Abstract:

This chapter examines applications of Systems Centered Therapy with individuals and groups that are engaged in spiritual practice. I first examine the goals of spiritual practice. In particular, I am concerned with the goals of the 'non-dual' spiritual traditions that are concerned with helping a practitioner live a life that is both transcendently centered and immanently involved with the concrete realities of this world. I then look at how Systems Centered Training and Therapy may be useful in helping individual practitioners and groups to reach these goals and examine some ways that spiritual teachers and practitioners may have deficits in terms of their training and understanding of group and individual dynamics that SCT may be useful in filling in. I then apply the Systems Centered understanding of the phases of systems development to examples of individuals and groups who are involved with spiritual practice and shows how a Systems Centered approach may be applied in each of these cases.

* A note about pronouns: In this chapter, the author has used the masculine pronoun 'he' generically as a matter of style and not as a gender description.

Systems Centered Therapy and Spiritual Life and Practice
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Introduction

As a meditation teacher and psychotherapist who works with people who are involved with spiritual practice, I have often observed individuals and groups who are fixated at some stage of their spiritual and psychological progress. When this occurs there can be great confusion as to how to extract themselves from the morass. In many cases a path that looks promising will dead end. Even if it is a wise strategy, the individual or group

may not have the resources to fully resolve the thorny issues in which they are waylaid. Spiritual teachers can sometimes be extremely useful to dislodge these stubborn blockages. They can also unwittingly be caught on the horns of a group dynamic that is larger than any individual (including the teacher!) or blind to the particular psychological level at which an individual is stuck. In the worst cases this can create a great deal of tragic and unnecessary suffering for all concerned. Even with the best of intentions, both students and their teachers can end up frozen in a repetitive pattern of destructive relationships that the particular method they are using is doing little to melt. This may have nothing to do with the soundness of the practices that they are using. It may simply be a confusion of levels. In the same way that one would not use a paintbrush to cut a pineapple, meditation or other spiritual practices may not be the tool of choice to resolve a problem in group dynamics or a psychological issue. *

It is an unfortunate reality that the modern history of spiritual groups is rife with examples of teachers who have committed boundary violations and either consciously or unconsciously abused their power (see Kornfield, 2000, p.139 -157 "The Dirty Laundry"). Similarly, recent history is filled with cases of individuals who have used all sorts of 'spiritual' rationalizations to justify behaviors and ways of thinking and feeling which when looked at with a grounded and sober eye, prove to cause harm to themselves or others. As our collective spiritual and psychological wisdom matures, we are discovering progressively more skillful strategies and resources to help individuals and groups reach the goal of psychological and spiritual maturity. Systems Centered Therapy and Training is

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* Footnote: Ken Wilber (2000) has noted that many researchers have discovered that development proceeds along many different lines simultaneously. He notes that "these lines are relatively independent, which means that for the most part they can develop relatively independently of each other, at different rates, with a different dynamic and on

a different time schedule" (Wilber, 2000, p.28) This means that a person may be a genius at reaching and transmitting spiritual states of consciousness and relatively poorly developed in his understanding of group or individual dynamics.

one approach that, in my experience, has enormously beneficial applications for individuals and groups who are involved in spiritual practice.

There are many reasons why a Systems Centered approach is a good match for people that are involved in spiritual practice. Three stand out immediately. 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 capacity to dissolve the habits of mind and body that keep one from living at the edge of the unknown with full openness and sensitivity to our environment is at the heart of many spiritual disciplines. The second is the absolute attention SCT pays to our moment to moment inquiry into experience from the standpoint of the inner observer. This can make SCT seem almost like an open eyed, interactive, mindfulness meditation. The third is the Systems Centered understanding that we are always embedded in a context that is greater then our personal perspective. SCT provides both an experiential process and an intellectual framework that 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.

In order to clearly demonstrate how Systems Centered Training and Therapy can be useful for spiritual practitioners, I will build a fairly simple and orderly scaffolding on

which the reader can hang his or her understanding. First, I will examine the goals of spiritual practice. In particular, I will be concerned with the goals of what might be called the 'non-dual' spiritual traditions that are concerned with helping a practitioner live a life that is both transcendently centered and immanently involved with the concrete realities of this world. Second I will look at how Systems Centered Training and Therapy may be useful in helping individual practitioners and groups to reach these goals. Third I will examine some ways that spiritual teachers and practitioners may have deficits in terms of their training and understanding of group and individual dynamics that SCT may be useful in ameliorating. Lastly I will apply the Systems Centered understanding of the phases of systems development to examples of individuals and groups who are involved with spiritual practice and show how a Systems Centered approach may be applied in each of these cases. This examination of case examples will be the major part of this chapter.

The Goals of Spiritual Practice

To fully appreciate the relevance of Systems Centered Therapy to spiritual practitioners, it is important to understand the strong similarities between the goals of each of these approaches to human development. This is particularly true of what might be called the 'non-dual' or 'heaven and earth' traditions. The following is a very brief examination of these goals and the context in which they developed.

The world of spiritual practice is as wide as the planet that we live on and as diverse as the particular historical traditions and cultural conditions that has given them birth. In this context, in order to understand the goals of the spiritual practices of humanity as a whole, it is important to look for common denominators that can help one to sort this huge mass of information into useful categories. Ken Wilber, a modern philosopher and researcher, has made an exhaustive study of spiritual practices throughout the world

and has discovered that spiritual traditions generally fall into three major camps in terms of the goals that they emphasize. (Wilber, 2003)

The first are the 'earth' centered traditions, which emphasize a deeply embodied and involved connection with nature and the harmonious relationship with our physical bodies. Practices in these traditions emphasize the downward, descending currents in the body and may involve drumming, dancing or some form of surrender to the deep pulsation of the life force in the physical body. The goal is to establish and maintain a sense of harmony and balance within the human body and the natural environment. They tend to be pro sexual and celebrate the natural, instinctual intelligence of the body. From the perspective of the 'earth' centered traditions spiritual values are betrayed whenever someone leaves their relationship with their body and their immanent involvement with environment. This approach is typified by the Shamanistic, Pagan and nature based religions of the world.

