

The Alchemy of Group Work

by Michael Robbins, M.A. , L.M.H.C.

reprinted from The Immortal Child, Newsletter of the Healing Tao
Instructors Association.

Presenting A Synthesis of Healing Tao Practices, Group Dynamics and Psychological Investigation

The Healing Tao offers a marvelous and complex guide to the world of internal energy. This technology is an enormous gift which helps each of us who do these practices to stabilize and harmonize our center and heighten the sensitivities of our inner being. In the Healing Tao most of our emphasize has been on developing a sense of mastery and understanding of the dynamics of internal energy as this relates to our spiritual goals. In this investigation it has seemed to me that we have not paid a lot of attention to developing the subtle emotional sensitivities that are involved in the dynamics of human interactions. When applied in a rigid or insensitive manner Healing Tao practices can even be used as techniques to stay 'in control' and to avoid the complexities of the moment to moment dance of human relationship and the raw undefended encounter with the unknown.

Qi Gong practice has an enormous contribution to make to western psychology. Equally true, western psychological practice has an important contribution to make to Healing Tao practitioners in rounding out our emotional and spiritual development. As a body oriented therapist, group therapist and long term Healing Tao practitioner, I have been deeply concerned with developing formats in which the energetic and emotional dimensions of our development can be addressed simultaneously.

Psychological group work has a long an important history in western spiritual traditions and in western psychology. By working as a group many important issues and experiences can be explored and understood in ways that are difficult to reach working alone. Healing Tao practices can be used to support psychological investigation and to create a stable energetic center from which we can explore emotional issues with a clear access to our internal witness and the ability to choose the part of ourselves for which we have the most

curiosity or about which we feel we have the most to learn. As we adapt Healing Tao Practices into a modern western context we have the opportunity to integrate this knowledge and wisdom and to create a synthesis which answers the calling of the particular context of our lives. By combining Healing Tao practices with psychological work we may be able to enhance the tastes and textures of the Qi gong practices which we are already doing and build a deeper container for our community which includes another octave of emotional contact, intimacy and authenticity. This retreat will present one unique synthesis which hopefully will answer a yearning from a particular part of the Healing Tao community to integrate more in depth psychological and emotional work with our energetic practices.

A Mindfulness Based, Present Centered Form Of Group Work

The particular kind of group work that I have been using in combination with Healing Tao practices, is a present centered, mindful, here and now form of group psychotherapy. This particular kind of therapy is different than a lot of other psychological work in that it allows for no explaining, story telling, interpretation or advise giving. The heart of this work is that group members stay in moment to moment contact with their inner experience and in resonance with the group members who are exploring similar experiences. As a group facilitator, I am constantly looking at the dynamics of the group as a whole, as opposed to the dynamics of individuals. By taking on the lens of the 'group as a whole' each individual member gains the very important benefit of coming to understand that it is impossible to take any part of their experience just personally. Each group member is a voice not only for themselves but also for the sub-group of people who are exploring a similar experience and for the group as a whole. This shift in perspective is also resonant with the recommendation of many spiritual teachings that we learn how to shift our awareness from the constricted perspective of our 'small mind' which take's everything personally and so easily becomes hurt, resentful or walled off behind a barrier of misunderstanding, anger or pride, and learn how to experience our emotional life from a more objective point of view. By keeping the group experience within the boundaries of the present moment and limiting our universal tendency to explain away our experience rather than explore it, the group energy also becomes very alive and contactful.

The Confrontation with the Unknown

As the group explores it's moment to moment experience we systematically encounter our defenses against our authentic experience, the frustrations and gratifications of group life, and most importantly the characteristic ways we protect ourselves from the unknown. From a Taoist point of view, the unknown, the vast, pregnant void, lies at the heart of the mystery of our existence. In the context of the groups exploration we have progressively more profound confrontations with the unknown every time we undo a distorted way of thinking, let go of defensive tension and explore the experience underneath it, give up a familiar role, or come into real relationship with someone with whom we have been holding a projection or withholding parts of our self. This experience of the unknown reaches into deeper levels of our bodies, minds and spirits as we undo each defensive layer of psychophysiological armor and increase our capacity to tolerate the raw undiluted voltage of the primary life force. As Healing Tao practitioners we are certainly well equipped with a methodology to increase our capacity for a greater intensity and higher frequency of chi flow. This type of group work can help us to increase our sophistication and subtle understanding of the interpersonal and psychological dynamics of this greater energy flow.

It is a frequent and familiar error on the spiritual path to believe that we can control or manipulate the life force. Unfortunately our ego, (in Taoist alchemy, the lesser Shen) will use anything, including spiritual practices, to keep itself in control and safe from the raw encounter with this awesome power. This form of group work is a gentle and powerful way to confront and work through the personality patterns and defenses that have been holding us back from a deeper ability to surrender to the calling of our spiritual self. For many people this leads to very important and practical changes in their approach to personal relationships, their professional life, and their spiritual practice. On a very concrete level these changes can include feeling more energetic, less anxious or depressed (as well as a methodology to work with these symptoms), a diminished tendency to act out anger in destructive ways, a greater capacity for intimacy and the ability to contain and integrate a wide variety of feelings that may

have become off limits or dissociated as a result of painful life experiences.

Because this work can be quite challenging, at each fork in the road group members always have the choice of exploring either their defense or coming up to the next immediate edge of their unknown. In this process we discover that the experience of the unknown changes depending on the context and the phase of group development that the group is exploring as well as the personal experience one is bringing to the session (so that what was unknown yesterday is the known today!).

