



An Interview with Dick Price

Esalen cofounder Dick Price died in a hiking accident in November 1985. These are excerpts from an interview conducted in April, 1985 over a two-day period. The interviewer was Wade Hudson, a San Francisco writer and activist who was involved in an innovation cooperative living situation. He had brought some members of his community to Esalen to participate in Gestalt workshop with Dick. Like Dick, Wade had once been incarcerated in a mental hospital. He and Dick had connected through organizations working for patients' rights. Dick offered weekly gestalt sessions in early Esalen Massage Certification trainings.

In celebration of what would have been Dick's 70th birthday (10/12/00), here we have some of his thoughts and memories.

WH: How did the vision of Esalen develop? When did you decide to do something here?

DP: I got out of my year and a half in mental hospitals on Thanksgiving Day of 1957. After what was done to me in the hospital I didn't have much energy to follow up my previous interests. I had been interested in being a research psychologist or a kind of anthropologist of mental health and illness. Then I had my own personal experiences, going into a state-labeled 'psychosis' and then my experience of the mental hospital system. After I got out of the hospital I worked up in Chicago area where my family was. I planned to save up, both financially and emotionally. I wanted to do something other than spend my life in business. My intention was to find a place where people who were going through the type of experience could simply get better treatment and to utilize whatever I might find.

WH: So that was in the late '50s and early '60s.

DP: I moved back to San Francisco from Chicago in May of '60. I was living in a cooperative house in the Upper Fillmore for about a year. The last few months in the city I was living in the Aurobindo Ashram—CIF—The Cultural Integration Fellowship, in San Francisco. That's where I met Michael Murphy, who was in residence there. He mentioned that his grandmother had this place in the country. I had been talking

to a friend who was a psychiatrist who had himself been hospitalized. He had gone into psychiatry and we had talked about finding a place that would be more than the ordinary mental hospital. Michael's interest wasn't specifically in this area. He had spent over a year in the Aurobindo Ashram in India and his interests were more contemplative and intellectual. So we had originally talked about taking over the place as a conference center that would in some way apply itself to a range of interests: medication, religion, particular experiences, whether religious or psychotic. The only definite direction we had were the people we knew like Haridas Chaudhuri, who was head of CIF and had been professor at the Academy Asian Studies.

WH: What had drawn you to the Cultural Integration Fellowship?

DP: I had been a student of Chaudhuri at the time of my going into what you might call psychosis—which I simply call “a state.” I had been a student at the American Academy of Asian Studies in late 1955 and early 1956. Chaudhuri had been a professor there and Alan Watts had been dean. When I moved back to San Francisco I started taking the programs with Watts and Chaudhuri again. Chaudhuri had started his own organization—cultural Integration Fellowship. So I started taking some courses from Alan Watts, who had his own set-up by that time and was no longer part of the Academy. I also went to a few of Chaudhuri's lectures. Chaudhuri's lectures were given at CIE. I moved in there.

WH: Was there a particular tuning point where Esalen took shape in the form we see today?

DP: There were a number of turning points. The first was simply taking the place over, which we did in October of 1961, but at that time our business was rather mixed. We were putting up the people who were building the bridge, just taking “off-the-road” traffic. We had started with the connections we had, through people like Alan Watts, and begun to set up programs. I think one of the first programs—it was probably early '62—was Alan Watts. Alan did his own program from his own mailing list. At that time we tended to use people who had their own followings, their own mailing lists, their own programs, and we would just provide the place as a conference center for them. Then gradually, I think the following year, we began to get out our own catalogue and formed Esalen as a separate entity. Before that we were Big Sur Hot Springs, Incorporated, and then we started running weekends, we gradually got a few five-day programs, and we were still running it for just “drop-in” traffic. Then gradually—I think by 1967—we took the Big Sur Hot Springs sign down and put Esalen sign up and attempted to make the whole place a conference center. The big turning points were the people who came in residence here, primarily Fritz Perls in 1964, Virginia Satir about the same time, Will Schutz in 1967, and then other people who became what we called associates-in-residence, including Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks. They weren't living here but had a place about thirteen miles away in Big Sur.

WH: Would you say more about what motivated you and why you were dissatisfied with what was available at that time? Why did you want to do something different?

DP: Different in the area of what's called mental health?

WH: Yes.