The second group are the 'heaven' centered traditions which emphasize the cultivation of a transcendent, absolute or unconditioned state of consciousness beyond a particular cultural or historical context and psychological conditioning. The emphasis in these traditions is on liberation from the unconscious roles that an individual plays in life, the search for an eternal sense of values and the wisdom that emanates from the formless, creative source that holds all human possibilities in potential. In these traditions, the conditioning and habits of the false self are ruthlessly examined until the seeds that gave them life no longer have any unconscious gravitational pull on the practitioners awareness. At this point the practitioner becomes free from the limitations of the world of form and the conditioned self and he attains great insight into the causes of human suffering. The goal is variously stated as getting off the wheel of death and rebirth, attaining enlightenment, or entering the "Kingdom of Heaven". Energetically, these traditions emphasize the upward, ascending currents in the body and their practices usually involve long periods of stillness. They often require that their

practitioners take vows of poverty, celibacy and sometimes, silence. These "heaven centered" practices are found in some forms of Yoga, in early Theravadan Buddhism, and in the great monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The third group integrates these two polarities and might be called the 'heaven and earth' or 'non-dual' traditions. In these spiritual philosophies the dichotomy between the absolute and the conditioned is overcome and the practitioner learns to travel between the world of emptiness and form, the pure space of creative possibilities and the particular context into which they have been thrown, with great facility and skillfulness. The energy currents in these practices travel in a circle, both literally inside the human body as well as metaphorically and philosophically (Chia, 1993). This understanding and approach to spiritual life is found in many forms throughout the world and is usually represented in the inner teachings of traditions that one might stereotypically think of as 'earth' or 'heaven' based. I have found this view articulated in Taoism, Sufism, in many Buddhist schools, in Advaita and Vedanta Hinduism, in some forms of Yoga, in the Hebrew Cabala, in Christian mysticism and in the oral traditions of Shamanism. In this chapter, I will be using this synthetic, non-dual understanding of spiritual practice as the foundation for the comparison with Systems Centered Training and Therapy.

Usually, the training paths in these traditions begin by helping the practitioner to deconstruct the conditioning and automatic responses of the false self that bind the mind and body into a particular structure and limit psychological and physical freedom. This first movement is similar to the paths of many of the 'heaven' centered traditions in that the goal at this stage is to awaken a realization of the transcendent, empty, creative center which lies at the core of Being. There is a profound rewiring of the nervous system so that it can withstand greater and greater charges of electromagnetic force as well as a ruthless examination of the psychological patterns and limiting belief systems that are binding the flow of the life force. After the layers of armoring and fear are

peeled away, there is a return to the world of form and a full engagement with physical, concrete reality. This turn of the circle is similar to the 'earth' based traditions. The difference is that this engagement is now informed by the freedom of having realized a transcendent center which is unattached to old roles, dysfunctional patterns and subconscious identifications. This process shifts the practitioner's sense of identity from his personal perspective to experientially being one with 'All That Is' and awakens a sense of conscience and compassion for the suffering of all beings. (Harvey, 1994) At the highest levels of practice all of these dimensions are awakened simultaneously within the practitioner who experientially realizes that the world of emptiness and form are one. *

Systems Centered Therapy uses different language and methods than spiritual practice to help individuals and groups to deconstruct the patterns of inauthenticity and constriction that bind the spontaneous core of human experience. However, the goals of living a life that is free from the reactivity of the false self and deeply connected to the subtle inner voice of ones authenticity in the context of daily life is very resonant with the goals of SCT. The goal of shifting ones center of gravity from ones personal perspective into a larger context, as well as cultivating the capacity to contain and observe ones experience as a method to untangle the habitual, limiting patterns of the mind, body and heart is also resonant with the goals and methods of SCT.

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Footnote: These few paragraphs are admittedly an extreme simplification of a field of study and experience which is quite vast. If the reader is interested in exploring this area in more depth there are many resources available. A couple of books that I can recommend are Eckhardt Tolle's The Power of Now (1999), Jack Kornfield's After the Ecstasy, the Laundry (2000) and Ken Wilber's Integral Psychology (2000).

Systems Centered Therapy and the Non Dual Traditions

Over the past ten years, I have led ongoing groups, weekend retreats and workshops integrating the practices of non-dual traditions, particularly Taoist and Sufi practices, with the methods of SCT. Using these approaches in a complementary fashion has accelerated the individual member's spiritual and psychological development and the group as a whole's capacity to observe and modify the obstacles that they are facing at every stage of development. Systems Centered Therapy gives the group a powerful method that makes it possible to resonate with each other around the conflicts which they may be experiencing and to work towards authentic resolutions. The spiritual traditions offer a wide range of methods to address and neutralize the energetic underbelly of stubborn charactarological problems which may be stuck in someone's nervous system, energy field, breathing patterns and musculature. A skillful integration of these approaches has appeared highly beneficial in terms of helping people to reach both their spiritual and therapeutic goals.

A major difference between the approach of spiritual practice and SCT is that in spiritual practice there is no well worked out model or vehicle for group process. Without a structure to relate to each other around the conflicts that they may be experiencing in their practice or with the teacher, many conflicts may go underground and either get 'acted out' in gossip, private outrages or affairs or 'acted in' by students becoming depressed, physically tense or even developing health problems that are psychosomatic in origin. This creates a loss of energy for the group as well as a loss of information that might be used in the service of everyone's' development (including the teachers!)

