbal manner of the telling. In this regard, it is also important for the therapist to help the
pays attention to some things that seem more significant than others; some aspects of the way the client tells his story pique curiosity and suggest ways of exploration, whereas others do not. Some phenomena suggest preliminary assessments that will either be revised and enriched or discarded in the light of the therapist’s ongoing experience with the client. During the course of the therapeutic process, the therapist is aware of “wises of theory” that weave in and out of her awareness and entertains “working hypotheses” and hunches as the client tells his story. The therapist holds lightly all these insights, hunches, working hypotheses, and meanings made of the results of suggested explorations and experiments. She does not cling to any of these thoughts or become fixed on any provisional diagnostic category, specific procedure, or agenda. Rather, the therapist constantly revises the assessment of the client as he reveals himself more and at greater depth.

In contrast to the Husserlian phenomenologist, the therapist considers everything she thinks about and does with the client in terms of use value, not truth value. Everything is done for the sake of helping a client discover his own unique truth as he learns how he actually lives, and for the sake of his becoming increasingly clear about how he wants to express that truth as his life goes on. Because the primary goal of the therapeutic process is healing and growth and not epistemological truth, it is phenomenologically legitimate to employ any thought, entertain any hunch or hypothesis, or suggest any variety of experiments and explorations that will, in a sense, “separate” the functional from the dysfunctional, the healthy from the destructive, the authentic from the inauthentic in how the client lives his life. The work of a Gestalt therapist, as the phenomenological method is employed, has the character of an improvisational dance: Being prepared with a ground of understanding and skill, the therapist meets the client in the space they share with a welcoming openness—and then they make up the dance together.

The transformation of Husserlian phenomenology into Gestalt’s phenomenological method was accomplished, in part, under the influence of Heidegger’s (1949) existentialist version of phenomenology, as well as Buber’s (1923/1958) assertion of the primacy of the
I-Thou meeting with the “Other” and the life of dialogue. Kierkegaard’s (1954) understanding of the faith relationship between God and the individual, and of the uniqueness of every person’s authentic truth, played an important role in the thought of all of these thinkers.

Laura Perls was familiar with the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Buber as a result of having studied philosophy with the Protestant philosopher/theologian Paul Tillich (Stoehr, 1994). The influence of these men’s ideas on Goodman resulted both from his association with Laura and from his own reading. Fritz Perls knew of Husserl through Laura and Goodman but did not have a direct familiarity with Husserl’s work.

Heidegger’s (1962) approach to phenomenology, with its more humanistic bent, significantly influenced Gestalt phenomenology. For Heidegger, Western thought had moved so far away from the lived experience of ordinary human beings that it was necessary to begin again with the experiential foundations of important concepts. Heidegger attempted (unsuccessfully) to give a phenomenological account of Being by beginning with a phenomenological account of human being, which Heidegger defined descriptively as a Dasein, a being (Sein) who is there (da). As with Heidegger, the Gestalt approach begins with the field of the organism-environment. For Heidegger, human beings have a sense of being thrown into the situations in which they find themselves; these situations seem to be the result of an accident of birth and to have no other apparent meaning. One of the great tasks of each person’s life is to create life’s meaning by how it is lived in the concrete situations of life. As people develop, they discover several other kinds of beings: Some things are vorhanden (objects that are merely there in the environment, without any particular purpose or usefulness), and others are zugehören (objects that are at hand and can be used). We are free to employ any of these as we enact the meanings of our lives, or we can “lose” ourselves in “busy-ness” to avoid the task of personal meaning making.

We find, in addition to vorhanden and zugehören, other beings like ourselves, each of whom is also a Dasein. We cannot be indifferent to others like ourselves, for each of us is thrown into the world and faced with the same existential task. Though each person is as unique as this-here-now-human-being, we are inescapably thrown together and have real relationships with each other, which in turn have important implications for our attitudes and behaviors toward each other. Each of us is, in actual fact, a Mitsein, a being (Sein) whose being is also being-with (mit). Though we may regard nonhuman things as merely useful, taking such an attitude toward another Mitsein is inappropriate—rather, we owe every Mitsein an attitude of care (Sorge) and concern (Heidegger, 1962).