DP: Well, very much of my own experience, as you know from your own experiences, was quite brutalizing. Rather than seeking someone through a particular type of experience, it was an effort to suppress and negate in every possible way what I was going through. There was a fundamental mistake being made and that mistake was supposing that the healing process was the disease, rather than the process whereby the disease is healed. The disease, if any, was the state previous to the “psychosis.” The so-called “psychosis” was an attempt toward spontaneous healing, and it was a movement toward health, not a movement toward disease.

WH: What was it like for you experiencing this at that time?

DP: It's a little difficult to talk about. Certainly a range of experience. In some categories it would be called mystical, really a re-owning and discovery of parts of myself in relation to a larger cosmos. But don't try to talk to a psychiatrist in these terms; to them, this is simply a symptom of “very deep-lying illness.”

WH: What kind of space would you have wanted? What would have been helpful for you at that time?

DP: Well, a space like Esalen, where it is possible to be outside and not locked up, a place where it's possible to get a good diet, a place where it's possible to live through experience rather than having it blotted out, a place where there aren't the same negative self-definitions of someone going through this type of experience. Also, people available who are not doing what psychiatrists, or at least many of them, characteristically do.

WH: And doing what instead?

DP: In my own work I have three keys: trust process, stay with process, and get out of the way. In other words, allow the space for what is happening without suppression and with trust. Don't suppose that a particular socially-conditioned way of life is the only correct way of being, and then define that, rather arbitrarily, as "health." There's a mystification in the language of psychiatry—at least as I experienced it—and given that mystification, there is justification for all sorts of brutalities.

WH: Your interest in Gestalt came through Fritz Perls. Do you remember your first encounter with Fritz?

DP: Actually he came here and did a program Christmas of 1963 and my first impression was not good. As it turned out Fritz had just had a heart attack and thought he might die at any moment. In a lot of ways he wasn't the most pleasant person socially, even when healthy, so it took a couple of years, actually two years from that day, for me to really start working with him. I started working with him around Christmas time of 1965, New Years of '66. And I was very impressed by what the man was doing and how different he was in the group than I had experienced him in just regular conversation.

WH: What impressed you about his work in groups?

DP: He was insightful. He was present. He was compassionate. All the things I didn't view him as when I was seeing him around the lodge or the property. I was very impressed that this man, a psychiatrist, was doing such good work compared to what I had experienced. As it worked out, Fritz was not qualified by the State of California to do psychiatry. There was nothing here that was psychiatry. A person can be a psychiatrist but they are not to do psychiatry here, they're to do experiential education. So he effectively defined a new category. I shouldn't say it's new. By Fritz's comments, Gestalt is as old as the world. It's a type of healing that's closer to so-called "primitive societies," a category of shamanistic healing and ritual. These approaches are humane, they come into contact with people as people, not as objects that are to be some way fixed.

WH: How long was it before you started doing Gestalt yourself?

DP: I started working with Fritz in early 1966. Then in the spring of '69 I had a second psychosis, largely the effect of not being able to finish what I was experiencing thirteen years previously. Most of this experience I was able to work out in Big Sur. Not here [at Esalen]. I was actually staying with a couple of non-psychiatrist friends who had their own properties and who would protect my space for me to experience just what I was experiencing. So rather than having the year and a half of hospitalization that I had to go through in 1956 and '57, I managed with only ten days. After I got out, which would have been the summer of 1969, Fritz was reestablishing himself. He left here after six years and reestablished himself at the Gestalt Institute of Canada at Adelaide College on Vancouver Island. I went up there near the end of 1969 for two of his last three teaching months. At the end of '69 I left Canada and came back here, Fritz left Canada and went for a tour of Europe that winter, got sick in Europe, and sicker still when he got back to this country, and never got back to Canada. He died en route in Chicago in March of '70. In the months I spent with him in Canada there was a training institute. I had gone up there less to train than to integrate the experience of my previous year and he said, "Dick, it's time for you to go out and teach and do your own groups." And so I started doing that when I got back here in 1970.

WH: So is Gestalt as you practice it fundamentally the same as you learned it from Fritz or have you made changes?

DP: Well, Fritz made a strong point of saying: "I do not want to train a lot of little Fritzs." What I got from Fritz I put into my own wine bottle. There are basic similarities and there are a lot of differences too.