Teachers in these traditions usually have an extremely well developed capacity to touch very expanded, luminous states of consciousness and even to transmit them, but usually have very little training or development in the area of group or interpersonal dynamics. Theoretically, interpersonal relatedness and non-dual states of awareness complement each other and work together synergistically. However, in practice this is

often not true. Not only are spiritual teachers not trained in group dynamics, they also often grew up inside of a cultural context that had different norms from those of modern Western culture around relationships between teachers and students and between students and students. Usually, the norm in a spiritual group is that the teacher is the 'expert' whose words the students treat as Gospel. This attitude has a tendency to keep the communication stuck in a hierarchical pattern of questions and answers which can keep even senior students from developing their own autonomous point of view and may foster a compliant role or a regressive dependency on the teacher. The fact that most successful spiritual teachers are charismatic further reinforces these dynamics. This combination of lack of training in group dynamics, charisma, and the difference in cultural expectations can be a recipe for a variety of tragic missteps that have left many spiritual communities reeling for years (Kornfield, 2000).

In the area of psychological development and group dynamics, Systems Centered Therapy has a tremendous amount to offer spiritual practitioners and teachers. In the following case examples of individuals and groups engaged in spiritual work I will show how the Systems Centered model of the phases of development may be extremely useful in understanding the conflicts that people encounter in the course of spiritual work.

An Overview of the Phases of Development from a Systems Centered Perspective

In Systems Centered Therapy, every intervention has a theoretical understanding which supports it. One of the cornerstones of this approach is the understanding that all human systems go through a developmental process which is organized and predictable (Agazarian, 1997). This observation was first made by Bennis and Shepherd in 1956 and has been born out by subsequent researchers (Beck, 1981). SCT applies

this understanding of the phases of system development to all groups, from families, to psychotherapy groups, to large corporations, as well as to individuals.

There are three basic stages to the SCT model of development. The first phase addresses the conflicts with both outer and inner authority. The second addresses the conflicts around intimacy. The third is the functional stage of a working group and is called the stage of love, work and play. In this last phase, a group extends its intuitive and analytic knowledge in the context of its current realities with common sense and existential humor (Agazarian, 1997). For the rest of this chapter I will be using the SCT understanding of the phases of development and relating them to the spiritual life of individuals and groups.

The Authority issue in Spiritual Life

The authority phase deals with the conflicts around compliance and defiance as well as with flight and fight. It is during this phase that a group or an individual undoes the attachment to the cognitive misconstructions that generate anxiety, the psychosomatic tensions that defend against an awareness of primary feelings, and the tendencies to discharge retaliatory impulses back on the self in depression or out onto the environment in tirades and outrages. SCT conceptualizes these defenses as 'flight' defenses, which keep an individual or a group away from dealing with their reality conflicts in the present moment. This phase culminates in working with the habitual 'one up' or 'one down' roles that one plays in life and the stubborn resistance to do the hard work that each of us must do to support real and lasting change (Agazarian, 1997).

In Individuals

a. The Issue of Compliance

At some point on the spiritual path, a spiritual seeker will confront an aspect of himself that has projected the image of an idealized, omnipotent parent onto his spiritual teachers or onto God. Often he discovers that he has made some kind of unconscious bargain with his teacher or with God that in exchange for following the 'rules' of his spiritual path he 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 is archetypal and as ancient as the Biblical story of Job. From the perspective of Systems Centered Therapy this conflict is seen 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 spiritual teacher, 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.

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SCT Application

A Systems Centered therapist might have worked with my friend in the following manner. The first step would be to help him to undo the cognitive misconstructions and beliefs that were generating his emotional distress. Once he had made conscious his thought that he could have omnipotently and magically controlled the universe through his spiritual practice and questioned his projection of an ideal, all-powerful parent onto God, the therapist would then help him to make a choice about whether to stay related to his thoughts or to attend to the moment to moment unfolding of his experience as he explored his pain. As he did this, he could begin to discriminate between his depression, self-pity and collapse on one side of his experience and his outrage on the other. The therapist would then help him to explore each of his impulses, without acting them out! As he learned how to contain each side of himself, the therapist would also help him to feel what each of these patterns felt like in his body. SCT would conceptualize each of these experiences inside of him as different 'sub-groups' which were held within the larger context of his personality. As these experiences were contained, a deeper level of experience might appear in which he might explore what it is like to sit with the existential fact that we cannot control reality and that we are all relatively helpless in front of certain existential facts. As he made more room for this primary level of experience, the therapist would stay attuned, present and in eye contact with him so that he could fully experience his feelings without defending against them, either by tensing his body, returning to a cognitive attempt to 'solve' the issue, acting out his pull towards depression or going into a tirade and outrage towards the 'unjustness' of life. SCT sees all of these, the cognitive defenses, tension defenses, depression and outrage defenses as defenses that relate to the first phase of systems development; the authority phase (Agazarian, 1997). By weakening these habits of the mind and body,

the person begins to come into contact with his deeper conflicts around dealing with his inner and outer reality as it is, rather than, as he would like it to be.

The Issue of Defiance

A different version of the authority issue in spiritual work is the seeker who has never completely mastered the mundane realities of daily existence. This person may not be able to earn an adequate living or have consistent problems working within the structure of a school or work environment and subsequently turn to spirituality as a way to bypass some of his difficulties. This is the opposite pole of the authority issue as the person is stuck in a defiant position, passively ignoring the demands of reality. This problem is particularly rampant in our time as many people engaged in spiritual practice are searching for a 'high' rather then the slow, often painful process of spiritual inquiry and self-reflection.

