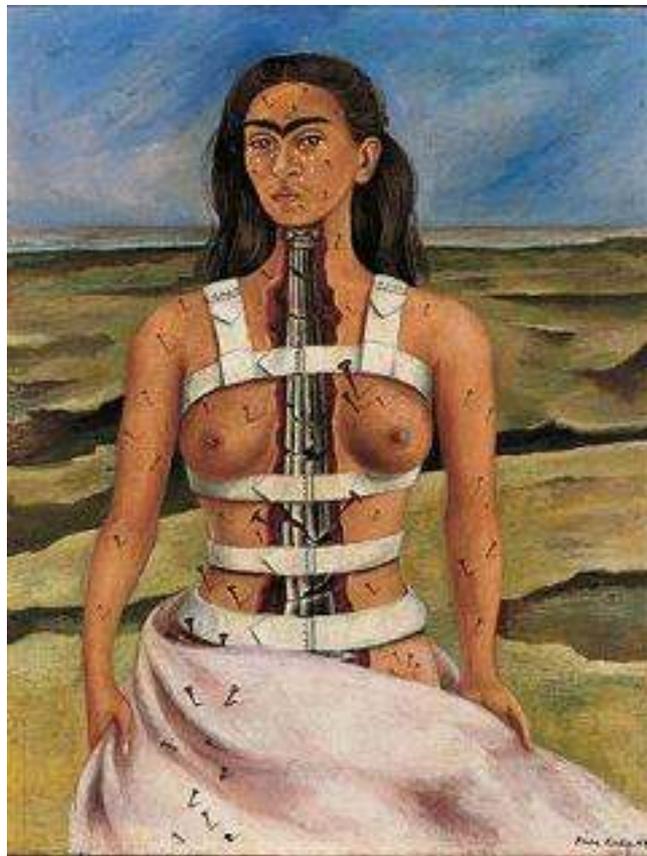


The Miraculous Path to Meaningful Living

Gestalt Therapy Thesis



Frida Kahlo "The Broken Column" - 1944

Kaire Varrak

Supervisor: Katrin Rosental

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1. WHY WRITE ABOUT IT, WHATS THE IMPORTANCE?

1.1 Introduction

Starting to write this thesis I had hypothesis that there is some way of living meaningfully and being satisfied with life, and also a way to live without a meaning and stay unsatisfied. What is the meaning in life? What gives meaning to the things we do in life, is there any meaning at all? And if so, is it given, are we born with it or are we supposed to find it, give it ourselves, and construct it?

1.1.1 Social, Personal and Professional Perspective

Socially my interest arises from the current situation in Estonia, where many people are engaged in what I call pseudo activities- looking for happiness in material things and successful lifestyles, but even having everything money can buy, they are still unhappy and unaware of what is missing. A lot of people are in depression; they are not having good relationships but are instead related to their computers and virtual lives. Media gives us a picture of a “happy person” and many are trying to achieve it, apply it in their lives not really knowing what they want themselves. Life has become difficult for young people as there are many norms and ambitions given to achieve.

I get worried for the people who are ambitious, heavily working and unsatisfied; or for those who only get high with substance use. Our senses are never satisfied, so what is there left to dream about if I HAVE everything already? People go to trainings where they are taught to achieve goals, when achieved, new goals arise. Never is there any training teaching a person to enjoy the achievements. Estonia lives in individualistic culture; accent is on individual advancement more than on co working and just being. I am interested of what gets lost there and if people know what it is to be satisfied, do they feel it or just think “I should be satisfied with all that I have”. What could they be looking for instead of what they are looking for now?

Recently there was an Estonian documentary in television “The Art of Selling” which pictured some people, in different ages, looking for the right place in life, and then some sales companies and network marketing systems, taking advantage of their void of meaning- offering their surfaced systems to fulfil the void. Many young people in Estonia go to USA to sell books from door to door. The selling system there (in Southwestern Company) is elaborated to the smallest detail- where to direct your gaze, how to gesticulate, how to scrape your shoes before you are even let in- and mindset, one must have while accomplishing the closing with a client. The system is built up to the slogan “you can do it!” And when you have done it, you are somebody, you can do ANYTHING. I can’t get my mind off the scene from the movie where one brainwashed boy is telling the other: “you must write down, in capital letters, one very cool and important sentence I am going to tell you- SKY IS THE LIMIT, WHEN YOUR HEART IS IN IT. Write it down and read it when you feel low!” This, I see, is the typical shortcut easy-to-digest solution to a person who is existentially lost.

Personally for me, the search for the meaning in life is familiar theme. Every now and then in my life I have been facing this question and unfortunately no-one has been able to give me the good answer, or maybe they have given me answers but those have not cleared things for me. At the beginning I was looking for the meaning in a way to find it and formulate it and then achieve it. As it didn’t give me satisfaction and I was still puzzled with “what really is the meaning of all of it”, I started to wonder why this question is so important for me. What I found out for myself was that asking this question itself is a symptom of something. To begin with, life should be meaningful itself;

the meaning is in little things and in living itself. What I had done was going away so far with my wondering that it was almost impossible to meet me with this simple level of answer. My problem was too big to be answered fully. I got interested, where had I lost my faith.

Professionally I am concerned with people who wonder about such basic things and I also care for people who have not yet become to think about it but are obviously in confusion with their constant dissatisfaction. I don't like shortcut solutions while dealing with such deep theme for human beings. And I don't like huge theoretical and philosophical approaches which try to determine the meaning of life in many words.

I would like to know how to help others who have this immense question in them, or those who come with some other question but the meaninglessness, hopelessness and confusion can be felt behind. I would like to know how to help them in simple enough way that is still trustworthy, not give hollow advices but help them get their feet back on the ground again. I am interested in people who live totally different lives than they would really like and I would like to know how to walk them back to the life they would really like. Also I would like to help those who are still looking for their identity. I am interested, how the way of living is found that makes you happy when looking back to your life being old. So, that you are not agonizing with the years lives purposelessly.

1.1.2 Some Studies on the Field

There has also been some investigation about people coming to therapy with meaninglessness:

Irvin D Yalom (Yalom, 1980) has made a research to find out, how many people are coming to therapy with a problem set like that (meaninglessness in life). 9 out of 40 people named some problem (most of them named 3-6 problems) related to losing the meaning: "purposelessness, meaninglessness, need for the meaning in life, why I do what I do, desultoriness, where am I going?" 12 had bigger problem with meaning in their lives.

Jill Gardner (Yalom, 1980) examined 89 patients. They were offered 16 different reasons to come to the therapy. 68 % named: "to seek increased meaning in life" as moderately or very important. Meaninglessness is rarely mentioned as a clinical entity because it is generally considered to be a manifestation of some other, primary, and more familiar clinical syndrome.

John Battista and Richard Almond (Yalom, 1980) explored the relation between self esteem and life regard. They concluded that satisfactory level of self esteem is necessary but not sufficient for a well-developed sense of meaning. It is possible for an individual with high self esteem to have low meaning of life but not for one with low self esteem to have high meaning. Positive life meaning is dependent upon some fit between ones goals and values and the roles and needs of the social structure on which one is enmeshed. Greater sense of meaning is related to perceiving oneself as approaching ones goal at a satisfactory rate.

The empirical research of meaning in life corroborates the following:

1. Lack of sense of meaning in life is associated with psychopathology in a roughly linear sense: that is the less the sense of meaning, the greater the severity of psychopathology.
2. A positive sense of meaning in life is associated with deeply held religious beliefs.
3. A positive sense of life meaning is associated with self-transcendent values.
4. A positive sense of life meaning is associated with membership in groups, dedication to some cause and adoption of clear life goals.

5. Life meaning must be viewed in an individual's life; other developmental tasks must precede development of meaning.

It has been said, that some patients undergo a crisis of meaning as a result of psychotherapy. As patients explore themselves deeply and open new vistas within, old compulsive patterns are undermined and eventually decathected. Patients who most of their lives have lived narrowly within the confines of fixed repetitive patterns are faced with the freedom that their compulsivity has guarded them from. There has been action in the place of meaning and quilt in the place of crisis of meaning. Without compulsive activity, life could seem boring, colourless and pointless. Then there are purposes and inner wisdom jet to be found, what tells us who we are to become.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE SUBJECT

2.1 Humanism

2.1.1 Abraham Maslow

Thinking about the meaningful life and how to live it, first Maslow came to my mind. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), one of the creators of humanistic psychology, investigated healthy people who lived exceptionally meaningful lives (differently from most of the psychologists who have studied the troubled people and made conclusions from those studies). Maslow talked about self-actualization: „the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentials, etc” (Boeree, 2006). In other words: ordinary man with nothing taken away. He said the average man is a full human being with dampened and inhibited powers and capacities. He wanted to understand creative and fulfilled human beings, therefore examined the people he considered to be most healthy and creative. Maslow wanted to know what those people did differently and how they succeeded to live such meaningful lives.

What he discovered was:

- These people were reality-centred, which means they could differentiate what is fake and dishonest from what is real and genuine.
- They were problem-centred, meaning they treated life's difficulties as problems demanding solutions, not as personal troubles to be railed at or surrendered to.
- They had a different perception of means and ends. They felt that the ends don't necessarily justify the means, that the means could be ends themselves, and that the means -- the journey -- was often more important than the ends.
- The self-actualizers also had a different way of relating to others. First, they enjoyed solitude, and were comfortable being alone. And they enjoyed deeper personal relations with a few close friends and family members, rather than more shallow relationships with many people.

