

# **The Essential Tenets of East-West Spiritual Counseling: Its Guiding Principles, Theoretical Foundations, and Creative Techniques**

by

Judson Davis, PhD

## Introduction

The practice of spiritual counseling represents a dynamic and often challenging process of discovery that seeks to penetrate to the very core of one's being. In its most essential form, it seeks to uncover and foster an inner relationship with the Divine, a process that ultimately requires an intimate consideration of each participant's most fundamental spiritual experiences as well as the religious teachings (also known as the *containing myth*) of one's socio-cultural upbringing. Facilitating and deepening one's experience of the sacred involves a variety of contemplative approaches and creative techniques, all of which are designed to work in concert with the individual's own unique qualities, intentions, and perspectives.

In the following essay, I will focus upon three primary areas of consideration: 1) the meaning and purpose of spiritual counseling, and how it varies from mainstream clinical psychotherapy; 2) the influence of one's formative upbringing, especially as it relates to the containing myth presented in one's religious inheritance and how this framework may be expanded to allow for a more immediate and integral experience of the sacred; and 3) the theoretical and practical application of various processes and techniques that are designed to facilitate a deeper and more abiding relationship with the source of one's being. As the spiritual counselor's own awareness and development exist as essential components in the counseling relationship, I will also include an overview of my own developmental process when it serves to further clarify the meaning and content of the above categories.

## The Guiding Principles of Spiritual Counseling

The distinction between spiritual guidance and clinical psychotherapy is an important one, and although both forms of counseling seek to expand one's self-awareness, it is important to

distinguish some basic differences between these two fundamental approaches. As one who has been trained and practiced in both disciplines, I have been exposed to many of the inherent psychological challenges and attendant psychic phenomena that in-depth clinical counseling naturally entails, and in many ways the established diagnostic components in the field of mainstream psychotherapy provide a clearly demarcated means of interpretation and treatment. Spiritual guidance, on the other hand, presents the practitioner with a considerably wider arena of uncharted psycho-spiritual territory, one that encompasses aspects of deeply felt experiences of sanctity that lie well beyond the realm of clinical assessment and diagnosis.

With this understanding in mind, and as one now begins to more fully consider notions of spirituality, faith, and the experience of the Divine, one is struck by the sheer immensity of the subject matter at hand as well as certain essential questions regarding both the considerable benefits and potential challenges that are involved in this work. For example, how would one adequately describe the notion of spirit, and what does it actually mean to be *spiritual*? Is there truly a divine force that serves as the source and inspiration of one's being (as one's deepest intuitions and/or various transpersonal experiences may suggest), or alternatively, is this merely an anthropomorphic projection (e.g., the figure of God as a benevolent male figure who resides in the heavens above) that can be linked to the workings of the human mind and the related religious postulations of one's particular cultural inheritance? Further, what is the actual role of the spiritual counselor, and how does such guidance assist the client in clarifying and facilitating his or her relationship with the Divine? And where does the ultimate guiding authority in the interpretation of spiritual experience reside, in the counselor, the client, or in one's higher inner nature? These inquiries represent crucial considerations in relation to this process because the spiritual guide is,

often forced into the role of omniscience. We work with the unconscious, with dreams and the psyche, realms in which the transcendental manifests itself. . . . And so it is expected that we know more about ultimate matters than the common mortal. (Guggenbuhl-Craig, 1971, p. 27).

Within the above context, it is necessary to establish a clearer understanding of what spiritual counseling represents, and the following passage serves to provide a more precise sense of its principle framework and focus:

Spiritual guidance is a relationship between a spiritual guide and a seeker that is focused on the growth of the seeker. The relationship is maintained between two mature people differing in competence but not authority. . . . In spiritual guidance, the central relationship

is *not* between the seeker and the guide but between the seeker and God. (Ochs & Olitzky, 1997, p. 11)

From this perspective, one comes to better appreciate that in spiritual counseling there exists a triadic (rather than purely dyadic) relationship, and this important distinction is given greater clarity in correlation with the awareness that “the spiritual guide helps seekers to recognize and pay attention to God’s personal communication and to respond to this direction throughout their lives” (Ochs & Olitzky, 1997, p. 15). Therefore, despite the counselor’s training and efficacy in various therapeutic and contemplative disciplines, it warrants repeating that it is the client’s inner voice that represents the ultimate authority in this process. This requires that the spiritual guide offers genuine openness, empathic listening, and unmitigated compassion, and involves a process by which the guide—acting as a deeply attuned, non-judgmental witness—provides unconditional acceptance, utter presence, and sensitive reflection to the client as a means by which an introspective dialogue can be established with the individual’s various experiences, psychic aspects, and primary life issues. This approach helps to foster greater awareness, self-acceptance, and healing in relation to any respective uncertainty or wounding. This process also serves to provide the client with a direct, experiential example of what must ultimately be developed in oneself if genuine psychological wholeness is to be established and sustained.

Human beings are drawn by their inner nature to seek spiritual growth and liberation, which can be described as an experience of dynamic interrelationship, or union, with the very ground of one’s being from which one originates and with which one naturally longs to commune. Connecting on a deeper level to this Mystery, this ground of being, necessarily corresponds in part (and ideally evolves and matures throughout one’s lifetime) to the manner in which the Divine is approached and envisioned, and thus an in-depth consideration of one’s formative religious upbringing, or containing myth, represents an important first step in this process.

#### The Containing Myth

Essential considerations exist regarding the interplay between one’s formative background and religious faith (as inherited from one’s culture and emphasized through familial and societal forces) and one’s deeply held personal sense of inner spirituality, which can at times be difficult to assess or adequately articulate. This intriguing and sometimes inconsistent interplay exists as one of the decisive challenges in spiritual counseling, and in this respect the following passage helps to establish a clearer sense of certain primary components and considerations:

One of the first things . . . that a spiritual guide has to do is help those seeking guidance to ascertain how they relate to God and where they find God in their adult lives. Spiritual guides help seekers expand their God images, making sure to include the insights that have come over years of growth and maturing. Along with the change in our image of God comes a change in our understanding of who we are in relationship with God. (Ochs & Olitzky, 1997, p. 25)

Some of my own earliest childhood memories involve the various preparations and procedures that accompanied weekly encounters with church services that were a regular part of my formative upbringing. In the act of wearing of one's finest clothes and engaging the church services with all of the required formality and reverence, there was in these Sunday excursions a strong sense of fulfilling a social commitment as opposed to any genuine devotional process, and indeed I cannot recall ever having experienced any explicit sense of awe, wonder, or connection pertaining to the divinity to which one was to offer his highest allegiance. In short, the process itself seemed largely contrived, and on the occasions in which I was successful in adhering to this Protestant ritual with some degree of self-imposed devotion, there was always the felt sense that there remained a substantial distance between the Creator—that *bearded Father in the clouds*—and oneself.

