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The *Somatic Perspectives* podcast explores somatic psychology, relational therapies, mindfulness and trauma therapies. It is edited by Serge Prengel, LMHC, who is in private practice in New York City.

*The following is a slightly edited transcript of the original audio. Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.*

Serge:            You recently wrote a book about gestalt therapy and Buddhist psychology.

Eva:             Yes. And thank you for this invitation to talk about that and to talk about those ideas that I've been very passionately interested in for a long time. So I'm excited to be here and talking with you about that. This book was published in July, written with my co author who's also my husband/partner Stephen Zahm, and it is an integration of Buddhist psychology and gestalt therapy. It lays out the convergences of the two systems and also looks at how they're different and has a lot of information about the clinical application of these concepts. So really I feel like in some ways it's the first thing that I've seen in this field that's kind of a full integration of a psychotherapy system that's really compatible with Buddhist psychology and mindfulness and bringing these two together.

Serge:            So, we're talking about an integration. We're talking about similarities and differences. So do you want to elaborate a little bit on what might be similar, and what might be different between those? And how will they lend themselves to integration?

Eva:             Sure. So in the book we have two chapters that are describing convergences and the first is the convergences of views and the second is convergence of methods. With the convergences of views, we look at how Buddhist psychology views or Buddhist psychology understandings and gestalt therapy understandings converge. For

example, the view of human nature, how we see humans, how we see our human experience and the similarity there is that both Buddhist psychology and gestalt therapy see us as having a potential for growth and transformation, as whole and complete as we are, and that the ways that we run into suffering or difficulties have to do with not something that's innate in us but have to do with what Buddhists, the Buddhists would call obscurations or in gestalt therapy, we would call modifications to contact--contact boundary processes that obscure, interfere with or interrupt our potential for natural growth and regulation. Gestalt therapy is based in a theory of health rather than pathology. And we see Buddhist psychology that way in the understanding that we have this potential for joy and compassion and growth and transformation. So Gestalt therapy and Buddhist psychology both have that perspective. That's one convergence.

Serge: So... Starting from the potential and dealing with the obstacles that hamper the potential.

Eva: Exactly, but not seeing those obstacles as sort of innate to who we are, but more as things that have been added based on our experiences. So, so that's one convergence--view of human nature. Another is how we understand how change happens. That we--this goes actually more into the convergence of methods. But in just going along with what I've been talking about. Part of the way that change happens is as we stay with what is and increase awareness. So those things that I was saying about where the obscurations are or where the obstacles are the way that both systems address those as very similar. Like what happens in mindfulness meditation and what we do in gestalt therapy is we pay attention to our present experience, our embodied experience, and we increase awareness and with awareness and both systems, I think converge here to see that the process of growth and transformation is organic, that it comes as a result of that increased awareness.

The view of self is another convergence. In Buddhist psychology that always seems to be one of the most perplexing sometimes to people is that understanding of not-self. Gestalt therapy and Buddhist psychology converge in certain ways there in that in Gestalt therapy we understand self as process and that there really is no solid reified ongoing permanent self. So that really meshes very well with the Buddhist psychology understanding of not-self. Of course, it doesn't mean that we don't have a sense of continuity over time, that we don't have aspects of who we are, that we recognize and other people recognize. But that really, that's not grounded in some solid, unchanging experience or way of being. That's another important convergence

Serge: What I very much like about this is that, as we talk about what is convergence, it also expands the appeal to all therapists, to people who are not necessarily thinking of themselves as influenced by Buddhist psychology, but that we're going away from the characteristics in the established camps if you want to find a connection with people who recognize themselves in these traits that you described. For instance, people who see self as a process. And so the conversation is more than just, strictly speaking, Gestalt therapy and Buddhist psychology, but noticing how a

lot of traits that many people might have are represented in these and can be integrated.

