

This is an article submitted to a special edition of the *British Gestalt Journal* on Gestalt therapy and climate change, but was thought to be too wide-ranging to be selected for publication at the time:

Gestalt Therapy in the 21st Century and its Relation to Buddhist Contemplative Practice. An integration of the new and the old for a world now facing, and experiencing, the threat of climate change and mass extinction.

Abstract: the climate emergency is the ultimate existential threat of our time, an absolute “what is” we can no longer ignore. Western civilisation has reached an apocalyptic crisis, but apocalypse is as much about revelation as destruction. This is the challenge. While Buddhism offers an understanding of universal values that go beyond the anthropocentric focus of the modern West, it, itself as a phenomenon, hasn’t changed substantially for a thousand years. But today, in a world of global communication, we are experiencing the potential integration of ageless oriental wisdom with occidental science. This has been called by some the “fourth turning”. Gestalt therapy, can play an important part in the emergence of a new consciousness from this integration of buddhist psychology and Western psychotherapy. Two concepts - central to both the Zen and Tibetan traditions - were introduced to Mahayana Buddhism in the fifth century CE, because it was felt the earlier teachings, particularly of the “void” and “emptiness”, were regarded as too nihilistic. These were that of the Store Conscious - the Buddhist understanding of what we know as “The Unconscious” - and Buddha nature - awakened human nature. The realisation of buddha nature begins with an awareness of the self. This can take many forms but the field of psychotherapy is itself, potentially, a practice which can benefit from its exploration. Gestalt therapy, in particular, could lead the way.

Words: climate emergency; psychotherapy; gestalt; Buddhism; integration; fourth turning, contemplative practice.

Clearly we no longer live in a “normal” world. Putin’s brutal invasion of Ukraine and Ukraine’s brave resistance has made us rethink what democracy and the democratic way of life means to us. Also, the sharp rise in our cost of living, partly as a result of the war,

has added to our anxieties and surely must help us at last question the gross material and consumerist values of the affluent West. But, at the same time, the climate crisis alone raises greater fears, which are existential and universal in their import.

As Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the UN, declared, with reference to the latest report this year (2022) from the UN Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC), “We are on a fast track to disaster”.¹ While previous IPCC reports “warned” humanity what it was facing if it didn’t cut its carbon emissions drastically, now the IPCC speaks finally of the absolute need for a “solution” in the next ten years, a solution that would set us on a path to zero emissions by 2050. But this really is our last chance. If we fail, we will be included in the mass extinction event we now see all around us and which we are responsible for. This is an apocalyptic challenge which, so far, has met with more denial and evasion than real action. Science has the technology to meet the challenge but, of course, it is also a question of human, political will. Why, as the political activists ask, are we doing so little to put out the fire that threatens to consume us all?²

We have come to interpret apocalypse in terms of its destructive potential, but it also implies revelation or awakening. On the opening information page of Mike Hulme’s book *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity* (2009), it states:

Climate change is not a ‘problem’ waiting for a ‘solution’. It is an environmental, cultural and political phenomenon which is reshaping the way we think about ourselves, our societies and humanity’s place on Earth.³

Mike Hulme is currently Professor of Human Geography at Cambridge University, with a special interest in climate and cultural change, and was the founding Director of the Tyndall Centre at the University of East Anglia for Climate Change Research. In his book he suggested climate change was an “idea” as much as a material or biospheric

¹ See *Guardian Editorial*, April 4, 2022, “The Guardian view on the latest IPCC report: a fast track to climate disaster”.

² See Naomi Klein, 2019, *On Fire: the Burning Case for a NEW GREEN DEAL*. Allen Lane, and Bill McKibben, 2019, *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* Wildfire.

³ Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

phenomenon. He examined it as a “mutating idea”, seeing how from the different perspectives - “depending who one is and where one stands” - the unfolding idea of climate change means different things to different people and implies different courses of action.

He added that the story of climate change is not one that begins in ignorance and ends in certainty. It is “much more interesting than that”. In his mind it is a story about “the meeting of Nature and Culture, and about how humans are central actors in both of these realms, and about how we are continually creating and re-creating both Nature and Culture”.⁴ Hulme reframed the question. We should ask ourselves not just what we can do about the climate emergency but how it changes us.

