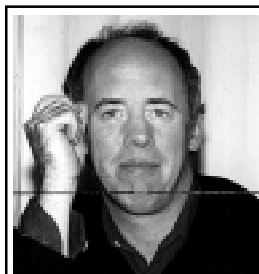


The Energetics of the Gestalt Cycle

by *Bill Palmer*



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Introduction

This is the first of two articles attempting to link psychological insights into human behaviour and experience with the Oriental understanding of body energetics and postural patterns. This article describes the Gestalt Cycle, which is one of the most successful models of psychological process to have been developed and links it to the Six Divisions of Chinese Medicine. The second article will describe the therapeutic possibilities opened up by this cross-fertilisation and link the development of movement patterns in childhood with the development of relationship patterns described by the Gestalt Cycle.

Developmental Lessons

Gestalt theory has lacked a coherent theory of child development because its strength is in dealing with how we can respond in the present. Psychodynamic models of development do not sit very comfortably within the framework of Gestalt therapy because they are analytical and do not make a linkage with our present sensational experience. The theory of energy development [1] that we have been forming in the last decade makes explicit the way in which the past has formed our posture and the way in which our posture gives a basis for our sense of self.

There is no need to hypothesize past traumas to explain postural patterns. Instead, the theory identifies postural and movement patterns in the present with developmental 'lessons' that have or have not been integrated. My belief is that any of these fundamental ways of physically moving that we have not learnt in childhood form uncompleted developmental Gestalts which are continually 'trying to be resolved' in the life of the individual. Hence we do not have to analyze how a developmental stage was blocked but focus on how that lesson is being continued in the present. This enables gestalt theory to include child development in its understanding of adult behaviour patterns in a way that does not compromise its focus on the present.

Equally, Oriental Medicine has no coherent theory of how psychological and behaviour patterns can be addressed

through the body. There are simple linkages made between emotional tendencies and the Five Elemental phases of energy but there is no mature way of integrating this with the subtle insights of Western Psychology into the dynamics of the personality. Various people have noticed that Oriental philosophy and gestalt theory resonate well [8]. I hope that these articles will show in detail how they do.

What is the Gestalt Cycle?

Imagine a lioness sleeping on the African Savannah. She has not eaten for a day or so and the pangs of hunger start to gnaw at her belly. Soon they become so insistent that she is forced to wake up and look around. Close by is a herd of gazelle grazing peacefully. As she sees them her body energizes and fills with alertness, you can see her purpose filling her muscles and her eyes focus intently on her prey. Her excitement grows and her spine lengthens, tail twitching, poised for action. Suddenly she erupts into movement and, choosing a gazelle slower than the rest, streaks across the yellow grassland. She leaps and buries her teeth into the spine of her kill, meeting her partner in this ancient dance of death. She tears at the warm flesh and gorges herself. Before long she lets of a low growl of satisfaction and, as the rest of the pride arrive to share her spoils, paces away and lies down in the evening shadows to sleep again.

Imagine a baby dazed with the satisfaction of his mother's milk. His mouth turns away from the tit and he stares inward, motionless, lying on his pillow. Slowly his attention swims out into the room again and he contemplates the moving colours of the world. Among the colours something shines and twinkles. His wide contemplation is gathered together into a one pointed focus which pulls him to a fast crawl across the room towards the glittering glass. Just as he reaches it and extends his hand to grasp the sharp shard he is lifted high in the air and his mother scolds: "Don't touch that, it hurts!". But the pain of his uncompleted reach is just as great and he cries out his loss, inconsolable in his lack of satisfaction.

Both of these stories describe a life process. In the first, the process completed making a rounded event. All the energies come a full circle. This is called a "Gestalt" and the Gestalt Cycle describes how life processes start and complete. Uncompleted processes are one of the major causes of suffering in human life since something that hasn't finished retains a charge of unresolved energy which is experienced as tension or emotional pain. Gestalt Therapy, created by Fritz Perls [2] and others, is largely concerned with helping unresolved energy in the body and mind to gain satisfaction in the present and thus to let go of

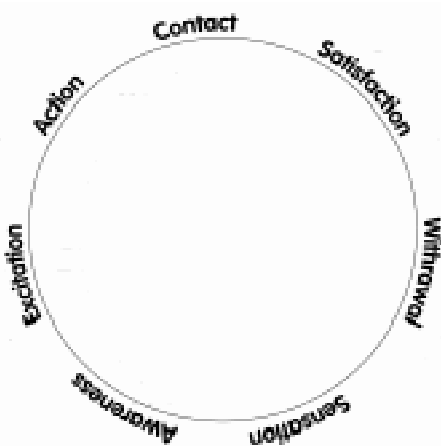
its charge and complete.

