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Emotional Transformation in the Threefold Human Being

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Introduction

To be human is to experience emotion. Although the emotions can (and often are) spoken of as a separate aspect of human experience, upon closer reflection emotional content is all pervasive – living in both the life of thinking and willing. In other words, we cannot have a thought or perform an action without some involvement from the part of ourselves that *feels*.

Emotions can be looked at as a particular subset of the feeling realm in general, and are continuous with it. It is helpful to think of feelings as soul-states. Poised between the spiritual capacity of thinking and the physical capacity for bodily action, the feeling realm is like a turbid medium in which the higher and lower meet. For this reason our feeling life is extremely rich, varied, confusing, subtle, intense, and ever-changing. One can experience that feelings are the primary content carried in the soul, as the meeting of the spirit and the body.

Emotions are soul-states which have a particular intensity and coherence with respect to the whole being, flowing into both thought and action. They play an especially large role in this middle realm of human experience, the realm of feeling, as they are the subjective layer that helps reflect to us an experience of our own inner reality. Emotions are thus very closely linked with an individual's experience of the personal self – the self that is formed and developed in the context of outer realities such as history, culture, parenting, genetics, and so forth. This personal self can be called the ego, with a lower-case “e”, to distinguish it from the “Ego” or “I-being” that links us to the transpersonal realm. Whereas emotions bind our I-being, our innermost objective self, to the personal realm of the ego, feelings can be experienced as a higher octave of emotions which link our I-being to the wider cosmos in a more objective way.

Emotional transformation then, can be thought of as a process whereby the emotions are led from the personal to the transpersonal. Rather than reflect to us something of our own

personal inner life, the transformation of the emotions leads to nothing less than the capacity to experience in our feeling life a reflection of the objective *inner* existence of our own I-being in its relationship to the cosmos. Ultimately, therefore, emotional transformation is an integral and necessary part of *self*-transformation, which would also include practices designed to address the willing and thinking realms with a similar goal in mind.

This process is multifaceted and polymorphous. No two individuals will have the same experience of transformation partly because the beginning point, the emotions themselves, are by their very nature personal and subjective; but also because the process is not linear, and is highly influenced by the initial situation of the individual in question – one’s particular emotional palette, specific capacities, inclinations, and of course one’s external situation, including the body. The process itself can be likened to climbing a mountain. All along the surrounding base, the various starting points are quite different and seem to be unrelated, but as one progresses up the side, the paths begin to converge until, perhaps after having passed over a few lower peaks and crevasses along the way, one reaches the top – where the view is essentially the same for all (depending upon how developed one’s eyesight is).

Luckily, those who have already worked to traverse the territory lying before us have come down with some sketches of the terrain and some advice for potential travelers. Specifically, we can recognize three general approaches – all dealing with the soul realm and its various modes of expression and manifestation within the context of the physical and the spiritual, the body and mind. The first approach, called Focusing, takes particular care with the subtle interweaving of the body and the soul realms, showing how emotional work can be accomplished by working, as it were, from below. The third approach, dealing with schemas and techniques of mindfulness, addresses the upper boundary of the soul with the spirit and our thinking life, and works from

above downwards into our soul life. The second approach lies between these two, and while significantly overlapping them (as it must, being a sort of mediator between them), works specifically with the emotions themselves as they arise and flow through the soul.

All three of the approaches can be examined in accordance with the alchemical cycle of Earth, Water, Air, and Fire. As the transformation of the emotions constitutes a major aspect of the alchemical tradition, it will be useful to show how specific aspects of the approaches above relate to the archetype of transformation embodied in the elemental mandala. The elemental mandala itself is a useful tool for any situation that is under development. As an embodiment of the archetype of transformative process, it gives a solid framework that can help to mutually contextualize the three approaches while making clear their essential features. It is a testament to the usefulness and objectivity of the three approaches to emotional transformation that they work, consciously or unconsciously, with the archetype of transformation so clearly developed in the alchemical traditions.¹

Focusing

Focusing is a technical term for a practice developed by Eugene Gendlin. He noticed that clients for whom psychotherapy is successful all seem to work with an inner process that itself is not explicitly a part of psychotherapy. Gendlin extracted the essence of this process and shaped it into a tool to be used consciously for those undergoing therapy or self-change. The essence of the practice is simple, and is comprised of six basic steps: clearing a space, felt sense, getting a handle, resonating, asking, and receiving.

¹ Further correspondences with alchemy cannot be dealt with satisfactorily in this paper due to space. However, it may be pointed out that the three approaches (Bennett-Goleman, Gendlin, and Greenspan) correspond to the fundamental processes of Salt, Sulfur, and Mercury respectively.

