

An exploration of the Zen Koan and Gestalt Impasse

by Richard Shrobe,
M.S.W., A.C.S.W.

One short case from the Blue Cliff Records. Forty-First Case: Chao Chou's "Man of Great Death"

Chao Chou asked T'ou Tzu, "When a man of great death returns to life, how is it?"

T'ou Tzu said, "Going by night is not permitted. You must arrive in daylight."

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate certain parallels that exist between Gestalt therapy and the practice of Zen Buddhism. Many people familiar with the literature of Gestalt therapy, realize in some vague way that there exists some influence of Zen in it. Hopefully, it might prove useful to clarify this more. It might also prove to be reassuring to Gestalt therapists that there exists some degree of kinship with Zen, an unbroken tradition that has existed for over 1,000 years. Also, from a personal standpoint, there have been times in my own work as a therapist, when I have treated patients who had both an interest in some Oriental spiritual discipline, as well as a need for psychotherapy. Some of these patients had been in treatment with other therapists before coming to me. Their experience had been that their previous therapist had had no understanding or tolerance for their spiritual interests and consequently, this had proved to be a stumbling block to treatment. Therefore, some awareness of the theory and practice of these disciplines and the areas of commonality with Gestalt might be helpful in facilitating treatment with these people.

There exists in the Gestalt literature, some previous attempts to deal with the subject of Zen and Gestalt. The best known to me, is an article entitled, "Present-Centeredness: Technique, Prescription, Ideal by Claudio Naranjo." Naranjo's article focuses on what he calls, "the continuum of awareness", as practiced both in Buddhist meditational disciplines and Gestalt Therapy. Naranjo's contention is that "the practice of attention to the present in the context of Gestalt therapy is very much like verbalized meditation." Further, present-centeredness in Gestalt therapy is seen as a meditative practice wherein many of the contents of awareness, are related to the interpersonal encounter of therapist and client and wherein the activity of self disclosure becomes an important component.²

In the traditional Zen literature, there are many references to the utilization of moment to moment awareness and the development of an unhindered responsiveness to all aspects of the Zen practitioner's life. Perceiving correct relatedness to the immediate situation and being able to act freely in accordance with the present situation are considered paramount in Zen training. Hence, an ancient Zen master said, "My enlightenment is that when hungry eat, when tired sleep." Naranjo's article makes another point which is relevant to the area of discussion to be pursued in this paper. He says that the practice of attention to the stream of life runs counter to habit, and precludes the operation of "character" i.e., the organization of coping mechanisms. In Buddhist parlance, this is called egolessness or selflessness.³

The focus of this paper will be a comparison of the technique of the Zen Koan, with Fritz Perls' concepts of the impasse and the fertile void. These issues will be looked at from both a theoretical and practical viewpoint. Perls describes the impasse as the position where environmental support is not forthcoming anymore, and authentic self support has not yet been achieved.⁴ From an experiential standpoint, this state is experienced as being related to individual survival and is connected with a fear of loss of self.

"When you get close to the impasse, to the point where you just cannot believe that you might be able to survive, then the whirl starts. You get desperate and confused. Suddenly, you don't understand anything anymore, and here the symptom of the neuro-

"To suffer one's death and be reborn is not easy."

Fritz Perls

tic becomes very clear. The neurotic is a person who does not see the obvious."⁵ Perls states that when one understands the impasse correctly, he/she wakes up and experiences a satori, a Zen word meaning "enlightenment." He further says: "It's the awareness, the full experience of how you are stuck, that makes you recover, and realize the whole thing is not reality."⁶ Perls therefore sees the process of therapy as one of becoming aware of and working through the roles that one plays and then experiencing the impasse. This leads to an experience of death or fear of death which then results in an explosion or release. Perls says, "The death layer comes to life, and this explosion is the link-up with the authentic person who is capable of experiencing and expressing his emotions."⁷

In comparison, I now turn to some discussion of the technique and purpose of the Koan in Zen practice. The Koan generally

you, 'What are you?', You don't know; there is only 'I don't know mind. Always keep this don't know mind. When this don't know mind becomes clear, then you will understand."⁸

In Zen literature, this state of not-knowing is referred to as Great Doubt and is likened to the experience of a child who has lost its mother. In practicing, one must nurture this doubt by maintaining a basic faith or confidence in one's intrinsic potential and by having a determined courage to stick with it. In brief, these are the essentials and intent of Koan practice.