In reflecting upon the uncertainty and questioning that accompanied my early upbringing and later development in this respect, I can now more fully appreciate that the socio-religious framework in which I was raised did not provide a container that could adequately embrace—through meaningful symbolism, ritual, or genuine transcendence—the penetrating inner yearnings of my soul. This realization represents a crucial insight in relation to one's spiritual life because in the absence of deeply felt connecting links to the Divine, one is left without any purposeful inner points of reference or foundational spiritual identity.

One of the principle elements in spiritual counseling that addresses the above conditions relates to what the eminent Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1964) termed the *archetypes*, which he described as inherent primordial images contained within the personal and collective psyche that serve as the basis of human identity and development. More than 2000 years before, Plato (2007) had referred to these elemental themes and images as eternal, ideal forms, and one of the most consequential aspects of Jung's work in the modern world would be his discovery and in-depth articulation of these universal mythic images and themes, which he described as follows:

The archetype is a tendency to form such representations as a motif—representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern . . . but the motif itself

remains the same . . . These manifestations are what I call the archetypes. They are without known origin; and they reproduce themselves in any time or in any part of the world—even where transmission by direct descent or ‘cross fertilization’ through migration must be ruled out. (1964, p. 58)

Archetypal themes and images present themselves in various symbolic guises, which include personified, nature-based, and abstract forms and motifs that have found lasting and far-reaching influence throughout human history in a wide array of disciplines, including various forms of artistic expression, architecture, literature, mythology, and ancient fairy tales (Jung, 1959/1981). Common forms of personified archetypes include the Divine Child, the Goddess, the Wise Old Man, the Trickster, and the Hero, and the latter figure has been especially well articulated in the work of Joseph Campbell (1949) and has been ubiquitously applied to a number of contemporary art forms, most notably in the medium of film.

The most significant application of Jung’s theory of the archetypes, however, has arguably been within the field of depth psychotherapy and the process of spiritual development, and within this context “Jung’s attempt at a spiritual approach to psychology, as both a theoretician and a clinician, has had the greatest acceptance in the academic world of any such endeavor” and “prefigured much of what is current in the field” (Scotton, 1996, p. 39). Jung (1963) felt that the loss of a sense of inner meaning and purpose was the most pressing issue of our time, and redressing this condition became the primary focus of his life’s work. Modern humanity’s overtly outward, rational focus, and its attendant disconnection from the inner symbolic workings of the psyche that in times past found ardent expression in the mythic manifestations of cultural and religious traditions and in the deeply instructive dream life of many ancient societies, have divorced contemporary human beings from their spiritual roots, often resulting in a sense of alienation and spiritual dislocation. Jung’s pioneering work in this area, which included more than half a century of intensive research and the administering of therapeutic counseling to thousands of individuals, was devoted to restoring a sense of the numinous workings of the human psyche and its deep interrelationship with the natural world. His abiding concern regarding the desacralizing effects of Western scientific-materialism and the ever-growing division between humanity and nature is exemplified in the following passage:

As scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional ‘unconscious identity’ with natural phenomena. . . . No river contains a spirit, no tree is the life principle of a man, no snake the embodiment of wisdom, no cave the home

of a great demon. . . . His contact with nature is gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied. (p. 95)

Jung (1964) stressed the importance of sustaining an ongoing psychic link with the natural world, and the importance of archetypal engagement with nature in its myriad manifestations (especially in light of the contemporary ecological crisis) is especially pertinent in that it serves as a bridge between one's inner and outer worlds. This hypothesis postulates that psychological processes are not purely subjective experiences but are at play in the *outer* environment as well. Aspects of the natural world thus take on mythic qualities in a dynamic interplay of psyche and matter. As beautifully enunciated in the work of Marija Gimbutas (1989), Anne Baring and Jules Cashford (1993), and Eric Neumann (1955/1983), in centuries past the archetypal depiction of Mother Nature found extensive expression through various themes and representations of the Earth Goddess, which include nature-based forms such as the Tree of Life, Sacred Stone, and World Mountain in addition to numerous personified deities, both in human and animal form. In her seminal work *The Language of the Goddess*, Gimbutas described this intimate and unifying interrelationship between human cultural expression and the natural world as follows:

The Goddess in all her manifestations was the symbol of the unity of life in Nature. Her power was in water and stone, in tomb and cave, in animals and birds, snakes and fish, hills, tress, and flowers. Hence the holistic and mythopoeic perception of the sacredness and mystery of all there is on earth. (1989, p. 321)

In his book *The Sacred Place*, Paul Devereux (2000) observed that the interaction of cosmic and earthly forces appears to be highly concentrated in certain physical environments and that throughout human history mountains in particular have been known to exist as the sacred refuge of the Goddess. This association would ubiquitously manifest in world culture through the archetype of the World Mountain, which in its most exalted form exists as both a physical entity (e.g., Mt. Kailash in western Tibet) and as a powerful psychic symbol of spiritual transcendence (Govinda, 1966). Within this context, the Tibetan Buddhist (and Eastern) association of Mt. Kailash with the mythical Mt. Meru serves as a bridge between mind and matter, bringing the heavenly spheres and earthly realm into union within the human domain. Here one comes face to face with the blurring of the lines between *inner* and *outer*, as the outer form serves to activate the inner archetype, which is simultaneously projected upon the physical entity, a process that is directly linked with the union of opposites and the psychosomatic dynamics of the *chakra* system. In the words of Lama Anagarika Govinda:

To Hindus and Buddhists alike Kailash is the center of the universe. It is called Meru or Sumeru, according to the oldest Sanskrit tradition, and is regarded to be not only the physical but metaphysical center of the world. And as our psychological organism is a microcosmic replica of the universe, Meru is represented by the spinal cord in our nervous system; and just as the various centers (Skt.: *cakra*) of consciousness are supported by and connected with the spinal cord (Skt.: *meru-danda*) . . . in the same way Mount Meru forms the axis of the various planes of supramundane worlds. (1966, p. 273)

Accordingly, the World Mountain, as a form of *axis mundi*, merges the physical and psychic domains and reveals a direct correspondence between the presence of the axial mountain, the human chakras, and concurrent access to other dimensions of reality, including the archetypal realms of the collective unconscious. For Jung (1959/1981), this sacred motif represented a prominent metaphor of the *Self* (i.e., one's higher nature, or psychic totality), and he observed that it often assumed a prominent place in the dreams of his patients as part of their unfolding process of *individuation* (i.e., psychological and spiritual development).