I'm Dick and I'm not Fritz. I have a lot of appreciation for Fritz—for Fritz's actual allowance to "take what I have and do your own thing with it." He was very good that way. I don't think a standardized school of Gestalt really exists. There are attempts at Gestalt Institutes, but I don't think Gestalt is something to be standardized and I don't really know all that much about Gestalt institutes. I had never really been interested. I had my relationship to a master and as far as I can see there's no reason for me to go to a Gestalt school, even if such a thing were possible, which I don't think it is in terms of standardizing a product.

WH: Try to picture someone who knows nothing about Gestalt. How would you describe what you do?

DP: I would have to say what I don't do because Gestalt is not a "doing." What Fritz called doctor/patient, that dyad, I refer to as reflector and initiator. The initiator is the person who formerly was in the "patient" role. My function as reflector is simply to be available to reflect and clarify whatever comes up in the person's process. So I'm never defining how a person should be. I'm available in a particular way—a mirror is a good analogy. The initiator remains responsible for his or her own experience. This is very unlike standard psychiatry, where you're put, if not in a jail cell, certainly in diagnostic pigeonholes.

WH: Would you describe Open Seat? Is that the central form that your work takes?

DP: Yes, the central form. Let's say there is a group of fifteen sitting in a circle. There are some basic awareness exercises that I give.

WH: You call that Basic Practice?

DP: Basic Practice is attention to breath, to movement, to kinesthetic sensations, to sensations in the body—feeling state, emotion, thought, image. And what's important again is a mode of present-centered contact, which doesn't judge, that is brought, to that. What's important and basic in the practice isn't change. The practice is not there to change anyone. What's important is contact. I function as an auxiliary to encourage and facilitated that contact—that is, contact with one's own experience not defined by anyone else from outside.

WH: So after the awareness/meditative exercises the opportunity is there for people to join you on the Open Seat?

DP: Or not.

WH: Or not.

DP: The authority to make choices remains with what we call the initiator. It's quite different from patient/therapist roles. The initiator designates an active role, while the word "patient" implies, at least to me, someone who lies back and is acted on. The role of the doctor is, for me, one who acts. Therapy is active. So this isn't therapy; it's a practice. This isn't something the therapist does to a patient. It's what two people in complementary roles do together.

WH: So if someone moves up on to the Open Seat, what happens then? How do you respond?

DP: What happens is whatever happens. I respond however I respond, but in a way to reflect and clarify. For example, often people start talking about a certain situation. Rather than talking about the past or speculating on the future, we bring everything real and present, so a situation in your childhood—rather than telling me about that, you bring that present in imagination and talk about that as if it were happening now. A continual instruction is simply to make real and present. That can also be true for future situation, a future imagining. My function as a reflector is to facilitate the initiator's imagination in a way that is present rather than speculative in past or future tense. Imagine you are there. Where are you? What are you doing? What is your experience? What is your experience of other people? Part of the Gestalt language is using the present tense. This is also true in dreamwork. Rather than talking about a dream or attempting to analyze, we enter the dream imagery, become the various parts, no matter how unworldly. You can become an animal, you can become a house, but everything is present-centered and handled by entering and experiencing rather than talking about from a distance.

WH: You say that the purpose is not to change. It seems as though most people participate because they want to change somehow, to resolve something.

DP: The practice is a practice of contacting “what is” and letting change be something that happens rather than something that is made to happen or even has to happen. A person might come up with a certain idea of how they want to change, enter their experience, and find they are satisfied with the change that happens, even though it is quite different from what they would have imagined. So to be open to what is, rather than having to define what has to be, is very important to the practice, important for the person initiating to have that attitude, and also for the person who is the reflector relationship. As reflector, I’m not defining how you, the initiator, have to be, I might have some ideas as I see you work, but again, the authority remains with you. I’m not going to push you in a direction even if I know that this is what’s going to be “good for.” Then authority would come back to me. My only authority is in being able to define the structure of Gestalt Practice itself. You remain the authority for your experience; you remain the authority for what choices you make.

WH: So is a part of your intention to reflect in such a way as to assist people to intensify or deepen their awareness?