Heidegger (1962) employed Kant’s distinction between things, which have value primarily by being useful, and persons, who, because they are originating sources of value, cannot legitimately be reduced to the level of mere things having only “use value.” Buber (1923/1958). Following this same tradition, distinguishes between relations (i.e., ways of being) of the “primary word” I-Thou and the “secondary word” I-It. For him, the fundamental fact of human life is that it is relational: “All real living is meeting” (p. 11), and the primary way of living, I-Thou, is a word that “can only be spoken with the whole being” (p. 10). In the relationship of I-Thou, each receives the unique revelation of the other. A few years after Buber published I and Thou (1923/1958), he elaborated his ideas in an essay he called “Dialogue” (1926), published in his book Between Man and Man (1926/1965a). Here Buber stated, “The basic movement of the life of dialogue is the turning towards the other... [in which] this one person steps forth and becomes a presence” (p. 22). Again, “He who is living the life of dialogue receives in the ordinary course of the hours something that is said and feels himself approached for an answer... [and thereby] receives... a harsh and strengthening sense of reciprocity” (p. 20).
This meeting is not, however, one in which one person seeks to use the other, for that would be an instance of I-It relating. It is important to note that for Buber I-It relating plays an important role in our everyday living because we must deal with the world and with each other in “I-It” ways in order to survive. There is nothing amiss in that. But to regard other persons, animals and things in nature, and even nature as a whole as merely useful is to depart from the fundamental motions of one’s humanity. Being constantly open to the revelation of Thou, whenever and from wherever it comes—even while being busy in the workings of I-It—and being willing to reveal oneself as Thou to an Other’s I when the opportunity presents itself—that is being faithful to oneself as a person. For Buber, in such meetings the unique individuality of the Other is revealed and received, and from this mutual process arises true community and thus the fulfillment of life.

In Gestalt therapy, the fundamental attitude of the therapist to the client is a caring and welcoming openness, a willingness to be there in ways that encourage the client to reveal his own personal truth, and a respectfulness of the primacy of the client’s experience. In this sense, the fundamental movement between therapist and client is the presence of an I to a Thou. Yet here is a paradox, expressed by Arnold Beisser (1970) as the paradoxical principle of change: The overarching purpose of the therapeutic process is the client’s desire for change that will relieve his pain, coupled with the therapist’s willingness to place herself, her experience, knowledge, and skill, at the service of the client and his needs. However, the processes of Gestalt therapy require looking away from this goal and focusing instead on the letting-be-of-what-is. The paradoxical principle is that change cannot happen unless we first affirm and embrace what-is. Just as happiness cannot be found by aiming directly at it, but by engaging in activities that produce happiness as a by-product, so healthy human change can be achieved by giving what-is its due, by facing it squarely and with clarity. Both happiness and healthy functioning are by-products of the way we live, and we cannot learn to live in healthy and more functional ways unless we first become aware of the truth of how we actually exist. The processes of Gestalt therapy—through which clients become vividly aware of what-is in their own lives—are the very processes that initiate the course of, or pathway to, change and lead toward more functional and satisfying living. The paradox is that what-is-wished-for can be accomplished only if it recedes into the background and if what-is-now takes “center stage.” Otherwise, the client will remain stuck.

Although the dominant movement in Gestalt therapy is I-Thou, to be therapeutically effective the therapist must move in and out of moments of I-It as she makes practical evaluations and suggestions about the client’s ongoing process. The therapist often suggests experiments and explorations of something noticed in the client as he tells his story, and these spring from an attitude of practicality, an application of methods and principles, that belongs to I-It. Many responses to that revelation are a mixture of the I-Thou’s disinterested (nonpractical) curiosity and the I-It of interventions. Buber (1923/1958) himself speaks of such a mixture when he says: “The It is the eternal chrysalis, the Thou the eternal butterfly—except that situations do not always follow one another in clear succession, but often there is a happening profoundly twofold, confusedly entangled” (pp. 17–18). The therapeutic relationship and its interactions between the Gestalt therapist and client are just such a mixture of I-Thou and I-It. All of the therapist’s interventions are motivated by a caring curiosity and concern to help the client reveal more and more of himself, and to do so at greater depth. However, regard for the client as a Thou is preeminent, and it is the motivating source of the therapist’s I-It movements in relations with the client. These interventions are not undertaken to “get somewhere”—that is, to achieve a
specific practical outcome—but to further the client’s process of self-discovery and self-revelation. The Gestalt therapist accepts whatever the client reveals, in whatever way he reveals himself. The I-Thou of the Gestalt therapist is embodied in this very attitude or nonjudgmental acceptance of the client’s self-revelation. The Gestalt therapist must be able to be present for and engage with the client in ways that begin to “retune,” reorganize, or, in a significant sense, re-create the ways in which the client experiences himself and others in everyday life.