In other words, the climate crisis is also an opportunity. It challenges us, not only to act, but to think about ourselves, and our own identity. We find ourselves asking the essential existential question: who, and what, are we? If we are responsible for the climate emergency, perhaps the “solution” is not just a question of geo-engineering, but involves contemplating the nature of human consciousness itself.

Psychotherapy and climate change

We might enquire, for example, how climate change looks from the perspective of our profession of psychotherapy as a whole. The Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA), originally an integrative group of psychotherapists from different schools, brought together round the urgent issue of climate change, is now thinking how it can help people with what is called “eco-anxiety”, not as a condition to be soothed or “cured”, but as a sane and understandable response to the climate emergency.⁵ The paradox, of course, is that when we actually begin to face our conscious or unconscious fears, then our anxieties are felt to be more containable and we can also begin to think creatively. In Gestalt terms, climate change is now the essential “what is”, the great collective “here and now” of our day. We can no longer ignore it. Nor should we.

The Gestalt therapist and active member of the CPA, Steffi Bednarek, has written her own concerns about the silence of the therapeutic world to these apocalyptic issues and how

⁴ Ibid. See p xxviii and throughout the Preface.

⁵ See the website of CPA

therapy might begin to think about them. ⁶ At the same time, the Jungian analyst, Sally Gillespie, also an active member of the CPA, wrote in her book, *Climate Crisis and Consciousness*, how she changed her career direction in 2012 from one-to-one therapy only and also started a group to engage with climate change anxieties. The members of the group experienced considerable relief when they could express openly their feelings and thoughts about climate change. ⁷

“Therapy” is a twentieth century phenomenon, which emerged initially in response to our mechanical and industrial culture, and, then, to the savage world wars in the last century which led to the deaths of so many millions. As a result it has largely taken the form of bereavement or post-trauma counselling. Freud may have written *The Interpretation of Dreams* around the turn of the century, as an attempt to explore the mystery of human life, but some of his more poignant and insightful thinking arose out of his experience of grief during and after The Great War. Similarly with Melanie Klein and the Second World War. But now the 21st century demands more than this. It asks us to think about absolute, or universal, reality while we are still here to contemplate it, something which Gestalt therapy was in sympathy with from its earliest days.

But this is a challenge for psychotherapy as a whole. Traditionally its practice has had an anthropocentric focus. It engages with the individual person and his/her social context, and avoids thinking in wider existential or universal terms. Clearly, modern psychology’s and psychotherapy’s insights into mental life will be important as the crisis deepens. Consolation has always been an important part of our cultural well-being, ⁸ But can psychotherapists offer something more in this century? What, as Mike Hulme asks, can the climate emergency and the prospect of catastrophe teach us, not only about our “discontented” civilisation but also about the place of *Homo sapiens* in the history of the Earth and the Universe itself. Is “psychotherapy” able to reflect on this?

⁶ See Steffi Bednarek, S. (2017). Therapy in a changing world, *Therapy Today*, 27 (1), pp 6-7. Also 2018, “How wide is the field? Gestalt therapy, capitalism and the natural world” in the *British Gestalt Journal*, Vol 27, No 2, 8-17

⁷ Sally Gillespie, 2020, *Climate Crisis and Consciousness: Re-imagining the World and Ourselves*. Abingdon, Routledge

⁸ See Michael Ignatieff, 2021, *On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times*, London: Picador, for an account of the literature and art of consolation throughout our history

Jean Gebser

One clue is to be found in the history of the last century. After the First World War Oswald Spengler wrote his magisterial *Decline of the West*, which took a very pessimistic view of Western civilisation, though he was of the view that destruction was a part of any rebirth.⁹ It is less well-known that a further magnum opus emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. Jean Gebser was another German, a poet and cultural philosopher in the mould of Spengler, but his lengthy book - in German, *Ursprung und Gegenwart*, translated into English as *The Ever-Present Origin* - had a more creative view of the future and looked towards the twenty-first century.¹⁰

Gebser took a long view of human history and thought in terms of structures of consciousness rather than simply periods of history, structures which were more fundamental and evolutionary than the cyclical idea of the rise and decline of civilisations. He identified five main structures, which could also be subdivided infinitely. These five structures of consciousness, according to Gebser, are Archaic, Magic, Mythic, Mental and Integrative. They may correspond with historical periods but are nested rather than linear, which means they describe forms of consciousness which continue to live alongside each other in our collective mind today, obviously some more figural than others, depending on the importance given by people to each structure. The Integrative structure is different in that it attempts to include and integrate the others, rather than purely differentiate from them.