A young client of mine is an example of someone who was searching for a spiritual high. 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 cooperating with 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.

SCT Application

I used Systems Centered Therapy to work with this client in a similar way to how I described the process with my friend. The first level of defense to address from a Systems Centered approach are the cognitive misconstructions that generate feelings that have no basis in reality. In this case I helped my client to notice that the unconscious belief that was motivating his behavior was that it was not necessary for him to deal with the 'boring', mundane realities that less 'spiritually gifted' individuals had to deal with. As this thought became more conscious, he began to question the arrogance of his position. When he gave up this idea, he was face to face with his feelings of omnipotent, defiant rage at reality. This led to an exploration of his stubborn refusal to deal with the world as it is rather than, as he would have liked it to be. As he gradually contained his rage and explored his stubbornness he gained more and more mastery over his impulses to act out. 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 the next step in his development as cultivating the capacity 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 cope successfully with the external authorities of 'this' world.

The Authority Issue In Spiritual Groups

Spiritual teachers are often only vaguely aware that from the first moment that they address a group of students, they are setting norms that will influence the life of a group and dictate the sphere of possibilities that will be available for their followers. The boundary between the outside life that an individual has and his role as a member of a spiritual group can be a turbulent one that can stimulate deep fears around a loss of autonomy. The conflict around autonomy will usually manifest in a variety of compliant and defiant behaviors. If the work of the group is the exploration of feelings, group members have the opportunity to explore the intense emotions in relationship to authority and their fear of losing their autonomy that may be aroused at the boundary of joining a group. Unfortunately, because spiritual teachers generally have very little experience helping groups to explore these conflicts, they are usually not addressed. The outcome of this is that these conflicts are very frequently acted out in gossip, complaining, righteous indignation, outrage, or acted in through depression, passivity and a variety of psychosomatic complaints which originate in the tension that we can use to defend against our feelings rather than experience them. These behaviors can eat away at the vitality of a group's work and even destroy it.

SCT sees the core issue for every group to explore in the first phase of development as their relationship to the authority of the group leader and the structure of the group (Agazarian, 1997). In the case of a spiritual group, this means dealing with their feelings about the teacher, both his or her gifts and failings, the practices the teacher is teaching, and to question if their personal values resonate with what the teacher is teaching. The clearer a teacher is about the norms and values of his or her group the easier it will be for an individual to understand the requirements of group membership and to decide whether or not they want to become a member.

An example of a spiritual group getting stuck in the authority stage occurred for me in a group I belonged to that was studying the dynamics of the human energy field. The leader of this group had a very particular system of psycho-spiritual exercises that needed to be followed exactly to achieve the desired results. He also had a dogmatic and rigid teaching style. Inevitably, the group had all sorts of responses to his level of precision and to his style of delivery. Some group members became extremely compliant and even started to behave like 'energy exercise police', making sure that all the group members were following the teachers' instructions precisely. Other group members became defiant and rebelliously compared the teacher's system with other systems they had studied, invented their own exercises, or put the teachers' exercises down. Outside the group meetings the gossip mill was turning at quite a furious speed as people jockeyed for political position in the group. Fairly quickly a number of what SCT identifies as role pairings and role locks (Agazarian, 1997) developed between group members and between the teacher and group members. These role pairings were of identified patients and helpers, victims and bullies, and scapegoats and scapegoaters. While the group was acting out these roles the group process stalled and many people left the group. Unfortunately, although the teacher was highly skilled in the particular system that he was teaching, his work floundered, as he did not know how to work with the group dynamics that occur during the authority phase of group development.

SCT Application

The value of a process such as Systems Centered Therapy for a group stuck in it's authority issue is that it can create an environment in which group members can explore the pull towards compliance or defiance rather than acting it out. As these experiences are contained and explored the group can begin to experience and

understand the feelings that are being managed by their compliant or defiant roles. Similar to the work with individuals, an SCT group facilitator would first help the group to undo it's cognitive misconstructions, which are usually in the form of negative predictions and mind reads, and hold group members in the box of exploring their moment to moment experience rather than explaining or trying to solve it. Often these negative predictions and mind reads are concerned with fears of retaliation or being shamed or humiliated if one explores the feelings that are being managed by acting out a compliant or defiant role. The group facilitator would then help the group to undo any psycho-physiological tension that group members felt as they explored their experience as well as help them to avoid discharging or aborting their exploration by acting out in tirades or 'acting in' through depression and self-pity. Systems Centered Therapy focuses on undoing these first level 'flight defenses' in order - the cognitive misconstructions first, tension defenses second and the tendency to discharge our retaliatory impulses out in outrage or in by becoming depressed, third (Agazarian, 1997). This lays the foundation for the group's capacity to productively explore their compliance or defiance towards the leader and the structure of the group.

 As group members develop the capacity to contain and explore their conflicts, the group will naturally split into two camps or subgroups; those that love the leader and agree with what he is doing, and those that want to change or modify the leader or in more extreme cases overthrow him. The crucial issue here is psychological survival, as group members must come to terms with the reality of the structure that the leader has chosen and the demands of working together. As both the defiant and the compliant sides of the group are explored, the group can than begin to grapple with the reality of the particular group that they are a part of as well as with their real responses to the particular teacher, who is always both gifted and flawed. When this exploration is done well, it can create an environment in which a functional dependency between the

teacher and the students that is based in reality (rather then in the omnipotent wish to control or flee from reality) can develop.