Shiatsu, in my opinion, is also concerned with helping uncompleted Gestalts to resolve. The unresolved energy is stored in the body as tension and is seen in Zen Shiatsu as a Jitsu meridian [3]. In addition, a completed gestalt nourishes the being by bringing the interaction with the world back into the self to be digested. The aspect of ourselves that is starved of nourishment or dis-inhabited in an uncompleted process is often pushed into the unconscious in our attempt to deal with the pain. This is mirrored by a part of the body being de-energized and is described in Zen Shiatsu as a Kyo meridian. Zen Shiatsu aims to complete the cycle by helping the energy stored in the Jitsu meridian to directly nourish the deficiency in the Kyo. Because the cause of a Kyo/Jitsu pair of meridians is an unfinished Gestalt, the Shiatsu work has the effect of helping us to let go of past resentments and attachments and come more into the present.

Buddhism, at a deeper level, also focuses on letting go of the charge that we hold onto from past un-finished business. In this system an uncompleted Gestalt is called Karma and the Buddhist's spiritual practice focuses on liberating the self from Karma by becoming aware of the unresolved energy buried during past actions. Simply bringing this energy into awareness through meditation can help deep frozen process to thaw out and start moving again. This means that alternative ways of bringing it to completion can be found.

Unresolved Gestalts can cause major life issues, or, like the second example story can be minor dissatisfactions that are soon released. The act of releasing, in contrast to "forgetting", means that an alternative way of feeling satisfied has been found. This is easier for small events than for traumas that deny our deepest needs. However, Gestalt Therapy, Shiatsu and Buddhism all, in their different ways, aim at finding alternative ways for unresolved energy to find satisfaction in the present.

The original Gestalt cycle, described by Perls and others, is pictured below.



This model was primarily designed to describe human gestalts but, as we shall see, the energy cycle it describes can be seen within all life processes including the

development of groups and ecologies.

If we examine the characteristic energy functions in each stage we find that they can be linked to the Six Divisions of Chinese Medicine. A past article on the Six Divisions [4] may help in understanding this analysis.

This linkage has great therapeutic potential because the Six Divisions describe how aspects of the body and posture are connected to our energy patterns. So it gives Gestalt Psychotherapists insight into how to work with the body to facilitate the emotional process that are often in the foreground of psychotherapy. The link also gives Oriental Body Therapists a way of translating their physical and energetic insights into an understanding of the way in which people deal with emotional issues in their lives.

1. Withdrawal Phase - Yang Ming Division

After eating, withdrawal and rest helps us digest. Withdrawal is necessary to be able to re-connect with our base and to process our interaction with the world. If we find withdrawal difficult then we have a tendency to try to merge with other people. If we find it impossible to cope with disagreement we cannot really be ourselves, since disagreement is inevitable. Equally, we cannot accept the separateness of another person and cannot really make contact with the outside world in situations where the it doesn't conform with our inner model. In this state we cannot get nourishment from relationships where there is conflict. We are in the dilemma of wanting to agree with everyone but actually being in disagreement, so real contact is avoided. Gestalt theory calls this state **Confluence**.

In the language of Chinese Medicine the energetics of confluence are identical with an imbalance in the functions of both the Stomach (ST) and the Large Intestine (LI). The Stomach empowers us to accept the foreign energies of the outer world into ourselves, giving us the opportunity to get support and nourishment from the energy that we can assimilate. But if the **Stomach** function is unbalanced then we are over-accepting and reaching out to others too much. The **Large Intestine** empowers us to disagree with those parts of the outer world that we do not want to accept as part of ourselves and to push them out of our boundaries. If the LI is weak then we find it difficult to disagree with another person and our boundaries are unclear. The ST and LI together form the **Yang Ming division** so the Withdrawal stage of the Gestalt cycle is enabled by this division and problems with the Stomach or Large Intestine meridians can be often associated with patterns of confluence in the life of the individual.