There isn't space to discuss Gebser's structures here. They are described and analysed in some detail by Ken Wilber, the philosopher of the perennial traditions, and Georg Feuerstein, the authority on Hinduism and yoga.¹¹ In thinking how psychotherapy can orient itself most creatively in this century, Gebser's integrative consciousness may be the key. It promises, for instance, to bring together, and unify, the three principle value spheres

⁹ Oswald Spengler, 1991 (1926), *The Decline of the West*, abridged edition by Helmut Werner with Introduction by H. Stuart Hughes, Oxford, OUP.

¹⁰ Jean Gebser 1984 (1949 and 1953) *The Ever-Present Origin: Part One: Foundations of the Aperspectival World: A Contribution to the History of the Awakening of Consciousness, Part Two: Manifestations of the Aperspectival World: An Attempt at the Concretion of the Spiritual*, translated by Noel Barstad with Aldis Mickunas, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press

¹¹ See Ken Wilber 1996 (1981) *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Evolution*, Wheaton, Illinois: Quest and 2001 (1995) *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality, the Spirit of Evolution*, Boulder, Shambhala and Georg Feuerstein, 1987 *Structures of Consciousness: the Genius of Jean Gebser - An Introduction and Critique*, California: Integral Publishing

of ethics, science, and aesthetics - known classically as the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, or Sublime - which have become so dissociated in our modern culture. Thinking about these central values can serve, for instance, to encourage dialogue among different psychotherapeutic approaches.

Integrative thinking and Gestalt therapy

While integral thinking applies to all of us, not just to those of a psychological or psychotherapeutic mind, we all have to begin where we are - though we don't have to stay there. In 2016 CPA members edited an edition of the UKCP's *Psychotherapist* magazine which included a substantial focus on climate change, an example of professionals from different schools of therapy working together. I suggested in my own article in that edition that it was time the different "colleges" of the UKCP began to think integratively, being true to their distinctive approaches but coming together over the greater issue of climate change and prospective mass extinction. In doing so, they might learn that it is difference that both differentiates and connects us.¹²

I did not train in Gestalt therapy myself but, after exploring some of its principal history, literature and practice, it is clear to me that it has something important to offer in this twenty-first century. It is always interesting to return to its original founder members, particularly "Fritz" Perls and Paul Goodman, who, with Ralph Hefferline, published *Gestalt Therapy* in 1951, subtitled *Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. This may not be an easy book to read now but it was also written in the aftermath of the Second World War and has an integrative feel to it. Again, the photograph on the back cover of my *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* may be of a bewhiskered and mischievous hippie figure but Perls also had respect for Freud as the founding father of psychotherapy. And Goodman became a significant and widely revered social critic, particularly after the publication of *Growing Up Absurd*. He brought the ethos of Anarchism and spirit of free thought to the Gestalt movement.

Interestingly *Gestalt Therapy* was republished in 1994 with a new introduction by Isadore

¹² *the Psychotherapist: the magazine of the UK Council for Psychotherapy*, Issue 63, Summer 2016.

From and Michael Vincent Miller. ¹³ *The Paul Goodman Reader*, edited and introduced by Taylor Stoehr, came out in 2011, the same year as a New York Review of Books edition of *Growing Up Absurd*, containing contributions from Casey Nelson Blake and Susan Sontag. Michael Vincent Miller also wrote an introduction to a 1990's edition of *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, included in Miller's very interesting collection of essays and talks on "the Poetics of Gestalt", *Teaching a Paranoid to Flirt*. ¹⁴ I mention all these as they suggest to me a millennial revival of the original spirit of the Gestalt movement.

Gestalt, which emphasised the importance of seeing the whole picture, brought many good things to the discipline of modern therapy - the primacy of experience, its focus on the here and now process, the importance of the authenticity of the patient-therapist relationship, the essentiality of being and staying with "what is" for change to occur and, of course, the centrality of social and political factors in conditioning one's identity. Also, Gestalt's emphasis on healthy functioning and growth, rather than just cure and pathology, meant it offered benefits to people other than those with mental health problems. Perl's well-known "prayer" - "I do my thing and you do yours....." - may have been criticised today by such as Thich Nhat Hahn for one, as we now question the notion of a separate self, but he did compose it in the middle of the twentieth century when it was perhaps more important to establish personal boundaries in the first place.