Eva:

I really love that you're saying that because I think that part of what my interest has always been, and Fritz Perls talked about this, Fritz Perls, one of the founders of gestalt therapy talked about this way back. Do we have to be so kind of divided into these different therapeutic camps or different ways of understanding things? And can we come at things from a more, a more sort of empirical perspective of, well, what do we really observe? What really happens in our, in our experience, in our interactions? What, uh, what works, you know, what's helpful to people and what's not. So I really like that idea of, of just kind of a broader perspective of some of these concepts without so much even the label of a, well, here's Buddhism and here's Gestalt therapy. Um, yeah, so that's a nice perspective...

The other one other couple of things that I wanted to touch on because it's such an important aspect is the understanding of Buddhist psychology and of gestalt therapy is an understanding of what creates suffering. From a Buddhist psychology perspective. There's an important difference between pain and suffering. The inevitability is pain of living and the suffering that we kind of superimpose on top of that pain of living by our resistance, reluctance to be with what is inability to be with let's say something painful or be with grief. The ways that we avoid or a stay away from experience. And that, that's kind of this added layer of suffering. So in Buddhism, there's this slogan that pain is inevitable and suffering is optional. However, it's not really totally optional because we're so programmed right to do those things to try to go toward what's going to be pleasurable and go away from what's painful.

And so I think what gestalt therapy brings, gestalt therapy has a very similar view of what causes our distress, what causes our symptoms, what causes our difficulties. And that is our difficulty being with what is. So if I'm angry and I don't want to be angry, then part of what I'm doing there is creating added suffering for myself. I'm maybe rejecting the part of me that's angry. Maybe I'm turning that anger back against myself and getting depressed. So what we do in gestalt therapy is we help people first of all, become aware of and notice that kind of process and also in that process as we're able to be more with what we may be in pain, maybe the pain of the anger or maybe we go deeper into the sadness or the hurt or the powerlessness that's underneath the anger.

But then we're with our actual full, authentic experience rather than having an argument with ourselves about whether it's okay to feel that. So both mindfulness meditation and in gestalt therapy, we're seeing here's how suffering gets created and here's the cure of suffering which has to do with being, with what is the attending to experience embodied experience. We have an example in the book of someone who's dealing with grief and she comes into therapy, wanting to get over or be over her grieving. Her mother died some number of months ago. And so the, that's an example of this where if this person were able to be fully with her grieving, she'd be in pain. But instead she's suffering with this idea of who she should be, that

you should be strong, that she shouldn't be sad, that she should be back to normal and not feeling what she's feeling.

And so that's the suffering in Buddhism. One of the ways that the Buddha talked about this pain and suffering was "first arrow" and "second arrow". In talking to his disciples about it, you know, if you were shot with an arrow, of course that would be painful. And then if you're shot with a second arrow, that is going to increase the pain. Right? So one of the ways that we look at this pain and suffering is that that second arrow is what we shoot at ourselves. So in this case, this client is critical of herself. She's feeling bad about herself, that she didn't bounce back from her loss, sees herself as weak. So that's all the suffering and second arrow part of it,

Serge: The image that comes to mind is that of layers on an onion: There is pain and then you have that extra layer that we add, and, you know, processing it. And removing that.

Eva: Yeah, and the removal part of it is, I think is a place that gestalt therapy has so much to offer because I think some therapy systems particularly recently where there's been a lot of focus on acceptance, I see that sometimes being problematic because people can use it as another "should" and superimpose it on top of their experience like I "should accept". And so in gestalt therapy, as we really take people right where they are, we work with that nonacceptance. So in the case that I was just describing the woman who doesn't want to be sad, or doesn't want to cry or doesn't want to show what she considers weakness, we work directly with that. We help her elaborate on those feelings, why it's important, understand what, what it was in her history that made it important for her not to have certain feelings. And so there's a way of just working directly with that and unfolding it and unraveling it and getting more awareness and insight into that process.

Serge: Right, right. So the acceptance of what is includes the acceptance of non-acceptance.

Eva: Yes, we say that exact thing in the book. So those are some of the convergences of views and I think I've already attended to some of the convergences of method in terms of mindfulness and gestalt therapy where we pay attention to the present moment in gestalt therapy just like we do in mindfulness, that we stay with what is, and that we're very interested in the actual, our direct sensory experience, our embodied experience.