What follows, is a narrative of an interchange between Zen Master and student which has become a traditional part of the literature and which exemplifies this process.



Precepts ceremony: Zen Master Seung Sahn and Master Dharma teacher Richard Shrobe giving Dharma teacher precepts to Angie Phoenix

takes the form of a question. These questions may be posed as a philosophical dilemma, or may be a question about one's existential position. Some Koans are narratives of interchanges between Zen master and student, which viewed from a logical standpoint, appear to make no sense. In any case, the Koan is a question whose answer does not satisfactorily lie within the realm of conceptualization and logical thinking. Charles Luk, a Chinese writer on Zen says,

"There was once a great Japanese poet named Basho. He was a very bright young man, and a serious Buddhist who had studied many scriptures. He thought that he understood Buddhism. One day he paid a visit to Zen Master Takuan. They talked for a long time. The Master would say something and Basho would respond at length, quoting from

"Gestalt therapy could be viewed as applied Zen within an interpersonal framework."

"Koans are, therefore not riddles and riddle-like problems which students should solve before their enlightenment, for Koans are full of meaning which is clear only to those who have rid themselves of discrimination and discernment. Obviously, they are incomprehensible to unenlightened people who grasp at externals and cling to the names and terms of conditioned human

language. However, as soon as they keep from illusions, that is when their minds are not stirred by thoughts, they will understand all Koans without making the least effort."⁹

The effect of the Koan is to bring one to a stuck point, where one's usual way of relating to oneself or the world proves to be unsatisfactory and yet how to proceed is unclear. In Zen terminology, the words of the Koan are called the question's tail while this stuck state is referred to as the question's head. The Zen Master instructs the student to grasp the question head, and not let go. Contemporary Zen Master Seung Sahn in a letter to a new student related the following:

"Sitting is only a small part of practicing Zen. The true meaning of sitting Zen is to cut off all thinking and to keep not-moving mind. So I ask

the most profound and difficult Buddhist scriptures. Finally, the Master said, 'You are a great Buddhist, a great man. You understand everything. But in all the time we have been talking, you have only used the words of Buddha or of eminent teachers. I do not want to hear other people's words. I want to hear your own words, the words of your true self. Quickly now - give me a sentence of your own.' Basho was speechless. His mind raced, 'What can I say? My own words - what can they be?' One minute passed, then two, then ten. Then the Master said, 'I thought you understood Buddhism. Why can't you answer me?' Basho's face turned red. His mind stopped short. It could not move left or right, forward or back. It was up against an impenetrable wall. Then, only vast emptiness. Suddenly there was a sound in the monastery garden. Basho turned to the Master and said,

Still pond - a
frog jumps in - splash.

The Master laughed out loud and said, 'Well now these are the words of your true self.' Basho laughed too. He had attained enlightenment."¹⁰

I would now like to present a Gestalt therapy session which in some ways parallels the process of the above story. At a training seminar, I observed a therapist working with a young woman. It became clear early in the session that the patient had a great deal of hostility that needed to be expressed. The patient was encouraged to go around the group, person by person, and verbally tear them apart. This she did in a quite vicious way, but at times with some trepidation. When questioned about her experiences during her periodic hesitancy, the patient revealed that at times, she feared retaliation, and consequently held back. The therapist then observed that this type of viciousness must have been acted out on the patient at some time in her life. The patient became sad and cried for a few minutes. She related how she had always been made to feel inadequate by her parents and that she had incorporated this relationship so thoroughly that now, in interpersonal situations she usually would feel that either the other person had all of the power, or that she needed to denigrate them to feel in control.