The Body Therapist, noticing chronic imbalance in these meridians may be able to help an individual link their body sensations to any confluent life issues in an holistic way. Weakness in ST and LI meridians results in postures which are over-reaching forwards, are not grounded through the legs and over-supinated in the arms. Working with strengthening the movements associated with these meridians can give the person a sense of how it feels to be grounded and be physically capable of pushing rather than reaching. This, in turn, can support their attempts to deal with their confluent tendencies; the personality is no

longer receiving the physical sensations from the posture which told them that they were in the process of reaching out to others. So the Psychotherapist, noticing confluent patterns in a person's life may be able to work physically with the client to support them in their therapeutic process.

In my discussion of the other phases of the cycle, I will identify the energetic focus of each phase in terms of the six divisions but will postpone the detailed description of the therapeutic applications until the next article.

2) Sensation Phase - Tai Yin division

During the stage of Withdrawal digestion takes place. By being apart from interaction we can process the past and get what nourishment we can from it. We then start to feel the inner support gained from having engaged with the outside. This feeling of inner support and nourishment is an uplifting energy and allows us to expand outwards again, confidently filling our own space and being open again to input from the outer world.

This stage is the **Sensation phase** of the Gestalt cycle. If we have a problem in this phase we contract and collapse inwards, blocking off from input. Gestalt theory calls this **Desensitization**. Psychologically this is often caused by avoidance of pain. We inevitably have pain in our lives and it can be a stimulus for growth and learning, nourishing our development. However, if we feel we cannot cope with the pain then it is common to collapse into a victim state or contract inwards to avoid the cause of the suffering. However, both the contracted and collapsed states also mean that we throw the baby out with the bath water: by closing off from painful situations we also close off from nourishing energy and fresh stimulation.

In Chinese Medicine the ability to feel nourished and supported is the function of the Spleen and the resultant confident expansion and openness to the world of sensation is function of the Lung. The Spleen and Lung together form the **Tai Yin Division** so the Sensation phase is empowered by the Tai Yin. Chinese theory traditionally links the Lung to the realm of sensation, naming it as the home of the **Po**, or 'sensation soul'. The Lung function fills the the whole body with the nourishment gained from the outside world (the process called Ying Qi). It is also our ability to receive fresh stimulation (for which Chinese energetics uses the metaphor of Fresh Air). Finally, the Lung is traditionally called the courageous Organ and the ability to be open to the world in spite of the knocks it gives you is one example of its bravery.



3) Awareness and Energizing Phases - Shao Yin Division

If we do not have that courage then we may tend to respond to painful stimuli in a way that reduces their strength; for instance by talking abstractly about our feelings rather than experiencing them.

However, the stimulus still has an effect, even if it is not in our awareness, so the effect is to create a split between our sense of self and our body state. We may end up doing things or having feelings without knowing why. This process of reducing awareness of the present is called **Deflection** in Gestalt theory and can happen at any stage in the cycle, as we will discuss later, but is often most noticeable in blocking the transition from sensation to feeling. For instance, if we witness a shocking event like a suicide, the sensation of vision can be clear but we may block our feelings about the suicide by deflecting our awareness into practical thoughts about how to clear up the mess, arrange the funeral, tell the partner etc. In this situation our actions are not in line with our real feelings and we may feel 'disconnected from reality'.

If, on the other hand, we can be aware of our whole response to stimulation then we start to feel the potential energy that drives our actions. If we can allow this inner excitement to ripen then it can blossom into actions which feel authentic, they are the true expression of our self. Therefore this phase of being aware of our core excitement and allowing that to drive our action is important in being able to own our behaviour and act authentically.

If we find difficulty in this phase then we experience a lack of integrity; we are caught in dilemmas like 'I want to cry but I must behave like a man and deal with the practical problems'. Our energy is divided because we are split between desire for satisfaction and desire to maintain an image of ourselves that is not real. Instead of acting from our core and facing the disapproval it might entail, we filter our actions by creating an internal policeman to keep us in line. This process of creating an internal authority figure separate from our core sense of self is called **Introjection** in Gestalt theory.

Of course, if we acted on all our urges then life would be hell. Many of us would end up killing, raping and pillaging. However, there is a great difference between (a) being aware of our impulse and choosing not to act on it and (b) feeling ashamed of our impulse and inhibiting our energy as a consequence. In the first case we have many options for going forward, we can choose some other way to satisfy our excited energy. In the second we block ourselves from any action because we feel that the original urge is 'wrong'.