Serge: So as we're talking about this as an integration, what I'm curious about is the experience of the person integrating... You... Being a psychologist... Being a Buddhist practitioner... And have a sense of how this integration has happened over time... How it happens on a day to day basis when you work... the inner experience of that integration.

Eva: It's a great question. The very first meditation retreat that I ever went to, which was in the late seventies, I was a fairly new gestalt therapist. So this is about 40 years

ago. And I was sitting in the meditation retreat listening to the teacher give instruction on mindfulness and I was saying to myself, wait a minute, this is gestalt therapy, the instructions that she's giving her, like I know about this I know about sitting with what is, and paying attention and allowing awareness to increase and not trying to change what's happening but just being with it. And so I was very struck by that and very taken as I was with gestalt therapy, very taken with that whole idea of change being organic and not imposed, and how we could increase awareness. But I never at that time had any idea that this could really have anything to do with actual psychotherapy practice.

They just seemed very different to me. Very separate. And I didn't pursue my meditation practice. I was, I think what some people call a nightstand Buddhist for a long time, I had all these books on my nightstand and I would read a lot. But I wasn't really practicing or meditating. And then about 20 years ago I got back connected with practice and started doing a lot more daily practice and meditation retreats and things like that. And as I did that, I was more and more taken with the intersection and these convergences. And in 2006 I gave a presentation at an international conference. There's an organization called the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt therapy, an international organization. And no one was really, again, even in the Gestalt therapy world, people weren't really talking so much about mindfulness or Buddhist psychology yet at that point, although I now know that in other circles that already was developing.

But I gave a presentation that was just on the convergences. And when I came home from that I said to myself, well, you know, I think there could be a book in this. And so that was 12 years ago. And so this book that we've just published was a 12 year process of both thinking about these ideas, my own experience of meditation practice and then how they came together within my own experience. Like when I'd be on a meditation retreat, what was coming up that was sort of what I would think of as the psychological issues that I was used to, how I was used to addressing them. And then what was the added perspective than I had from let's say, of suffering or attachment and suffering perspective. So I started initially, and at some point I kind of dragged my husband into writing this book with me, so we ended up writing it together.

We also run a training program together. And I said, you know, I think there'd be some value in bringing the mindfulness and the Buddhist psychology into the training program. I started to see the ways--and we have a chapter about this in the book--I started to see the ways that my own meditation practice was impacting my therapy without there being anything intentional about that. And I felt like I was more, well more grounded, more clear, more able to attend to my own embodied experience in the sessions. More attuned to the nuances of my patient's experience in the sessions.

Serge: Just to just to say that you noticed in yourself that the person in the room was now performing... Acting... Being different.... And you say, more grounded...more aware of the nuances of your self perception... Your felt sense of yourself,,,, And more aware of the nuances of what was happening with the client.

Eva: Right and more able to really slow down and stay more with the immediate experience. In gestalt therapy we can do experiments for example, that kind of have an arrow pointing into the future or the next thing or we can really stay very directly with the immediate experience that's happening and I find myself doing more of that. So rather than, let's say someone's exploring a polarity where there's one part of them that wants this or feels this way and another part that feels another way rather than quickly moving into having people embody each of those sides or be in that polarity, I might say something like, "just get a sense of what it feels like right now to be sitting right in the middle of those two poles" and then we would just stay there and then see what emerged out of that.

Serge: So, slowing down the process of just noticing.... Noticing the polarity... It's not an automatic jumping into exploring both sides, but is a point that's worth being experienced itself.

Eva: Yeah, that's perfect. Perfectly said

Serge: As you're describing your experience of saying: Here's how my mindful self is seeping into the therapy hour, maybe some people who are not necessarily thinking of themselves as having a mindfulness practice, but through a training in experiential methods have noticed that they themselves are more aware of the felt sense experience, or more slowing down, or more aware of being in a process that they explore in that way.... This creates a bridge to say that that experience is similar to the experience of somebody who finds themselves influenced by meditation practice in what happens in therapy.