Some General Reflections on the Authority Phase in Spiritual Groups and Individuals

The conflict between our individuality and the reality that both group membership and the existential facts of life demand that we surrender personal agendas into a larger context can stir up primitive anxiety, rage and terror. In groups and in the face of the existential realities of life, people will usually deal with their conflicting feelings in a dialectical pattern of flight and fight. SCT sees this pattern of flight and fight as part of the authority phase of group and individual development (Agazarian, 1997).

Knee jerk compliance is a flight away from an honest struggle with the demands of reality or group life and can incur a painful loss of self. Often people will only recognize the cost of their compliant roles late in life or after years of being a member of a spiritual group. In groups, the compliant position resolves the conflict with external authority by prematurely giving over to group membership and fleeing from any direct confrontation with the leader and/or the group as a whole. The compliant impulse is to accept the norms of the group or spiritual teacher before one has thoroughly evaluated them rather than experience the terror of being excluded or actively ostracized.

On the other hand, if someone has a salience for defiance, they will stubbornly preserve their individuality at all costs and instinctively see the structure of the group and the demands of spiritual practice as a threat to their autonomy. The fear of losing oneself results in a distorted perception of the teacher, the structure of the group, the discipline of the spiritual practice and a rebellion against the realities of taking responsibility for one's life. This position can easily crystallize into paranoia or antisocial

behavior. From this perspective the benefits of cooperating with the status quo can feel like a devils deal.

In groups, a good barometer to test whether or not the group has moved from the authority phase into the next phase of intimacy is to monitor the communication pattern of the group. During the authority phase all group communications are triangular, with members constantly checking either verbally or non-verbally if the leader approves (Agazarian, 1997). This is particularly obvious in the way that members make eye contact. During the authority phase, eye contact is either directly with the leader or darting back and forth to the leader, as group members quickly try to gage whether what they have said has met with approval or disapproval. This is very different than the communication pattern which occurs during the intimacy phase when the center of authority is squarely within each group member and the major focus of concern is his or her relationship with each other.

The Transitional Phase Between Authority and Intimacy - The Stubborn resistance to Change

As we mature, the salience for acting out either compliance or defiance gradually loses its allure. When people lose their attraction for the juicy charge of outrage and righteous indignation or the pull to take a nice warm bath in a pool of self pity and depression, they have to deal with the reality of their lives or the group they are a part of as it is, rather than how they think it should or ought to be. If life is treating them well this can be easy. When things are difficult, their capacity to live in full contact with reality, vulnerable and unprotected by defensive roles can challenge the very core beliefs around which they have based their identity. This confrontation with helplessness in the face of harsh existential facts can tear apart the fundamental fabric of who someone thinks they are and their belief in a benevolent universe or Deity.

No life is shielded from the realities of loss. There is a famous Buddhist story about a woman whose child was dying from an incurable disease. She visits the Buddha and asks him to cure her child. He replies that he can cure him but he needs a very special ingredient. She must bring him a mustard seed from a household in which no one has ever died. She searches and of course is unable to find one. However in each household she hears the stories of the family's loss. When she returns to the Buddha she understands that his cure was for her to develop her compassion for the realities of human suffering.

Confronting the irrational and wild nature of the Unknown is both devastating and opening. SCT frames this challenge as learning to 'sit at the edge of the unknown' (Agazarian, 1997). As we separate from our attachment to a magical, parental image of God or our spiritual teachers we can be thrown into a dark night of the soul and feel forsaken and forgotten. In Sufism there is a saying "Smash your ideal on the rock of truth". This ideal is not simply our idealized version of God or our teacher; it is also our idealized image of ourselves. Before we can truly land in the center of our authentic self, we must be willing to hunt down and dissolve those stubborn patterns that keep us from taking full responsibility for our lives in the context of the real conditions into which we are thrown. This dissolution of old roles and character defenses that we replay involves a ruthless examination of the false self.

The Phase of Intimacy in Spiritual Life - Enchantment and Disenchantment

After a group or an individual has confronted and contained their stubborn resistance to change, SCT conceptualizes the next phase of development as working with the conflicts that we have around intimacy (Agazarian, 1997). Similar to the first phase, this issue is worked with dialectically until the polarities of our intimate relationships with each other are contained. The first sub-phase works with the idealization defenses of

enchantment and hope. During this sub-phase, a group or an individual explores the pull towards the blind trust and fusion with each other, which is a defense against the real acknowledgement of difference and the hard work of separation and individuation. The second sub-phase deals with disenchantment, and the defenses of alienation and despair, which are a defense against recognizing our real similarities and the capacity to work interdependently with each other. This phase is resolved when an individual or a group comes to terms with the existential fact that we are always both together and alone.

In Individuals -The issue of Enchantment

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 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'.

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 that 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 hang out only 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.

SCT Application

I used a Systems Centered approach to help her deal with her salience for acting out her impulses towards merging and fusion. SCT identifies enchantment as a defense against an authentic intimate connection, which is based on an avoidance of difference. Whenever she felt the frustration of encountering difference, either in her intimate relationships or in her therapeutic relationship with me, I helped her to contain her powerful impulses to flee and asked her to observe her experience with acute awareness. As she did this, she discovered a primitive terror of being abandoned and left alone, which had very early roots in painful childhood experiences. As she developed the capacity to separate the past from the present in a visceral as well as cognitive way, she became more capable of developing intimate relationships that had an acceptance for differences as well as similarities. The reality that all of our joinings are imperfect, that there is always a gap between us and our loved ones that exists side by side with a profound connection, became more and more bearable as she crossed the boundary from the unbearable misattunement which she had experienced as a child

into the present where, as an adult, she had the skills to manage periodic misattunements.