Remnants of these sacred associations survive in contemporary culture through such figures as the Christmas tree, which now exists as a celebrated seasonal decoration whose deeper meaning as the Tree of Life and as a preeminent symbol of *axis mundi* has long since faded into the annals of ancient history (Davis, 2019b). In the modern world, with its ever-increasing emphasis on technology, unfettered urbanization, and the ever-increasing estrangement of humanity from the natural world, there has been a serious breach in humanity's interconnection with and attendant sense of the sacred in nature, which comes at a considerable cost to both human beings and the world in which we inhabit. These circumstances have a direct relationship to the process of spiritual counseling in that intimacy and communion with the natural world is deemed essential in the broader framework of a truly fulfilling existence (Jung, 1963). However, as outlined above, such associations of nature with sacred entities and profoundly instructive spiritual processes have been largely lost to the modern world (especially in the West), and in the absence of deeply purposeful symbolic representations of the Divine, whether in nature-based, personified, or abstract forms, human beings find themselves in a world largely devoid of genuine meaning and deep inner fulfillment, a dilemma that is well enunciated in the following passage:

When the psyche's needs are provided for by a living myth which adequately contains its archetypal projections, the soul can be at peace with itself. The world, like a good parent, mirrors it, is in tune with it, and allows its complete expression. . . . However, if its natural functions are disturbed or thwarted, one's primary attention is drawn away from external

tasks toward that which is ailing. Like the physical body, the psyche requires an enabling world for its healthy expression. When the archetypes lose their appropriate external counterparts, they become trapped in the unconscious, creating waves of unrest, or they continue to project themselves externally, but into inappropriate objects. In either case, the soul finds itself isolated, stranded in a world that no longer mirrors its existence. Such an experience of utter disregard greatly wounds the soul, as it would any living entity. (Whitfield, 1992, pp. 23-24)

Within the above context, one is compelled to question the very nature of the modern Western containing myth and the extent to which—in my own experience (as described above) and in a broader cultural context—it may be unable to provide its inhabitants with the necessary means by which to establish deeper connecting links to experiences of the sacred. In reflecting upon this central issue, Joseph Campbell (1964) observed the following:

In the Western range of mythological thought and imagery . . . whether in Europe or in the Levant, the ground of being is normally personified as a Creator, of whom Man is the creature, and the two are not the same. . . . Man alone, turned inward, according to this view can experience only his own creaturely soul, which may or may not be properly related to its creator. (p. 4)

Jung (1944/1968) also expressed a similar concern, and during the course of a prolonged investigation into the medieval tradition of European alchemy that would greatly influence his thinking, he came to understand that this discipline was “ceaselessly engaged in preserving a bridge to nature, i.e., the unconscious psyche” (p. 34). This arose in response to Christianity’s emphasis on the rational, masculine orientation of the historical figure of Christ and its insistence on unquestioned faith rather than the inward integration of the heightened spiritual characteristics symbolized by his God-image. Further, the Church’s separation of spirit and nature and the attendant subjugation of the sacred feminine evade the crucial task of the union of opposites, which in a psychotherapeutic context refers to the merging of the feminine and masculine principles (known in Jungian terms as the *anima* and *animus*) that lie within each individual. Accordingly, the central theme of European alchemy’s inner orientation was that of redressing Christian orthodoxy’s separation of spirit and nature, and of the masculine and feminine, and in this sense its practices were ‘pre-eminently concerned with the seed of unity’ (p. 25).

#### The Integration of Eastern and Western Precepts

Jung (1963) was also drawn to the esoteric religious disciplines of the East, especially the tantric Buddhism of Tibet, and in this tradition he discovered a holistic approach and an affinity with nature that resonated with him deeply. He was also fascinated by its highly articulated and



complex symbolism, which provided further support for his emerging theories of the archetypes of the collective unconscious. And although he remained committed to his Christian heritage throughout his long life, he felt that the image of the Buddha constitutes a more complete and accessible representation of the unmitigated human being than that of Christ because it integrates both the light and dark aspects of human nature. Buddhism also emphasizes that enlightenment lies *within* each human being (and in all of creation) as one's true nature, as opposed to the separation of God and humanity, and of humanity and nature, as depicted in traditional Christian faith. In addition, the life and teachings of the great Eastern master were much more closely aligned with the introverted religious path that he deemed so essential to genuine spiritual development. Further, Tibetan Buddhism's emphasis on finding one's own way toward inner realization through direct creative and contemplative engagement with mythic imagery (as found in both Jungian psychotherapy and Tibetan Tantra) contrasts directly with the Christian view of an *external agent* of divine intervention. In these Eastern precepts he found many meaningful correlations to his own spiritual inclinations, and for him "Buddha became, as it were, the image of the development of the self" (p. 280), a representation he believed was directly reflective of the individuation process and its movement toward an ever-increasing integration with the Self.