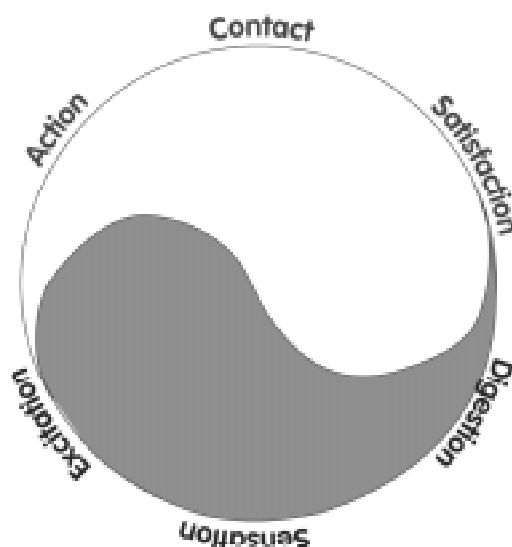
Tantric Practice

This is an essential step in most therapeutic and spiritual processes, becoming aware of the underlying energy rather than the behaviour it causes and finding an alternative way for the excited energy to manifest. In essence, this is the basis of Tantric practice in Buddhism. Once we start feeling desire or anger, for example, those emotions are inevitably projected out onto an object. I can't just desire, I have to desire something. If that something is unattainable then I've got a problem and I will never be satisfied. Tantric practice develops the capacity for experiencing the pure energetic excitement underlying emotions such as desire or anger and channeling that excitement into another path. In this way we do not repress our urges but they transform into an energy that can resolve without causing more turmoil [5].

In the language of Chinese Medicine, the capacity for Awareness of our core being is called the Heart while the excitation of the core which drives our actions and emotions is the energy of the Kidney. Thus the Awareness and Excitation Phases of the Gestalt Cycle are combined into the **Shao Yin Division** which connects both Kidney and Heart.

This Shao Yin phase is an important point in the cycle. The process has, up until now, been largely internal and at this point the internal (Yin) energy has ripened to a point that it has to give birth to action in the outer world. We see the seeds of the (Yang) action being born in the aware intentions that the Shao Yin division produces.

The Taoist symbol of Yin-Yang interdependence can be superimposed on the Gestalt cycle to reflect this observation and the next three stages describe the Yang aspect of a process.



4) Action Phase- Tai Yang Division

Interruptions of the cycle such as introjection effectively block authentic action from manifesting. It is as

though the core excitation in the Shao Yin is capped and pushed down before it can come out into the world.

Essentially, introjection happens because we have not been able to discriminate between other people's view of how we should be on the one hand and our authentic nature on the other. Certain pressures from the environment can be naturally assimilated into ourselves because they flow with our inclinations, introjections are pressures that we have swallowed and absorbed but not been able to assimilate because they are too foreign to our nature.

This language is very digressive in nature which is why the Chinese associate the ability to discriminate between energy we can assimilate and that which is too foreign with the Small Intestine. In fact, Chinese Medicine calls this ability the Small Intestine Function.

Its meridian is strongly related to the extensor muscles of the shoulder, shoulder blade and neck and tension in these muscles is strongly connected to introjection, producing an inhibited and cowering posture.

However, if the Small Intestine function is healthy then we experience the ability to "go for it" without inhibition and the potential energy of the Shao Yin turns into clear action. The muscles and bones involved with aligning the body for action and transmitting our power through the skeleton to produce movement run along the Bladder meridian.

Thus the Bladder and Small intestine meridians are both involved in facilitating clear action in this phase and the two combine to form the **Tai Yang Division** in Chinese Medicine.

There is an interruption to the cycle, complementary to introjection, that is particularly associated with this phase. If, instead of focusing on our own impulses, we transfer the feelings we have about them onto the actions of someone else it is called **Projection**. Projection is a common method of disowning our own actions. For instance, I may be lustful. Introjection means that I disapprove of that tendency in myself and repress my feelings. I end up feeling disempowered. Alternatively, I can deflecting my awareness of my lust by projecting my discomfort onto other people who seem to be seeking sex. I judge them, disapprove of them and I may even disapprove of sex in general. Projection is thus a more Yang deflection than Introjection and I feel better about myself, in this case, as a result of off-loading all my self-denial onto someone else.

5) Contact Phase - Shao Yang Division

If I can own my impulses and act clearly then I am inevitably inter-acting with my environment. My action elicits a response and I am in relationship. This engagement of my core self with the environment is called Contact in Gestalt theory and is a phase full of rich complexity and creativity.

The major skill involved in this phase is the ability to maintain connection in spite of the differences between myself and the other. This is like a dance, both people moving in their individual ways but integrated by the joint

adventure of dancing together.