- They enjoyed autonomy, a relative independence from physical and social needs. And they resisted enculturation, that is, they were not susceptible to social pressure to be "well adjusted" or to "fit in" -- they were, in fact, nonconformists in the best sense.
- They had an unhostile sense of humour -- preferring to joke at their own expense, or at the human condition, and never directing their humour at others.
- They had a quality he called acceptance of self and others, by which he meant that these people would be more likely to take you as you are than try to change you into what they thought you should be. This same acceptance applied to their attitudes towards themselves: if some quality of theirs wasn't harmful, they let it be, even enjoying it as a personal quirk. On the other hand, they were often strongly motivated to change negative qualities in themselves that could be changed.
- Along with this comes spontaneity and simplicity: They preferred being themselves rather than being pretentious or artificial. In fact, for all their nonconformity, he found that they tended to be conventional on the surface, just where less self-actualizing nonconformists tend to be the most dramatic.
- Further, they had a sense of humility and respect towards others -- something Maslow also called democratic values -- meaning that they were open to ethnic and individual variety, even treasuring it.
- They had a quality Maslow called human kinship or *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* -- social interest, compassion, humanity.
- And this was accompanied by a strong ethics, which was spiritual but seldom conventionally religious in nature.
- These people had a certain freshness of appreciation, an ability to see things, even ordinary things, with wonder.
- Along with this comes their ability to be creative, inventive, and original.
- And, finally, these people tended to have more peak experiences than the average person. A peak experience is one that takes you out of yourself, that makes you feel very tiny, or very large, to some extent one with life or nature or God. It gives you a feeling of being a part of the infinite and the eternal. These experiences tend to leave their mark on a person, change them for the better, and many people actively seek them out. They are also called mystical experiences, and are an important part of many religious and philosophical traditions.

Maslow doesn't think that self-actualizers are perfect, of course. There were several flaws or imperfections he discovered along the way as well: First, they often suffered considerable anxiety and guilt -- but realistic anxiety and guilt, rather than misplaced or neurotic versions. Some of them were absentminded and overly kind. And finally, some of them had unexpected moments of ruthlessness, surgical coldness, and loss of humour.

Maslow says (Fadiman & Frager, 1976): to actualize is to make real, to exist in fact and not just in potentiality. And by self, Maslow means the core or the essential nature of the individual, including ones temperament, ones own inner nature. This means to decide for yourself if you like certain foods or certain movie, regardless of others ideas or opinions.

Self actualization means living fully, being aware what is going on around us. Life is a process of choices and making every decision a choice for growth, instead of choosing safety. Being honest, instead of giving calculated answers that make us look good.

Also self-actualizers have higher level motivation Maslow called being motivation (see Appendix 1) - like curiosity and playfulness. Peak experiences, he says, are generally related to the being realm. The pursuit of the higher needs is in itself one index of psychological health. Higher needs are intrinsically more satisfying and meta-motivation is an indication that the individual has progressed beyond a deficiency level of functioning.

2.2 Existentialism

People who have talked a lot about meaningful living are the existentialists. What is important for Camus and Sartre (Yalom, 1980), is that human beings recognize that one must invent ones own meaning (rather than discover Gods or natures meaning) and then commit oneself fully to fulfilling that meaning. This requires one to be „half sure and wholehearted“. It is good and right to immerse oneself in the stream of life.

2.2.1 Irvin D. Yalom

Irvin D. Yalom, in his book “Existential Psychotherapy” (1980), discusses some secular activities that provide human beings with a sense of life purpose. Those activities seem right, they seem good; they are intrinsically satisfying and need not to be justified on the basis of any other motivation.

- Altruism: leaving the world a better place to live in, serving others, participating in charity. The idea of being a model to others, especially for ones children- helping them to diminish or remove the terror of death- can fill life with meaning until the moment of death. The belief that it is good to give, to be useful to others, to make the world better for others, is a powerful source of meaning.
- Dedication to a cause: what man is he must become through the cause he has made his own. Working for some cause is a pervasive theme. Many kinds of cause may suffice: the family, the state, a political or religious cause, secular religious cause like communism and fascism, a scientific venture. It must lift the individual out of himself, and make him cooperating part of a vaster scheme.
- Creativity: creative life is meaningful. To create something new, something that rings with novelty or beauty and harmony is a powerful antidote to a sense of meaninglessness. The creation justifies itself. Another facet of creativity is self-discovering (unconscious comes out).
- The hedonistic solution: the purpose of life is simply to life fully, to retain ones sense of astonishment at the miracle of life, to plunge oneself into the natural rhythm of life, to search for pleasure in the deepest possible sense.
- Self actualization: belief, that human beings should strive to actualize themselves, that they should dedicate themselves to realize their inbuilt potential.
- Self-transcendence: though human beings should begin with themselves (by searching their own hearts, integrating themselves, and finding their particular meaning) they should not end with themselves. Human beings have a more far-reaching meaning than the salvation of individual souls. Through excessive preoccupation with gaining an advantageous personal place in eternity, a person may lose that place. The more one focuses on oneself the less is ones ultimate satisfaction.

- Self- transcendence and the life cycle: these life activities that provide meaning are by no means mutually exclusive; most individuals derive meaning from several of them. There is gradual evolution of meanings throughout an individual's life cycle.

2.2.2 Viktor Frankl

Viktor Frankl (Yalom, 1980) believes, that what human being needs, is not a tensionless state but rather a striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. Pleasure is not a final goal, but it is a by-product of ones search for meaning. Frankl distinguishes between drives that push a person from within and meaning that pulls a person from without. There is a difference between drive and strive- human beings strive for some goal and are free to accept or deny the goal that beckons them.

Though Frankl stresses that each individual has a meaning that no one else can fulfil, these unique meanings fall into three general categories:

1. What one accomplishes or gives to the world in terms on ones creations
2. What one takes form the world in terms of encounters or experiences
3. Ones stand toward suffering, toward a fate that one cannot change

He talks about creativity: each of us is uniquely equipped with something that has to be done, experiential and attitudinal systems. A wide array of life's activities, if approached creatively, may imbue one with meaning. Frankl refers to what one derives from beauty, from truth and from love; engagement in deep experience constitutes meaning.

2.3 Eastern Philosophy

One very meaningful approach to life I have found in eastern philosophies. Mostly they stress the futility and foolishness of valuing the external standards over inner development. Their ideas seem trustworthy, as they are derived from careful observations of human experience, centuries of empirical observations of the effects on individuals of various ideas, attitudes, behaviours and exercises.

2.3.1 Zen Buddhism

The way Zen Buddhism sees existence overall is (Fadiman & Frager, 1976):

1. Impermanence: Understanding that everything is constantly changing, nothing is permanent. There is no final authority or permanent truth, only level of understanding, suitable for a certain time and place.
2. Selflessness: there is no immortal soul or eternal self existing in each individual. Individual is seen as an aggregate of attributes- intellect, emotions, body- all of which are impermanent and constantly changing.
3. Dissatisfaction: suffering that includes birth, death, decay, sorrow, pain, grief, despair and existence itself. Suffering is an inescapable part of existence; source of suffering lies within the individual (so something can be done about it).

Therefore it is true in human life (4 noble truths), that:

1. Dissatisfaction is inescapable
2. Dissatisfaction is the result of craving or desire (if one is unable to accept the world as it is, caught up in attachment to desires for the positive and pleasurable, and feelings of aversion for what is negative and painful)
3. Elimination of craving brings the extinction of suffering; it is possible to learn to accept the world as it is, without feeling dissatisfaction because of its limitations. Even minded attitude of enjoying fulfilled desires without becoming seriously disturbed over the inevitable periods of non-fulfilment.
4. There is a way to eliminate craving and dissatisfaction (noble eightfold path): right speech, right action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, concentration, thought, and understanding.

Zen Buddhists seek for the enlightenment, which is the intuitive understanding of things, also called as satori. It is seeing into one's own nature dynamically. It has its resemblance to Maslow's self-actualization.

The way to meaningful and satisfactory being, or Buddha-nature as Zen Buddhism names it, is described in Appendix 2

2.3.2 Taoism

Taoists (Smith, 1977) say that the individual must become integrated to live good and meaningful life. His conflicting forces must be brought into balance and harmony. He must become centred. By the word *Tao*, they mean the first cause and underlying essence of all, like a cosmic river that flows through all things. The perfect man is like the sage who learns to flow with the *Tao*.

- He is ego-free and at one with the world.
- With this total peace and harmony he does not push but lets the cosmic tide carry him. He travels far without effort. The Taoist sage practices effortless effort and action through non-action.
- He has no desires and no demanding ego. Things come easily.
- Being detached and content, he suffers no loss.
- Being centred and aware, he stays in the now.
- He recognizes the ultimate change as an internal one and a matter of consciousness.
- Taoist may act paradoxically, but he still remains within the flow, he works in perfect rhythm and harmony.
- There is zero point or centre; he trusts the wisdom of the organism as opposed to the rational intelligence.

2.4 Gestalt Therapy

When gestalt therapists talk about meaningful and satisfying life they derive from the idea of organism as a whole. Fritz (Frederick) Salomon Perls (1893-1970) insisted (Fadiman & Frager, 1976) that human beings are unified organisms, that there is no difference in kind in mental and physical activity and any aspect of an individual's behaviour may be viewed as a manifestation of the whole – the persons being.

