

Unpublished Manuscript, Copyright ©1999, by Michael Robbins. This article is part 2 of a series. This first

part examined the same issue as it exists for individuals.

# **Spiritual Awakening or Psychological Defense? part 2**

**Some reflections on the phases of group development in  
spiritual groups**

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

The disturbing experiences of New age groups in which leaders have either consciously or unconsciously abused their power, the rise of fundamentalist religious movements, and the horrifying agenda of 'new age looking' cults such as the Japanese sect Om Shinri Kyo which poisoned the air supply in the Tokyo subway system a couple of years ago, make it imperative that spiritual seekers begin to educate themselves about the dynamics of groups and the vulnerability of these dynamics to being misused. Working in a group invokes extraordinarily powerful energies which are deep in the psyche of the human race. These forces, once unleashed, can have a tremendous potential for good as well as evil. If we add into this mix spiritual technologies that develop the inherent power of human potential, a charismatic leader, and the unworked through psychological difficulties of devotees or students we create quite a potent brew which, if mismanaged, can wreak havoc in the \_\_\_\_\_

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individual lives of spiritual seekers, sabotage the ideals on which a spiritual group was founded and poison the larger spiritual culture which is currently enjoying a renaissance.

Similar to individuals, in order for spiritual groups to function as healthy containers for spiritual growth, they must work through their issues around authority and intimacy. These issues are predictable phases of group development. In my opinion, it is essential for spiritual leaders to educate themselves about the stages of group development so that they can recognize what phase their particular group is in and keep their fingers on the pulse of the group process if it begins to go awry. In this article, I will use one particular model for working with groups, Systems Centered Therapy™ (SCT™), to illuminate the stages of group development as they relate to the life of spiritual groups (Agazarian, 1997).

The SCT model of group development is based on research that was originally done by Bennis and Shepherd (1957). Since that time a variety of independent researchers have observed similar stages of group development (Beck, 1987). In some models, these stages have been given slightly different names, but the general sequence of them is the same.

SCT has a very specific methodology for working with the phases of group development. The cornerstones of this methodology are an understanding of the group as a whole, a sophisticated model of the hierarchy of psychological defenses, a System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction (S.A.V.I., Simon and Agazarian, 1967), General Systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968), Lewin's field theory (1951), and a rigorous training for group leaders that teaches a Systems-Centered therapist how to understand the phases of group development experientially inside themselves as well as theoretically. This training takes years of personal growth and intellectual study. It is not my intention in this brief article to teach the reader how to become a Systems-Centered group therapist. My goal is simply to give the reader a basic understanding of what the phases of group development are and how these apply to spiritual groups. It is my hope that this information can begin to give the reader some direction towards understanding the experiences they have had in spiritual groups and begin to open up a dialogue in the spiritual community around the relationship between group dynamics, psychological growth and spiritual awakening.

**The Stages of Authority, Intimacy, and Interdependent Love, Work and Play in**

## **the Life of Spiritual Groups**

### **1. The Authority Phase of Group Development**

All leadership interventions necessarily ask group members to change the way they are outside of the group and to take on a new role as a group member. From the first moment of a group's existence a norm is developed which will influence the life of the group and dictate the sphere of possibilities that will be available for group members. How group members respond to both leadership interventions and to group norms constitutes the first phase of a groups development. The core of this phase is the relationship to the external authority of the leader and the sense of inner authority and personal values of each member.

All groups have different requirements for membership. Examples of naturally occurring social groups are families, peer groups, religions, graduate schools and corporations. To attain and to maintain membership, individuals must be willing to abide by the norms of their group. The clearer a group is about its norms 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. Individuals who flagrantly violate the norms of their group usually will incur some form of sanction. These sanctions can be as benign as being sent to one's room without supper or as serious as a prison term.

If the work of the group is the exploration of feelings, group members have the opportunity to explore the intensely virulent feelings that may be aroused at the boundary of joining a group. In most groups, including spiritual ones, little or no time is given to a conscious exploration of these feelings. Unfortunately this often results in a variety of acting out behaviors that have tremendous costs both for individuals and the group as a whole.

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 role pairings and role locks 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. The value of a process such as Systems-Centered Therapy at this point is that it can create an environment in which group members can explore the pull that we all have to act out one or another of these roles and to begin to experience and understand the feelings that we are managing by these roles.

The major explorations in the first phase of any groups development revolve around compliance and defiance. This conflict will show up both in relationship to the authority of the leader and to the demands of group life. The group will usually split into two camps; 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 come to terms with the structure that the leader has chosen and the demands of working together. Even without leadership intervention, every group has certain conscious or unconscious norms that will exert a lot of pressure on its members. This pressure will be both overt and visible and subtle and invisible.