It is only through Contact that conflict can truly resolve. In a contactful relationship, two people can maintain their differences but transcend them by seeing the value of both sides in a common project. The conflicting natures come to be seen as complementary and compassion can be born.

In our bodies, the same dance is continually being enacted between the muscles on each side of a joint. Their natural contraction moves the joint in opposite directions so there is great potential for conflict. However, if the two muscles are in relationship as the agonist and antagonist of a movement then they do not conflict but simply modulate each other to create smooth, graceful movement.

In the language of Chinese Medicine this function is called the Gall Bladder and its meridian runs on the midline between the extensor muscles and the flexor muscles, providing a focus for this collaborative relationship in the body. The result of Gall Bladder function is the ability to act without internal conflict, to make clear decisions and to go forward without vacillation.

But also, this collaboration at a joint needs to connect to the rest of the body so that the movement embraces whole. In the same way, an act of collaboration by two people means nothing if it is not part of an ongoing relationship and a relationship between two people only makes real sense if it is integrated into a social context.

In Oriental terms this integration of the whole matrix is the function of the Triple Heater which links central energy to the periphery and creates a unified organism by integrating all the different parts. The Triple Heater meridian runs down the centre of the arms, up the side of the neck and down the core of the body to the centre of gravity.

We can see how the contact phase of the Gestalt cycle is enabled by the Gall Bladder and Triple Heater which together form the **Shao Yang Division**.

If, instead of receiving response to our actions from others and thus forming relationship, we self-respond to our own actions then we interrupt the contact phase by turning our energy back into ourselves. In effect we only have relationship with ourselves. In Gestalt theory this is called **Retroflexion** and self-criticism is a common example. Guilt is our negative response to our own action: instead of standing by our authentic actions and facing the displeasure of others in relationship with them, we preempt their response by censuring ourselves, denying the possibility of full contact with the other.

In the body, Retroflexion translates as jerky and over-controlled movement. If the Gall Bladder function is unbalanced then the antagonist reacts against the agonist's movement resulting in muscular conflict. If the Triple Heater is unbalanced then one part of the body will not be integrated into the movement of the whole, again causing internal conflict.

6) Satisfaction phase - Jue Yin Division

Engaging in relationship with the environment or another person means that, not only do our impulses complete their trajectory into the outer world, but also we receive energy in the form of the other's response.

If we act from the Heart then other people's response is to our Heart rather than to a protective layer. Relationship is a real exchange of energy. This allows our impulses to find satisfaction and come to rest and also nourishes us, replenishing the energy we have given out to the other.

This means that our store of internal nourishment is not depleted by our actions. A contactful encounter leaves us feeling full rather than empty and our movement can find a place of rest and satisfaction.

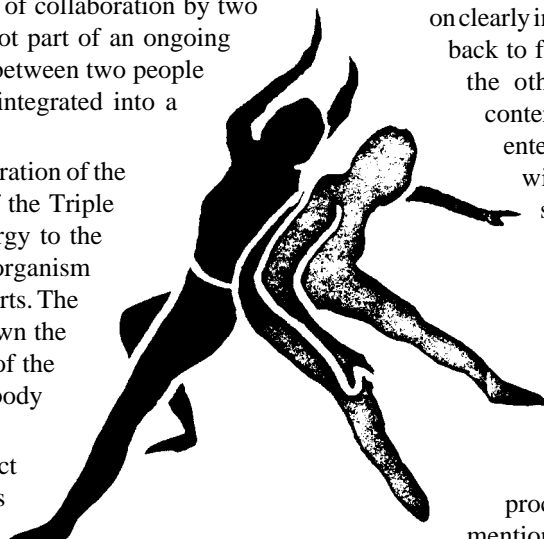
Full contact is being actively in relationship, creating relationship. There are also times in the process of relationship when two people are simply communing with each other; being in contact but without energetic interaction taking place. This companionship really forms the centre around which the pulsation of separation and togetherness in a relationship can flow smoothly.

Satisfaction has two faces. On the one hand it means that the Gestalt has completed and we can move on clearly into the future without being dragged back to finish off unsatisfied impulses. On the other hand it provides a store of contentment which means that we can enter times of separation and conflict without fearing that we won't be satisfied again. It is the ripe fruit of relationship which creates a smooth flow of movement around the cycles in our lives.