Perls saw healthy persons as ones:

- Without mind-body split and also without inner-outer split- individual is also a part of wider field.
- He saw them to have clear contact boundary between the individual and his or her environment, this boundary defines the relationship between them. In a healthy individual, this boundary is fluid, perpetually permitting contact with-, and the withdrawal from the environment.
- Also he saw them being aware of their dominant needs emerging as foreground or figure against the background of the total personality, effective action is directed toward the satisfaction of a dominant need.
- Here and now: Perls stressed particularly on the importance of an individual's present, immediate self-perception of his or her environment. Healthy person is aware of the present experience. One's present experience at any given moment is the only possible present experience and the condition for being satisfied and fulfilled in one's life is simply wholehearted acceptance of that present experience.
- Awareness- avoidance of the awareness is the major factor inhibiting psychological growth. According to Perls, healthy, mature individual is self-supporting, self-regulating individual. Perls suggested that the hierarchy of needs principle is always operating in the human individual. The most urgent need, the most important unfinished situation will always emerge if one is simply aware of one's experience of oneself, moment to moment.

Perls defined psychological health and maturity as the capacity to move from environmental support and environmental regulation to self-support and self-regulation. The crucial element is balance, within itself and with environment.

Self-regulating and self-supporting individuals are characterized by freely flowing and clearly delineated figure-ground formations in expression of their needs for contact and withdrawal. They recognize their own capacity to choose the means of fulfilling needs as such needs emerge. They are aware of the boundaries between themselves and others and are particularly aware of the distinction between their fantasies of others and what they experience through direct contact.

3. CLOSER TO THE PROBLEM

3.1 When the Meaning Gets Lost

3.1.1 My Perception of the Problem

When I talk about a person who has lost meaningfulness in life, those themes come to my mind:

Pseudo Personality

A person, who has grown layers of pseudo personality around him, has lost the very meaning of living. He doesn't feel joy, because he does something else than he really wants to do. He does all the things that are acceptable, good, popular, demanded, dictated by the fashion, cultural authorities etc. He tries to live the life that looks good and is supposed to lead to the happiness. Instead he is unsatisfied all the time. He has lost the contact with inner self.

Inner Emptiness

... is what the person with pseudo personality experiences. As he is not supported by the inner self, but instead by the outer things and opinions, he cannot stand being alone. He is too afraid to meet himself, not knowing what would he meet with, and what happens then. He seeks for the satisfaction from extreme activities or beautiful things, or from the attention of the other person. He could work until the burnout to get away from himself.

A young woman came to therapy with me, telling she has everything in her life- work is ok, boyfriend, friends, activities, sports, parties... and she is still unsatisfied. She said she is willing to DO anything, but nothing seems to help. I perceived her as avoiding "being" by "doing" a lot. She was obviously not able to be alone and do nothing for longer period of time.

Exactingness and Ambitions

As the person is anxious about the inner emptiness and unsatisfied, he thinks that pushing him more things would go better. He is pushy towards himself and others, thinking that high-enough targets would guarantee him to become someone. He cannot stand just being; he considers it a waste of time. He senses his willpower and applies it in all the wrong places to feel he is moving ahead- away from the emptiness inside. Becoming someone brings happiness, he hopes. Others need to be pushed there too.

Here I remember a colleague I had who was most of the time unsatisfied with everything and everyone around him. He had such a high standards, that no-one could possibly meet them. He knew everything already and had experienced everything. He pushed the speed all the time, and was bored most of the time. He made others around him nervous and afraid of making mistakes. Actually others did always make more mistakes him being near. Sometimes, for a short while, I noticed this hopeless look in his eyes, and some short periods of time he was actually very friendly and giving, only to surprise you the next moment with his high demands and dissatisfaction again.

There was almost no-one who liked him and trusted him, so his life was constant fighting against others.

Loneliness

All people are existentially lonely, but there is another kind of loneliness- when there are no other people in ones "picture"- only things or emptiness, and one has the feeling relying only on oneself. One has no support from others, no good contacts with people.

I remember myself in individual therapy session where therapist asked: "who is your support in life?" I remember my surprise and confusion about the word "support". Was there supposed to be also support in ones life??? Learned to manage on my own so long, I was even confused about the meaning of the word.

Learnt Assessment

A person sees himself, and criticizes, based on the unidentified standards. If feelings have been denied in his past, he thinks he is too emotional of a person. Actually no feelings can be seen outside, maybe some little wetness in eyes, tears not allowed to come out. The fear of starting to cry is so big and it is so much impermissible, that person interprets those feelings being too much. The same can happen to other feelings. From this comes the:

Inadequacy

There could be huge split between ones understanding of oneself and others perception of him. It comes visible in the misunderstanding of some terms like "accepting my sadness" (actually the person only cries alone), "having good friends" (actually only people to party with), "having loving relationship" (depending on the lifestyle the other is providing), "living happily" (living the "right" life).

A client in group therapy told many times about the good relationship with her husband. She said they could talk about anything and that they often did talk long hours. It was difficult to understand, why the relationship still didn't give the support she needed. At the last weekend of the course it accidentally came out, that they actually talked about their work all those hours, and never had discussed their relationship. It hadn't come to our minds to ask her about the specific content of the discussions assuming that client is aware enough about the issue.

Thinking

It could be a problem, if making decisions in life, one relies more on the logic than intuition or feelings- if something looks good, it must be the right thing to do. "You cannot trust feelings, they let you down" is the lesson behind that. So a person is putting a lot of effort in reading and learning, asking "why is it in life that ...?" from others, and putting a lot of energy trying to choose between two apparently good choices. The gut feeling has left too long ago to be able to read it. Instead the person could be enjoying a lot of debating, believing that the truth eventually comes out of it.

A man came to a pre-interview, wanting to participate in a group therapy. Among other things I asked him about satisfaction in his life- he replied with a question "what is satisfaction, how to recognize it?" When I asked about him having good friends, he asked back "what is friendship after all? How do I know who is good friend?" He was truly suspicious about my guessing that one would recognize those things inside without thinking about it. He had most intricate thinking constructions about everything in his life and as those constructions were sometimes contradictory, he was so confused in even the simplest things in his life.

Controlling

Controlling oneself and others- a person could construct in his thoughts a good strategy for living and then try to make it happen. He does it by controlling himself and others, pushing with willpower to make things happen the very way, not letting any incidents come between. I know this about myself as an everlasting conflict between my mind and body. Many times I have been angry about my body not following my plans. Some times I have been lucky to realize, that my body and feelings guided me to much easier solution than I first planned to implement. But still I easily tend to trust my mind more and then I get into conflict.

A person came to a job interview with me in the company I work for. He had brilliant preparation, he knew everything about the company, had prepared questions for me and tried many times to take over the interview. He acted strangely familiar with me from the first minute and let me know in every way how important and in-a-hurry he was. He actualized the image of being "fast and furious", young man working hard 25 hours a day, prepared to meet any target great enough for him, being talented. He looked very cool and arrived by motorcycle.

His image barged into a real life work situation, where his speed was suddenly not so high anymore and it took quite some time to for him to figure out what to do. Actually it was ok for the specific job, the person not to be so quick. What got me worried was his learnt understanding of himself needed to be so fast and high demanding and leading everything in his life. He was so inadequate about himself and tried so hard to make happen something that was absolutely not necessary.

Identity Crises

With identity crises, the questions arise: "Who I really want to be? Am I doing the right job, living with the right person, maybe something is there that is better? Who could be the role model?" If a person is not hearing the inner wisdom, it is really difficult to choose outer roles. It takes a lot of courage to be who you are, as it could involve also negative feedback from outside. Being someone else could succeed for a while, but also it could end with a bigger crisis at some point. Having tried to be all kinds of different ways, the person could end up with a really difficult void. Being able to let the void be, it could turn out to be a fertile one- something real could grow out of the emptiness. More often, sadly, a person would prefer escaping the void. Grabbing the next possible easy solution or choosing to anaesthetize the senses and stay with safeness.

3.1.2 Seeing the Problem through the Hierarchy of Needs

As I used Maslow's theory at the beginning of the thesis, I got some ideas there also how and where people could be stuck and lose the meaning. Here is what I think: many people are stuck in the belonging level (see Appendix 1) and have not moved forward and have not even started to actualize selves. Their need for support or belonging to somewhere is unsatisfied (they don't have people around or are stuck in unfinished businesses from past) and they don't move forward to esteem needs. They don't see the bigger picture (as self-actualizers do), because their own needs are unsatisfied.

Some people are stuck in esteem needs. People needing the respect of others, status, fame, glory, recognition, attention, reputation, appreciation, dignity, even dominance. They often don't move forward to respecting themselves. They lack such feelings as confidence, competence,

achievement, mastery, independence, and freedom. The negative version of these needs must be then low self-esteem and inferiority complexes.

Maslow affirms my observation by saying: "if one has had significant problems along development - a period of extreme insecurity or hunger as a child, or the loss of a family member through death or divorce, or significant neglect or abuse -- one may "fixate" on that set of needs for the rest of ones life." (Fadiman & Frager, 1976)

Those people are derived from the D motivation and D thinking (see Appendix 1), they see objects as means to achieve something else. They see things from the perspective of their strong needs.

3.1.3 Existential Vacuum and Noogenic Neurosis

I find support to my understanding also from the work of Frankl. He talks about existential vacuum and existential neurosis: he distinguishes two stages of a meaninglessness syndrome: vacuum (frustration) is characterized by the subjective state of boredom, apathy and emptiness. One feels cynical, lacks direction and questions the point of most of life's activities. Complain of a void and vague discontent when the busy week is over (the Sunday neurosis). Free time makes one aware of the fact that there is nothing one wants to do.

He also talks about noogenic neurosis. When there is a vacuum, symptoms will rush in to fill it. (Alcoholism, depression, obsession, delinquency, hyperinflation of sex, daredevilry). What differentiates noogenic neurosis from conventional psychoneurosis is that the symptoms are a manifestation of a thwarted will to meaning. Behavioural patterns also reflect a crisis of meaninglessness.

