

# **Spiritual Awakening or Psychological Defense?** part 1

**a guide for individuals from the perspective  
of Systems-Centered Therapy ©\*,  
by Michael Robbins, M.A., L.M.H.C.**

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In order for individuals and spiritual communities to engage in spiritual inquiry without entangling themselves in a web of neurotic and unnecessary suffering they must develop psychologically in a healthy and balanced way. If we fail to distinguish a psychological issue from a spiritual breakthrough we can behave like someone who is trying to find their way out of the backwoods of Maine with a topographical map of India. We may assign meanings to our experiences which are inaccurate and misinterpret our inner guidance.

As a psychotherapist and as a spiritual seeker there are two major areas of confusion that I have noticed. These are our relationship with authority (both with the inner authority that allows us to take responsibility for our lives and with the external authorities and structures of the world) and intimacy. In this article I will use the perspective of one particular school of therapy, Systems-Centered Therapy, to examine how this confusion can occur for individuals. In the next installment in this series, I will examine how issues around authority and intimacy can hinder the progress of spiritual groups.

Systems-Centered Therapy (Agazarian, 1997) is the brainchild of Dr. Yvonne Agazarian and is a synthesis of her forty years of experience as a group and individual therapist, General Systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1957), Lewinian field theory, (Lewin 1951), the classical analytic understanding of the mechanisms of defense (Freud, 1936), and information theory (Shannon and Weaver 1964). Training in Systems-Centered Therapy is a rigorous and lengthy process which involves both intellectual and experiential learning. It is not my intention in this brief series of articles to teach someone how

to become a Systems-Centered Therapist, only to shed some light from this perspective on some very important issues for people on a spiritual path.

There are two particular features of SCT (Systems-Centered Therapy) which I think make it extremely applicable to the process of spiritual inquiry. The first is the attention that SCT pays to our relationship with the unknown and the vehicle it provides for a careful and developmental working through of our defenses against the unknown. The second is an understanding of how we are always embedded in a context that is greater than our personal perspective. SCT provides both an experiential process and an intellectual framework which can help us to move from our personal perspective to an experiential and cognitive understanding of the different systemic contexts of our experience. The movement from the personal, to the dyad, to the group, to the environmental and ultimately to the universal is a transformational process of deep concern to people who are involved in spiritual development. The ability to understand group process from a systemic point of view is also particularly relevant for spiritual groups and leaders and will figure prominently in the second article in this series.

For the purposes of this exploration, I would like to functionally define spiritual work as a transcendent dialogue with the unknown, which immanently touches the specific context of our lives in the here and now. This is a definition of spirituality which encompasses both our vertical relationship with the profound mysteries of life and the horizontal relationship of our engagement with the nitty gritty of daily existence. In contrast, our psychological defenses are those ways that we defend ourselves from the unknown and get stuck in stereotyped, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, being and behaving which stop us from integrating new experiences and developing into mature, individuated human beings.

Systems-Centered Therapy is not explicitly a spiritually based psychology. However, it is a psychology which is deeply concerned with creating a container in which people can have a progressively more profound experience of the unknown. Phenomenologically and poetically we might describe the unknown as an open space of possibility in which we are apprehending the creative river of our being in the moment of it coming into our awareness. This experience of presence and total attention in the here and now is always our leading edge and the harbinger of the next steps in our personal and

collective growth and evolution. If you can accept that this experience lies at the heart of all spiritual awakenings and that all of these awakenings occur in a context of a hierarchy of infinitely expanding systems which are intimately related and interdependent, SCT has some extremely important insights to offer individuals and communities who are on the spiritual path.

## **The Issue of Authority in Spiritual and Psychological Work**

At some point on the spiritual path, we usually confront an aspect of ourselves which has projected the image of an idealized, omnipotent parent onto our spiritual teachers or onto God. Often we discover that we have made some kind of bargain with our teacher or with God that in exchange for following the rules of our spiritual path we will be protected from the unpredictable suffering and tragedies of life. This expectation can be very deep, insidious and embedded in the unconscious of even sophisticated and psychologically astute seekers.

An example of this is a dear friend of mine whose son was born with a birth defect. His disappointment and rage with God at the unfairness of his family's misfortune was intense. The pull to collapse into a bitter pool of self-pity and depression was almost irresistible. As he meditated on his feelings he realized that somewhere inside of him he had been making the following bargain - "I will do all of my spiritual practices and contribute to the alleviation of suffering in the world, and in return for this, You (God) will protect me and my family from any serious misfortune or tragedy." As he let go of the belief that he could have magically controlled the unpredictable nature of his son's illness, he was able to open his heart to a much deeper level of compassion and acceptance for the reality of human suffering.