Eva: Yeah, absolutely. And you know, because we had been training therapists in gestalt therapy for a number of years and we were always working with helping people slow down, helping our students, our trainees to be more embodied in their sessions, to pay attention to experience. I started to think we could really, I think our trainees and our training program could really benefit from integrating this, these ideas, both the Buddhist psychology ideas and the meditation practices in the actual training program. So I think it was around 2008 or so that we started doing that. So our training program now is Buddhist psychology and gestalt therapy. And then what we do in the training is we meditate together, we talk about the Buddhist psychology ideas, we do different meditations, sometimes we'll do an exercise where we'll go directly from a meditation and then have people work with each other in the sessions so that they can get a sense of bringing that kind of clarity or presence or just the paying attention to the nuances of experience into their sessions.

So that's been a big part, so in terms of my development, before I really started intentionally bringing something different to my work with patients, I was already being influenced by my meditation practice and doing something different in terms of the training and seeing, you know, what we could bring to the, to the training program. And so really it was a lot of years after that that I started to be more, I guess intentional about how some of the Buddhist view might inform what I was doing in therapy and, considering starting to look at where people were from this

perspective. I mean it's, it's a bit contradictory because in gestalt therapy we're always very interested in the difference between a person's direct experience and their concepts about it, and their ideas about it, their thoughts about it know we're always interested in curious to bring things more into direct experience.

But I think what started to be added for me was to see that that difference, the difference between direct primary experience and thoughts and concepts and ideas was also at times maybe always. I'm not sure the difference between the first arrow and the second arrow, in Buddhist psychology the difference between pain and suffering, and then as I started to have that perspective and helped people move more into their immediate experience, I started to notice really notice that difference, notice how people could be, and with being with the pain more directly and that that was where the movement and change and growth and transformation could happen. And that was also where a different kind of contact was possible.

Serge: Yeah. What I'm hearing is that you started with that perspective already as a gestalt therapist to differentiate between the felt experience, the primary experience, and the constructs that we put around that. And then, in contact with Buddhist psychology, or in that context, starting to see that that frame that we put around it is actually a constructed reality that creates a layer of suffering.

Eva: Right, right. So that whole, I really like what you just said in that whole idea of the constructed reality. So that's where now in our, the penultimate chapter of the book where we start talking about Buddhist Psychology informed Gestalt Therapy, which is what we're calling this, this integration, that's an important piece of it, what you just mentioned, the understanding, the seeing through constructions in a more radical way. That not only can we see through let's say an introject or something that's a "should" that's superimposed, but now we can kind of see through that whole identity construction and the ways that the suffering is in that. So the thing that Gestalt therapy doesn't include, but we're trying to include it now, is the understanding from Buddhist psychology, the Dharma seals the understanding of not-self, the understanding of Dukkha of how suffering is, is inherent our conditioned existence. So the, the idea that we can be freer of that level of suffering. Oh, I know what I wanted to go back to, actually. Am I going too fast?

Serge: No, maybe we'll come back to this. Obviously there's something you're connected with, and then I'd like to come back to the strategy.

Eva: Okay, because I think I need to backtrack to just clarify this. So one of the differences, we've talked a lot about the similarities and the convergences, but you had also asked me about the differences and what we need to bridge to bring these together. So I got a little ahead of myself in going into that, that bridging versus first looking at where the differences are. So, in Buddhist psychology there's an understanding that there is both the relative level of our experience and the universal level of our experience and the universal level has to do with these givens of existence, like the, given of impermanence, and that we're interconnected, the given of the truth of not self, the truth of suffering. And in gestalt therapy while we can draw some parallels, like for example, that in gestalt therapy we see self as

process and in Buddhist psychology, there's an understanding that there is not a reified self but we don't make a distinction in Gestalt therapy between sort of this material, relative level of our existence and the more universal view.

So in terms of bringing them together, they do have like a different focus, a somewhat different purpose, different ultimate aims. In gestalt therapy, our ultimate aim is for people to develop more awareness, understand themselves better and have greater capacity for living an enriched life, for aliveness, contact, a fresh vitality in their existence that's not so contained or constrained by old patterns, and ways of conceptualizing about experience. So, we're looking very much at that relative level. We're looking at individual and relational psychological issues, right? The person's history, what created wounds or disrupted natural regulation, what requires healing, it's very relational. And Buddhist psychology, again, it's like this wider perspective where regardless of your individual psychological issues, you're going to suffer as a human being in the context of the human condition.