INFLUENCE OF TAOISM AND ZEN

Organismic Self-Regulation

In both its theory and its practice, Gestalt therapy is a biological and educational model. We view the human being as an organism that is part of nature, living in natural cycles of contact and withdrawal. Human beings, like all other natural organisms, regulate themselves in changing circumstances (whether internal or external). As a result, the natural tendency is to adapt in ways that bring about organismic balance, either within the organism or within the larger field of the organism-environment. The organism, in other words, regulates itself in ways that enable it to develop that natural stature and those powers that, in turn, enable it to function in ways natural to mature members of the species. The term organismic self-regulation was developed by the authors of Gestalt Therapy to express this naturalistic adaptive process (Perls et al., 1951).

Within this theoretical framework, the Gestalt therapist regards the client as always possessing innate principles of healthy functioning, even though the client’s personal experiences in her own environmental circumstances may have resulted in survival adaptations that, in turn, interfere with and distort the working of these principles. The task of the therapist is, therefore, to facilitate the client’s returning to healthy ways of living freely guided by natural principles. In contrast to the psychoanalyst, the Gestalt therapist is not required to be a “fount of wisdom” or to “put into” the client correct interpretations of her experience. Indeed, the therapeutic task is not essentially cognitive—though cognition is involved—but experiential and transformative of both awareness and patterns of behavior. Just as the client’s dysfunctional patterns of living involve the whole person (mind, feelings, desires, body, habitual patterns of behavior, and varieties of relationships with others), so also must the processes that lead to healing and growth engage the whole person in the many dimensions of living. The work of the therapist is thus a holistic task.

Goodman brought to the writing of the theoretical volume of Gestalt Therapy not only his own synthesis of Aristotle’s ethical and biological writings and the biological and problem-solving bent of the pragmatists Dewey and James but also a number of Taoist philosophical principles of nature. Goodman, like many other intellectuals of his time, was very familiar with the Taoist ideas of “going with nature.” This is apparent in his 1947 book Kafka’s Prayer, in which he employed Taoist principles in his analysis of some of Kafka’s work. A few years later, in the early days of the New York Institute, one of the courses Goodman taught used the Book of Tao (Lao Tzu, 1963) as one of the texts to be studied (Stoehr, 1994).

A central theme running throughout the Book of Tao is the assertion that the wise and virtuous person learns the ways of nature and lives in accordance with nature’s ways. That this belief was fundamental in Goodman’s thinking is clear in one of his favorite sayings: Natura sanat non medicus (only nature heals) (Goodman, 1977b). Thus the task of the Gestalt
therapist is to engage the client in ways that allow nature to do the healing and the growing. Perls et al. (1951) are clear and specific in how this approach helps the client “[t]o observe [his] self in action—ultimately to observe [his] self as action—[which] calls for techniques strikingly different from those [he] may have tried already and found wanting; in particular, introspection” (p. 3). In contrast to essentially cognitive approaches (“talking cures”), the Gestalt “clinician has sought ever more intimate contact with the activities of the human organism as lived by the human organism” (p. 21).

The patient is taught to experience himself. “Experience” derives from the same Latin source experiri, to try, as does the word “experiment,” and the dictionary gives precisely the sense that we intend here, namely, “the actual living through an event or events.” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 15)

Here the therapist is a kind of catalyst, “an ingredient which precipitates a reaction which might not otherwise occur” (p. 15), so that how the person actually functions in certain situations is enacted in the here and now of the therapeutic situation. By experimenting with these processes, ultimately the client “has tools and equipment to deal with problems as they may arise” and experiences a sense of “heightened vitality and more effective functioning” (p. 15).