The major idea behind this practice is to get in touch with what Gendlin calls the ‘felt sense’, which is something like the vague gestalt of experience in the moment that arises as a response to willed attention on a specific situation we may be dealing with. Most of us ‘live in our heads’ throughout the day, and often have difficulty getting in touch with the deep undulating movements of the bodies processes and their reflections in our emotional life. Focusing is a technique that helps us to find the roots of our emotions in the diffuse expressions of the body as they arise in consciousness. In other words, focusing provides a technique to bring awareness into the space where body processes and soul processes meet.

The first step is to clear a space – this is the element of Air. By opening up a space inside which we are not filling with our own incessant self-talk, we prime our attention for deeper work. Like a butterfly flitting from flower to flower, the task in this step is to touch into the body repeatedly with soft attention while asking the question “What is between me and feeling fine?” By letting our *bodies* answer (not our minds), we keep our awareness light as it moves across and through the various sensations that arise. In this realm of Air, we are detaching our attention from the strict reigns of habitual thinking that keep us locked to the ground, and allow the deeper wisdom of our bodies a chance to speak.

The next step is to step into the fire of a particular issue that stands out as a response to the previous question. The element of Fire deals with looking at the whole, and the task here is precisely to expand our awareness to include all that is occurring in the meeting of our body and soul surrounding this particular issue. Because our awareness of the body *itself* (not our sensation *of* it) is the least developed human capacity at this point, the feelings that arise in our soul when we undertake this step are generally diffuse, ethereal, and hard to pin down. We are relying on unconscious processing that occurs in the body in response to directed attention – we

could say meditation – on a particular issue. But because our bodies will not *only* respond to the issue held in awareness, but also to *every other aspect* of our existence in that moment (including the unconscious ones), the sensations that arise as a kind of report from below are not at first clear, detailed, and definitive. Yet within the vague sense of ‘all that’ surrounding an issue, there is often a key that will unlock a door leading to a deeper level of our psyche, which often has very little to do with the overt issue itself.

Therefore, once the whole felt sense has been experienced, the next step is to move this felt sense down into the Earth by forming an word or image that encapsulates its essential quality. Alchemically this is known as forming an ash, in which the key is later uncovered. Yet by attempting to fix something that is ultimately unfixable, we both lose something and gain something. We lose the flexibility of adaptation, and may become locked into thinking “this is simply how it is”, while gaining a foundation upon which we can proceed. Were we to simply stay with the felt sense in the Fire, we would never get anywhere, because the all-inclusive realm of Fire offers no definitive direction – all directions are included equally. It takes the courage to fix this amorphous whole into a definitive word or image *that may be wrong*, in order to proceed further.

Luckily, this is not the end of the process. By resonating with the *rightness* of the word or image, its “name”, we move into the flowing Water of relationship. Here we shift our focus from the name to the felt sense repeatedly until they begin to relate to each other. Then, by paying attention to the quality of this relation, we can sense the degree of its applicability. By entering into the Water, however, we must let go of both the particular name and the felt sense itself – because both may change. If the name doesn’t seem to fit with the felt sense, we are called upon to shift the name and check it again. Likewise, if the felt sense shifts in response to

the name, then we can follow along with it and see where it takes us. By working with this process of resonating back and forth between the name and the felt sense, we can usually hone in on a particular match that *feels right*.

Once we have made a match, we move back into the realm of Air, where we again form an inner space in which we ask a question: “What is it about the whole problem that makes me feel so _____?” Having worked through one full cycle of the elements, we are now at a higher octave of our original Air question. The task at this stage is to listen to what comes, not to project. Often in when in the Air element, the complementary pole away from the Earth, we can experience a crisis. In this case we may feel stuck or unable to sense a coherent answer to the question. This is perfectly normal and is a natural part of the stages of the alchemical cycle. To address this, Gendlin’s technique is to exacerbate the crisis through the use of further questions that push the boundaries of the Air element in various directions, such as “What is the worst of this feeling?”, “What’s really so bad about this?”. This creates more subtle inner tension, but when asked authentically, primes us for insight. Further questions help us transition to the last Fire stage, calling on the deeper wisdom of the whole felt sense, such as: “What does it need?”, “What should happen?”, “What would it feel like if it was all okay?”, and “What is in the way of that?”.

The last stage is a higher octave of the previous Fire stage. Whatever insights and ‘answers’ come to us here should be received and welcomed. The primary attitude to develop at this stage is that of gratitude, which means we must still make an effort to maintain the feeling of the open space we developed in air, where we refrain from judgments about “whatever came”, and simply allow it to flow into our whole being.