DP: My function is to be present for people as a mirror. There is much you can do yourself, so I’m present as a mirror. One example I could give: If you wanted to shave, you could do it without a mirror, right? Yet, having a mirror there is going to help you in the process of shaving. It’s not that you couldn’t do that yourself. So that’s a pretty good analogy of what I do. Another one of my primary functions is aiding you to hold the avoided figure. You might find yourself getting angry for example, or resentful, or sad—things you think you shouldn’t be. I just say, “Hey, hold on a minute. Contact that sense of anger or sadness or irritation or whatever it is.” And I’m leaving it to your own experiences. You could choose not to follow my direction, but if you do slow down and enter, what you find most times is with contact comes a certain type of self-regulation. In other words, if you feel sad, you can allow crying, and in allowing crying you no longer feel sad. That is a change that is allowed to happen. What’s primary here is not the goal of “don’t be sad,” it’s simply “Contact your sadness.” And you may stay sad—no guarantees. For me the three elements, the three jewels of Gestalt Practice are awareness, choice, and trust. Trust in your power of self-regulation, given the exercise of your ability to contact experience and to choose. And the more you discover that trust, the less you need a person – even like me—and certainly the less you’ll need that average psychiatrist.

WH: You say what is primary is not any specific goal or striving to achieve a particular state, but it seems like there are secondary or implicit goals or values that are a part of the Gestalt attitude. I’m trying to clarify what those values are.

DP: There are few people who come into a group not wanting some change or some resolution. So that’s always going to be there. I’m not trying to make something bad out of it. But the practice is one of contact and not change, and that takes a certain reorientation. A person might want to resolve something. There’s another way he wants it to be. But what you might notice is that the more he wants to do that, the more he tries to keep things in the “why” rather than in the “how” framework, the more he ties himself up and effectively remains the same. So it’s a paradox. Like Aikido, there’s a kind of Taoism: by allowing, change happens. With allowing and with contact rather than forcing, change happens. So there is a philosophy of non-forcing and an openness to what happens rather than having a firm definition of how you have to be.

WH: What would you say are the secondary or implicit goals or values of the Gestalt attitude? Clarify, simplicity, honesty, are some values that seem to me to be included.

DP: One is moving from environmental support to self-support. You can think of this in terms of individual self-support, but you can also think of it in terms of group self-support, where there isn’t an outside dependence. Rajneesh was very influential, at least in his writings. You talk about the issue of environmental to self-support. Fritz would almost overemphasize this. He was so committed not to be dependent on anyone else that the theory reflects to some degree his personal pathology. What I like about Rajneesh are the terms that he used: moving from dependence to independence to the recognition of the need for interdependence. In Gestalt we talk about desired directions, and one would be from environmental support to self-support, still with the recognition of interdependence. In other words, not the

position of self-support in the sense that I don't need anyone else, but the recognition of need within certain boundaries. And part of self-support is knowledge of when and when not to use environmental support. There is not a rigid dichotomy between the two. The more I allow you room to utilize your own capacities, the better off you are. Self-support doesn't deny a certain type of functional environmental support. As Fritz would put it, "You learn to wipe your own ass," either as an individual or as a fairly creative, self-supportive group of people.

WH: Are there other values?

DP: Awareness is a value. Awareness in itself is a good thing. Life—vitality—is a value. Fritz was a patient of Wilhelm Reich for ten months. So some of the Reichian values such as vitality and aliveness are at least implicit in Fritzian Gestalt values. Reich referred to an "emotional plague," where the implicit values are "Life can't be trusted." You have to be able to trust. So trust is a primary value. I would say awareness, choice, and trust are all values. With trust comes openness and honesty. Trust in yourself, learning to trust the other. I may have some good reason not to be open and honest with some people. Again it comes back to choice, but in the interest of life and vitality. As relationships become more and more established, we do learn to trust.

WH: When, if ever, are you disappointed with a Gestalt session? Are there things that you want to happen that if they don't happen you will be disappointed?

DP: Well, at one time I would say this was more true. I would see how much could happen when someone would willingly contact or enter the Gestalt play, and this type of session is likely to be a lot more satisfying. A person who really contacts their experience feeds back with a degree of clarity. For example, when I can see a person entering into sadness, going into grief work and coming out the other side with clarity and openness and sense of life, that's satisfying for the person, that's satisfying for me. I've been doing this for nineteen years as an initiator and sixteen years as a reflector. What I've learned to do is to really make it a practice for myself. So part of the ideal for both parts of the dyad, who, remember, are doing a practice together rather than one doing something to the other, is to make a practice of it. And in the practice there's equality. The Buddhists call it the Wisdom of Equality when equal attention is given to when equal attention is given to whatever emerges. So whether it's a real interesting and vital session, or one that is not interesting and not vital, I can bring the same clarity of consciousness to either one. Whatever is presented to me is an object of my awareness. Just like a pain in my arm or a real good feeling in my heart. One is not so pleasant. One is quite pleasant. But I can bring attention equally to either object. I'm doing that with people, too. So every session for me is equally an opportunity for my own practice. I am no longer left disappointed inasmuch as whoever is there is providing me with this opportunity. I can be equally grateful to the most "disappointing" session and the most alive session.