The therapist then requested the patient to see if she could observe something about herself and something about someone else in the group without a sense of comparison and evaluation based on the concept of more or less. For example, without judging in terms of better or worse, to observe - 'you're short, I'm tall.' As the patient tried to think of something in this way, she began to feel how she couldn't do it. She then became somewhat confused and uncertain. This led to her becoming quite terrified and crying deeply. Upon coming out of the crying, she said to the therapist, 'I see you, and I'm sitting here.' She said that this was as close to being free of her evaluative way of seeing things as she felt she could get at that moment. This was accepted as closure and the session ended.

It can be seen quite clearly, that a similar process is at work in both examples. The process is one of stopping the person's habitual way of maintaining his or her view of self and world and bringing them to a point where they feel that they have lost everything. This then enables them to reorganize in a more realistic way. In the case of Basho, he had been so identified with his role as a Buddhist scholar, that when the Master asked him to be a Buddhist without recourse to his erudition, he felt completely at a loss. The Master, understanding how important this was to Basho, used this to generate a feeling of humiliation which disturbed Basho's balance - "I thought you understood Buddhism, why can't you answer me?" This opened the possibility of Basho's being able to respond differently.

In this case of the therapy session, it was the disruption of the patient's topdog/underdog dichotomy that produced the result. It must also be observed that in both instances, preparation and timing were very important. The Zen Master allowed Basho to go on at length and expend himself before making the critical intervention. In the therapy session, the patient had first been helped to experience herself as both topdog and victim before she was confronted with the impasse. This process of heightening a behavior as a means of going beyond it, can be related to those principles of Gestalt psychology that deal with figural saturation i.e., once a figure reaches a certain point of saturation, it begins to recede into the ground.

By way of transition to relating the above to Fritz Perls' concept of the fertile void, I would like to quote from Castaneda's account of his experiences with the Yaqui Indian sorcerer, Don Juan, from his book, *Journey to Ixtlan*. Castaneda has been alone in the hills and had had a mystical experience. He was questioning his teacher Don Juan about this. Don Juan said,

"What stopped inside you yesterday was what people have been telling you the world is like. You see, people tell us from the time we are born, that the world is such and such and so and so, and naturally we have no choice but to see the world the way people have been telling us it is. Yesterday, the world became as sorcerers tell you it is. In that world,

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TO SUFFER ONE'S DEATH

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coyotes talk and so do deer and all other living beings. But what I want you to learn is 'seeing'. Perhaps you know now that 'seeing' happens only when one sneaks between the worlds, the world of ordinary people and the world of sorcerers. Yesterday, you believed the coyote talked to you. Any sorcerer who doesn't 'see' would believe the same, but one who sees knows that to believe that, is to be pinned down in the realm of sorcerers. By the same token, not to believe that coyotes talk is to be pinned down in the realm of ordinary men." (*Journey to Ixtlan*, pps. 299-300, *Stopping the World*).

Fritz Perls calls the technique of withdrawal into the fertile void, the final step in dealing with one's areas of confusion. He describes it as "an eerie experience, often approaching a miracle when it first occurs." The experience is likened to a trance but accompanied by full awareness.

"The person who is capable of staying with the experience of the fertile void - experiencing his confusion to the utmost - and who can become aware of everything calling for his attention (hallucinations, broken up sentences, vague feelings, strange feelings, peculiar sensations) is in for a big surprise. He will probably have a sudden 'aha' experience; suddenly a solution will come forward, an insight that has not been there before, a blinding flash of realization or understanding." [*Gestalt Approach and Eye Witness to Therapy*, p.99]

Perls sees this experience as being a schizophrenic experience in miniature, in which confusion becomes transformed into clarity and emergency into continuity. This experience of voidness is also very much stressed in Zen training. Voidness is the experience of egolessness, i.e., that there is no permanent entity called a self. Instead, everything is perceived as being in process. As Perls said, 'everything is aware process.' Basho's experience exemplifies this through the references to his mind racing, stopping short, and then the sense of vast emptiness. Buddhism expresses this process orientation succinctly in the Heart Sutra with the aphorism, "Form is emptiness, Emptiness is form."