Focusing is a useful technique for training our awareness to be awake in a place where it is normally asleep and dreaming: the lower boundary of our soul as it meets the upwelling of forces from the life of the body. By building a capacity to become aware of how the gestalt of this meeting is expressive of the emotional situation of the whole human being at any given time, we open ourselves up to receive valuable pictures which help to clarify and bring to light the threads that link our emotions to unconscious or semi-conscious patterns. The resonating process is additionally useful as it helps to train the heart's nascent capacity to judge objectively according to the lawful movement of pictures rather than the arbitrariness of the brain's mental abstraction. Focusing, as a method which trains us to listen to the subtle signals coming from below which are normally obscured by everyday mental activity, gives us an advanced warning in times when an aspect of our life is out of balance. At the same time, it provides a tool which helps us get in contact with the threads that lead us down into the murky waters of the unconscious. Ultimately, the technique, if practiced regularly, can become a valuable aid in the path of self-discovery.

Schemas and Mindfulness

Tara Bennett-Goleman works primarily from the Buddhist traditions, but has also spent time with cognitive therapy – and schema work in particular. A schema is essentially a maladaptive process that includes actions, emotions, and thoughts. It is maladaptive because it serves to keep us from developing in a healthy way – it blocks us from adapting appropriately to the ever-changing circumstances of life. Goleman identifies ten major schemas, such as unlovability, mistrust, failure, subjugation, entitlement, etc.

The formation and source of schemas is complex, having deep roots in past thoughts, actions, and emotions, which may have served as valid defensive mechanisms at one time, but

which have outlived their usefulness. Schemas are like tornadoes which constellate thoughts, emotions, and actions into predictable, un-free, inflexible, non-creative patterns of movement. The momentum of schema patterns is so great that once activated, they have an almost compulsive drive to complete themselves according to their unwritten logic, to the point of severely warping our own view of what is real to fit the nature of the particular schema.

Interestingly, despite the title of her book, “Emotional Alchemy: How the Mind can Heal the Heart”, Goleman states that “alchemy offers an apt metaphor for the process [of emotional transformation] that I will be describing.” (2001, p.6). The extent of Goleman’s familiarity with historic and contemporary alchemy is very unclear, as she makes only vague references to the tradition. This may account for her view (consistent throughout the book), that alchemy is a *metaphor* for what she is describing. But Goleman is working with processes that have been refined explicitly and to a high degree in the alchemical tradition.

To begin with, she implicitly identifies the three major modes of human life: thinking, feeling and willing, which she identifies with thoughts, emotions, and actions (habits).² Although she has chapters dealing with habits, emotions, and thoughts individually, she does not explicitly seem to recognize that her overall approach is weighted towards the thinking pole, just as Gendlin’s approach is weighted towards the willing pole. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, but mentioning it helps to lawfully contextualize the various ways in which these three innate capacities can be transformed, as it is important that we be well-rounded.

Because she has a Buddhist background, Goleman locates schemas in our *minds*. Although they have effects in our emotional life and in our behaviors, for Goleman the source of much of the trouble is in the patterns built around what we habitually tell ourselves. She applies the Four

² Strictly speaking, thoughts, emotions, and actions are *results* of these capacities, which weave together in (as) our soul under the influence of our I-being in its cosmic spiritual context.

Noble Truths to her emotional alchemy: recognition of suffering, seeing our habitual patterns, recognizing that we can free ourselves from suffering, and finally the path to this freedom.

(Goleman, 2001, p. 143) What is important in this path is mindfulness, which is a capacity of developing the habitual mind by bringing it into closer connection with our individual I-being – our higher self.

Therefore it makes perfect sense to deal with schemas by trying to change them from the top down, so to speak. Rather than address the body or feelings directly *in and of themselves*, Goleman opts to calm the schema vortexes swirling through our heads by using rationality and mental awareness. This is made clear in the language she uses to speak about the various methods of finding an “antidote” for schemas, and is consistent at each level (thinking, feeling, and willing). For her, schemas are parts of ourselves that should be both witnessed and analyzed. We can “think of ways [we] can change their direction in the moment... [to] find several new options for [ourselves]”. We can also “do a reality check”, “try shifting into a more mindful stance”, or “practice making a more positive response” (Goleman, 2001, pp. 207-208). All of these techniques require conscious identification of the schema as such in our minds.