The conflict between one's individuality and the reality that group membership demands that one surrender personal agendas into a larger context can stir up a tremendous amount of primitive anxiety, rage and terror. Groups will usually deal with their conflicting feelings around membership and the leadership in a dialectical pattern of flight and fight. Knee jerk compliance is a flight away from an honest struggle with the demands of group life and can incur a painful loss of self. Often compliant members will only recognize these costs years

into the life of the group. The compliant position resolves the conflict by prematurely giving over to group membership and fleeing from any direct confrontation with the authority and/or the group as a whole. The compliant impulse is to accept the group norms before one has thoroughly evaluated them rather than experience the terror of being excluded by the group or actively ostracized. On the other hand, group members with a salience for defiance, will stubbornly preserve their individuality at all costs and instinctively see the structure of the group and leadership interventions as a threat to their autonomy. The fear of losing oneself in the group will result in a distorted perception of the leader and the structure of the group. This position can easily crystallize into paranoia or anti-social behavior. From this perspective the benefits of co-operating with the status quo feel like a devil's deal. Neither the compliant, one-down position nor the defiant, one-up position can allow for the development of genuine intimacy. Both strategies are fundamentally concerned with survival rather than relationship.

The position of SCT is that both the impulse towards compliance and defiance must be explored before one can authentically cross the boundary into group membership. Before a group member can make this shift authentically he or she must attain a considered, individuated position, untainted by either compliance or defiance, from which they can evaluate the norms and values of the group and decide whether or not they are willing to subscribe to them. Until a group member has made conscious his or her impulses towards compliance and defiance it will be very difficult to cross the boundary into group membership in an authentic way. This process happens not once but many times during the course of one's membership in a group. Until a group has explored its impulses towards compliance and defiance and its relationship with authority (both the leader's and their own!), according to SCT, it will be unable to support a genuine exploration of intimacy.

The issue of intimacy requires that group members are landed in their own authority and have attained some degree of individuation in their relationship to the leader. A good barometer to test whether or not a group has moved from the authority phase into 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, whereas during the intimacy phase members are much

more concerned with their relationship with each other. This is particularly obvious in the way that members make eye contact. During the authority issue, eye contact is either directly with the leader or darting, as group members quickly try to gauge whether what they have said has met with approval or disapproval. In intimacy the center of authority is squarely within each group member and the major focus of concern is their relationship with each other.

## **2.The Phase of Intimacy**

As in the authority phase, the issue of intimacy poses the group with another conflict. Again, this conflict is usually explored dialectically until the group has achieved an integration. The two polarities of intimacy are the pull towards enchantment and being 'in love' (at the cost of recognizing the real differences in the group) and disenchantment and despair (at the cost of recognizing the real similarities in the group.)

An example of the intimacy phase of development occurred for me in a spiritual group that I belonged to that had a very devotional and inspirational practice. The meditations were often ecstatic, blissful, 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 member's 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 crises 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.

In studying Systems-Centered Therapy, I learned that this experience was not unique.

Most groups that survive and work through their authority issue (which is no small achievement!) will go through a phase of enchantment which is followed by some form of disenchantment. During the phase of enchantment, the group can have a very warm womb-like quality. Everything is wonderful. This is the best group in the world with the most incredible people and the most fantastic leader. The group is flushed with the energy of idealization and optimism. Everything is seen through rose colored glasses and there is a feeling of enormous trust in others and an omnipotent feeling about oneself. The difficulty is that all of this trust and love is blind and can only be maintained by denying the real differences that exist between group members. So long as the group can keep its 'high' going everything is great, even ecstatic. 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.

Many people involved with spiritual work have a strong resonance for this experience. We are all familiar with the workshop junkie who is addicted to getting a hit of this wonderful high energy. (Maybe we have even been one ourselves!) Group leaders that are addicted to this state of bliss will collude with group members to keep this game alive. The distinction that never gets made in a group or an individual who is stuck at this stage is the difference between 'union', which occurs between autonomous individuals with great respect for differences, and 'merging' which has very little authentic tolerance for difference. The symptoms of this stage of development can manifest in life as a love addiction or dependency which denies the possibilities of separation and individuation. This sub-phase begins to become modified when members of the group start to notice the real differences and separations between them. Reality can arrive like a ton of bricks when this bubble breaks.

In the phase of disenchantment, suddenly the group's world is bleak and all that group members notice are their differences. Mistrust colors the group grey, and group members explore experiences of alienation, paranoia, contempt and despair. A reactive independence seems like the only solution. Similarities may be noticed but are quickly defended against as the group (or a sub-group) revolts against the vulnerability and exploitability of its tendency to merge and fuse. The cost of living in this defense is that it is

almost impossible to create a functional dependence or interdependence. As the group resolves these two polarities it develops the ability to find closeness without being blind to difference and to explore the possibilities of autonomy and individuation without losing connection.