The Issue of Disenchantment

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 are heavily weighted towards the "heaven centered" side of spiritual life and advocate detachment, poverty and celibacy as the path to liberation 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 began 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 dread of opening up to the possibility of a warm and lasting intimate connection, which was 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 his case meditation and spiritual work was blocking his entrance into a more profound knowledge of intimacy both with others and with himself.

SCT Application

The Systems Centered approach to this dilemma is the flip side of the previous case. In this situation my job was to hold my client at the fork in the road whenever he experienced a warm, personal, intimate relationship either with me or in his life, and help him to restrain his impulse to act out by 'spiritualizing' the relationship into some ethereal abstraction. As he was able to bear feelings of genuine attachment and closeness he had to confront deep fears around being taken over and psychically swallowed up. Similar to the previous case, this fear had very early psychodynamic roots. His therapeutic path was to do a lot of careful painstaking work to help him to discriminate between the very real experiences that he had overcome in childhood by fleeing into a fantasy world, (which later became the foundation of his 'spiritual' practice), and the reality of his present relationship both with me and with his potential partners. Over a period of years I helped him to recognize and use the real resources that he had as an adult to overcome his fear of being left alone. I also helped him to discriminate the resources available to him in his present circumstances, from the overwhelming feelings of physical and emotional discomfort and longing which he had experienced as a child. The only way to achieve this goal was to establish a deep and empathic therapeutic relationship.

In Groups

Similar to the work of individuals, the intimacy phase poses the group with the conflict of integrating the polarity of their impulses either to merge in blissful enchantment, at the cost of recognizing the real differences - or to distance in alienation and despair, at the

cost of recognizing their real similarities. Again, this conflict is explored dialectically, in sub groups, until the group has achieved an integration.

An example of a group struggling with the issues of the intimacy phase occurred for me in a spiritual group that I belonged to that had a very devotional and inspirational practice. The meditations were often ecstatic, and there was a lot of high, loving energy both during the meditations and in our social interactions with each other. Often I couldn't wait to go to these meditations to get my hit of this pure, ecstatic atmosphere. For years we were living in the wonderful blissful space of enchantment with each other and with the high spiritual current of energy which was coming through the group. Difficulties in the community began when several of the group members' marriages began to blow apart. As a group we had lots of skills for getting into a very high attunement, however we were lacking the ability to deal with the frustrating reality of difference in our intimate relationships. Most of us were in denial of the existential paradox that we are always both together and alone! When we came up to this frustrating reality, rather than work with it, we often acted out and went in search of the next ecstatic union (or perhaps to be more psychologically accurate, one might say the next ecstatic merging!). This issue culminated when two of the leaders who were in a long-term marriage, split up. This precipitated a group crisis after which many of the old group members drifted away. At this point you might say that many of us were acting out the second sub phase of intimacy - disenchantment, alienation and despair.

SCT Application

A Systems Centered group process might have helped this group to contain its impulses towards both enchantment and disenchantment without acting out. An SCT group leader would help group members both bear and explore their feelings on each side of the existential paradox that we are always both together and alone. For the

'merging' sub group, the task would be to explore their impulses to fuse until they noticed just bearable differences. For the distancing sub group, the task would be to explore their impulses towards despair and alienation until they noticed just bearable similarities. As the subgroups integrated both sides of the split an integration would occur at every level, in the group-as-a-whole, the sub groups and in the individual members. The group would then have the capacity to embrace and explore both their similarities and their differences without making a defensive flight down either side of the split.

General Reflections on the Intimacy phase in Individual Spiritual Practitioners and Groups

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 are ultimately 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 and fellow group members deeply, without fusing 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, or a group, feels 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'. If either

position becomes rigidified, and if a spiritual philosophy is used to support it, we only prolong our suffering and inevitably have to backtrack to resolve our difficulties.

In my experience, the sub-phase of enchantment is particularly problematic for spiritual groups. The psychodynamic forces that are at play during this phase are extremely compelling. Group leaders that are addicted to this state of blissful merger will collude with group members to keep this game alive. In spiritual groups this is particularly dangerous as it is during this phase that a cult can be created. This state can be so addictive that group members will often deny their own perceptions of reality and allow a lot of unsavory things to happen so long as they can keep that 'loving feeling' alive. Unfortunately, the history of many modern spiritual groups is filled with the stories of boundary violations that occur when a spiritual group is fixated at this stage of development. This often occurs in the form of sexual acting out between teachers and students, but it may also show up in the financial life of the group or in other abuses of power (Kornfield, 2000) The forces that are unleashed during this stage are so primitive and powerful that even wise and experienced teachers have been swept up in this dynamic.

The underlying dynamics that are stimulated in the intimacy phase of a group's development are rooted in our earliest learning's of what it is like to be in relationship. It is very easy to mistake the bliss of a regressed merger with an idealized teacher or community onto which one has projected an image of an ideal parent for a true spiritual awakening. The wish for a return to the unconditional love of our early bonding with our parents is a primal urge which is difficult to resist and all too easily used by a charismatic teacher who may be unaware or unresolved in regards to these early dynamics. As any experienced psychotherapist can attest, even with knowledge and experience, it is extremely easy to get caught in the current of these powerful forces.

The vast majority of spiritual teachers are genuinely good people who really desire to make the world a better place. It is tragic when these dynamics, which are truly

larger than any individual teacher or student, are acted out rather then contained and explored. If teachers can be educated, both apprehensively and comprehensively in the theory and methods that Systems Centered Therapy and/or group dynamics has too offer, and be able to apply it to the unique situation of their particular community in a way that is attuned to their group, a tremendous amount of unnecessary pain may be avoided.