Gestalt brought a heady mix of sixties counterculture to the therapy world - phenomenology, existentialism - the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger - and Zen Buddhism for instance - but I have often thought that there were parallels in psychotherapy, from the start of psychoanalysis, with long established contemplative traditions.¹⁵ The level of concentration alone or the combination of tranquillity and analysis in therapy sessions is akin to classical meditation. We like to think of therapy as a talking cure, but there is also, of course, so much going on beyond language. Gestalt has drawn on the practices of non-occidental traditions - particularly Zen Buddhism - but

¹³ Isadore From and Michael Vincent Miller 1994 (1951) Introduction in Frederick Perls, Ralph Hefferline & Paul Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, The Gestalt Journal Press.

¹⁴ Michael Vincent Miller 2011 *Teaching A Paranoid To Flirt: The Poetics of Gestalt Therapy*, The Gestalt Journal Press.

¹⁵ See Cartwright, T., 2022, chapter 2 "Everything and Nothing" in *Everything and Nothing: Essays on Climate Change and Cultural Transformation*, for a discussion of the comparison between modern psychotherapy and perennial contemplative practices.

these traditions themselves have changed in the last fifty years as they have been exposed to the challenges of the Western world. Both occidental and oriental views and practices have much to learn from each other - for the wider world, as well as for the therapeutic schools.

Buddhist psychology and Gestalt therapy

This is the view of Eva Gold and Stephen Zahm who have written an illuminating book, *Buddhist Psychology and Gestalt Therapy Integrated*, (BPGT) ¹⁶ comparing Gestalt Therapy theory and practice with the original psychological teachings and meditational practises of Buddhism. They write both as experienced practitioners of Gestalt therapy and with knowledge and experience of Theravada Buddhism - the original teachings of Gautama Buddha, the historical buddha - and *Vipassana* Insight meditation. As they say in their introduction: “Buddhist psychology and Gestalt therapy both recognise the human potential for growth and actualisation that is available to us as we free ourselves from restrictive patterns, beliefs, and self-concepts.” ¹⁷

Both Gestalt and Buddhist psychology approaches show how focussed attention leads to greater awareness and how transformational attending to actual present experience can be. Both share a broadly holistic perspective and emphasise the field of which we are an interconnected part. Gestalt therapy, as I have mentioned, is based on a model of health, not pathology, which includes belief in the capacity for natural regulation. This fits with the Buddhist view of human nature - “buddha” means “awakened”, so buddha nature is simply awakened human nature. There are also parallels with the understanding of the important concept of “self”, not as a reified and solid entity, but as a fluid process. Gold and Zahm are convinced of the value of recognising how convergent gestalt therapy and Buddhist psychology can be, whilst also recognising and respecting their differences. Both are grounded in the recognition, for instance, of interconnectedness and interdependence and the essential truth that it is difference - more than sameness - which connects and leads to growth.

¹⁶ Eva Gold and Stephen Zahm, 2018, *Buddhist Psychology & Gestalt Therapy Integrated: Psychotherapy for the 21st Century*, Foreword by Erving Polster, Portland, Oregon: Metta Press

¹⁷ Ibid. p 13

The “three characteristics of existence” and meditation

While therapy - of most schools - has concentrated more on the individual person - as well as couples and families - Buddhism has also explored the wider more universal field. The Theravada teachings focus on the Four Noble Truths of suffering and the cessation of suffering, including “the noble eightfold path”, but, as Gold and Zahm point out, ¹⁸ Buddhism also teaches about the “three marks of existence” which reflect its understanding of universal or absolute truth. These three marks, or characteristics, are:

1. **impermanence , or transience.** The very nature of existence is change. Everything - including us - grows old, withers and dies. Death is a natural process, as natural as birth. No phenomenon endures.