WH: I can see how you could draw value out of a session that might also be less vital. Does that mean you find all sessions equally satisfying?

DP: No, no. (laughing). I'm not to that point yet—but I'm working toward it! There's less of a difference. I'm able to maintain nourishment by following the Basic Practice that I give other people: by being aware and centered in my own breath, taking responsibility for my own experience, and being available in a particular way that doesn't push and doesn't have to have anything happen from outside. And, yes, there is a relative pleasure and satisfaction in sessions where that certain something does happen. But I wouldn't use the word "disappointment" now. There's relative satisfaction. Any session is satisfying; some sessions are just more satisfying (laughter).

WH: How is your approach different from others, would you say?

DP: In relationship to Fritz—Fritz had a background in theater and acting. I don't, and I don't have a whole lot of interest in theater, really, and so I would say that Fritz was more entertaining. And he wouldn't stay with a person as long in process as I would, so there was less permission. Permission is either given explicitly or implied. There was less implied permission to go deeply into emotion. So I'm more available than Fritz at what I would call a deeper level. And I'm probably not as entertaining. There are what I call conceptually two categories of Gestaltists. One does Acid Gestalt. They tell you how you should be and they frustrate. Fritz would talk about skillful frustration. Not everyone doing the work frustrates skillfully. If I frustrate you skillfully, then you are almost forced to find another way beyond your usual neurotic

defense. This works well for some people, both as initiators and reflectors—or patient and therapist. Acid Gestalts tend to be confrontive and sarcastic. And there's what I call Soft Gestaltists, the Aikido Gestaltist. They're simply present with whatever happens without having to put in their own judgments or frustrate. My own attitude is that you frustrate yourself enough. I don't have to frustrate you. All I need to do is be present to reflect your self-frustrations back and then let you choose whether you want to continue to do that or want to find another way. I don't have to be your judge.

WH: How much training or skill is needed to be a reflector?

DP: Compare massage and Rolfing. You can give a massage that feels good with very little training and very little experience. Rolfing requires more training. Some people just have a great aptitude to do that. Some people can train forever and never really be good masseuses or masseurs. I consider Gestalt more like massage. Of course, there's a value in training, but this is an approach that you can do at almost any level. You can do it almost as a game. It's not so much about training. The experience you have at doing it and a particular type of aptitude are more important than any kind of training. Effectively, Fritz didn't train in the usual sense, by supervising carefully. You hung out with him. For me, you learn Gestalt by hanging out with a master and picking it up; then, like Fritz did with me: "Dick, time to go out and teach." I'd never say that he carefully trained me, with this unit and that unit, like a college. The model is much like learning weaving, or any folk skill or art. It's relational—in relation to your own particular aptitudes and interests. It's made a big difference for me to do it a lot. Most training in this particular area—in social works, in psychiatry, and certainly in psychology—is mistraining. I have an undergraduate degree in psychology and did graduate work at Harvard in clinical psychology. It's mistraining. It's attempting again to put people in cognitive boxes with a lot of denial of the stuff of life, which is sensation and feeling.

WH: What pitfalls or dangers do you see in the use of Gestalt?

DP: In the softer Gestalt approaches, I don't see any because, for me, Gestalt, more than being a therapy, or perhaps even a practice, is simply an alternative way for people to be present with one another. It's a way that is likely to be quite a bit more nourishing than many of the ways that people tend to be together. It's being available for another experience, just as that experience is, without trying to define it to be a particular way. I think that you could look at Gestalt as simply a way to be present with yourself in the world and a way to be present with another person or a group of people.

WH: What do you think is required of people in order to do Gestalt with another?

DP: A little experience and the willingness to play.

Group Process Principles

1. Be Here now
Show up
Be Present
2. Pay attention to your body and emotions.
3. Absorb the moment with your senses.

4. Tell your story. Keep to yourself themes that are private.
5. When describing your life, use possessive pronouns—I, me, mine. Avoid: it, you.
6. Notice who's here.
7. When speaking to each other, use I and You statements. Be specific.
8. Listen, absorb, then respond.
9. Take responsibility for your actions and the results of your actions.
10. Take some risks to reveal and discover yourself.
11. Observe confidentiality.

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