Frankl says (Yalom, 1980), that modern mans dilemma is that one is not told by instinct what one must do, or any longer by tradition what one should do. Nor does one know what one wants to do. Two common behavioural reactions to this crisis of values are conformity (doing what others do) and submission to totalitarianism (doing what others wish.)

3.1.4 Crusadism, Nihilism and Vegetativeness

Salvador Maddy (Yalom, 1980) describes meaningless living in 3 states of being: crusadism, nihilism and vegetativeness:

Crusadism or adventurousness is characterized by a powerful inclination to seek out and to dedicate oneself to dramatic and important causes. These individuals are demonstrators looking for an issue. They embrace cause almost regardless of its content to stay one step ahead of the meaninglessness that pursues them.

Nihilism is an active pervasive proclivity to discredit activities purported by others to have meaning. The energy and behaviour flows from despair, seeks angry pleasure involved in destruction. It often masquerades as a highly enlightened, sophisticated approach to life.

Vegetative form- existential sickness is most extreme degree of purposelessness. One sinks into a severe state of aimlessness and apathy, a state that has widespread cognitive, affective and

behavioural expressions. Cognitive component is the chronic inability to believe in the usefulness of the value of any of life's endeavours. Affective component is pervasive blandness and boredom, episodic depressions. Later indifference and periods of depression become less frequent. These people don't select much in behaviour- it becomes immaterial to the person which activities, if any, he pursues. Individuals with vegetative syndrome may seek therapeutic help for the associated depression and painful doubting. They have also guilt or esteem-identity problems, manifestations of sexual or aggressive concerns.

They also engage in compulsive activity- pattern of frenetic activity that so consumes the individuals energy that the issue of meaning is drained of its toxin. Any human activity can be so cathected that it serves as a caricature of meaning. When the activity has no „goodness” or „rightness” then it sooner or later will fail the individual. This comes to clinicians' attention when the vehicle of meaning has collapsed or is in obvious danger of collapsing (social position, prestige, materialism or power).

3.1.5 Greed, Hate and Delusion

Eastern philosophies (Fadiman & Frager, 1976) see greed, hate and delusion as great obstacles to meaningful and good living.

Greed emerges in vanity, discontent, craftiness, love of rich, sweet food and wines. Hate occurs in fighting with enemies, getting back at others, defending against possible attacks, in tendencies to anger easily. Delusion is seen as general state of confusion: lack of awareness and vacillation, difficulties to make up ones mind or go deeply into something, imitating others rather than forming own opinions, doing everything inattentively and sloppily- lazy, worry, obstinacy, confusion and excitability.

These tendencies can blossom into neurosis or psychosis. By working greed can be turned into compassion, hate into love and delusion into wisdom. Pride is another obstacle to growth- leads to lack of respect to ones teacher.

3.2 Neurotic Living According to Gestalt therapy

In gestalt we also deal with the question of life meaning. From the gestalt point of view, healthy personalities are considered to live wholly and meaningfully. The opposite is neurotic personalities and neurotic living. Fritz Perls views avoidance of awareness and the resultant rigidities in perception and behaviour as the major obstacles to psychological growth and wellbeing.

Neurotics cannot see their own needs clearly, nor can they make appropriate distinctions between themselves and the rest of the world. They often feel that social and environmental boundaries extend too far into one; neuroses consist of defensive manoeuvres designed to protect one against and balance oneself in this impinging world.

Gestalt therapy sees 4 basic neurotic mechanisms (boundary disturbances) which lead a person to meaningless and unfulfilling life (Fadiman & Frager, 1980):

Introjection

... is the mechanism by which individuals incorporate standards, attitudes, and ways of acting and thinking which are not their own and which they do not assimilate or digest sufficiently to make their own. Introjecting individuals find it very difficult to distinguish between what they really feel and what others want them to feel- or simply what others feel. Introjection can also constitute a disintegrating force in the personality, since when the concepts or attitudes that are swallowed are incompatible with each other; the individual will find himself torn. This is the way people lose sight of the inner wisdom that should tell them what is the good way of living.

Projection

... is the opposite of introjection, projection is the tendency to make others responsible for what originates in the self. It involves a disowning of ones impulses, desires, and behaviours, placing outside what really belongs to the self.

Confluence

In confluence individuals experience no boundary between themselves and the environment. Confluence makes the healthy rhythm of contact and withdrawal impossible, since both contact and withdrawal presuppose another. Confluence also makes tolerance of differences among people impossible, since individuals experiencing confluence cannot accept a sense of boundary and thus differentiation between themselves and other people.

Retroflection

It means literally "turning back sharply against". Retroflecting individuals turn against themselves and instead of directing their energies toward changing and manipulating their environment, they direct those energies toward themselves. They split themselves and become both subject and object of all their actions; they are the target of all of their behaviour. Here it happens that a person is not able to ask for support and instead is trying to be self-sufficient.

Neurotics have mind-body split, and also inner-outer split. In a neurotic person the contact and withdrawal functions are disturbed, and the individual finds himself faced by a conglomerate of gestalten which are in some sense unfinished- not fully formed, not fully closed. Neurotics are often unable to either sense which of their needs are dominant or to define their relationship to the environment in such a way that their dominant needs are satisfied.

Neurotics are also unable to live in the present because they chronically carry with them unfinished situations from the past. Their attention is at least partially absorbed by these unfinished situations, and they thus have neither the awareness nor the energy to deal fully with the present. Since the destructive nature of these unfinished situations appears in the present, neurotic individuals perceive themselves as unable to live successfully in the present.

Perls defined (Fadiman & Frager, 1976) anxiety as the gap, the tension between the "now" and the "then". The inability of people to tolerate this tension causes them to fill the gap with planning, rehearsing and attempts to make the future secure. Most people interrupt the awareness, mostly because of being aware of something unpleasant. Avoidance sets in- thoughts, expectations, memories and associations from one experience from another. Nothing is actually experienced. Instead he is stuck with an unfinished situation.

4. WHERE DOES THE MEANING GET LOST?

4.1 Living among People

4.1.1 Child's World

When a child is born, his parents are his all world. A child learns about himself and about relations based on the attitudes of his parents. If parents take good care of him- he learns to take good care of himself and have a positive attitude towards himself. If parents recognize his feelings, he learns that those feelings are ok. If he is supported, he learns to support himself later in life. If parents see him as he is, and accept him the way he is, he learns to accept him and believe in himself. He would believe that he is ok the way he is and trust his inner wisdom.

On the contrary, if child gets into a difficult situation and is left there without support, he could learn that world is dangerous and unpredictable place, where he has to manage on his own. If he doesn't manage in the situation, he may learn that he is not ok. If he is laughed at he could start criticize himself and push himself to get better, get to be someone else instead of who he is.

If in a difficult situation, his confusion and helplessness is not recognized, and instead taking care, he is fed some false ideas about how life is or should be- he could grow very keen on finding the answers of right and wrong in life. Some of the ideas he could swallow and start to act on them.

If child is put into a role and addressed with expectations, if affirmation is linked to some qualities or performance, the child could learn that he himself is not worthy, only what he does is. He would start to live up to the norms and avoid failure instead of being curious and reaching out for the success.

4.1.2 Obstacles to Growth

When I search for earlier thoughts about the obstacles to growing up healthily, I find Maslow's states (Fadiman & Frager, 1980) that the growth motivation in human is relatively weak compared to physiological needs and needs for security, esteem and so forth.

The process of self actualization can therefore be limited by

- negative influences from past experience and resulting habits that keep us locked into unproductive behaviours
- social influence and group pressure that often operate against our own taste and judgement
- inner defences that keep us out of touch with ourselves

He says that destructive environment or rigid authoritarian education can lead to unproductive habit patterns based on a deficiency orientation. He mentions that group pressure and social propaganda also tend to limit the individual as they act to diminish the autonomy and stifle independent judgement.

Maslow also names it *Jonah complex* when talking about a refusal to try to realize ones full capabilities (Jonah denied becoming a prophet). He says, people are afraid of using their power fully and prefer safety from average accomplishments instead of putting really ambitious goals to them which would need full devotion also.

The way I see it, is that when brought up without proper support from outside, a person is not able to support her/himself stepping out of the safer zone and actualizing the whole personality. The escape could be depression or also psychosis (schizophrenia), also the good feeling from antidepressants. One could derive the support also from making oneself numb to any outer influence- positive or negative. Once in childhood the situation was so terrible, that now later in life he is unable to lose those defence mechanisms, to let in some changing powers. Escaping into negativism is much safer.

4.1.3 Our Changing Culture

I see the culture having some impacts on our self actualizing and meaninglessness also. People in the pre-industrial agricultural world were beset by many life problems, but today's malady of meaninglessness was probably not one of them. Meaning was supplied then in many ways- the religious world view supplied an answer so comprehensive that the question of meaning was obscured. Also people of earlier ages were so preoccupied with the task of meeting other more basic survival needs, that they were not afforded the luxury of examining their need for meaning. Meaninglessness is intricately interwoven with leisure and disengagement (Yalom, 1980). The more one is engaged with the everyday process of living and surviving, the less does the issue arise. Earlier people had other meaning-providing activities in their everyday life - they lived close to the earth, felt a part of nature, and fulfilled nature's purpose in ploughing the ground, sowing, reaping, cooking, and naturally and unselfconsciously thrusting themselves into the future by begetting and rising children. Their everyday work was creative as they shared in the creation of life amongst their livestock and seed and grain. They had a strong sense of belonging to a larger unit, they were an integral part of a family and community, and in that context, were provided scripts and roles. Their work was intrinsically worthwhile.