Yes. So the universal givens birth old age sickness and death and, I think it might be Charlotte Joko Beck, one of the Zen teachers I think says, life can be an endless series of disappointments. And so no matter what, how well you do, no matter how much gestalt therapy you do and how much you work through your psychological issues or whatever, you're still confronted with birth old age sickness and death. Right? So one of the things that I got interested in and one of the reasons that I wanted to bring these together is because it seemed to me that, even though, and a lot of the, the Buddhist teachers say that this is a limitation of western psychotherapy is that if you're not dealing with understanding of ultimate suffering, you're only helping a person part of the way that it's not there's not complete healing or or possible freedom from suffering, there's not complete transformation if we don't have that perspective.

Serge: So from the perspective that we are living in an environment, and if we don't have a sense of our relationship to our environment, we only have a limited view?

Eva: Right. And the reality, those realities of existence, you know, that ultimately everything is impermanent. Um, that all the things that we try to hold onto and that we think we can hold onto are ultimately slipping through our fingers. And the reality of the pain of that and the potential suffering, especially as we try and hold on to things that we really can't hold onto. So, you know, in the early, and I think aging has been a factor in this too because it seems to me that it's easier to grab this perspective as you get older. When I was younger, it was easy to say, oh, life is going to be great when I get my degree, when I start my practice, when I move into this other house or you know, there's always the next thing and where life is going to be, everything's going to fall into place.

And as you get older you realize, well, you know, yeah, that might fall into place and something else might fall out of place. So it's a really, I think useful and important perspective to have. And I started to want to have a way to work with people, to recognize some of that because also sometimes people can be really self critical



about not being happy or not getting their life completely figured out so that it's perfect. And so these Buddhist teachings are like, well, it's never going to be right. And rather than that continued striving to, you know, keep trying to make that happen, could we take a step back and look at that process itself. So that's where I started to bring in some of these things a little bit more directly in my work with people.

And then I started to find because it's so much in the, in the culture now, that people who were doing meditation practice could start to use that in some way to support the therapy. I started to introduce things like loving kindness practice or compassion practice to people, for them to work with their own experience of something with themselves. There's an example in the book of someone who is dealing with her teenager who was taking drugs and stealing and ended up getting kicked out of the house and was homeless. And she really wanted to, she really needed to set limits and boundaries with him around that. And it was very painful for her. And at the same time, she wanted to maintain an open heart toward him. So she started working with doing metta practice, loving kindness practice in which she was wishing him well and compassion practice for herself in the situation that she was in. So using some of those things which I hadn't really done directly before.

Serge: It's interesting because we could say this is the equivalent of doing a little bit of physical therapy, a little bit of exercise, take an aspirin, whatever... But what you're talking about is actually also practicing a different way of being. And saying therapy alone is not going to give you that practice. And you as you do that, then it helps you change.

Eva: Right. I think that I want to underline what you just said. Therapy alone is not going to give you that. I think that was so important for me to recognize as I started on this Buddhist path and the meditation practice that I'd done probably at least 20 years of psychotherapy in various contexts in individual therapy and training groups and the meditation practice offered something really additional, and important that I think, again, you know, it sort of goes along with that idea, no matter how much of our personal work we do, if we don't have this broader perspective or, or just practice the continuity of, you know, like on retreat of taking the mindfulness from sitting on the cushion and staying with that into walking to the dining room and eating our lunch and, you know, that whole experience of really being present and connected with experience.

One of the things that we say in the book is we think that gestalt therapy kind of always took it for granted that people would be gestalt therapy patients, they would learn about awareness, they would learn how good it felt to connect with present embodied experience and then somehow they would just be able to know, take that out into the world and do that. And to some extent that's true. But the idea of being able to practice that between sessions of really paying attention, it so much, supports the work and then the work supports being able to do that.