2. **Suffering, or unsatisfactoriness.** This is known as *dukkha*, the first of Buddha’s noble truths. *Dukkha* goes beyond pain and unhappiness and refers to the unsatisfactoriness in all conditioned existence. We experience pain insofar as we identify with our physical bodies and the life cycle that leads to ageing, sickness, and death, and the mental grief, sorrow, and loss that accompany them. If we try to hold onto something impermanent we suffer. As Gold and Zahm write: “Whenever we yearn for our experience to be other than what it is, we suffer”.

3. **Not-Self.** This characteristic refers to the absence of any essential, enduring, independent self-identity. There is no separate, personal self. The continuity of identity we all experience is not to be found in our conditioned life, which is more a process of “selfing”. The personal self - and the environmental field which forms it’s background - are a construction, and mindfulness/meditation is a means to realising this, at the same time as experiencing what is actually essential and enduring.

While Gold and Zahm go on to give an account of all the main basic understandings of Theravada Buddhism, they also devote a whole chapter to Insight meditation practices, which they feel it would be helpful for Gestalt practitioners, to know about. To be effective, mindfulness meditation, which was brought to our attention in the twentieth century by Thich Nhat Hahn out of his experience of the immense suffering of the

¹⁸ See chapter two, “Buddhist Psychology Views”, pp 23-4

Vietnamese War, ¹⁹ needs to be linked to a whole way of ethical living, as Gautama Buddha taught in his fourth “noble truth”. *Vipassana* is a Pali word - the original language Gautama’s teachings were conveyed in - meaning “clear seeing” or “insight” and can lead to freedom from mind-created suffering. Included with mindfulness (*sati*) were concentration (*samadhi*), loving kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*). These practices are known to benefit therapists as well as their patients: “Even if not directly used or taught in therapy, they have benefits for the therapist, and can impact the therapeutic relationship”, ²⁰ something which Gold and Zahm explore in depth in their tenth chapter. Meanwhile chapter three contains valuable descriptions and exercises of the main insight.

The “three turnings of the dharma wheel”.

What Gold and Zahm don’t go into is the evolution of Buddhism, particularly the development of *Mahayana* - the Greater Vehicle - and the *bodhisattva* ideal of service. Buddhism is, after all, an enlightened teaching that began 2500 years ago and developed its theory and practice quite dynamically between 600 BCE and 1000 CE. In those centuries its Northern schools consolidated their teachings in China, Korea, Japan and, of course, Tibet, the “land of the snows”, where Mahayana and the more esoteric traditions of India, particularly Vajrayana and tantric Buddhism, removed, following the Moslem invasions of the subcontinent leading up to the fourteenth century. But it really hasn’t changed much in relation to the rest of the world since then.....until today perhaps, as it responds to the secular challenges of the Western world!

In descriptions of Buddhist history by Buddhists it is maintained that Buddha - in the forms of Gautama, the historical figure, and the spirit of Buddhism within humanity - has “turned the wheel of dharma” three times - “dharma” is a Sanskrit word meaning universal law or teaching. The first turning took the form of the ethical and pragmatic teachings of Gautama. These were recorded in the original teachings of the Theravada schools, which form the basis of Buddhism and made possible the further developments. The “second turning” included the teachings on “emptiness”, expounded particularly by the Indian sage, Nagarjuna, in the second century CE. In case the emptiness teachings were thought to be akin to nihilism, the *Yogachara or Vijnavada* - mind- or consciousness-

¹⁹ Thich Nhat Hahn, 1986, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, London: Rider.

²⁰ Gold and Zahm, 2018: p 45

only - school - taught the truth about “Buddha nature” - awakened human nature - and the reality of the “Store Conscious” - the Buddhist unconscious - in the fifth century CE. These were known as the third turning of the dharma wheel.

These second and third dharma teachings have only relatively recently become known in the west, particularly after the invasion of Tibet by China and the establishment of a Tibetan diaspora throughout the world. Some think we are currently experiencing a “fourth turning”.²¹ This is not just a challenge to Buddhism but an integration of Buddhist psychology with Western culture, including Gestalt and other psychotherapy traditions. This integration is not a separate development but includes all former turnings of the dharma wheel, as well as the fourth we are experiencing now.