All those meanings have vanished today. Today people must face life sans a religiously based cosmic meaning-system and far from the natural world and the elemental chain of life. People have too much time to ask disturbing questions. Free time is problematic because it thrusts freedom upon us. Work no longer supplies meaning. There is less creative potential in many common forms of modern work. Much work lacks intrinsic value. With the population explosion, and its exposure on the mass media, the individual doubts that the begetting and rearing of children is doing favour to anyone.

4.1.4 Individualism/Collectivism

As I mentioned before, meaning could get lost with having little support. That could also be true concerning the society we are living in. Based on famous cultural researcher Geert Hofstede's (1980-1993) distinction, we live in individualistic culture (Pajupuu, 1995).

In contrast to collectivistic culture where group interests are more important than the individuals, we live in a world where everyone must stand out alone for themselves.

In collectivistic culture people is supported by family, many generations live together and take care of each other. There is loyalty and safeness and it is considered to be important. In our culture a child is lucky to have a sister or brother; relatives often don't get along or live too far from each other to meet often. Growing up, child learns to see himself as "I" and learns that what he "is himself" is important, not where he belongs. So that puts a lot of pressure to one person, not giving much safe network to rely on. It gets very important to be independent and relations between people can be relatively weak therefore. Being brought up mostly alone, child has not learned to adapt to others, personal opinion is important instead. So there could be a lot of stress and little support, finding ones own opinions. Person without opinion is considered to be weak in individualistic culture- so a person being in trouble finding ones own, could easily swallow someone else's thoughts about being.

Escaping into safe solutions is also caused by the belief, that in individualistic culture one has to earn ones own living whatever way- it is not ok to rely on someone else's help. So it is not easy for a person to wait for a long time and figure out what to do in life, you have to get going as soon as possible and feed yourself, doing whatever job there is that pays well. In collectivistic culture income is divided equally between the members of a group.

In individualistic culture, children have to study the whole life, to get better and better, because life is demanding more and more. Therefore the KNOWING gets to be very important, intellectual abilities and access to information is basis for success, while in collectivistic cultures a person has more time for just being, as doing more doesn't get him any farer than he already is due to his background. A person in collectivistic culture doesn't get fired because of the bad development- he is hired because he is family and he stays there.

So not trying to compare which culture is better, the evidence of the possible difficulties is easy to see. Little support and a lot of aloneness, together with emphasis on doing, is what the individualistic culture we live in, brings along.

5. HOW CAN IT BE HELPED

5.1 What I See is Important

When thinking about how to help a person with meaninglessness problem, I get some themes in my mind that could be helpful to emanate from.

Creativity

There is a lot of power and energy in releasing the creativity. Letting the “fool” out, is what I find to be very relieving. A person, who has limited himself according to the norms from outside, has cut off parts of him and lost a lot of good energy with it. Instead of using fully all his resources, he is working double hard with half the resources. Usually those impermissible parts of him are some “negative” qualities, the shadow as Carl Gustav Jung names it (see Appendix 1). Allowing them, a person gains some new nutritious dimensions to his life.

Inner support

A person, who has lost meaning, has to find the inner wisdom again. Inside he knows what is best for him and what the answers to his questions are. He has just confused himself too long to hear it. He has to regain the trust in himself being the expert in his life. So I guess he needs a lot of confirmation to his inner feelings and secret thoughts to understand what is right and what is wrong for him really.

I have a client who is coming from family with emotionally very violent and terrorizing father. The boy is smart and has lot of feelings inside going on, he is in contact with his sadness quite easily. With his father though, he has learned to use only anger, as that is what the father uses. In therapy we have spent lot of time just to talk through many situations in his life- he is smart enough to understand, that all things in his life are not right, he just needs to check his feelings with reality and get confirmation to his understanding. There is where I find very important to just be with the client, listen and give reactions-“that is all right”, “that is incorrect”, “that’s how I see things” or “I agree with you on that” to give some sense of adequacy a person can rely on when starting to build up self support again.

Feelings

Allowing feelings again is a big part of self-acceptance. To be able to have feelings together with someone is even bigger step. A person usually has a fear of getting rejected and in therapy there is a chance to get affirmation that feelings are welcome. Feelings have always important messages about us with them. Not hearing them, we don’t recognize what we want and who we are.

I think of 2 clients who came to gestalt group, one came with previous experience of psychoanalysis, the other from cognitive therapy. They didn’t have contact to their feelings, instead they were very mettlesome trying to understand everything, one of them was asking “why” all the time, the other claimed “there is no point in getting angry (or sad)”. They were eager to work hard, if only they knew how and with what. There was no “response ability” coming from the feelings and no trust in them knowing what is right for them.

Grounding

The person in trouble needs to learn to fly with his feet on the earth. Not flying away with ideas or fears. The courage to be who he is comes from the feeling of ones feet strongly on the solid ground- physically and psychologically. Deep breathing and staying in the actual here and now goes together with grounding. That is the way out of intellectualizing and rationalizing.

I have a client who is world champion in speed of talking. She can present all the pro- and contra arguments in longest sentences in a minimum time. Answering even the simplest questions she flies away to distant earth so that I even forget the question. I have found it helpful to keep at least my feet strongly on the ground and keep held of a subject I think is important, and ask even if hundred times "but what about just now, in this room we are, on that time of the day, on that minute? How is it now?" It is a difficult question for her, but I guess she might be getting the point already in near future.

Contact

It is said that contact is healing. It sometimes amazes me, why people gain from gestalt therapy, especially when I don't remember being done anything special - any technique or exercise. So sometimes just being there is good enough already. A person in trouble doesn't need any "helpful" ideas from outside. He knows deep inside what to do. So he just needs to be recognized and accepted, to find what he knows.

Intuition

It is the voice of the inner wisdom as I see it. Learning to listen to it and recognize its voice is very helpful in ones life. Trusting the intuition one doesn't have to think and weigh choices so much. At the beginning it seems risky to listen to something that so uncontrollable and also its voice is weak if we haven't listened to it for long. It gets better by training, every intuitively decided choice that comes out to be the right thing, makes one hear the voice of intuition more and trust it more.

With clients I sometimes get strange ideas of the next question or suggestion that doesn't seem to have any logical bound to what the client is talking about. I have noticed that when I use those ideas, it usually leads to something valuable and helpful for the process. Instead, when I don't, I find myself after some minutes thinking heavily what to do next. So I explain the intuitive ideas like the integrated wisdom from my book readings, life, learning, instantaneous awareness etc. that sums up the way I don't control and just gives the good answer in some moment.

Trust

To ask for help is almost always one of the most difficult things for people in trouble (as it has been for me). Partly it is the reason one gets into trouble the first place. It is deeply related to trust- to trust oneself to ask for help, and then trust, that the help would come and then, that the help is trustful and really "helpful" is not easy. When trust is lost, it takes time and many small steps to get it back. It could begin with first creating the trustful relationship with one person and then, trusting that one relationship, one could go out and check how the others are, always having the way back to the first person to get help if needed. It involves spitting out the ideas (introjects) that one has to survive alone and manage on ones own. When learned to trust others, the person must move forward to trusting oneself again in new level. The new level of self trust is not "managing on ones own" but more like truly knowing oneself, responding honestly to the environment and believing having resources to live according to ones values.

In therapy groups I have many times heard a person say that he/she is aware of the others thinking negatively about him/her. When asked to check it really out with others, the person gets stubborn. When finally convinced to do that, he/she doesn't hear the real answers, still believing that there is something else behind, or that others are just polite. So it takes some chewing on the real answers to get to believing them really.

I-thou relationship

When a person has lost the meaning in life, it is a trouble in deep personal level. Have been looking for the solution for a long, one probably has grown cynical about many of the advice, knowing the feeling of not been understood really. So relating to the person in an objective way- treating him as diagnose or problem doesn't really help. For me the I- thou relationship (see Appendix 1) means not to have pre-made solutions to the other one, but being open to find them together with the other, being open to the possibility that I would find something new as well. So the other can feel as equal human being with me.

Lately I have found that meeting my clients with mindset "I have no idea what to do this time", I am often very satisfied at the end of the session, if I have really been able to bear the not knowing and have not panicked about it. Instead the mindset "I know this client and I know exactly what to do with him" has got me into unforeseen trouble many times. Having the knowledge that I have I cannot know all the people and all the solutions forehand, but what I can do, is be vigilant and turn my attention to every single thing that is happening in the process and in me. Then I can use my knowledge to create the way towards some possible insight. The moment is always new and no readymade solutions are good enough.

Group therapy

The experience of really being together with others, getting honest feedback is indispensable for developing adequate understanding of oneself and surroundings. Also the recognition that others might feel the same as me in my deepest fears, or sometimes exactly the opposite, is sometimes so helpful for normalizing the view of the world. In a group the person could experience the actual support in difficult situations and learn a lot about others- things unimagined to be under the surface.

5.2 Gestalt Approach

I see gestalt approach to be most efficient way to help a person with meaninglessness problem. To begin with the attitude, Gestalt therapy is phenomenological and dialogical approach, based on the idea that human being is active, self-actualizing, self-directed being who has unlimited possibilities for positive growth. Gestalt therapists believe that every person is capable of finding meaning in life and realising it.

According to Gestalt therapy a “disorder” is that one has flattened ones potentials. Neurotic person is one who is disunited and alienated, feels desperate and alone in the world. The purpose of the therapy is therefore getting more aware of one and regaining the ability for contact. In the therapy process, the experience is most important. Gestalt therapy mixes introspection and spontaneous experiments in a way to turn person’s negative experiences into positive ones and help getting contact with ones feelings. In Gestalt therapy client and therapist are in subject to subject relationships (I-thou) and what happens in the very moment is mostly in focus.