### **3.The Phase of Love, Work and Play as a Container for Spiritual Work**

The final phase of group development is the ongoing work of an experienced group exploring its possibilities for interdependent love, work and play. When a group has reached this level it can begin to contain and touch the boundaries of the 'numinous' unknown.

I would like to distinguish the core of the unknown as 'numinous' because unlike the previous levels of the unknown in which the surrender of one psychological position only revealed yet another structure which we ultimately had to dissolve, the numinous unknown is fundamentally mysterious, unexplainable and shot through with paradox. The numinous unknown contains all polarities and yet is also beyond polarity. At this level we are aware of our structure sitting precariously in the ocean of the formless. We are both the glass and the glass blower's breath, the particle and the wave, the sparkle in our eye and the vast, cosmic light. The numinous unknown is parallel to what the Buddhists call the pregnant Void, the Taoists the Wu Chi, and the Cabalists the Ain Soph. This is the potential space that we will all dissolve back into and from which all human possibilities arise. All authentic processes of transformation must touch this space if they are to succeed.

A group that has arrived at the third phase of its development has contained and explored group members' conflicts around authority and intimacy. These earlier phases may not be completely resolved, however 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 and to not 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.

An example of a group in this stage of development functioning as a container for the energies of the numinous unknown occurred for me during an SCT training weekend. This particular group was rather well trained with all members except for two having substantial experience with Systems-Centered Therapy. Just prior to the time the group touched this level which I am calling the numinous unknown there were two subgroups\* working, one which was exploring their dread and terror of chaos and the unpredictable and another which was tracking a vast, pulsing energy which was moving inside their bodies and in the space between group members. As each subgroup deepened their work, my subjective experience was that the energy in the room became profoundly magnetized and intensely alive in a quiet and centered way. The quality of this energy was similar to what I have experienced in the middle of meditation retreat. At a certain point the two subgroups merged in an oceanic

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\* In SCT group work, a sub-group is composed of the members of the group as a whole that are resonating with each other in a similar experience. Sub-groups function within the group-as-a-whole similar to the way that sub-personalities function within an individual person. As the group as a whole comes to the next level of integration, the sub-groups naturally transform and integrate as well.

experience of the pulsation of energy which contained both a sense of awe (this seemed to be a transformation of the dread) and a comfortable, for some even blissful, merging with chaos and the basic life force. There was no specific emotional content which the group was exploring at this point and yet there were many different emotions which members were aware of touching as we floated in, contained, and were contained by this vast cosmic soup. There was room within the group-as-a-whole and each group member for many different polarities as members lightly touched and hovered through feelings of love and hate, a visceral awareness of both molecular and the highly differentiated forms of life, warmth and cold, and many other feelings which moved through the group in waves. In reviewing our experience, we noticed that the boundaries at all levels of the system (the individual members, the sub-groups and the group as a whole) were open and permeable. Occasionally a member would pop back into dread and tighten up against the energetic flow and the group would effortlessly

make room for this experience before it descended into an even deeper exploration of a sense of pregnant emptiness, a pulsing space which held all human possibilities in potential.

## **The Confrontation with the Unknown**

In the previous article in this series, I functionally defined spiritual work in two ways. First, as a transcendent dialogue with the profound mysteries of the cosmos, the unknown, which immanently touches the specific context of our lives in the here and now. Second, as those disciplines, practices and activities that shift us out of a purely personal view of our experience to include a larger, and ultimately a universal, context. In counterpoint to this, I described our psychological defenses as the ways that we defend ourselves against the unknown and get stuck in stereotyped and repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, being, and behaving which stop us from integrating new experiences and developing into mature individuated human beings. These mechanisms are operative at all levels of the human experience, in individuals, couples, groups, organizations and the global community. In order for a group to productively engage in the dialogue with the unknown I believe that that it is necessary to have thoroughly explored the issues of authority and intimacy. 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.

The spiritual paths of many traditions have provided a vehicle whereby individuals have attained great degrees of enlightenment. The difficulty is that it is hard to transmit this attainment to the community as a whole. In order to radically transform our world, it is my contention that the spiritual work of the future must not simply help individuals find their liberation but that it must also provide the stimulus to awaken the conscience of society at large. This goal requires that we develop structures which help us to deeply shift our perspective from a self centered one to a systems centered one. If we have learned how to be responsible to the group-as-a-whole in the process of finishing our personal work, perhaps we will remain attuned to each other, to our communities and to our environment as

we explore the farther realms of human possibility.