This Taoist principle of “going with nature” is clearly expressed in the following passages from the Tao Te Ching, the Book of Tao (Lao Tzu, 1963):

> The sage manages affairs without action
> and spreads doctrine without words.
> He acts but does not rely on his own ability. (#2)
> By acting without action, all things will be in order. (#3)
> [The great rulers]
> . . . accomplish their task; they complete their work
> . . . they simply follow Nature. (#14)
> Tao invariably takes no action,
> and yet there is nothing left undone. (#37)

Oriental martial arts have been strongly influenced by the Book of Tao. The point of these arts is to understand the nature of motion and to employ the opponent’s own force in such a way as to deflect the attack, often to turn that force back on the attacker. It is because the martial artist understands how to work with natural processes that a tiny man or woman can defeat an opponent who is much larger and stronger. In this way, the martial artist acts without acting: That is, he “does not rely on his own ability.” Seen in this light we can regard Gestalt therapy as a kind of “martial art”—the art of using the client’s own natural processes in the service of her healing and growth. The therapist “does not rely on his own ability” but helps the client learn to live by the healthy principles of nature. At the very end of the theoretical section of Gestalt Therapy, Goodman says of a client who is living well:

> In its trials and conflicts the self is coming to be in a way that did not exist before. In contactful experience the “I,” alienating its safe structures, risks this leap and identifies with the growing self, gives it its service and knowledge, and at the moment of achievement stands out of the way. (Perls et al., 1951, p. 466)

In Goodman’s words, the “I” lets nature heal.
Here-and-Now Focus—Just Seeing, Just Being

At one point, Fritz Perls went to Japan to learn about Zen, a synthesis of Mahayana Buddhism and Taoist principles. Zen meditation is a process of emptying the mind in order to experience satori, or enlightenment. No philosophical discourses are involved in Zen training. Rather, the Zen master directly points to the “Buddha nature,” by pointing to what-is, or answers a question about the Buddha nature with a seeming non sequitur: “two pounds of flax.” Like koans, riddles that do not make sense to ordinary ways of thinking (e.g., “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”), meditation, direct pointing, and seemingly nonsense statements are ways of emptying the mind of ordinary thought processes so it may become able to perceive the “suchness,” the “thinness” (Watts, 1957, p. 127), of what-is in the present moment. A person who can perceive “this” will be “instantaneously enlightened” and experience satori.

No doubt this is the source of Fritz’s famous exhortation to Gestalt therapists and clients to lose their minds and come to their senses. In his view as a trained psychoanalyst, the problem with the psychoanalytic approach was that it played directly into neurotics’ problem, which was to substitute thinking for action, and thus contributed to their remaining “stuck.” In contrast, Gestalt therapy is not a talking approach, although it uses language: Language is merely the medium of experimentation, of actively exploring how clients actually perform their acts of living. Because Gestalt is an experimental and holistic approach to “what-is,” the experiences in therapy are not “about” what-is but are actual lived experiences that have the power to alter how clients live their lives beyond the therapeutic context.

One of the major ways in which Zen has had an enduring influence on Gestalt therapy is, therefore, in the emphasis on the primacy of the here and now. The Zen archer effortlessly lets go of the arrow without trying to hit the target, without deliberately breaking down the motions into lifting the bow, pulling back the arrow in the string, aiming at the target, and releasing. Rather, it is all one seamless and spontaneous act. It is as if the arrow shot itself. “In walking, just walk. In sitting, just sit. Above all, don’t wobble” (Watts, 1957, p. 135)—which is to say, in effect, don’t reflect on the process, just do it. Alan Watts emphasized,

Zen is not merely a cult of impulsive action. The point . . . is not to eliminate reflective thought but to eliminate “blocking” in both action and thought, so that the response of the mind is always like a ball in a mountain stream—“one thought after another without hesitation.” (p. 150)

This ability to live in the present moment and to give ourselves fully to whatever we are engaged in is the sign of an “awakened mind.” Watts (1957) said that such a “mind responds immediately, without calculation” (p. 83). The “liberated” person fully embraces whatever is happening in this place and in the present moment.