To describe the focus and the route of the therapy process those themes I have found to be basically important:

Body

Fritz Perls, the creator of gestalt therapy, views the body-mind split of most psychologies as both arbitrary and misleading (Fadiman & Frager, 1976). He says that mental activity is simply activity that is carried on at a less intense level than physical activity. Thus our bodies are direct manifestations of who we are, by simply observing our most apparent physical behaviours- posture, breathing, movements- we can learn an immense amount about ourselves. Therefore, in Gestalt therapy, a lot of attention is put on the clients’ whole way of being. Therapist might draw attention to clients’ posture, gestures, tone of voice etc, to find the concurrencies and discrepancies with the spoken story and gain insights for the clients troubles in life overall. The client might not be aware of the body signs he is sending out and getting aware might be a great help to understand ones problems in bigger picture.

A client who has learned to suppress his anger stays silent when asked about his attitude towards some people in his life. At the same time his leg is starting to vibrate heavily. When asked about the leg, client seems apprehended and ashamed. The leg is “telling” what the client is silent about.

For some clients this amount of attention seems to be “too much” and they consider it to be fault-finding. Detection of the whole client is therefore also great frustration that must be done in a supportive way to be helpful instead of frightening for clients.

Social relationships

Gestalt therapy sees an individual as participating in a field from which the individual is differentiated but inseparable. Contact and withdrawal functions are crucial in determining an individual’s existence, one aspect of contact and withdrawal from the environment includes relationships with other people. The sense of relatedness to a group is our primary psychological survival impulse. Neurosis results from rigidities in defining the contact boundary with regard to other people and inability to find and maintain proper balance with them. In therapy situation therefore the clients contact to therapist is also examined many times- if there is good contact or confluence, is the client projecting things (demands, attitudes) on the therapist, that really belong to himself or leaving something unsaid or undone (retroreflecting). As the relationship in Gestalt therapy

is even, the way client relates to therapist can be considered as an example of the clients overall relationships in life. With straight questions about the contact, the therapist can also give an example of the attitude to others a healthy person could have in his life. With notions about the contact disturbances happening in the therapy session, the therapist teaches the client to learn to take notice of ones tendencies to cut the contact.

Will

Perls says it is very important to be aware of ones preferences and being able to act on them. Knowing ones own preferences entails knowing ones needs, emergence of the dominant need is experienced as preference for what will satisfy the need. It is very close to what is generally called will. In choosing to use the term preference, Perls is emphasizing the organismic, natural quality of healthy willing. Willing is simply one of various mental activities; it entails the limiting of awareness to certain specific areas in order to carry through a set of actions directed toward satisfying certain needs.

In gestalt therapy the question “what do you want” is asked many times. The reason is to bring it to clients’ awareness, that in every moment a healthy person could have a need or wanting to act upon. To be aware of ones needs and aims, one can be more aware of ones choices. In Gestalt therapy the idea of a person making ones own choices is central, therefore turning all the “should do’s” into “want to do’s” considered to be very clarifying. Already listening to ones way of speaking and changing it is considered to be helpful step in regaining the responsibility of ones life. Getting to know ones real wants includes “spitting” out early introjects of what one should want and changing retroflecting into action towards real goals.

Emotions

In Gestalt therapy, the emotion is considered to be the force that energizes all action. Emotions are the expression of our basic excitement, the ways and means of expressing our choices as well as satisfying our needs. The emotional excitement mobilizes the muscular system. If muscular expression of emotion is prevented, we build up anxiety, which is the bottling up of excitement. Once we are anxious, we try to desensitize our sensory systems in order to reduce the built-up excitement, at this point symptoms like frigidity, not listening – what Perls calls the “holes in our personalities”- develop. This emotional desensitizing is at the root of the avoidance of awareness that Perls finds basic to neurosis. Learning to recognize ones hidden feelings is therefore pervasive in gestalt therapy process. Turning suppressed (retroflected) emotions outside is considered to be the way to release and gain more energy and clarity in ones life. The question: “what do you feel?” is most confusing to neurotics; some of them get angry if asked many times because they “don’t know what they feel”. Then the therapists’ mission could be to draw attention to the anger and suggest that to be possibly the feeling in question.

Intellect

Perls has said that intellect is in our society overvalued and overused, particularly in attempts to understand human nature. He believed in the wisdom of the organism, he saw it to be a kind of intuition, based more in emotion than in intellect, and more in nature than in conceptual systems. Perls said that the intellect has been reduced to a computer-like mechanism used for playing at a series of fitting games. Preoccupation with asking why things happen prevents people from experiencing how they happen. Genuine emotional awareness is blocked in the interest of providing explanations. Explaining is the property of the intellect and constitutes something much less than understanding.

Therefore in Gestalt therapy the question “how” is asked instead of the “why”. For client it is important to first understand how he has got himself into trouble. Clearly and fully understanding the way he is acting neurotically, the client is able to make responsible decision of continuing the action or stopping it.

Asking why questions Perls considered being manipulation the therapist must confront. Seldom the why questions are asked to get more information, and even if so, the more information is not necessarily helpful to a client. Having much information can turn into “as if” improvement- the client now knows why he is neurotic but can still do nothing about it.

Perls named 3 levels of verbiage production that is overvalued and not helpful in any way: chickenshit (social chitchat), bullshit (excuses, rationalization), and elephantshit (theorizing, particularly of a philosophical/psychological sort).

Self

Perls said that we are who we are, instead of being whom we would like to be or who we should be. Our self-boundaries are constantly shifting in interaction with our environments. He also said that a person must start to actualize the real self, instead of actualizing the “self-concept”. In gestalt therapy it means that with all the anterior themes handled, the person is likely to rediscover from under the “as if” layers the person he really is and wants to be.

Therapist

Perls suggested that the therapist is basically a projection screen on which the patient sees his or her own missing potential; the task of therapy is the patient re-owning of this potential. The therapist is above all, skilful frustrator. While offering the patient satisfaction through offering attention and acceptance, the therapist frustrates the patient by refusing to give the patient the support which the patient is lacking within. The therapist acts as a catalyst in helping the patient break through avoidance and impasse points; the therapists primary catalytic tool is helping the patient see how he or she consistently interrupts himself or herself, avoids awareness, plays roles, and so forth. Finally the therapist is human, and the therapists encounter with a patient involves the meeting of two individuals, which includes but also extends beyond the role-defined therapist-patient encounter.

Perls believed that individual therapy was obsolete, both inefficient and often ineffective. He suggested that work in groups had more to offer, whether the work involved the entire group took the form of interaction between the therapist and one individual within the group. Group is valuable in providing microcosmic world situation in which people can explore their attitudes and behaviour toward each other. Group support in the “safe emergency” of the therapeutic situation also can be extremely useful to an individual, as can identification with other members’ conflicts and their working out of those conflicts.

Living with attention to the present could lead to psychological growth. One's present experience at any given moment is the only possible present experience and the condition for being satisfied and fulfilled in one's life is simply wholehearted acceptance of that present experience. Perls suggested that the hierarchy of needs principle is always operating in the human individual. The most urgent need, the most important unfinished situation will always emerge if one is simply aware of one's experience of oneself, moment to moment.

5.3 How Would I Work with the Client Suffering from Meaninglessness?

5.3.1 Formulation of the Problem

Client who comes to therapy may formulate the problem in many ways. Sometimes the meaninglessness is easier to see, other times it is hiding behind something else. But if client comes to therapy and starts right away with the question "what is the meaning of life?" it is for sure too wide for a problem-formulation. To accept that kind of formulation I am likely to share clients' sense of entrapment and be reminded of my own personal incomplete quest for meaning in life. The problem might seem insoluble - how is it possible for one to solve something for someone else one cannot solve for oneself?

So not to find ways to circumvent the whole question in therapy, my first step would be to NOT to accept at face value the clients problem. Instead I would rigorously examine the legitimacy of the complaint that life has no meaning. If one analyzes the ground on which the complaint rests- that is the meaning of the question „what meaning is there in life"- one learns that, often to a great extent, the question is primitive and contaminated. The question assumes that there is a meaning to life that a particular patient is unable to locate. The question is in conflict with the existential view of the human being as a meaning-giving subject. There is no pre-existing design, no purpose „out there". How could there be one if each of us constitutes our own „out there".

Another major problem inherent in questions about life meaning is that they are so often confounded with a host of other issues. When these other concerns are dissected and discarded, the patients primary meaning crisis is less lethal and far more manageable.

5.3.2 How would I Practice According to what I Saw Important

As doing Gestalt therapy doesn't involve practicing specific techniques, my focus as a therapist would be on the attitude with respect, humility and compassion (Rosner, 1987). Respecting the other means doing it so out of awareness for where the person stands, placing no judgements on him and receiving him totally. Compassion getting in touch with persons struggles and hopes; joys and sorrows, not necessarily liking him or wanting to change him, just being aware of his situation makes possible to experience empathic relationship. Humility leads to truth about us, others, our world and our relationship to these.

With that attitude I would focus on next 4 cornerstones of gestalt therapy: Creating good contact; staying in the here and now; noticing the issue of responsibility; and helping to widen awareness.

I would examine the quality of the contact I have with client and take notice of what might be disturbing the contact- if the way client avoids contact is saying something about the way client has got herself into trouble. The therapy is a good situation of "here and now" where the client is mostly doing the same things, he is doing in life. So in the here and now, some valuable hints are available finding the ways to help the client- concerning also the amount of responsibility the client seems to be taking in her life and awareness she has about herself overall.