The Systems Centered perspective is that these dynamics are larger than any individual member. From this point of view, it is vital that we do not scapegoat or demonize a teacher or student who acts out under the influence of these dynamics. Restraining the impulse to go on a 'witch hunt' when the facts of a teachers or senior students abuses of power come to light can be a monumental task as the forces which are unleashed at this moment are often quite virulent and laced with a rage that is multi-determined by the early childhood experiences of community members. If the acting out can be contained, the community as a whole has a tremendous opportunity to deepen their understanding of the dynamics that have been at work behind the scenes. This is not to condone the actions of teachers or students that have acted out in any way. Depending on the situation, sanctions and perhaps even some form of reparations may be necessary to re-establish some sense of safety in the community. However, once a sense of safety has been restored and clear norms of acceptable and unacceptable behavior established, the community must explore the feelings that have been acted out or they may simply be recycled and return to haunt the community in another form. From the Systems Centered perspective, these feelings belong to the group-as-a-whole, not to any individual member, and if the group can 'unstuff' the scapegoat, each member has the opportunity to take back the disowned parts of themselves that they have projected into the person who has acted out. It is one of the most extraordinary and important lessons of the Systems Centered approach to group process that when group members take back the parts of themselves that they have disowned and

condemned as unacceptable in an authentic way, the group member who has a salience for acting these feelings out feels much less pressure to do so. Systems Centered theory and practice asks us to continually test the hypothesis that a group member who gets scapegoated by the group is always the messenger of some aspect of the human experience that the group or the leader has not yet contained and integrated (Agazarian, 1997).

The Stage of Love, Work and Play in Spiritual Life

The third stage of development concerns the ongoing work of an individual or a group to continually extend the boundaries of their knowledge through both their intuition and comprehensive understanding, in the context of their present reality. This involves moment to moment reality testing, a common sense approach to their goals and the obstacles that must be overcome to reach these goals, and the continued, disciplined work with all of the defenses which have been explored in the earlier phases of development (Agazarian, 1997). The SCT understanding is that none of the earlier stages are ever 'permanently' resolved, they are simply explored at deeper levels with more profound degrees of existential insight and humor. One might say that at this stage, the inner witness is firmly established and is observing the drama of life with a great compassion, a keen awareness of the good of the whole, and the capacity to disidentify from any particular position when it is no longer useful in helping the group or the individual reach their goals.

In Individuals

Once someone has contained and integrated the 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 and 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 for a period of ten years who was deeply involved in a practice of Christian contemplative prayer and Buddhist meditation. 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 inside 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. Through her psychological work, 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 fiercely compassionate with herself and not act out her compulsions. Rather than act out her uncomfortable feelings she slowly fought with her 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 and to bear the anxiety of shifting her sense of identity away from her old roles.

In the last two years of her work 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 creatively 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 also 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.

SCT Application

When someone has reached this stage of development, the Systems Centered approach is to help the person continually deepen their experience of what they know, both non verbally as a felt sense in their bodies and comprehensively in words, and to continually reality test in the context of the actual lives that they are living. At this stage, all of the defenses that have been worked with previously will still come up, however the person will have a greatly increased capacity to dissolve them and to regain their center in the middle of life's existential paradoxes. One might say that the role of the SCT practitioner becomes more like a coach with an elite athlete who is helping them to play the game of life with greater and greater skillfulness.

In Groups

A group that has arrived at the phase of love, work and play has contained and explored group members' conflicts around authority and intimacy. The group is not defended against the conflicting feelings involved in these issues and has the skills to check experience against reality and to live in the frustrating and gratifying experience of group members' real feelings for each other and for themselves. In other words the group has both the capacity and the skill to call a spade a spade rather than to deny the reality of an inner or outer experience. As a whole, the group also has the capacity to contain many contradictions and paradoxical truths simultaneously without defending or going into stereotypical roles. The defenses salient to the earlier stages of development still come up, however the group now has the skills to work them through with great facility.

In my experience, groups that are living in this stage of development, exemplify the consciousness that the non-dual traditions are striving to embody. Groups at this stage are cultivating an awareness of both the numinous core of the Unknown and a full embrace of the concrete realities and specific goals that they are working with. The group's awareness of the particular concrete tasks and goals of the moment grounds them in a context that is beyond the goals of inner exploration, which can become an excuse for solipsism and 'navel gazing'. The group consciousness is now truly focused on creating an environment that serves the greater good. Inner exploration is used in the service of living a skillful, clear and creative life. This is similar to the consciousness of the few true Spiritual Masters that I have met. Each one was extraordinarily focused on the goal of alleviating the suffering of the world. In my opinion, this compassion in action is the heart of spiritual work.

The following example occurred for me in a group that was not explicitly spiritual. However, it is easy to observe the core insights and values of the non-dual spiritual traditions in the following description. The group has an experience of a transcendent core that is beyond old roles and conditioning, explores the subtle energies that are

released when the body and mind is free from armoring, and grapples with the concrete and immanent existential realities of life. In a sense, one might say that the group was rediscovering the consciousness of the wise sages who developed the non-dual traditions.

The context is the group that manages the Systems Centered Training and Research Institute. This group is unusual as far as management groups go in that it begins each meeting with two days of experiential work to explore and contain the underlying group dynamics that might impede its capacity to function as an efficient management team. After a particularly moving meeting, I wrote the following description for the newsletter of the organization.