The embrace of what-is, concretely and specifically, in the present is not limited to the embrace of what is of monumental importance, but it is the single-minded embrace of “nothing special” (Watts, 1957, p. 126). Zen spirituality is not about thinking about God when one is peeling potatoes; it is being fully engaged in peeling the potatoes. Indeed, Zen teaches that all daily activities can be done with the same kind of undivided presence in the moment, where we give ourselves wholly to whatever we do, without second-guessing ourselves, without self-consciously observing how we are doing what we are doing, without being double-minded. One of the Zen masters said:
Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it’s just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters. (Watts, 1957, p. 126)

Similarly, in Gestalt therapy we focus on the concrete and specific events of a client’s life. We do not reserve our energies for her “big problems” but help our client notice, to become aware of how she actually lives in the everyday affairs of her life—without trying to change anything but simply to become mindfully aware. It is clear how this point of view harmonizes with “the paradoxical principle of change.” Change does not occur when we strain to make it happen, or even when we have the present intention to work at change. It happens when we allow the issue of change to recede into the background as we single-mindedly focus on what-is. Of course, the therapist employs his understanding and therapeutic skills to encourage deeper and fuller revelations of what-is in the client’s living, but not directly with the goal of achieving future changes in the client’s living. Rather, the therapeutic process is itself a full engagement with the present moment. The entire therapeutic process is done in the present, and the client’s self-revelation, her letting-what-is-stand-out-in-the-open, happens only in the present, in the here and now. Such present engagement often leads somehow (mysteriously) to the breaching of the barriers to transformation, not by trying but by simply wholly embracing present experience. This is one of the great contributions of Zen to Gestalt therapy.

The Fertile Void

Another contribution by both Taoism and Zen is the idea of the fertility of “the void.” As indicated above, Zen meditation is a way of emptying the mind of ordinary thought processes in order to become in tune with the fertility of nonbeing or no-mind. Although being (sky energy, maleness, activity) and nonbeing (earth energy, femaleness, passivity) are one in the Tao, nonbeing is ontologically prior to (more fundamental than) being. In Taoism and in Zen, nonbeing is the source of all creativity; it is the void that is always fertile. Though both principles exist together eternally in what-is (the Tao), the superiority of nonbeing over being is one of the major themes in the *Book of Tao* (Lao Tzu, 1963). This is clear from the following passages:

Weakness is the function of Tao.
All things in the world come from being.
And being comes from non-being. (#40)
Tao is empty [like a bowl]. It may be used but its capacity is never exhausted.
It is bottomless, perhaps the ancestor of all things. (#4)
The Spirit of the valley never dies.
It is called the subtle and profound female.
The gate of the subtle and profound female is the root of Heaven and Earth.
It is continuous, and seems to be always existing.
Use it and you will never wear it out. (#6)
Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel,
but it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends.
Clay is molded to form a utensil,
but it is on its non-being that the utility of the utensil depends.
Doors and windows are cut out to make a room,  
but it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends.  
Therefore turn being into advantage, and turn non-being into utility. (#11)

Through the practice of the highest form of zazen, namely schikan-taza, "just sitting," Fritz learned the value of silence: the willingness to "just sit" with silence and to experience a kind of emptiness, which in Zen is called nonbeing or no-mind and in Taoism is called nonbeing,  
the void, or the feminine. This often provides the key to a person’s breaking through to a kind of new awareness that has a liberating effect—that is, satori (Greaves, 1976). Perls called this  
the experience of “the fertile void,” and it has become an integral part of the Gestalt approach.

In Gestalt therapy, silence is often important in the therapeutic process, for important  
things that have been out of awareness are thereby given an opportunity to emerge into consciousness, where they can be explored and effectively dealt with. As long as the time is  
always "filled" with talking, by either the therapist or the client, some of those elements in  
the client’s ground that support important behaviors are not given space to come into awareness. It is important for the therapist to be comfortable with silence so that she can resist the  
urge to “say something” when the client falls silent.

Similarly, it is important for the therapist to encourage a client to “stay with” being  
confused or at a loss to know “what to do next.” This is another version of the experience of the  
“fertile void.” By attentively waiting in the silence or asking the client to stay with the confusion, the therapist supports the client in ways that can lead to a breakthrough in the client’s  
understanding of his situation. This “attentive waiting” is one of the ways in which Gestalt therapy facilitates the client’s letting-be-of-what-is. Just as the empty spaces in Chinese and  
Japanese landscape painting are integral to the design and significance of the whole, so is staying with the silence and the confusion that is sometimes an intrinsic element in the Gestalt  
therapeutic process.