This particular issue, which is archetypal and as ancient as the Biblical story of Job, is seen from the Systems-Centered Therapy perspective as an authority issue. In this phase of development, we project power and authority onto some force or person outside of ourselves as a defense against experiencing the chaotic, the unpredictable, and the mysterious. As we come to some sense of peace with the reality that life is shot through with unpredictable, difficult experiences, we move from a passive dependent relationship with a protective Deity (or group leader, parent or institution) into an active, co-creative and responsive stance. We take our authority back

into ourselves and struggle to form our own personal creative response to the unpredictable events in our lives.

A different version of the authority issue is the spiritual seeker who has never completely mastered the mundane realities of daily existence. This person may not be able to adequately earn a living or have consistent problems working within the structure of a school or work environment and turn to spirituality as a way to bypass some of his difficulties. This problem is particularly rampant in our time as many people engaged in spiritual practice are searching for a 'high' rather than a slow process of spiritual inquiry and self reflection. The spiritual dilettante of today has a wider range of powerful spiritual techniques available than ever before in history. Often these techniques are taught with very little ongoing relationship between the teacher and the student. This situation can be both frustrating for the teacher, whose seeds of wisdom may fall on barren ground, and at times dangerous for the student, who may learn a much more powerful technique than they can ground and contain in a healthy way.

An example of this was a young client of mine who was filled with spiritual ambition. From the moment I met him I was immediately struck by his charm, charisma and creativity. At the time that he started to work with me he was living off of an inheritance from a distant relative. He came to me because I had a reputation for knowing something about the interface of psychology and spirituality and for working with some pretty 'far out' healing techniques. His goal was to grow spiritually as quickly as he possibly could and to this end he had worked with some of the best spiritually oriented therapists and healers in town. At the beginning of our work, I was seduced by his charm, intelligence and obvious joie de vivre. However, as we worked together I began to notice that his life was littered with unfinished creative projects and half baked dreams. Every other week he would tell me about a new project or spiritual adventure. Like a beautiful butterfly he drifted from one artistic or spiritual interest to another. As long as his funds held out there was very little real pressure for him to develop the discipline, focus and concentration that completing his projects or working within the structures of the working world would require. Unfortunately, he used the spiritual philosophies and practices that he was learning to rationalize his bypass of the frustrating, tedious business of mastering the practical realities of life. Over the years that we worked together, he began to

realize the cost (both spiritually and financially!) of his inability to focus and discipline himself. Together we defined his true spiritual work as being able to follow through with the 'boring' details of his creative projects. Eventually, he was able to find and hold onto work that he was interested in and stop using spirituality as a way to avoid the real demands of mundane existence. For him, spirituality had become a defiant flight away from the anxiety of mastering his real life problems and learning how to successfully cope with the external authorities of 'this' world.

From a Systems-Centered Therapy perspective, the heart of the authority issue is our struggle with compliance and defiance. This struggle is both in relationship with the outer authorities and structures of our lives and our sense of internal authority and self responsibility. When we are compliant we make deals and engage our lives from the position of trying to be good to gain the approval or fulfill the expectations of an internal or external image of how we should behave and feel. When we are defiant we refuse to conform to any ones expectations and stubbornly preserve a false sense of autonomy which can lead to all types of acting out and self sabotage. In both positions we lose our connection with our authentic self. Both positions are ultimately concerned with survival. If survival is our first priority it will be impossible to do more then give lip service to an authentic struggle with the issues that genuine intimacy present. Before an individual can truly begin to grapple with the issues of an intimate relationship they must land squarely in the center of themselves and know something about their impulses towards acting out either their compliance or defiance. In spiritual work it is important that seekers recognize the possibility that spiritual practices can be misused in our struggle to work through our relationship with the rigid authoritarian voice inside and outside of ourselves. Once this relationship has been worked through the spiritual seeker will hopefully be able to better discern the difference between the demanding voice of his or her superego, which speaks in shoulds and oughts, and the quiet authoritative voice of inner guidance.

### **The Issue of Intimacy in Psychological and Spiritual Work**

In spiritual circles I have often encountered people who are so filled with light and love that they seem to float above the mundane struggles of life and intimacy with an almost ethereal beauty.

Although there is something extremely alluring about these people there usually is also something about them that feels a little unreal. It is almost as if they are walking around in a bubble of saccharine purity which is begging to be burst. If one examines their relationships usually there are problems lurking just below the surface. Inevitably, over time, something in life happens which brings them out of the clouds. Unfortunately, sometimes they land with a painful 'thunk' that can precipitate a real dark night of the soul.