"The meeting began with two days of experiential work led by Yvonne Agazarian to remove any restraining forces that were located in our group dynamics that might hinder us from effectively reaching our goals as a task group. The group started by exploring the paranoid defenses that kept us locked inside of a world that had only to do with ourselves and away from the frustrating experience that reality simply is what it is and how impossible it is to control either reality or other members of the group. As the group worked through its paranoid defenses, a sub group emerged that explored the tremendous energy and potential that opened up when they sat fully centered in their bodies without binding or tightening against the spontaneous flow of apprehensive experience that welled up both inside of them and from the environment. This led to the metaphor of each member sitting or bobbing in a sea kayak, which the subgroup differentiated from the 'slave ship' of its defenses and old roles. From here the group explored what it is like to bear what seemed like unbearable existential facts without closing down or defending against them, and made room for all of the hatred, grief and pain as well as the awesomeness and beauty of the full spectrum of human life and our individual and collective helplessness in front of difficult realities. At one point, there

wasn't a dry eye in the house as members brought in deeper and deeper levels of the life experiences and seemingly unbearable realities that they were learning how to bear, were bearing, or had borne, and allowed their hearts to break open (rather then simply break!). As we struggled to live authentically with ourselves as the people that we are, with the lives that we have, rather then the people we wish we were (or the people we wished others were!), we set the stage for each member to discover what tasks and roles inside the organization we had our hearts behind. The group differentiated these 'roles with heart' from the tasks and roles we thought we should want to be in (or were already in!) but for which we didn't really feel any passion. This led the group right into undoing role locks and naming the behaviors that we each do that induct the group and ourselves into supporting a defensive, old role. As we named the behaviors that support our old roles we also made a commitment to call attention to the fork in the road for each other whenever these behaviors showed up during the process of managing the organization." (Robbins, 2003)

SCT Application

Similar to working with an individual who has arrived at this stage of development, the SCT group leaders task is to help the group to deepen its apprehensive and comprehensive knowledge in the context of the realities that it is currently living in. Defenses are called and the group works in sub groups to explore each side of the conflict that the group is containing. As each side of a split is explored there is a greater and greater degree of integration and development at every level of the groups life.

Conclusion

The unique conditions of spiritual practice in our time make it imperative that we develop as psychologically and spiritually 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. 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 which is rooted in our inextricable interdependence on each other and with our natural environment.

I would like to propose that spiritual work can be deeply enhanced by the methodology and theoretical framework that Systems Centered Therapy offers. Central to the spiritual path is the journey from the perspective of the individual ego to an experience and an understanding of our interconnectedness with all of life. Conscious group work, or individual work using a Systems Centered approach, offers an ideal opportunity to make this journey without incurring a spiritual bypass of our issues around authority and intimacy. Properly managed, conscious group work is one of the most powerful modalities available to make the journey from the perspective of only looking out for what is good for 'I, me and mine' to looking out for the good of the whole. When this approach is skillfully integrated with spiritual practice, the spiritual growth of both individuals and groups may be accelerated.

I think that it is essential that the leaders of spiritual communities as well as the members of spiritual groups begin to educate themselves about group dynamics and the stages of group development. It is equally important that spiritual teachers develop a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the various psychological motivations that are underlying the spiritual lives of their students. Both a comprehensive and experiential understanding of these dynamics would help to avoid much of the psychological damage that has occurred in some spiritual communities. Sometimes, this has occurred through the blatant abuse of the power of the leadership role. More often, I think that it has occurred out of sheer ignorance. An understanding of the psychological dynamics that are at play in both groups and individual may also help prevent teachers

and students alike from unwittingly using spiritual practice to support an unworked out psychological issue around either authority or intimacy. It is unfortunate that when this occurs, the very tools that are being used to gain liberation from suffering only prolong it.

For the most part, I believe that spiritual leaders come to their roles with the best of intentions and a pure heart. Unfortunately the dynamics of the group, the unworked out emotional issues which seekers bring, and the hierarchical structure of near absolute power which we often hand over to our teachers, makes it almost impossible for them to carry out their roles without stumbling. A productive exchange of training and education could go a long way towards correcting this situation. To be sure, this exchange has been going on informally for many years, however the time may be ripe to create more formal avenues in which this can occur.

Both spiritual practice within the non-dual traditions and SCT are disciplines that help us to contain the existential paradoxes that life presents. To live a spiritually mature life we must integrate many profound and dynamic polarities and learn how to live with seemingly contradictory truths about our human experience. We must accept that we are simultaneously capable of experiences of great spiritual radiance, wisdom and compassion and cosmic fools capable of endless mischief and self delusion. The modern history of spiritual groups has taught us that this truth applies equally to advanced teachers and to beginning meditators. If we can hold this paradoxical truth with great kindness and compassion we can engage in the project of deepening our understanding of both spiritual practice and psychological development with humility and existential humor about the many missteps that teachers and students may make along the way.

The transformation of our world can only happen if we work together. The time for giving over our authority to charismatic leaders is over. The spiritual leaders of tomorrow must know how to create learning environments in which we can reclaim our own authority

and self-knowledge, and be more concerned with creating emotionally mature, discerning, awakened and interdependent human beings, than with creating disciples. To paraphrase the words of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, 'we will either learn how to live together, or we will surely learn how to die together.'

In this chapter, I have examined the goals and practices the 'non dual' spiritual traditions. These traditions are concerned with helping a practitioner live a life that is both transcendently centered in the formless emptiness that is the pregnant womb of all creative possibilities and immanently involved with the concrete realities of this world. I have looked at how Systems Centered Training and Therapy may be useful in helping individual practitioners and groups to reach these goals. I have also examined some ways that spiritual teachers and practitioners may have deficits in terms of their training and understanding of group and individual dynamics that SCT may be useful in ameliorating. Theoretical and experiential training in these dynamics may help practitioners and teachers alike to accurately diagnose and intervene at the level of the underlying motivations that are driving an individual's or a group's spiritual practice. Finally I have applied a Systems Centered understanding of the phases of systems development to examples of individuals and groups who are involved with spiritual practice and shown how a Systems Centered approach may be applied in each of these cases.

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