Interestingly, the Zen priest, Norman Fischer, in the foreword to a recent book on *Yogachara* Buddhism by Ben Connelly,²² writes of what he calls “Buddhism’s third wave” today, the three waves being Buddhism’s growing influence on Western culture - the first is the knowledge of Asian thought and practice in nineteenth century Europe, inspiring, particularly, the Romantic movement, the second following in the twentieth century with, for instance, the establishment of Buddhist societies in the West and the discovery of Zen Buddhism, and the third wave, being a better understanding today of the history of Buddhism, particularly the schools of Emptiness and the Store Conscious, of which Thich Nhat Hahn’s *Understanding Our Mind* (see below) and Connelly’s books are evidence.

Emptiness

Emptiness is something quantum science has explored. In the Buddhist understanding it is not so much a theory but could be said to be the ultimate field of our being.²³ It connotes a sense of the infinite. Rather than a bounded reality it is an absolute

²² Ben Connelly, 2016, *Inside Vasubandhu’s Yogachara: A Practitioner’s Guide*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom.

²³ See Cartwright, T., chapter 9, “The Field of Our Being: On Emptiness”, in *The Timeless Axis: Climate Change and Cultural Transformation*, a book that is not yet published but can be found complete on my website, www.thetimelessaxis.com.

experience of no boundary.²⁴ In fact the experience of freedom from relative reality helps us to redraw our boundaries in the relative world. Nagarjuna wrote of the two truths, or realities - relative and absolute - and the relationship between them. In our modern Western world we tend to know only the relative reality and make the mistake of taking that for absolute reality. The challenge for the 21st century is how we connect again with a sense of absolute reality, while retaining the scientific and humanist achievements of the modern world.²⁵

Michael Vincent Miller, the Gestalt therapist and thinker, began to engage with these issues when he gave a talk on "The Emptiness of Gestalt Therapy" at the first international Gestalt therapy conference, "A Global Vision: Taking Gestalt Therapy into the 21st Century" in 1996, in which he suggested that, given the revolution in "managed care" and the demise of a truly exploratory form of therapy, there was "a need for a reinvention of psychotherapy as we have known and cherished it". This involved, in his view, the conversion of negative emptiness into a positive emptiness: "we need now to empty psychotherapy of a great deal of paraphernalia it has saddled itself with" - such as too much scientific theory, the idea of simple cure, notions of normality as health and, above all, the ideological tendency that one's own approach is the whole truth. He is of the view that Gestalt therapy is well-placed for this "restorative work".²⁶

In conclusion I focus on the two Buddhist concepts of the Store Conscious and Buddha Nature, the exploration of which, through a contemplative practice, would give all forms of psychotherapy a new dimension altogether, and help us think how we might begin to meet the existential challenges of climate change and mass extinction. The *Yogachara*

²⁴ See Ken Wilber, 2001 (1979) *No Boundary: Eastern and Western Approaches to Personal Growth*, Boston: Shambhala. This, one of Wilber's most read and popular books, is "a simple yet comprehensive guide to the types of psychologies and therapies available from Western and Eastern sources, from psychoanalysis to Zen, existentialism to Tantra". He wrote it as a brief follow-up to his ground-breaking and more difficult *"The Spectrum of Consciousness"* (1977).

²⁵ This is reflected on by Stephen Batchelor whose whole life and writings have been about the integration of Buddhist dharma practice with the secularity of the modern Western world. Atheists, as Batchelor points out, can be "devout" and modern sceptics can sometimes embrace more moral high ground than orthodox ceremonial or ritualistic Buddhists. See *after buddhism: rethinking the dharma for a secular age*, New Haven; Yale University Press, 2015.

²⁶ See his talk published in *Teaching a Paranoid to Flirt*, 2011.

school described the “three natures” of human nature ²⁷ - the constructed and the interdependent selves, which Gestalt therapy understands, but also the sense of the perfect fulfilled nature, which is less known in modern psychotherapy. It can be said to be experienced when the constructed self becomes wholly transparent and Buddha nature shines through.

The Store Conscious

The third turning of the dharma wheel is said to have been made by the *Yogachara* - mind- or consciousness-only - school, led by the teachings of the Indian brothers, Asanga and Vasubandhu in the fifth century CE. The twentieth century Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh has written a translation and commentary of fifty of Vasubandhu’s verses describing the nature of consciousness and particularly the Store Conscious, which could be said to be the Buddhist version of the “Unconscious”. ²⁸ I have always felt the psychoanalytic term, “The Unconscious”, to be, in some senses counterintuitive. Not only is it liable to reify the very source of all vitality but it opposes conscious and unconscious when, to my mind, they are not opposites but a continuum. The universe can be viewed as a supremely intelligent work of art. We may not be very conscious of this, but “The Unconscious” cannot be unconscious to itself, as it were. The challenge for us is how to gain conscious access to the conscious “Unconscious”. To suggest how, the *Yogaran* school put forward the notion of the Store Conscious.