In addition to the profusion of psychic images that Jung (1992) encountered in such works as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, he was also intrigued with the doctrine of One Mind, which posits that all things (including the material world) are in reality mere reflections of this Absolute or Universal Mind and as such all manifestations are in effect *mind-made*. Jung viewed this approach as a much-needed counterweight to the extraverted and materialistic orientation of the modern West, and he would correlate the Self with Buddhism's Universal Mind and drew associations between the latter's doctrine of formlessness and the nature of the unconscious:

Because the unconscious is the matrix mind, the quality of creativeness attaches to it. It is the birthplace of thought-forms such as our text considers the universal Mind to be. Since we cannot attribute any particular form to the unconscious, the Eastern assertion that the universal Mind is without form, yet is the source of all forms, seems to be psychologically justified. (1992, p. 62)

Elaborating further upon this theme, Jung suggested that "the psyche is . . . the Buddha-essence; it is the Buddha-Mind, the One, the *Dharmakaya*. All existence emanates from it, and all separate forms dissolve back into it" (p. 54).

Although certain contemporary commentators have stated that at times Jung was prone to generalizations and even misinterpretations of certain Eastern tenets, Jung's seminal contribution to the East-West dialogue cannot be underestimated (Clark, 1994). His exposure to Tibetan Buddhism (and to Eastern traditions in general) would have a prominent and far-reaching effect on his theories of the archetypal nature of the unconscious and its autonomous symbol producing faculties. In this respect, creative and contemplative engagement with God-images and other sacred symbols holds special significance in the Jungian and Tibetan tantric traditions, both as a means of facilitating spiritual development and as a process that points directly to a foundational precept that exists as the very basis of both systems—*the primacy of psychic reality*. Lama Yeshe (1987/2001), in referring to the process of tantric meditation, exemplified this perspective when he stated that,

the deity we choose to identify with represents the essential qualities of the fully awakened experience latent within us. To use the language of psychology, such a deity is an archetype of our own deepest nature, our most profound level of consciousness. In tantra we focus our attention upon such an archetypal image and identify with it in order to arouse the deepest, most profound aspects of our being and bring them into our present reality. (p. 30)

And in *The Psychology of Eastern Meditation*, Jung (1936/1958) also emphasized this shared principle when he expressed the following:

In the meditation it is realized that the Buddha is really nothing other than the activating psyche of the yogi—the meditator himself. It is not only that the image of the Buddha is produced out of 'one's own mind and thought,' but that the psyche which produces these thought-forms is the Buddha himself. (p. 567)

The ultimate symbol of this Buddha-essence, or psychic wholeness in Jungian terms, is the mandala, which holds a central place in the creative and meditative practices of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and in Jungian psychotherapy (Davis, 2016). Jung (1963) encountered this abstract symbolic form in dreams (both in his own and in that of his patients) and encouraged the painting of mandalas as part of his therapeutic approach to healing and transformation. He also suggested that specific archetypal motifs manifest in direct correlation with one's spiritual development, and observed that as the Self increasingly assumes a central position within consciousness, the mandala becomes the most predominant and consistent symbol. Jung stated that this age-old archetypal image "signifies the *wholeness of the self*. . . . which spontaneously arises in the mind as a representation of the struggle and reconciliation of opposites" (pp. 334-335). In his own psychic struggles and inner development, the painting of mandalas became a

central part of the healing mechanism in his process of individuation, and the impressive forms he produced are now prominently displayed in *The Red Book* (2007).

The reconciliation of opposites and its direct correlation to spiritual transformation remain among Jung's most significant contributions to the field of psychology and human development, and his contact with the East, especially with the tantric tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, served to further deepen his sensitivity to this pivotal aspect of inner unification:

The union of masculine and feminine is central to much of life, both inwardly and outwardly. The conjunctio, as Jung called this union, is equally important to the completion stage of tantra, where male and female aspects of the meditator are brought into union on an inner level. (Preece, 2006, p. 215)

This emphasis on the union of opposites also applies directly to the light and dark aspects of human nature, and in Tibetan Tantra, as in certain primary practices in depth psychotherapy, visualization plays a primary role in this process:

In Jungian analysis one must deal with one's shadow, the dark rejected part of the psyche; one must detect projections and egocentric aims. . . . For that reason the total psyche must be approached, its dark as well as its light aspects, personified in tantra by peaceful and wrathful deities repeatedly constructed and dissolved in one's visualization. One is continually facing the conflict of opposites in an effort to transcend them. This is the purpose of the *sadhanas* (meditation exercises), which are based on a profound understanding of what Jung would call depth psychology. (Moacanin, 2003, pp. 88-89)

I will conclude this section with a basic summary of primary similarities and differences between Tibetan Buddhist precepts and those found in Jungian depth psychology. First of all, both traditions emphasize that direct identification with the transpersonal source of one's being is of supreme importance because it provides the ontological basis for an inwardly directed, deeply experiential, integral spirituality (Jung, 1963). In addition, both disciplines have developed contemplative methods, creative techniques, and artistic practices that are designed to facilitate this process. At the same time, the Buddhist tradition (and Eastern disciplines in general) emphasize a transcendence of ego-consciousness, or *no-self*, whereas Jungian psychotherapy focuses on an ever-increasing union of the ego with the Self, with the latter ultimately becoming the predominant basis of spiritual identification. This requires the distinction between what Jung described as his *number one* and *number two* personalities, with the number one personality, or *persona*, representing one's identity in the outer world as defined by the firmly established set of social and familial expectations that one is expected to adhere to and which most human beings continue to identify with throughout their lives. The number two personality, on the other hand,

represents what he considered to be his true self, the vast, ethereal, and eternal inner being that is exemplified by the Self. In Buddhism, there exists the distinction between relative and absolute truth, with relative truth representing the experience of a separate self, or ego, that is transcended through the ultimate realization of the pure luminosity and emptiness (*no-self*) of *sunyata*, the Truth Body, or Absolute Truth, of the Buddha known as the *clear light of Dharmakaya* (Yeshe, 1987/2001). As such, both approaches emphasize a shifting of self-identity away from the ego toward union with an all-encompassing psychic totality, and through these principles each respective system not only provides healthier and more holistic theoretical and developmental frameworks but also cultivates more genuinely fluid and receptive psychological containers through which numinous experience can manifest. And it is this direct experience of the sacred in any number of its myriad forms, both immanent and transcendent, that provides the necessary spiritual depth and nourishment that is the very basis of a joyous and meaningful life.