The Form/Emptiness dialectic is conceived of as existing on three levels. The realization of Form is Emptiness begins at the level of intellectual understanding, then moves through the experience of absolute voidness, which leads to the immediacy of directly apprehending the world just as it is, free from the screen of conceptualization. This three level realization is stated as: The truth of Form is emptiness, Emptiness is form, is No-form, No-Emptiness. The truth of No-form, No-Emptiness is form is form, emptiness is emptiness. Perls was fond of saying, "Lose your mind and come to your senses", and humorously, "I am what I am, I'm Popeye, the sailor man". In Zen training, the final emphasis is not on the extraordinary experiences of the void, Don

Juan's world of the sorcerer and Perls miniature psychotic experience. Instead, the final emphasis of Zen is on the completeness of one's moment to moment experiencing, this being a temporal expression of the absolute truth. Moment by moment, the phenomenal and the Absolute interpenetrate each other.

Hence, the Zen maxim - Zen mind is everyday mind. Joel Latner expresses this in Gestalt terms by saying,

"In our terms, this direction is towards the last Gestalt. The momentum of our development is toward wholes that encompass more and more of the potential of the organism/environment field. In the more advanced stages of this process, we are embracing ourself and the cosmos. The Gestalt is: I and the universe are one. All of me and all of the infinity of activities and energy around me, people and things, all of them together are one figure. Nothing is excluded." [*The Gestalt Therapy Book*, p. 226]

In conclusion, the use of the Zen Koan, and then Gestalt focus on the impasse can be seen as parallel processes. Both lead to some experiencing of disorganization and voidness with a focus toward reemergence into the world with a new orientation. Zen with its techniques of sitting and keeping a 'not moving mind', leads to an intensive experience of centering and unification of energy. Gestalt Therapy could be viewed as applied Zen within an interpersonal framework. Gestalt also enhances this process by its utilization of the concepts of developmental psychology. Therefore, it could be concluded that each discipline might enhance the other in the movement toward wholeness. □

Richard Shrobe received a Master's degree in social work from Hunter College in 1976 and did post-graduate training at the Gestalt Center for Psychotherapy and Training from 1976 to 1980, receiving a graduate certificate. In the early 1970's he was director of Horizon House, a drug program in New York City. From 1975 to 1978 he was a clinical instructor in the faculty of the Department of Psychiatry at Downstate

Medical Center. Currently on the faculty of Gestalt Associates for Psychotherapy, a post graduate training program, he has recently been training with Laura Perls.

He studied intensively with Swami Sat-chidananda from 1967 to 1972 and lived at the Integral Yoga Institute for four years with his wife and three children. He met Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1975, and has been associated with the Chogye International Zen Center in New York for many years, currently as its Abbot. He was given "inga"—authority to lead retreats and teach kong-an practice— by Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1984 and is one of the six Master Dharma Teachers in the Kwan Um Zen School.

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ENDNOTES

1. Gestalt Therapy Now, Forgen and Shepard
2. Ibid, p. 54
3. Ibid, p. 61
5. Ibid, p. 41
6. Ibid, p. 43
7. Ibid, p. 60
8. The Secrets of Chinese Meditation, C. Luk, pps. 45 and 46
9. Dropping Ashes on the Buddha, S. Sahn, p. 12
10. Ibid, p. 120
11. The Gestalt Approach and Eye Witness to Therapy, p. 99
12. The Gestalt Therapy Book, p. 226

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