An example of this was a client of mine who had spent years in a spiritual community with a rather charismatic teacher. Inside the aura of this community she had tremendous feelings of oneness and bliss. During her time in the ashram, she had several romantic relationships which she had left as soon as any conflict arose. Conflict and difference in relationship disturbed her 'high', and as her first priority was to preserve her feelings of oneness and bliss it was always easier to leave than to stay and deal with the reality of difference and her disappointments. Unfortunately, the norm of the particular spiritual community that she was in also supported this flying from one relationship to another. Her strategy worked fairly well within the protected walls of the ashram, but when she left, she fairly quickly became despairing and hopeless. As she investigated her despair, she came to understand that much of her spiritual bliss had been based on siphoning away as much difference as possible in her pristine quest for spiritual purity. She began to notice how she had been very careful to only hang out with those people with whom she felt a very close resonance and how she had maintained herself in a comfort zone of ecstatic 'spiritual' merging. As long as this illusion of 'oneness' - or more precisely the absence of difference - could be maintained, she was in a state of ecstasy. As soon as she began to deal with the disenchanting reality of difference, she also had to stop using spiritual philosophy to justify her flight from the rigors of intimacy.

The flip side of this dilemma is the seeker who comes to spiritual work as a way to avoid intimate relationships altogether. Spiritual philosophies that advocate detachment as the path to liberation such as Buddhism or even some western monastic traditions are particularly vulnerable to being misused and distorted in this way. It is sad and at times even tragic when someone who has not yet learned how to love with attachment uses a spiritual philosophy of liberation through non-attachment as a way to avoid the messy, wonderful, and

sometimes awful business of loving the particular people in their lives. It's fine to talk intellectually about loving humanity and to reach very high states of consciousness in the solitude of a retreat hut, but what about loving a spouse, a child, or your parents?

An example of this is a client of mine who came to work with me after spending years as a monk. During the course of our work together it became clear to him that much of the spiritual work he had done had been used as a way of managing the tremendous longing that he had for an intimate, loving relationship and his terror that if he opened up this well of longing he would be devastatingly disappointed. To avoid his negative predictions, which were based on very real childhood disappointments, he had developed a philosophy of loving in a general, almost abstract way, and had even done tremendous good deeds for his community in the name of his spiritual ideals. This form of spiritual bypass had created a saint who loved humanity in principle - it was just individual people that he had a hard time with! In this case meditation and spiritual work was blocking his entrance to a more profound knowledge of intimacy and his own heart.

In both of these cases, an unresolved issue around intimacy was acted out using spiritual philosophy and spiritual practice as a rationale. In both these cases, the psychological decisions these people made were in some ways adaptive and ingenious and in other ways costly and difficult. From a Systems-Centered Therapy perspective, the core of our issue around intimacy is the existential paradox that we are at once essentially together and essentially alone. In exploring our intimate connections with each other it is inevitable that we will touch the impulse to merge and deny the reality of difference in the delicious enchantment of being 'in love' as well as the impulse to distance and isolate ourselves in despair at the reality that we are different and that all of our joinings will ultimately be imperfect. All of us must explore the dance of what happens 'when I get too close and lose myself in you and your agenda, or too far and gain a relationship with myself but lose my connection with you'. In the process of integrating these two polarities we discover that it is possible to attune ourselves to each other with a deep sense of resonance without losing a sense of individuality and autonomy. We learn how to love our partners deeply, while not necessarily being 'in love' with them. We learn how to distinguish the difference between a union of two autonomous individuals with great respect for their

differences, and a merging in which two people feel joined at the hip. In terms of our spiritual path it is important that we do not use spirituality to institutionalize or rigidify either the psychological position of the merger or the distancer. When this does occur we only prolong our suffering and inevitably have to backtrack to resolve our difficulties.

### **Love, Work and Play: The Stage of Integration and the Dialogue with Mystery**

Once someone has contained and integrated their conflicts around authority and intimacy, spiritual work takes on a very different flavor. If a spiritual seeker can stop using spirituality as a container for his psychological 'stuff', spirituality may become a truly profound dialogue with the mysteries of the unknown. This is not to suggest that people at this level will have no more authority or intimacy issues, only that the impulse to act out and avoid their real conflicts with authority and intimacy by misusing spiritual practice (or anything else) has been contained. They have developed some insight into their tendencies toward compliance or defiance as well as the impulse to merge or distance and are not afraid to confront the inner or outer reality of their situation. A person at this stage of development has developed a mature capacity for self knowledge and the ability to hold many paradoxical positions simultaneously. They can be both soft and hard, disciplined and playful, close and individuated.