Polarities

From a Taoist point of view, even though nonbeing is ontologically superior to being,  
experience testifies to their ultimate inseparability. Polarities are found throughout nature,  
including human life. Therapists often see the natural occurrence of polarities in their clients’  
everyday life, especially when clients feel internally conflicted about taking one of several  
possible courses or when they have ambivalent feelings toward other people and/or situations.  
These inner conflicts frequently have a confusing, sometimes paralyzing, effect on their ability  
to function. The Gestalt therapist helps the client explore each side of the polarity, often  
taking an experimental approach by asking the client to give a voice to each of the poles. As a  
result of this experimental exploration, the client either discovers the reconciling ground and  
thus moves beyond the conflict to some form of resolution or discovers a way to live with the  
polarity.

CONCLUSION: THE SINGULARITY OF WHAT-IS

_The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao._

Lao Tzu, The Book of Tao, #1
In contrast to cognitive behavioral (CBT) and rational-emotive (RET) therapies, Gestalt therapy and many varieties of psychoanalysis acknowledge the powerful role of the therapeutic relationship in the success of the therapy itself. However, there is a watershed difference between psychoanalysis and the Gestalt approach. Psychoanalysis continues to emphasize the analyst’s interpretation of the client’s experience, which the analyst gives by listening to the client’s story in ways that permit the analyst to access certain psychological categories (such as projection, Oedipal issues, separation issues), which are, in turn, given to the client as explanations of his experience. Here the analyst subsumes the themes of the client’s story under a complex of psychological categories that can be discussed and intellectually understood by the client and that the client can “work through” with the analyst. In contrast, Gestalt therapy uses the phenomenological method to help the client explore and experiment with the concrete specific events of life. In so doing, the therapist guides the client in paying close attention to what actually happens in his life and how he typically responds to it.

By learning how to “let-what-is-stand-out-in-the-open,” the client begins to reveal his own unique personal truth, both to himself and to the therapist. Through this process, the client in Gestalt therapy becomes more focused on the here and now in daily life and more and more discovers how he actually lives his life—and, gradually over time, how he wants to live it. Increasingly, the client is able to express his own unique truth beyond the therapeutic situation and in his daily living. The meaning of the client’s story is not imposed upon his experience by the therapist but emerges through the therapeutic processes of self-discovery and self-revelation. Therefore, although it is possible for the therapist and the client to discuss some aspects of the changes that are happening in the client’s living, such lived truths are unique to the person—and ultimately can only be witnessed to, never fully verbalized. Because this truth is lived truth and is not essentially cognitive, it can readily lead to transformative changes in how the client feels, thinks, and acts—which, of course, is the ultimate aim of psychotherapy.

PETER: In the therapeutic setting, I stay as much as possible with the givens of our experience together. I am not looking for choices. As awareness develops, the dilemma pushes for completion and closure. My interest is in the truth of the unique situation, what is authentic to experience, to the “principles of nature,” as you say at one point. That truth is not one person’s interpreted truth, but the truth we are creating together. Sometimes something happens that neither I nor the client understand but that is the only real response to the situation.

SYLVIA: I believe, too, that by means of the Gestalt therapeutic processes clients can learn how to have livelier contact with others, can learn how to speak and act in ways in which there is greater congruence between thought, feeling, intention, and behavior, and can gradually come to an empowered understanding of how they want to live their lives, and that this readily translates into the manner of clients’ everyday lives. However, most of the meanings a person lives by are not essentially those created together by client and therapist but those created by a client and the people and situations with which she has contact in everyday life.

PETER: As I’ve written about in my recent book, Self in Relation (Philippson, 2001), for me the image of this therapy is of people facing each other, neither of whom knows what will happen next, but one of whom, the therapist, is grounded in the knowledge of having done this many times before and knowing that something new has the power to emerge that can promote major changes in the client’s life and possibly also in the therapist’s.
In *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls et al., 1951), the paradigmatic human process of doing business with the world involves taking an interest in a situation to be dealt with, going through a discovery process to find alternative approaches to the problem, "identifying with" one of these and "alienating" the others, then acting on that alternative and thus dealing with the problem. Ideally, the person would live holistically enough so that he would "give himself" fully to whatever course of action seemed best to him and with which he had identified, and thus his actions would be performed spontaneously and naturally. Unfortunately, such naturalness is rare, and its absence creates a variety of difficulties that bring people into therapy. Among the many sources of these difficulties is a client’s inability to move from thought into action, or his being ambivalent or “of two minds” about the course of action he has decided on but has not *fully* identified with. The formulation in *Gestalt Therapy* of this ideal process—and the methods that have been developed to address the many issues that interrupt and distort it—shows the impact on Gestalt therapy of the strands of thought that have been the focus of this chapter, namely Taoism/Zen and existentialism/phenomenology.