Creating a good contact is crucial for building trust. And in a trusting relationship important issues are most likely to come out. Also the remaining issue of trusting or not trusting in every new moment is an important source or reflection of the clients' troubles.

So after reformulating client's complaint of meaninglessness in order to discover the presence of „contaminating” issues, it is possible to concentrate on much narrower issues. The experience of meaninglessness may be a „stand-in” for anxiety associated with death, groundlessness, and isolation. Often the therapist may be useful to the client by maintaining a relatively culture-free perspective toward meaning, and by helping the patient appreciate that “meaning” is highly relative. The formula that life has no clear purpose, it follows that life is not worth living is based on culture-bound, arbitrary assumptions.

To help clients with meaninglessness I find it very important that the therapist herself has a mind-set for the particular subject. It may often seem at first, that client is living very meaningful life (fulfilled with material things and goals). Therefore the therapist must be attuned to the meaning, she must think about the overall focus and direction of the client's life. Is the client in any way reaching beyond himself or herself, beyond the humdrum daily routine of staying alive? Therapy is rarely successful unless the therapist helps the patient focus something beyond these pursuits. If the therapist has a heightened, sensitivity to the importance of meaning in life, then the client will, through picking up subtle cues from the therapist, become similarly sensitive to the issue. The therapist will implicitly and explicitly wonder about the clients belief systems, inquire deeply into the loving of another, ask about long-range hopes and goals, explore creative interests and pursuits, takt an in-depth history of clients efforts to express himself of herself creatively.

Frankl has said that happiness cannot be pursued, it can only ensue (Yalom, 1980). The more we deliberately search for self-satisfaction, the more will it elude us. Therefore I find it also important to help clients take their gaze off themselves, from the source of their neuroses and toward the intact parts of their personalities and the meanings that are available for them in the world- to help the patient develop curiosity and concern for others. Sometimes it means supporting verbally the healthy ideas and parts in life the client is presenting; other times giving better meaning systems to some situations or cases presented by the client. I find it a good way to bolster up clients weak inner support.

When I was drowning in the Deep Sea of meaninglessness, one sharp notion was very handy to get the other perspective to my life. A friend said that he perceived me being so narcissistic about my huge problems that no one could help me with- almost being proud of them. That made me think, and that made me first time really want to DO something about my problems, to LET SOMEONE in for a help. I understood my responsibility of making myself so miserable and not putting effort to taking the help offered.

In therapy I, as therapist, am (if everything goes well ☺) to be the personification of the healthy relationship the client never had (at least it is supposed to be so). So the contact with client, where I express myself is itself something healing. The client comes to therapy with all the neurotic patterns, trying to trick the next person into them. Not going into counter transference with the client is itself healing, even if it is sometimes hard to perceive as support. The client could get frustrated and angry encountering the resistance, perceiving it as abandonment, repelling, not understanding, ignorance or attack. It is the therapist skill to STAY in contact while refusing to go into confluence.

The experience could make the client reappraise many of his thoughts, fears and values in life. Finding new values and new ways of seeing things, life could get more meaningful already. One very new value for client could also be the truth about the “I-thou” contact- that the therapist is refusing to take responsibility for the client.

In a good contact there could appear a “fertile void” that client could fulfil with something healthy that has never tried out before. For example: expressing “dangerous” feelings or being creative in a new way. The fact that therapist is supportively frustrating the neurotic patterns and is supportively (also sometimes frustratingly) available for the healthy sides is healing for the client. In contact with the therapist, the client is learning something new for the social relationships in his life outside the therapy.

The therapists’ task is also to keep in mind the “goal” of the therapy sometimes. The client who is not aware of all the ways he is avoiding solutions, needs to be grounded. Good way is to ask questions to bring the client from overall intellectualizations to the very present here and now moment, ask the client to spy the contact and feelings in the present moment. It is also useful to examine and maybe lessen the mind-body split in client.

So in a good contact, staying with the issues of the here and now, taking responsibility and being aware, the client is most likely to discover the meaning of living in the very moment here and now. Luckily that could widen later to the living outside the therapy as well.

5.3.3 What Other Approaches Could Be Mixed In

Writing this thesis I happened to read some useful hints from other authors that could also be handy with a client in therapy. I mention some of these here.

Some eastern techniques are suggested to use with clients who are severely divided within themselves intellectually (are of several minds about things), suffer misery and depression growing out of their ambivalence, indecision and never-ceasing obsessiveness, and lead the major portion of their lives „in their head”, are fixated upon their intellect as their primary means of interacting with the world (obsessive-compulsives). Also those who are suffering from identity crises or those who suffer from „existential anguish”, aimless personas lacking any apparent meaning in life and in general any persons seeking more out of life or to maximize life (Smith, 1977).

Koan

Koan is frustrating the intellect (with contradicting statements) so that a person is not able to see the answer. The learning point is that all the answers are not in “thinking”. Instead the answer could be in acting or feeling something.

Zazen

Intensive concentration and emptying ones mind from all the thoughts, ideas and pictures, so that only the concentration stays.

Mondo

Conversation between master and student, student asks certain questions and master relies or fails to reply in such a way that the student must somehow find the solution to his own question, aided by the masters often baffling response.

The easiness is in „no thinking” as can be seen if we compare Rodin’s piece of sculpture „the thinker”, a man with tightened muscles of body and head resting on fist, with that of the sitting Buddha, serenely smiling and composed, we see effort versus effortlessness. Effort and striving mean a goal not yet reached. Thinking cannot solve the most basic problem of Existence.

Maslow thinks that it is important that the body be given its due (Fadiman & Frager, 1976). Ascetism, self-denial, deliberate rejection of the demands of the organism tend to produce a diminished, stunted or crippled organism, and brings self-actualization to only a very few, exceptionally strong individuals. He mentions the importance of intense stimulation of the physical senses in peak experiences, which are often triggered by natural beauty, art, music or sexual experience. He also indicated that training in dance, art, and other physical media of expression could provide an important supplement to traditional, cognitively oriented education.

Therefore he suggests experiencing life fully, vividly, selflessly, with concentration and total absorption, to have awareness about what is going on within or around us. He advises to make each decision a choice for growth (between growth and safety). Listen to your own tastes; learn to trust your own better choices. Be prepared to be unpopular, get rid of illusions and false notions. Learn what you are good at and what your potentialities are not. Opening you up to yourself in this way means identifying defences-and then finding the courage to give them up

5.4 Some Other Possibilities for Therapy in Estonia

I look briefly at the other therapies that are available in Estonia and how would they probably deal with the issue.

5.4.1 *Psychoanalysis*

Psychoanalysis deals with the energy, instincts and resistances. It claims that all the inner conflicts are the counteractions of the inner forces of psyche. A person is an aggregate of intra psychic counteractions. Disorders arise when energies are blocked. Something is unrealized and unsatisfied. Opposite forces create conflicts.

The roots of the problems are seen in childhood and the cure is to reveal unconscious material, to help the client to get aware of the crucial information. To eliminate the dysfunction one has to restructure the whole personality. The methods used in therapy are mostly free associations and interpretation of dreams. Also the transference happening from client to therapist is used as a source of information- to reveal traumatic relationships, traits of the person one has had conflict with.

In classical psychoanalysis there are no contacts allowed between therapist and client. Even eye contact is avoided. The therapist is supposed to be the white screen to project ones relationships to. Confrontation lies in the facing of ones own problems. Therapist gives meanings to the situations clients bring to therapy and investigates on the interpretations. The relationship is uneven- like father and child. Therapist chooses the material to work with and also chooses the interpretations. Client has obligations to present the material. This kind of relationship is built up from the beginning with contracts and settlements (Corey, 2001).

If a person with meaninglessness struggle comes to psychoanalysis he would probably be talking about fear and anxiety towards different things. He would be asked a lot of details of his life and past to construct the picture. Psychoanalyst would probably not take his descriptions as objective ones and would seek for the traumas in childhood that would make the person see things that way. Analyst would interpret his situation as a scission between reasonable and what seems to be at the bottom of his feelings and behaviour (the reasonable always wins). The client would probably get very accurate analysis and list of the reasons he feels the way he feels today, probably the accent would be on the getting rid of the feelings. So he would know a lot, but could still feel lonely- as he would be left without a contact during the therapy process. Could be, that he would get some more norms to live up to in his life. He would be treated as an "it" in I-it relationship. There would be few tolerance and acceptance, lot of demands and rules, more outer than inner wisdom, definitely mind-body split. It is difficult to say, if he could have a risk to confront with reality at all, as the therapist puts minimal of him to the therapy situation and main theme circulates around fantasies.

If the client doesn't have enough power, fixity of purpose to commit for a long time therapy, he could also be recognized as not suitable for the therapy. I see psychoanalysis more like a hobby than impendent help. It is intellectual and lonely way where the client gets very smart.

5.4.2 System Therapy

System therapists see that therapy is not listening with one's heart, but targeted and goal oriented activity based on a specific theory and relieving or eliminating clients' complaints. The efficacy of such action must be corroborated with researches. There must be clear conception of a human being, idea of how the problems arise and how they are relieving with clearly described techniques. System therapy is based on psychodynamic, experiential, cognitive-behavioural and system approaches.

Differently from other approaches they see the problem being outside of a person. Relationships make a person act in some way, that looking from outside may seem like a disorder inside of a person. Actually a person is coerced to act that way to stay alive. So the relationships must be healed to lose their meaning and influence that way. The good relationship between people is one where no-one needs to expose disorders. Techniques used are interviews mostly, circular interviews to gather as much information as possible. Therapist and client are uneven; therapist asks questions in a way that client himself answering the question gets new information. There are no norms; norm is that everyone in the system is satisfied. Therapist helps client to achieve the goal. Both can change in the process (Küünarpuu, 2001).