The Principals Of Alchemy Applied to Group Dynamics

The principals of this type of group therapy, which is called Systems Centered Therapy are drawn from General Systems Theory (1), and interestingly enough are almost identical to the basic tenets of Alchemy.

The first principal is **Isomorphy** (2). In language that might be more familiar, this is the principal that the macrocosm is contained within the microcosm. The universe, the five elements, everything that ever was or will be is inside of us in a potential state. (Sound familiar?) In the context of the group what this means is that the group is a reflection of our inner being. Each time we enter the group we are in a sense entering a hall of mirrors in which we find different reflections of our humanity. Some sessions we are resonating more with one aspect or another. Because the group as a whole can hold such a relatively larger band of human possibility than any one of us can individually, many different experiences can be explored to some depth during any given session. We also catch the 'downdraft' from each others explorations and 'grok' something of each others realizations in a visceral, non-intellectual, cellular way. In fact as practitioners trained in the dynamics of energy, Taoist group members will probably be acutely aware of these types of transmissions. Usually the group will progress by exploring opposite sides of an experience by turns before finding a balanced synthesis and integration, which a Taoist might predict based on the principles of yin and yang. For example if a part of the group is exploring feelings of blind trust and the idealization of external authority another part of the group might begin to become aware of their stubborn suspiciousness of outside authority. Or in another phase of the

groups development an exploration of feelings of irritation and anger might be followed by an exploration of feelings of closeness and intimacy.

The next principle is that of **Hierarchy**. This principal states that 'every system exists in the environment of the system above it and is the environment for the system below it' (3). In terms of the group this means that the group as a whole is the environment for the sub-groups, (i.e. the members of the group that are exploring similar experiences based on resonance), which are in turn the environment for the individual members. What this also means, is that who we are in any given group has at least as much (or more!) to do with the group dynamics then it does with us. The Taoist meditation system is built on the principle of hierarchy. The microcosmic orbit lives inside the environment of the internal organs and the five elements (Fusion 1&2), which live inside the environment of the special meridians (Fusion 3), which lives inside the environment of our male,yang and female, yin energy (lesser Kan and Li), which lives inside the environment of the five elements of the planet (greater Kan & Li), which lives inside the environment of the solar system (Greatest Kan & Li) etc.

The next principle is that of **Structure**. Structure refers to the observation that "every system is defined by its boundaries in space, time reality and role." (4) In simple language in order to be effective in any task we have to be fully psychologically present in time and space (here and now), with all of our energy in the role that is appropriate to the goal which we wish to accomplish. It is not enough to simply have our physical bodies present in time, space and role, we must also be psychologically present in these ways before we can be truly effective. Although this might sound simplistic and obvious, the actual achievement of getting across these boundaries can be quite a profound experience! We must also be living in reality and not fantasy about the requirements which we must meet in order to accomplish our goal.

The last principle is that of **Function**, which defines the dynamic by which systems grow. This principle states that "systems survive develop and transform from simple to complex by the process of discriminating and integrating differences" (5). Put another way, before we can learn anything new on any level - physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually - we have to first recognize that it is different from what we already know, find enough similarities with it

to make a connection based on some authentic resonance, and then be willing to integrate it into our being. Without the recognizing and seeking out different types of nourishment for our bodies, minds and spirits, we would stagnate and rigidify in our growth. The ancient Taoists recognized that as we develop we need new and different kinds of nourishment to feed each level of integration and therefore devised different practices to work with different aspects of the human, animal, vegetative, planetary, and galactic dimensions of experience.

Along with doing basic Healing Tao practices and the group work, I will work with creative and/or expressive exercises to help stimulate the groups progress, and give the group some brief theoretical lectures on the phases of group development. As each group is different it is impossible for me to predict what exercises I will use, but in past retreats these exercises have been very effective in stimulating each members dynamic confrontation with the unknown in gentle and powerful ways. The information on the phases of group development is very important information for anyone that is leading any type of group, whether it is a meditation group, a martial arts school, or a therapy group.

Are You ready to explore Group Alchemy?

Feel into your heart to see if you feel called to do this retreat at this time in your life and practice. I have just used a lot of words to describe something that is much better understood through first hand experience. Although the theoretical basis for this type of work is complex, like the Healing Tao, the experience is actually quite simple, heart-centered and often profoundly transformational. It will most certainly be an opportunity to stretch yourself into the unknown in important ways. It will also be a space to work safely with each other on an exciting new level which I hope will deepen the emotional and spiritual maturity of each individual and of the community as a whole as well as increase each persons sophistication and understanding of group dynamics and basic leadership skills. If you have any questions or comments please feel free to contact me at 617 623 0024, or on the web at michaelrobbins@rcn.com .

Come .

Come again.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Even though you've broken your vows
a thousand times, come once again.
Come again.

Jelaludin Rumi

References

1. Von Bertalanffy, L. 1968, General System Theory (rev.ed.), New York, George Braziller.
2. Agazarian, Y. 1996, The Four basic Constructs of Living Human Systems in a Nutshell, Handout.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

Systems Centered Therapy is a registered trademark of Dr. Yvonne Agazarian.

Michael Robbins is a psychotherapist in private practice in Somerville, Massachusetts. He has been skillfully facilitating individuals, groups and personal growth retreats since 1984. He has trained intensively with Dr. Yvonne Agazarian in Systems Centered Therapy 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 taught Tai Chi, Qi Gong and Taoist Meditation for 14 years.