Early *Buddha dharma* - “Buddhism” was a word coined in the nineteenth century - made no distinction between conscious and unconscious processes - *vijnana* is the Sanskrit word for consciousness (*vinnana* in Pali, the original language of the Theravada teachings) But this distinction became more problematical in early Abhidhamma - buddhist philosophy - thinking. Unlike the Freudian metaphor of the Unconscious as a sort of reservoir that could be tapped into, or could express itself, unawares to us, as a symptomatic pathology, *Yogachara* thought in terms of a Storehouse containing an infinite number of seeds which the human mind can have access to. Whether these “seeds” come to bear wholesome or unwholesome fruit depended how closely we had trained our mind in mindfulness or self-awareness. The *alaya-vijnana* (*alaya* storehouse in

²⁷ The French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan’s three registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, which seemed to turn psychoanalysis inside out and make it more accessible to other disciplines, is similar in some ways to the “three natures” of the *Yogachara* school.

²⁸ Thich Nhat Hahn, 2006, *Understanding Our Mind*, Berkeley, California: Parallax Press

Sanskrit) are described as “the ‘basal, store, or home’ consciousness” by William S. Waldron in his study of *The Buddhist Unconscious*.²⁹

Yogachara thought in terms of eight forms of consciousness, which are the field we live in - the five sensory consciousnesses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell; the mind - which Buddhism considered, itself, a sense, a sixth sense numerically speaking; *manas*, or the personal, individual, human self; and the Storehouse consciousness, which was the base consciousness for the other seven. The difficulty arises when the personal, individual self - *manas* - takes a part of the Store Consciousness and assumes it to be the whole of reality. Only when this personal self, including body and mind, is seen as a constructed nature, could one gain access to the whole of the Store Conscious. The Store Conscious is, then, a metaphor for everything or “the All”, and give us access to the infinite number of seeds and potential fruits, as the need arises.

Buddha nature

Buddha nature - the complete, fulfilled nature - is the key for all of us in this 21st century, particularly for psychotherapists. Everyone has Buddha nature, one’s awakened nature.³⁰ It is not something that can be taught by the use of a technique or strategy. According to Mahayana, while everyone has Buddha nature, too few of us are fully aware of it.³¹ Psychotherapists in the 21st century will need to use all their skills and experience in the art of consolation, but buddha, or awakened, nature can only be communicated by a sense of presence, which depends, in turn, on a person engaging, her- or himself, in a contemplative, or mindful, practice, - not just a sitting meditation but a whole way of life, whichever culture you come from. There are many ways of being, something which Gestalt therapy is well-placed to encourage.

Psychotherapists, like many people, are awakening to the apocalyptic nature of climate change and the current mass extinction event we are responsible for. This is the priority of

²⁹ William S. Waldron, 2003, *The Buddhist Unconscious: the ‘alaya-vijnana’ in the context of Indian Buddhist thought*, London: RoutledgeCurzon.

³⁰ What is it to be awakened? It is to be released from identity with your constructed self. It is to be who you are, a source of mystery and wonder, as mysterious as the universe itself, an emptiness which is the field of everything. This is the ultimate freedom.

³¹ For an account of the history and form of Buddha nature, see my chapter 11, “Wrapped in Tattered Rags: on Buddha Nature”, in *The Timeless Axis*, posted on my website, www.thetimelessaxis.com.

what Erving and Miriam Polster once called “The Now Ethos”.³² It is the “field” we currently find ourselves in, or the “contact boundary” of the 21st century. But there is a further awakening: to ourselves, what the philosopher, Teilhard de Chardin called “the human phenomenon”. Gestalt therapists like to ask who we are. The answer is, we do not know. Heidegger thought our being lies in its very questioning. The current Dalai Lama regards climate change as our greatest challenge. It is the supreme issue of our time and out of its contemplation can come, despite everything, the simple feeling of absolute being itself.

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