If a person with meaninglessness struggle comes to system therapy he would probably be talking about unsatisfying relationships with people around him. The therapist would probably see him being a victim of the non-functioning system where people are influencing each other at the same time. So the therapist would concentrate a lot on the people around him and in his past. He would be talking about the symptoms that are evident of the malfunction and suggest modifying the signals client is sending out to other people. They would concentrate on the behaviour modification. Due to the therapy, the client could experience the relationships getting easier and also life happier. Still some deep questions of meaninglessness of all things could be left unanswered. If the client is wondering about his overall path in life he would not get any good answers to that. He would know how to improve things, but no why those things at the first place and where to go in his life in bigger picture.

The therapy is effective placation of complaints; there is few human contact or recognition of what the person really is. It is more like achieving a goal. A person is not treated as equal there and probably no excellent ideas or insights about life would come out of the process. Therapy would include a lot on practical work and training.

5.4.3 Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy

Cognitive therapy is very effective training and needs a lot of goal oriented effort. It is dealing with traceable and measurable. Every action is based on what person has learned or not learned. Malfunction happens when a person has misunderstood or learned something wrong way, disorder is an unintentionally learned reaction to the stimulus of environment that is repeating. People have to learn new reactions to those stimuli and create new connections. In therapy lists of problems are composed and client is learned techniques to practice in everyday life. To erase old connections de-sensibilisation is used (exposing stimuli in the state of deep relaxation- no anxiety). It is supposed to carry over to the real life. Therapist is a teacher who knows what is right, so the relationship is uneven. There is no understanding of things, more training, dry and operationalized treatment, it works well with phobias.

Cognitive therapy is based on the hypothesis that problems come from mistakes in information processing and non-functional beliefs and attitudes. And those attitudes activate in critical situations causing negative automatic thoughts, which bring up emotional conditions like fear, anger and guilt; and behavioural problems like avoiding certain situations, reacting non functional way, problems in relating, conflicts etc (Kalaus, 2003).

If a person with meaninglessness struggle comes to cognitive therapy he would probably be talking about irrational discontentedness. The therapist would probably diagnose him and put him into some category of disorders. Then they would construct an action plan for the client to put into practice. The therapist would explain to him the more or less logical way the client has got himself to the place he is with his thoughts and feelings, and show the client that those feelings are irrational and needless. She would divide his problems into many sub-problems, and have specific improvement technique for every one of them.

This therapy is even more logical and far from feelings than psychoanalysis- a person is treated like a computer. The therapy is effective, short and cheap. It is very safe and all-encompassing for the therapist, but not so enriching for the client. It tells to the client that feelings are not ok. There are few acceptances of the flaws and defects and instead a lot of rules and norms, there is no bigger picture. The outcome could be peace of mind but surely no peak experiences. The goal is more important than the being itself and being who one is.

5.5 What Society Has To Offer For the Person Who Is Looking For the Meaning

Considering what would happen to a person who is wondering about the meaning in life and does not happen to come to therapy, I find some better and worse solutions. Nowadays a lot of people's lifestyles are discussed in the magazines and newspapers. Also many advices are given there; there is health magazines that introduce courses and people involved with some interesting hobbies or school of thought. A person can join groups starting from rebirthing to Jehovah Witnesses or visit different gym trainings to look after ones body and art galleries to look after ones soul. Also in theatre there are plays that can give insights and second looks to ones problems, good books from self-help themes to autobiographies of interesting people are also useful.

The better solutions, as I see it, are those that support person's inner wisdom and help finding inner power. Also those that give inspiration or new ways of seeing things are good for a person who is looking for "something". Those that give only strong outer support without any inner insights or possibilities to regain more responsibility of ones life, I don't consider really helpful, but more like making oneself blind to the existential issues.

The worse solution, as I see it, is when such kind of person ends up with a doctor who prescribes antidepressants, especially when the person is not depressed but just wondering about existential themes and is not able to find out ones own whether he needs medication.

It is up to every single person to find what is best for him and most suitable help he is able to receive in his troubles. What I see is that it is better if the solution has to do with creativity, meeting other people, getting new information or new feelings, or developing ones physical health, not with anaesthetizing ones senses to the whole problem.

6. CONCLUSION

According to Gestalt psychology, our perceptual neuropsychological organization is such that we instantaneously pattern incoming random stimuli trying to fit things into familiar explanatory framework. When failing to do that, we feel tense, annoyed and dissatisfied and this feeling stays until we succeed to discover some larger, recognizable pattern.

This is how we also approach our existential situation. We experience dysphoria in the face of an indifferent, unpatterned world and we search for possible patterns, explanations and the meaning of existence. We feel helpless if we cannot find a suitable pattern and get a sense of mastery when we believe that we have deciphered meaning. Whatever the meaning-schema we discover, it is better than no schema at all.

This is the difficulty of being free, that one has to figure out one's own meaning- it would be much easier to think, that some meaning is out there somewhere, waiting to be discovered. And it is probably not; this is the responsibility of a person to live the life as meaningfully as possible, to keep the faith and hope, that things have meaning in life. Facing the unknown life without coordinated, comforting structure, we get anxious- so we need meaning to lessen the anxiety. The meaning we formulate for ourselves gives birth to our values, which in turn, support our sense of meaning and gives the source for our decisions.

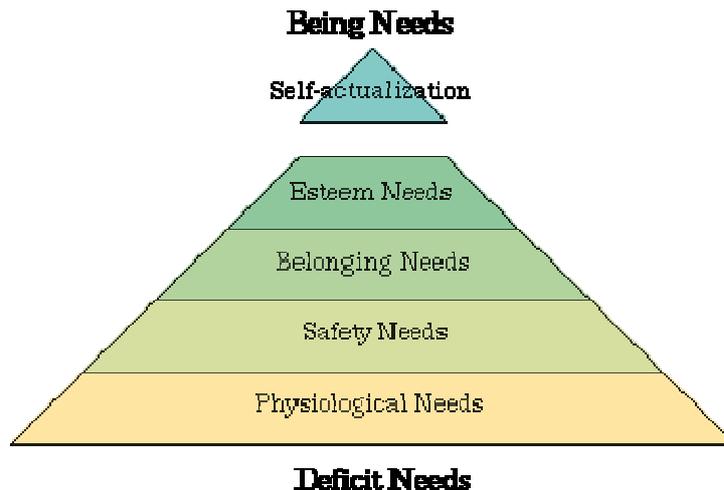
Creating the meaning for ourselves, we get the feeling that we have mattered in this world, that our lives do not end with us, but we have made significant difference for ourselves and others. This thesis is about finding the ways to live with such meaningfulness.

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Appendix 1

Abraham Maslow The Hierarchy of Needs



Being Needs:

Also B love, B thinking. Being motivation refers primarily to enjoyment and satisfaction in the present or to the desire to seek a positively valued goal (growth motivation or metamotivation). B thinking is not related to giving judgements or comparing- it is more like a being aware of what is, following it. B love is love for the essence, the „being” of other, non-possessive, not intruding. Letting things be.

Deficit Needs:

Also D love, D thinking. Deficiency motivation includes a need to change the present state of affairs because it is felt to be unsatisfactory or frustrating. D love is the viewpoint of others fulfilling ones needs, out of a need for self-esteem or sex, out of fear of loneliness. First four levels in the hierarchy of needs, Maslow calls deficit needs, or D-needs. If you don't have enough of something -- i.e. you have a deficit -- you feel the need.

Carl Gustav Jung

The Shadow:

It is everything in us that is unconscious, repressed, undeveloped and denied. These are dark rejected aspects of our being as well as light, so there is positive undeveloped potential in the Shadow that we don't know about because anything that is unconscious, we don't know about.

Jung said, our shadow was 90% gold.

Martin Buber

I - thou

Martin Buber speaks about I-thou relationship as a certain inclination to meet people. He says: "I felt I have not the right to want to change another if I am not open to be changed by him as far as it is legitimate."

Appendix 2

The way to meaningful and satisfactory being, or Buddha-nature as Zen Buddhism names it, is described by those steps:

- At the beginning of the spiritual quest, those who are searching must eventually come to believe that they can „find” the Buddha-nature within themselves. It is not that it has ever really gone astray, but the searching begins at the point where one has turned his back on his True-nature, and cannot see it anymore. He is confronted by a maze of crisscrossing roads. Greed for worldly gain and dread of loss spring up like searing flames, ideas of right and wrong dart out like daggers.
- Next step is intellectual understanding of basic truths, not experiencing them yet. One is not yet able to distinguish well from evil, truth from falsity, has not entered the gate but sees in a tentative way, the tracks.
- The first direct experience. If he will listen intently to everyday sounds, he will come to realization and eventually see the very Source. The senses are no different from this true Source. In every activity the Source is manifestly present.
- Next the goal is to extend the awareness of the Buddha-nature to all activities and to manifest that awareness in all circumstances. Breaking old habits, which is not easy.
- Training, precise and perfect. Every act, every thought begins to reflect the true self.
- Discipline is now embraced as a source of real freedom and satisfaction. The struggle is over; gain and loss no longer affect him.
- Distinction between religious and worldly categories disappears, as everything is seen to possess the Buddha nature. No distinction between enlightenment and ignorance.
- Experience of void, essential nothingness of all creation.
- The new dynamic appreciation of the world. Nature is not merely void or sacred, it is. Every aspect of the world can serve as a perfect mirror to show us ourselves.
- Returning to the activities of the early stages with a different perspective. Helping all other beings without limitations.