The existentialists stress the paramount importance of the unique individual’s choices and the actions that flow naturally from them. The emphasis in all of these approaches is on doing what is “appropriate” to the situation, what the situation “calls for” and what “belongs” to it. Ideally, such actions express the individual’s unique response to the “call” to her of what-is in the present situation in which she finds herself. The “call” is unique to her and sometimes requires actions that are for her alone to do. The authentic person takes responsibility for how she answers that call. What she responds to can be another person who addresses her, as in Buber, or a significant situation that is developing around her. In her response to what-is in a given time and place, the “liberated” person expresses her own personal truth, a truth that is uniquely lived out by her in a given time and in a specific place. She responds as a singular individual, not as one for whom there can be adequate “substitutes.” Because what is revealed is unique, it cannot be expressed fully in words because the meanings of words have to do with *shared* characteristics.

This is precisely the ideal in Zen. The liberated person “goes with nature” while wholly embracing “what-is”—in this *place* and in this *now*. His response is without internal conflict or any apparent process of deliberation and decision. Like Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith,” who makes difficult leaps without the least indication of a loss of balance, the person who lives naturally “just does it,” whatever is called for in that concrete situation. In his identifying embrace of what-is and what-is-to-be-done, he acts responsibly with a completely spontaneous naturalness. From a Taoist/Zen perspective, such a person is doing “nothing special,” he is simply allowing what-is in the present moment to reveal itself to him and out of that receptivity is responding with “no-mind.” According to the *Tao Te Ching* (Lao Tzu, 1963), such a person:

Manages affairs without action
And spreads doctrine without words.
... He acts but does not rely on his own ability. (#10)

Persons who follow nature

... accomplish their task; they complete their work
... they simply follow Nature. (#17)
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Crocker cites three rules that operate in a phenomenological process. Define each rule: (a) the rule of *epoche*; (b) the rule of *description*; and (c) the rule of *horizontalization or equality*. How is each rule useful to Gestalt theory?

2. The term *organismic self-regulation*, as defined in *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls et al., 1951, 1994) and in this chapter, has implications for the tasks of therapy. How is the term useful in describing the therapeutic process?

3. What is the likely source of influence for Fritz Perls’s declaration that to be vital and healthy it is good “to lose your mind and come to your senses”?

4. What are the relationships and differences between therapeutic work existing in the here and now and Zen spirituality?

5. What is the therapeutic purpose of exploring polarities?

EXPERIENTIAL PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITIES

**ACTIVITY 1:** Read an opinion column on the editorial page of a newspaper. In reading it, distinguish between what is “public fact” and what is the “author’s opinion.” Next, read a news account on the front page and see if it is a report of observable facts or a mixture of opinions and reported facts. Start noticing what other people reveal to you and your interpretations of what they say and do. Discuss your findings and observations with a classmate, including how these “fact versus opinion” differences pertain to therapeutic dialogue.

**ACTIVITY 2:** Invite a tai chi master to attend your class as a guest to demonstrate and explain the martial arts exercise of *push hands*. After each class member learns the basics of *push hands*, discuss how this is a useful metaphor of therapy from a Gestalt perspective.

**ACTIVITY 3:** In the Hollywood film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the hero must make a leap of faith when stepping on an invisible bridge crossing a gorge. As Crocker describes the leap of faith in this chapter, “The person who lives naturally ‘just does it,’ whatever is called for in that concrete situation. . . . From a Taoist/Zen perspective, such a person is doing ‘nothing special,’ he is simply allowing what-is in the present moment to reveal itself to him.” After viewing this excerpt from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, discuss in small groups other events of your own life or your clients’ lives that have required leaps of faith and what supports helped make them possible.

**ACTIVITY 4:** Zen meditation includes the experience of just sitting with silence and experiencing no-mind. If you have not practiced meditation before, begin by sitting and being aware of quieting your thoughts for a short time. Quieting thoughts is not as easy as it sounds, and you may find you begin this exercise with mere seconds of no-mind. As you practice quieting your thoughts every day for a week, take note of the process in a journal. You may want to document increases in time spent with no-mind, or you may want to catalogue those thoughts that invade the quietness.