An example of someone at this stage of psychological and spiritual development is a client of mine who worked with me on and off for a period of ten years. When she first began to work with me she was in a marriage with a rather abusive and alcoholic man. For the most part, she was living her life in the role of a caretaker and an enabler. As she disidentified with these roles through her therapeutic work and through some fairly disciplined spiritual practice in a variety of settings, her marriage dissolved. She painfully confronted and transformed both her compliant role as a caretaker and her pull towards an unrealistic love addiction that denied the reality of who her partner really was. This part of her work was a real dark night in which she learned how to be ruthless with herself and not act out her compulsions. Rather than act out her uncomfortable feelings she slowly fought with her own stubborn, defiant refusal to take



responsibility for her own life. Throughout this period her spiritual work was crucial in helping her to learn how to contain and explore her feelings rather than unconsciously continuing to recreate the suffering inherent in her old roles.

In the last year before she stopped working with me, the quality of her sessions changed quite remarkably. She began to express and feel a deep rootedness in her own authority and center. She became increasingly fluid and free psychologically without being inconsistent or labile. It became significantly easier for her to let go of any psychological position and to struggle with her reality as it was rather than how she would like it to be. She began to hold the many paradoxes of life simultaneously and her body became progressively more alive and filled with the dynamic presence of the life force. She developed a relationship with a man that was firmly rooted in reality, a mutual respect for their differences, and a deep resonance around a set of common values. Her relationships with her spiritual teachers and with me changed as well. Rather than omniscient authorities with some special window on the truth, she began to see her spiritual mentors as peers and companions, elder brothers and sisters engaged in a similar quest, sharing resources and wisdom with her towards her goal of transformation and spiritual development.

## **Conclusion**

The particular conditions of spiritual practice in our time make it imperative that we develop as psychologically mature individuals who are capable of interdependent relationships which cut across religious, cultural, political and economic boundaries. In order for this project to be successful, we must develop a profound degree of self knowledge to protect us from acting out our unconscious defenses against difference and the unfamiliar. Spiritual traditions and teachers that do not help people to develop psychologically run the risk of accentuating the psychological problems in their students and of having spiritual work misused as a way to avoid important life problems. True spiritual work demands that we are constantly open to seeing through the false prophets in our psyches and awakening an authentic sense of conscience about our interconnectedness to the whole of humanity and ultimately to our environment and the entire universe.

In this article I have explored how issues around authority and intimacy can hinder individual spiritual seekers from attaining the psychological maturity necessary to reach their spiritual goals. Spiritual work is a transcendent dialogue with the mysteries of the cosmos, the unknown, which immanently touches the particular moments of our lives. Our psychological defenses protect us from this dialogue by maintaining repetitive, stereotyped ways of thinking, feeling, being and behaving. In order for spiritual seekers to grow in a healthy and balanced way it is important to distinguish between a psychological defense dressed up in holy clothing and an authentic contact with the mysteries of the unknown.

In the process of spiritual and psychological growth, individual seekers are learning how to shift their awareness from one context to another. The first task is to center inside of ones self and become fully conscious of ones own authority, as well as ones potential to avoid the inherent conflicts of living in ones authority by acting out either compliance or defiance. The second task is to enter into relationship with another human being and to master one's tendency toward either merging or distancing. The third stage is to re'member' oneself as embedded in a universe that is fundamentally mysterious, awesome and filled with power and possibility.

In the next article in this series I will examine how these same issues are alive and important in the life of spiritual groups and communities.

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Concise two sentence tag line : Michael Robbins is a psychotherapist who uses an integration of Systems Centered Therapy, Body/mind therapies, object relations therapy, Taoist Qi Gong practice and art therapy in his clinical practice in Somerville, Massachusetts. If you are interested in his unique perspective on the interface of spiritual and psychological issues either individually or for your spiritual group you may contact him at [mrobb@erols.com](mailto:mrobb@erols.com), or call (617) 623-0024.

### notes

- 1.The masculine pronoun is used in this article as a generic not as a gender description.
2. If you are interested in the Systems-Centered approach to therapy you might pick up a copy of Dr. Agazarian's recent book "Systems

Centered Therapy for Groups”, Published by Guilford Press, N.Y. & London, 1997.

3.If you are interested in training in Systems-Centered Therapy , please contact SCT Training C/O Yvonne Agazarian, 553 N.Judson St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19130

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#### Biography

Michael Robbins has been facilitating individuals and groups in their healing work since 1984. He has trained intensively in Systems-Centered Therapy tm with Yvonne Agazarian for the past 7 years. He has also trained in a variety of body oriented and expressive therapies, object relations and existential psychology, improvisational movement and theater, is a visual artist and has been a student of Tai Chi, Qi Gong and Taoist Internal Meditation for more than 20 years. He works as a psychotherapist in private practice in Somerville, Massachusetts. He can be reached at (617) 623 0024, by e-mail at mrobb@erols.com, or at 237 Summer St., Somerville, Mass., 02143.