#### Theoretical Applications and Therapeutic Approaches

As described above, the practice of spiritual counseling represents a deeply introspective process of exploration and discovery that is facilitated and nurtured through an array of contemplative methods and creative techniques. First of all, a further consideration of the role of the human ego is necessary, especially as it pertains to the manner in which the ego relates to, and is supported by, various aspects of the broader psyche. The following examination of ego-consciousness and its relevant functions will be viewed in part within the context of my own personal experience as well as its more general theoretical and therapeutic applications. These aspects will be presented primarily within the framework of Jungian depth psychology while being concurrently informed and accentuated by the aforementioned Tibetan Buddhist precepts that Jung (1963) considered so essential to the process of spiritual development.

I'll begin this examination with a basic outline of pertinent Jungian perspectives and their related focus upon the essential archetypal nature of the human psyche. As outlined previously, Jung (1964) postulated that the various images, symbols, and motifs that manifest on a personal level as well as those that have arisen ubiquitously throughout humanity's cultural and religious history originate from the collective unconscious. In accordance with this view, he stressed that psycho-spiritual development unfolds through an archetypal framework. This dynamic process requires the integration and synthesis of conscious and unconscious contents as well as the reconciliation of opposites, processes that are facilitated through an active, ongoing interplay

between the ego (as consciousness) and the Self (representing the personal and collective unconscious as well as the psychic totality of the individual and species). Universal archetypes thus serve as the fundamental structural forms through which human beings psychologically manifest, translate, and metabolize this process of psycho-spiritual development on both a personal and collective level.

Any consideration of Jung's (1963) work must also necessarily include his notion of *unus mundus*, or "one unitary world", which he encountered through his intensive study of medieval European alchemy and which finds correlation—in the context of a unified psychic totality—in the One Mind precept of Buddhism. This all-important doctrine places humanity in direct interrelationship with a sacred, all-encompassing psychic force that guides and supports its development while concurrently revealing the primordial unity of all things. The conscious ego is thus held, both inwardly and in the outer world, within the larger container of the Self, which actively fosters spiritual development through the merging of opposing inner forces and the attendant experience of heightened and often numinous states of consciousness.

From this standpoint, one can better ascertain some of the various ways in which the ego receives underlying support and spiritual nourishment from the contents of the unconscious, especially through the psychic material that arises in dreams as well as through engagement with mythic forms and figures that hold special resonance with a given individual. This process naturally has a direct and intimate correlation to the experiences of one's clients, who often bring to sessions dream images and other symbolic forms that hold the potential to reveal deeply transformative aspects of their inner world that can act as "a means of helping the individual find his or her own way back to the precincts of numinosity" (Hollis, 2000, p. 26). With the above perspectives in mind, one can more fully appreciate that,

it is the archetypal imagination which, through the agencies of symbols and metaphor and in its constitutive power of imaging, not only creates the world and renders it meaningful but may also be a paradigm of the work of divinity. (p. 7)

Accordingly, it is the role of the spiritual counselor to assist in the facilitation of this deep unfolding of the unconscious (which may variously include psychic dialoguing with wisdom figures or the bringing forth of inner psychic contents through various forms of artistic expression), although the potential complexities of the psyche are such that this process must be approached with the utmost care and with a very sensitive attunement to the strength and development of the client's conscious ego. Attention to the manifestation of shadow material

also represents an especially important consideration in this regard, and as such it is imperative that “the analytic process is structured to create a positive container wherein the ego can meet and integrate the highly sensitive contents of the unconscious and eventually come into a receptive dialogue with the unconscious as a matter of course” (Whitfield, 1992, p. 195).

In line with the above perspective, the ego serves in an indispensable capacity concerning the relational interplay of this psychic exchange. This naturally includes not only the ego’s interactions with the unconscious, or Self, through dream content and other imaginal forms but also the manner in which it perceives and processes the wide array of thoughts and emotions that arise within human psychological experience. In both examples (and in this phase of spiritual counseling) it is essential that the ego exists as a distinct, differentiated, observing consciousness and as such can engage such aspects (e.g., archetypal images and highly charged thoughts and emotions) dialogically and through healthy, balanced reflection.

The mythic forms and figures that so often appear through dreams, psychic projections, and other such phenomena include such manifestations as the anima and animus, the shadow, and of course the Self. Each plays a significant role in the ongoing developmental process of individuation, and can appear in both uniquely personal and universal representations. To the male gender, the anima acts as the inner feminine counterpart to the conscious masculine identity (just as the animus, as the masculine principle, serves to balance the feminine character), and it performs the pivotal task of guiding the male inward:

Vital is the role that the anima plays in putting a man’s mind in tune with the right inner values and thereby opening the way to more profound inner depths. It is as if an inner ‘radio’ becomes tuned to a certain wavelength that excludes irrelevancies but allows the voice of the Great Man to be heard. In establishing this inner ‘radio’ reception, the anima takes on the role of guide, to the world within and to the Self. (von Franz, 1964, p. 193)

Further, the anima represents the “personification of all feminine psychological tendencies in a man’s psyche” (von Franz, 1964, p. 186), and in dreams, religious lore, and mythological depictions she can appear in various positive guises (e.g., the Greek Goddess Athena, or Tara in Tibetan Buddhism) or in her negative aspects (e.g., the Lorelei of Teutonic myth, or the evil sorceress of innumerable cultural manifestations). The positive aspects lead a man toward his true inner nature, whereas the negative features lead him astray. Both aspects are also commonly projected outward, so that they “appear to the man to be the qualities of some particular woman” (p. 191), which naturally creates the potential for all manner of fantasy and psychic transference.

Thus, it becomes an essential part of the individuation process that an individual learns to recognize such projections as representations of his own inner processes, and to withdraw, resolve, and integrate these aspects into his inner world in the service of spiritual growth and psychic wholeness.

One of the greatest obstacles to this process on both a personal and collective level presents itself in the form of the shadow, which represents “unknown or little known attributes and qualities of the ego—aspects that mostly belong to the personal sphere,” but “can also consist of collective factors that stem from a source outside the individual’s personal life” (von Franz, 1964, p. 174). This typically manifests as the negative projection of “those qualities and impulses he denies in himself but can plainly see in other people” (p. 174). Consequently, the inability to *own one’s shadow* can have predictably disastrous results, from various forms of arrested personal development to dysfunctional and convoluted interpersonal relationships to the conflicts that so often characterize the political and religious spheres and armed conflicts between nations. On the other hand, through the conscious acknowledgement and integration of one’s shadow aspects, the individuation process is deepened and enriched and one is able to offer himself, and the world, greatly enhanced levels of understanding, insight, and compassion.