In the language of Chinese Medicine these two aspects of satisfaction are called the **Liver**. The Liver function is to create smoothness in the movement of life processes. It does this in both the ways mentioned above. The **Liver Yang** is the clear vision of the future that completed Gestalts allow. It facilitates a forward movement without being pulled back by the past. The **Liver Yin** is the store of contentment (**Blood** in Chinese Medicine) which allows us to go through difficulties without panic or deflection. The result is that we can move through the Gestalt cycles of our life without losing contact with our Heart.

In oriental energetics this maintenance of connection with the Heart is provided by the Heart Protector. The Liver and the Heart Protector together form the **Jue Yin Division** and it is this division which enables the **Satisfaction Phase**. The Jue Yin, in postural terms, is largely concerned with flexion at the shoulders and hips and adduction of the limbs, thus providing a physical sense of being knitted together and connected to centre.

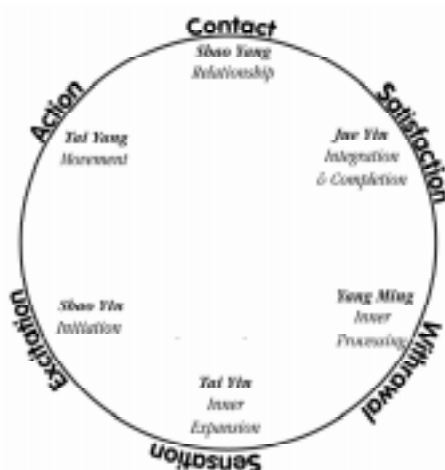
It is possible to experience the contact phase and to miss out on satisfaction. This is more common in people with a bias towards action and the Yang side of life, they leap onto the next gestalt without reaping the contentment provided by the last. The oriental emphasis on a balance of



Yin and Yang provides the therapeutic key for people with this tendency. By encouraging the Yin aspects of the body and behaviour, these individuals can be helped to feel nourished by the warmth of their contactful interactions.

It is more common in neurotic personalities however for both the contact and satisfaction phases to be missed. Retroflection describes the action of responding to oneself rather than being in outer relationship. The result of this is that we attempt to get all our nourishment and satisfaction from ourselves. We form a self-contained circle. This state is called **Egotism** in gestalt theory and I see it as the Yin side of Retroflection. An example of egotism is self-analysis. Instead of experiencing, we comment on and analyze the experience. This as a futile attempt to 'digest' ourselves to get nourishment but it leaves us empty and without satisfaction.

This completes our description of the Gestalt cycle and its connections to the Six Divisions can be summarised by this diagram.



Awareness in the cycle

You will notice that the traditional Gestalt cycle has seven phases. Some theorists have added even more detail. In this article, however, I have linked it with a system of six divisions by combining the Awareness and Excitation phases into one.

This fits naturally into the Shao Yin division because the Shao Yin actually does embrace both Awareness (the Heart) and Excitation (the Kidney). But I feel there is a deeper reason this dissonance of numbers.

Essentially, all the interruptions of the Gestalt cycle, Confluence, Desensitization, Introjection, Projection and Retroflection can be seen as forms of Deflection : turning aside from awareness [6]. It is fundamentally awareness that produces liberation from the endless round of incomplete cycles by helping unfinished energy to complete its gestalt.

In this way Awareness can be seen to be the sea in which the whole gestalt cycle moves and therefore is not strictly a phase in the cycle.

This is reminiscent of the Buddhist view of the **Wheel of Life**. This Wheel is the idea that we are continually suffering because we are attached to resolving unfinished business, or Karma, and are not free to move on or to respond authentically. Buddhist philosophy also identifies awareness as the key to being liberated from this painful circling. [7]

It also resonates with the role of the Heart in Chinese Medicine. The Heart is the seat of pure awareness in that system and is seen more as the context in which life process happens rather than an active function of life. In this system the role of the Emperor in Ancient China is seen as the metaphor for the Heart. He purposely did as little as possible; his role being to provide an immutable centre around which everything else could move securely.

Conclusion

These connections between Chinese energetics, Gestalt theory and Buddhism complete a gestalt in my life. All three disciplines have been major factors in my development and to combine them gives me great satisfaction.

However, this personal satisfaction is somewhat arid for other people unless I can also show how Gestalt psychotherapists can use the insights of Chinese Medicine through bodywork and how Oriental Body Therapists can include the subtle view of the personality provided by Gestalt and Buddhism. For me, the key to this therapeutic cross fertilisation is the study of child development, showing how the posture and personality develop together. This is the subject of the following article.

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