Serge: It's also a realistic view that... The idea, the wishful thinking, that once people get a taste of how wonderful it is to be mindful, through therapy, then they would do it

by themselves. And the experience of real life is how difficult it is, how there's a lot of things that prevent us from doing that, and it takes intentionality to actually bring it into real life.

Eva: Yeah. I think that's why, like with our training program, it's really useful for the trainees--the therapists--to see that they, in the, in the training weekend we'll meditate and people will say, "I don't know why I don't do this all the time. It's so great when I do it." But then they'll see how difficult it is. So if they're working with their own patients on mindfulness and meditation and wanting to support that, they also have the experience of, Oh yeah, this is one of the teachers says it's simple but not easy.

Serge: Right. And so maybe you could extend it to something that's more than mindfulness practice, and say that the work we do with our clients, the insight is relatively easy. But turning that insight into sustained change is actually something that's much more difficult. And having a constant reminder of how difficult it is to translate that sense of knowing into being transformed, into applying it in life, and changing our relationship with our environment... The environment gives so much pressure to maintain the status quo, so it's really not something that's that easy.

Eva: Right. But I also think that in both in both systems, I think there are two things operating there and in what at least what I'm hearing you talk about, I think there is a kind of change that is based in experience and awareness that does organically shift something in us, inside of us, in our capacity to be with ourselves and to relate to other people. And that there's an added challenge of actually shifting something that we do want to do, but that also sometimes there's some what's the word, you know, reluctance. Like I'll often ask people, well, what happens when you sit down and just breathe and they'll say "well I think of all the things I should be doing instead" or "I don't really want it be with what I'm feeling." And so then that can bring up more places to work with, you know, where that reluctance is or where that difficulty is, can be worked with in therapy.

Serge: Right, right, right. So you're making a distinction between two kinds of changes. There is some change where you have an insight, you have a glimpse of what's possible, that in itself provokes a shift. And so we're different, we act different. And there's also another kind of change where we have a really strong sense of: Well, I would like to do this, I would like to see more of this. But at the same time, this desire for change is counterbalanced by some kind of a resistance, something else, some fear. And what you're saying is, in that situation, it's great to embrace the fear because it opens the door to what might actually bring in progress.

Eva: Right. And it's a way that if someone is doing a meditation practice and is in therapy at the same time that the two become synergistic because people can come in with what is coming up in their meditation practice and then that can get worked with in therapy as well. So I've lost track of where I was with answering your questions.

Serge: So I have a sense that actually, in some way, we have addressed it. Maybe not in a linear way, but it feels like we have addressed it. And then actually what I want to

just check is... It feels like that last part we did about change was, in a way, putting the whole context of therapy in the broader context of change, of mindfulness, and how awareness can be helped in therapy. So it felt like a very nice place of integrating both. And I want to check if you want to say a little bit more about that as a way of ending, or if there's something else you might want to add to this conversation.

Eva: Yeah. I think I'm still with some kind of struck by this idea of how our own personal growth and that sort of relative level work can interweave with a Buddhist practice, meditation practices, whether it's mindfulness practice or loving kindness or compassion practices that they can both support each other. Also, we were just talking about this in our training group with someone who's in our training who was a Buddhist monk and talked about the issue of spiritual bypassing and how sometimes when people go directly to spiritual practice but haven't done personal work that things can get kind of papered over and, you know, there's the idea that we're going to "transcend" our personal issues or will not be angry or you know, not be critical or whatever. So as people do that meditation practice, as those things come up, rather than thinking of them as, "oh, well that's not very spiritual," or "you're being a bad Buddhist or you're a bad meditator," or whatever, again, this gestalt therapy perspective helps us come to, well, of course that comes up because you're human and you can work with that and you can embrace that. This whole idea, you know, I mean, people in meditation practice, I think a lot of times in mindfulness it's like, "sure, I'll be mindful, but I only want to be mindful of this" or you know, "here's what I want the experience to be like." And so it becomes this more, more radical understanding, I think, of including everything, you know, that nothing's left out.

Serge: So, what feels very striking.... When you were saying, "But of course, that comes up", and that gesture, and your tone of voice seemed to me to embody that part about acceptance of what is, including of the resistance, including of the difficulty.