I’d now like to explore this intriguing dynamic on a more intimate level, and I’ll begin with the dyadic relationship between one’s ego and the sometimes highly charged thoughts and emotions that arise in one’s consciousness. Because human beings can be at times so easily overcome by tremendously strong thoughts and emotions, and because these highly charged psychic contents so often contain clues to deeper issues and developmental processes, the ability to differentiate oneself—to stand back and observe as an active, objective witness as opposed to identifying directly with such contents without conscious reflection—is absolutely paramount to the establishment of a balanced and healthy psychological framework (Jung, 1963). And yet this differentiated consciousness is a relatively rare capability in the mental lives of most human beings, often even among those working in the helping professions. We are all human, and we are all vulnerable at times to such unsettling circumstances, but it is precisely such thoughts and emotions that may hold clues, and sometimes even the keys, to deeper understandings of our unique personal journey. The spiritual guide thus acts as a kind of mirror to these processes, reflecting back to the client the various themes and life issues he or she has brought forth, and in this capacity serves as a fully present, deeply focused, non-judgmental witness. In this role, the

counselor represents *the center that holds*, a partner in the process of discovery who provides unconditional acceptance, compassion, and perspective to the client. A trusting, supportive, and reflective dialogue can thus be established with the client's sense of self-identity and his or her various formative experiences, psychic phenomena, and spiritual longings, thus facilitating greater awareness, self-acceptance, and healing in relation to primary life issues and any respective wounding. This process also serves to provide the client with a direct, experiential example of what must ultimately be developed in oneself if genuine psychological wholeness is to be established and sustained. In addition, in moving beyond entrenched patterns of thought and identity, and in the quieting of the incessant chatter that often fills the habitual workings of the mind, an opening to expansive inner space can occur, revealing an immense interior stillness and silence that induces the profound tranquility that is the origin and birthright of every human being. This is the realm of the formless in Buddhist cosmology that exists, as outlined above, as the source of all mental and physical manifestations and their accompanying dualities and distinctions. It reveals itself as a serene and boundless inner dimension, and serves as the impetus for an array of deep meditative disciplines (for further enunciation of this theme, see Jung's Foreword and the main text in D. T. Suzuki's [1934/1994] *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*).

To briefly summarize, in working through such emotional and psychic material the spiritual counselor serves in the role of the fully present and supportive witness, emulating key aspects of the client's experience in a manner that mirrors the self-reflection skills that the client will learn to develop and refine in the course of the spiritual work they conduct together. This process begins with an exploration and deepening of a particular experience or emotion through compassionate inquiry, and may variously involve archetypal associations, figures, and themes that exist in concert with the client's unfolding revelations. The guide may ask, for example, *how would this highly charged emotion appear in personified form, and what would be its biography or background? If one were to speak with this personified emotion, what words would be exchanged and in what manner would one adequately express the essence of what one feels toward this figure? Where, and to what extent, can one feel this emotion in the body, and how would one visualize its release? And how might one envision such an experience or emotion as a force of nature? How would it look and feel, and in what manner would one approach, for example, an ominous, brooding mountain or an endless, barren desert, and what mysteries might lie within such landscapes?* Bringing form, substance and texture to such material can be highly



instructive, and the clarification of thoughts and emotions through giving them distinctive, recognizable form fosters depth, increased understanding, and the potential for genuine healing.

Through this awareness one's begins to engage in an open and receptive exchange with the psychic forces, or *inner voices*, that present themselves in relation to an array of life issues and circumstances. And in correlation with this process of interior reflection and dialogue inspired by Jung (1963), one learns to step back from certain negative thoughts or resistant mindsets and consider them from the standpoint of representing autonomous complexes, or shadow aspects. The *judge* (in correlation to oneself and others) reflects but one of these compelling characters who inhabit one's inner world, and this often uncompromising psychic entity may reflect, on a personal level, unresolved issues concerning identity and self-acceptance, and at the same time may even reveal the unconscious attributes (as inherited from one's culture) of the Judeo-Christian figure of God as a stern and condemning father archetype. Identifying these inner dynamics represents an important part of freeing oneself from unhealthy and inhibiting unconscious processes, which subsequently lends itself to a greater openness to benign inner entities and wisdom figures that may arise in one's dreams and imaginal processes. Bringing these consecrated and revelatory voices into greater clarity and awareness represents an essential component in creating a living, benevolent link with the unconscious. This holds the potential for the reconciliation of opposing inner forces and fosters the opening of numinous communications between the ego and the Self. It also facilitates the awakening of one's own unique personal myth and life purpose (often depicted as the *Hero's Journey*), which moves beyond the limited conceptual confines of one's culturally inherited containing myth and into the realm of direct spiritual relationship with the Divine. In this sense, it is the Self—the third and most important component in the triadic structure of the spiritual counseling relationship—that represents the ultimate *center that holds*, and it is this direct identification with the very source of one's being that exists as the essential purpose of spiritual guidance.

#### *Imaginal Archetypal Therapy*

Following his break with Freud in 1913, Jung (1963) suffered through a long period of uncertainty and disorientation and felt himself to be in a state of constant inner pressure. For the next few years he engaged in an intimate exploration of his personal dreams, visions, and fantasies, a process that would further confirm his conviction that the unconscious is the very root and vital origin of our beings. This understanding was coupled with the awareness that

modern humanity, through the development of ego-consciousness, has to a large extent lost direct contact with the very source of its existence. In an effort to redress this wide-spread condition, and in order to restore psychological equilibrium in his own life and to the lives of his patients, he chose to experiment with various creative techniques designed to help manifest the interplay between consciousness and the unconscious. He painted and regularly dialogued with profound wisdom figures such as Philemon (whom he initially encountered in a dream), and he developed and implemented other creative methods designed to bring unconscious material into the realm of conscious focus. Jung also discovered that drawing, sand play, and other imaginal exercises involving archetypal imagery could be very effective in bringing clarity and form to vague feelings, images, and other manifestations of inner content. This proves especially useful in that,

the whole procedure is a kind of clarification of the affect, whereby the affect and its contents are brought nearer to consciousness, becoming at the same time more impressive and more understandable. . . . This is the beginning of the transcendent function, i.e., the collaboration of conscious and unconscious data. (Jung, 1960, p. 82).