At each stage of the group's work we face a necessary loss of our protection from the confrontation with the unknown. This is a simultaneously thrilling and terrifying initiation into a more direct contact with the life force. As we unveil the false prophets in our psyches we must be willing to let go of our learned ideas about right and wrong and develop an evolving sense of conscience which is dependent on context. We must be willing to take a leap of faith out from under the limiting canopy of the specific culture and religion which we were born into. To paraphrase a teacher of mine, "the religion of our childhoods is usually an inoculation against God". True awakenings have equal parts of excitement, and an 'awe'ful terror that shrinks our omnipotence down to size. A deep confrontation with the unknown restores our place in a universe that is fundamentally unexplainable and mysterious. My opinion, is that it is this attitude of awe and a fierce, disciplined curiosity about the mysteries of life which lies at the heart of a spiritual life.

## **Conclusion**

What phases of development do you recognize in the groups and organizations that you are now, or have been, involved with? Although this article has presented the phases in a linear fashion, the longer a group is together, the more the phases will be experienced in a non-linear or cyclical way. Do you know which phase you are personally in at the moment and how this relates to your spiritual practice and your participation in your group? Are you working more in issues around your relationship with internal and external authority, intimacy, or the challenges of functionally dependent love, work and play?

I would like to propose that spiritual work can be deeply enhanced by the incorporation of conscious group work such as 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 things. Conscious group work offers an ideal opportunity to make this journey without incurring a spiritual bypass of our issues around authority and intimacy, and for learning deep in our bones the lesson of our

interdependency on one another.

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. Properly managed, conscious group work is one of the most powerful modalities available to transform ourselves individually and as a planetary community. On the macro level, the environmental, economic, social and cultural crises that we are facing as a world community make it imperative that we learn how to work together as responsible, conscientious beings with great respect and tolerance for our differences. 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.'

Both a comprehensive and experiential understanding of group dynamics would help to avoid much of the truly awful 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. 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. If we can grow ourselves individually and collectively to the level of maturity where we can truly function interdependently, there may be an enormous paradigm shift in the offing. This shift is one from the hierarchical dominance of the leader to the responsible interdependence and partnership of people with an awakened conscience. If both seekers and those who serve in leadership roles for our communities can educate themselves in the psychological nitty gritty of helping individuals and groups to make this shift, we may be able to develop an interconnected network of spiritual communities based on partnership, a respect for our differences and a profound and mature collaboration around a common inquiry into the farther reaches of human possibility.

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, competent, awakened and interdependent human beings, than with creating disciples.

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Concise two sentence tag line : Michael Robbins is a psychotherapist who uses an integration of Systems Therapy, Body/mind therapies, object relations therapy, Taoist Qi Gong practice and expressive 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, or call (617) 623-0024.

#### notes

1. 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.

2. 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

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Spiritual awakenings are the soul's cry for freedom. Listen to its call and your life will be transformed into something meaningful and significant. Refuse its call and your life will be like a graveyard. If you have experienced a spiritual awakening, you have come to see through the lies and illusions of this world. Deep in your soul, you realize that nothing external has ever, and can ever, bring you true happiness or fulfillment. This profound realization leaves you craving for something richer, more fulfilling, and something that will make you feel whole once again. In fact, spiritual awakening symptoms are not only emotional but also psychological and even physical. Here are twenty-three of the most common symptoms out there. See how many you can identify with Spiritual Awakening versus Psychic Awakening. What is the Ego and the Spirit? Here's What Happens During Spiritual Awakening. Spiritual Traps: False Signs of Spiritual Awakening. Trap #1: Thinking You're "Good" and Others Are "Evil". Trap #2: Identifying Yourself as a "Spiritual Person". Here, we use spiritual ideas and practices to avoid unresolved emotional or psychological wounds. These wounds must be addressed to proceed in our psycho-spiritual development. We often resist this process because addressing these wounds requires going through the discomfort they represent. Spiritual Awakening is the initiation into expanded states of consciousness. Are you experiencing it? Here are the spiritual awakening signs you need to know... Much of what transpires as you spiritually awaken cannot be seen, or accurately described, but rather can only be felt, lived through, witnessed and experienced. What Is Spiritual Awareness? Some describe awakening as the moment you open your heart to the One True God and Original Creator of your Soul allowing in a new level of light so that you begin to see and experience a deeper understanding of what life really is. Spiritual awakening means waking up or evolving from your ego-self into your higher self. There is a massive energy shift happening in the universe, and you are part of it. Everyone goes through certain spiritual changes throughout their lives, which some are aware of, and some are not. It is beyond the physical state. Psychological symptoms are more important to understand. Knowledge. You start re-defining your existence. This spiritual post offers a definition about what spiritual awakening is and how it can lead someone towards spiritual freedom. The post is by spiritual teacher, Jim Tolles. A spiritual awakening is realized throughout your body, heart, mind, and soul, but no sooner has that erupted than you are forced to see how limited you have been in so many regards. That bright light shining in the inner most depths of us asks us a potent question: "Now that we know the truth, will we clean up our home or will we try to ignore our illusions, pain, and misconceptions?" Thoughts on this blog are not medical or psychological advice. Sign Up for my Free Spiritual Awakening Newsletter.