The integration of such practices into the process of spiritual counseling represents a very effective means by which to deepen and expand the client's experience of spiritual wholeness (Jung, 1963). Working within this framework involves the use of various forms of art and archetypal therapy, which provides the spiritual guide and his clients with meaningful opportunities to assimilate psychic images, symbolic metaphors, and intuitive intimations into the therapeutic relationship. This in turn creates unique opportunities for genuine spiritual insight and awakening, as the use of such imagery requires an active, conscious engagement with psychological processes that initially lie beyond one's immediate awareness but reveal their intrinsic meaning in the deep metaphorical content contained within the images themselves. Robert Johnson astutely observed this process when he stated that "when we experience the images, *we also directly experience the inner parts of ourselves that are clothed in the images*" (1986, p. 25). The transformational quality that so often arises through this merging of the conscious ego with an emblematic image or archetype was described by Jung as "the beginning of the transcendent function, i.e. the beginning of the collaboration of conscious and unconscious data" (1960, p. 82). He emphasized this synergetic relationship as being central to the healing process in that it initiates "a movement out of the suspension between opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation . . . a quality of conjoined opposites" (p. 90).

The experiential and theoretical precepts of Jungian depth psychology thus hold great potential for eliciting deep-seated meaning and enhanced awareness through the spiritual counseling relationship, and an exploration of the archetypal workings of the unconscious—and the clarification of the inherent meaning of such imagery on a conscious level—represents an unfolding of personal and collective processes that have the potential to be both instructive and highly transformative. Jung (1964) further delineated this theme in the following perspective:

From the standpoint of mental equilibrium and physiological health in general, it is much better for the conscious and the unconscious to be connected and to move on parallel lines than for them to be dissociated. In this respect the production of symbols can be considered a most valuable function. (p. 89)

And this process subsequently involves an ever-increasing appreciation that,

any understanding of the psyche must begin with an understanding of the role of the unconscious and the relations between consciousness and the unconscious. . . . The analytical process is a means of systematically drawing upon the resources of the unconscious and progressively integrating these contents into consciousness. (Singer, 1972/1994, p. 15)

This compelling co-creative process has the effect of moving one's focus out of the often restrictive domain of the rational mind and into a more fluid and spontaneous mindset in which the imagination is given free rein to playfully and purposefully engage in the exploration of one's inner world. Margaret Guenther (1992) described this lively engagement as follows:

With imagination as the generous supplier of raw materials, we can be rich beyond belief. . . . Since it is hard to be heavily defended when engaged in true play, it is also an excellent way of shedding our masks and letting ourselves be known, of *unselfing*, in the classical language of spirituality. (pp. 59-60)

In my own personal experience as well as in my spiritual counseling practice, both drawing and exercises in guided imagery have been especially effective in bringing clarity and form to vague feelings, images, and other manifestations of inner content. This process is two-fold in that it has the effect of helping the client out of a state of contracted focus (especially in such cases in which the intensity of an unresolved emotional condition creates rigid psychological boundaries that may unduly inhibit the client) and subsequently moves him or her into closer contact with the sphere of the total personality. This in turn helps to foster and enhance the psyche's natural healing and transformative processes. In this fashion, the spiritual guide assists with the task of opening channels to the abiding wisdom of the client's inner world, with the underlying focus being that of "mending psychic splits and restoring inner wholeness" (Sullivan, 1989, p. 16).

### *The Process of Active Imagination*

As with the other creative and imaginal processes described above, the purpose of the practice of *active imagination* is to reduce the one-sided awareness of the ego and dissolve the partition between consciousness and the unconscious (Davis, 2019a; Jung, 1960). In creating a fluid and engaging dialogue between these two primary aspects of the psyche, one works with archetypal symbols and themes, and as outlined above Jung stressed that these psychologically potent mythic forms and motifs are not creations of the conscious ego but rather arise from the depths of the unconscious. For this reason, the phenomena of dreams are of primary importance in this healing process “because dreams are the most common and most normal expression of the unconscious psyche . . . they provide the bulk of the material for its investigation” (Jung, 1977, p. 73). Direct and creative engagement with such mythic imagery arguably represents one of the most fascinating and consequential features of the healing process in spiritual counseling, and this intriguing phenomenon is well represented through the following dream (one of my own) and the practice of active imagination that followed:

I am standing in a room and am engaged in a conversation that reveals with great certainty that at a later date I will be involved in the dissemination of Jung’s theories to a wider audience. This realization is accompanied by a strong sense of personal pride at the prospect of professional accomplishment and recognition in the outer world. Then I suddenly pass through a curtain and find myself on a football field preparing to kick a field goal that will signify my success in this endeavor, but when I kick the ball, it hits the goal post, and falls short. Then I wake up. (Davis, 2015)

I was left with the undeniable sense that this dream had special significance, and at the same time was confused by the seemingly contradictory messages it provided. So, intent upon uncovering its deeper meaning, I chose to engage in the practice of active imagination, which was created by Jung (1960) as an imaginal exercise in which one reenters an especially potent and impressive dream in a conscious state by focusing upon the dream’s primary image and then allowing an *inner drama* to unfold of its own accord. In this case, the goal post was clearly the most prominent figure, and so, with this image firmly in mind, I proceeded to close my eyes, concentrate my focus, and then experienced the following:

In a short time I found myself again on the football field, this time playing quarterback. Each time I tried to pass the ball, I was quickly tackled. Finally, I decided to keep the ball and attempt to cross the goal line by my own volition, and was then able to maneuver my way through the defense, ultimately being brought down as I successfully crossed the goal line. As the football I was carrying touched the ground, it suddenly turned into an enlarged, glowing blue diamond, and this was accompanied by a wordless telepathic communication

that can only be described as a sacred revelation, one that arose from a deeper part of myself that I rarely have direct access to, and yet somehow instinctively know to be my true self. And what this communication revealed to me was that the *goal* in life is not about achieving success or status in the outer world, but rather the true meaning of this life is to reconnect, to return *home*, to the very source of one's being. (Davis, 2015)

This process unfolded in the form of a wholly unexpected and utterly astonishing epiphany, and proved to be a compelling confirmation of how the unconscious acts in a creative and regulatory capacity (Jung, 1960), compensating for the misguided direction of the ego through the spontaneous manifestation of archetypal imagery. This process typically combines aspects of one's contemporary personal existence (i.e., the goal post) with the universal symbolic imagery of the collective unconsciousness (i.e., the blue diamond), resulting in a sense of deep personal meaning and psychic wholeness (Davis, 2015). Jung stressed that the purpose of such dreams is "to effect a reversal of the relationship between ego-consciousness and the unconscious, and to represent the unconscious as the generator of the empirical personality" (1963, p. 324), which is precisely what was revealed to me through this remarkable experience. Further, it was through *keeping the ball, rather than passing it off to another*, that proved decisive in bringing forth this profound revelation, which serves to confirm Jung's emphasis on direct inner realization as opposed to a reliance on exterior authority. In short, each human being carries within *an inner diamond*, which shines forth in all of its inherent numinosity when the ego and the unconscious are united as one psychic entity.

Having been thoroughly fascinated by this mysterious phenomenon, I decided to explore the broader universal applications of the blue diamond motif, which is part of the process of expanded cultural and religious association that Jung (1963) termed *amplification*. Through subsequent research I soon discovered that the diamond exists as one of the primary symbolic representations of the Soul (von Franz, 1964), and is an ancient, sacred symbol of spiritual radiance whose existence can be traced to a great number of religious and cultural traditions, including Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhist Tantra, or *Vajrayana*—the Diamond Vehicle. The term *diamond* derives its name from the Greek word *adamas*, which means unconquerable, and has variously symbolized immutability, purity, and permanence since ancient times. It also represents the classic symbol of eternal love, and thus the diamond came to be used in the modern West in the tradition of the diamond engagement ring. Further, the color blue has long

symbolized eternity, purity, and truth, and historically has been depicted throughout the world as being representative of the heavenly and celestial spheres.

The use of mythic imagery as representations of the Divine has a long and diverse history in humanity's various religious disciplines (Fisher, 1988), and this particular form of spiritual practice "emphasizes our capacity to reach God through creatures, images, and symbols" (p. 62). Such an approach, which has traditionally been referred to as the *kataphatic* path, represents a dynamic means of bridging the world of psyche and matter, which often involves connecting with a deeper sense of spiritual presence through the manifest world:

Since God is present in all creation, any aspect of that creation can be a sacrament of the divine presence. Many images disclose aspects of the divine; none can encompass it. . . . A spiritual guide's role is not to promote any one image of God, but rather to support a woman's process of understanding how she images the divine and how her images affect her life. (pp. 58-59)

In this way, the visual and symbolic substance of the images that resonates with a particular individual are allowed to unfold and reveal a deeper, non-conceptual connection with his or her life and inner processes. This is meant to initiate a highly personal relationship between the image and the observer-participant and to emphasize the sense of the image as a mirror to both one's inner nature and to the broader collective characteristics of humanity. From this standpoint, one of the most pressing prerogatives of applying imaginal practices within the context of spiritual counseling necessarily involves developing "ways of relating to images that allow them to teach both patient and therapist the depth of meanings—historical, existential, mythical, and poetic—lived by the patient" (Watkins, 2000, pp. 187-188). This presents each human being with the possibility of genuine insight and healing because "the awareness of the transpersonal and trans-historical dimension by the analyst allows for an unfolding of the analytic process in a way that would not otherwise be possible" (Edinger, 1996, p. 45).

By helping the client to focus on these vital psychic processes, the spiritual guide helps to cultivate an evolving interrelationship by which the images and symbols can speak their own intrinsic truth through the client, a process that "helps the patient interact with the image being expressed in order to see more metaphorically his or her daily struggles, fears, and preoccupations" (Watkins, 2000, p. 198). Spiritual guidance thus provides a means by which "people could find their own direction and live according to their own sense of purpose" (Singer, 1972/1994, p. 135), and it attunes itself to unfolding the mysteries of the client's

inner world through creative engagement with sacred figures, images, and themes, which may manifest in a myriad of ways, both large and small. And it is on such occasions, when the Self speaks to the ego through dream symbol, synchronicity, or spontaneous revelation, that one can go beyond a purely conceptual understanding and become aware through direct experience that our everyday waking consciousness represents a very small part of an immense, eternal Mystery, one that speaks to us, and guides us, if only we can truly listen. As Jung (1963) stressed throughout his long and fruitful investigation of the human psyche, this Mystery, the Self, communicates through archetypal symbols, which constitute the ever-enduring sacred language of the Soul. And engaging such mythic imagery through active imagination, artistic expression, and amplification thus represents a preeminent aspect of spiritual guidance. This is the adventure of inner discovery, the *Hero's Journey* that lives at the heart of every human being.

### Conclusion

Spiritual counseling can be understood as a richly rewarding and often challenging process of exploration and discovery between the client, the counselor, and the mysterious, eternal force that exists as the very source of each. Ultimately it is this source that reveals the mythic symbols and revelations that constitute the truth and meaning of a given life, and it is the fundamental role of the spiritual guide to facilitate and support the means by which such processes and awakenings can take place. This begins with an examination of the religious beliefs that exist in the containing myth inherited in one's cultural upbringing, and clearly understanding how these formative influences resonate with, or may inhibit, a more authentic and profound sense of direct identification with this eternal Mystery represents an integral part of this process, especially as it pertains to the unfolding of one's deeper nature and life purpose.

This unfolding of one's inner nature can be cultivated and nurtured through a number of creative processes and techniques, and Jungian art and archetypal therapeutic practices serve as highly effective methodologies that are designed to engender a meaningful and enduring interrelationship between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche on a uniquely personal and collective level. In this decisive manner, archetypal images and themes serve as channels of psychic healing and as avenues to the sacred dimensions of life, and through their creative application the universe of the inner world opens in all of its mystery, majesty, and splendor. This in turn deepens the connection to one's own unique and authentic identification with the core of one's being as part of the ever-evolving process of spiritual awakening.

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