When addressing the feeling realm, Goleman suggests many techniques, such as writing in a journal, engaging in reparative inner dialogue, witnessing emotion without letting it move us into action, and using wise reflection. When dealing with the thinking life, Goleman recommends more techniques, such as bringing thought patterns to awareness, counter-thoughts, challenging assumptions, and empathic reframing. The skill of empathic reframing, although seemingly an emotional technique, is useful as an example of Goleman’s weightedness towards the thinking pole:

Use empathic reframing to acknowledge the schema reality while you put into words a more accurate picture of things. Empathic reframing allows you to nod to the way the schema sees the world, even as you correct that flawed perception. (Goleman, 2001, p.255)

The important thing taking place in this technique is a mental reorganization of our interpretations of reality. The goal is to retrain our thoughts to more accurately reflect an objective view, which will help dampen the extreme tendencies activated in schema patterns.

Overall, the mindfulness approach is extremely useful on the path of emotional transformation, because it provides us with a lifeline to the part of ourselves that stands above it all – our witness, or I-being. This part of ourselves has an infinite capacity for observing without judgment in the sense of blame and shame, but while we are locked in our lower egos we have little ability to access this power. Mindfulness training thus helps us identify and slowly become free of the stickiness of our schema patterns.

One way of working with the mindfulness technique is rooted in the elemental cycle. First we get in contact with an overall situation that sends us into a schema pattern – this is Fire, where we take the big picture. Then we immediately go to Earth, to find the specific trigger event that set us off. Then we summon up – mindfully – our responses to the situation as they occur in our body (Earth), emotions (Water), and thoughts (Air). Then, by seeing how these reactions pushed us into some particular course of action (Fire) with the same mindfulness, we begin to objectify this part of ourselves, and to dis-identify with it. In order to dis-identify in this way, we must simultaneously place our consciousness more and more into identification with its

own objective source – our I-being or witness. The efficacy of the technique is based on this transition of our consciousness to this higher level, while still remaining coherently involved with the turbulence occurring in the soul, although now without self-judgment, negative thoughts, or anything other than clear, unobstructed awareness of the arising and playing out of the soul drama. Ultimately, we learn that *we are not our drama*, and that in fact our drama is a wise teacher from whom we have much to learn.

Riding the Wave

Miriam Greenspan, in her book “Healing Through the Dark Emotions”, recognizes that *thinking about* our emotions is in no way equivalent to *feeling our emotions*. She takes a middle approach in which the emotions are experienced directly. In fact it is very accurate to say that a key element to her approach is to *feel* our emotions rather than to *have* (or think!) our emotions – because when we are “having” emotions, it is rather that our emotions are “having us”.

Specifically, Greenspan notes the usefulness of ‘riding the wave’ of the emotional energy. Like a wave in the ocean, it is only when we oppose the *flow* that destruction becomes immanent. If we can learn to ride the waves, and flow *with* the ever-changing soul life, we will prime ourselves to be able to utilize the energy in a more productive way. This is just like a surfer who utilizes the energy of a wave to maneuver across, down, or up a wave, *as long as* the motion takes place in the general direction in which the wave is already traveling.

Greenspan has identified three essential skills to working with emotion (particularly the difficult, or “dark” emotions): attending, befriending, and surrendering. She has laid out a seven stage process that acts as a training for these skills. These seven stages follow the archetypal pattern of development expressed by the elemental mandala, and outline a path for emotional

transformation that leads to authentic emotional expression in line with the healthier impulses of our I-being.

The first stage is Intention. Greenspan recognizes intention as an aspect of our highest being – it is our spiritual will. If we are to attend to our emotions, we must develop the capacity for attending through our will – our intention. In particular, by formulating the intention to work *with* our emotions, we facilitate the necessary *attention* that will be required of us. This is the fire stage, in which our spiritual will is activated and brought to the doorstep of the emotions directly.

The next stage is a grounding, Earth stage, in which we recognize that our dark emotions are not necessarily negative, but hold great wisdom. This is a moment of cognitive restructuring, where we must first identify our habitual attitudes, judgments, and coping mechanisms surrounding emotions, and then consciously change our default thoughts about our them, so that our approach is more positive. This helps to lay the groundwork for the path we will need to follow, and gives us a little bit of food for the journey before we actually delve into the emotions themselves. Greenspan calls this stage affirmation, as we are to affirm not just the reality, but the usefulness of our emotional drama for self-change.

Next we continue in the Earth element by getting in touch with the way emotions live in our bodies, and naming them accurately. But more than this, we are to enter into a sort of dialogue with them. This takes us into the element of Water or relationship, where we are to consciously sooth our emotions so that we do not lash out or react blindly. The body works to reflect our emotions to us through its life processes, and by attending to this arena we are helped to come into a more intimate relationship with our emotions, so that they can be addressed directly. The parallels with the focusing technique is clearly evident here.

Once we have identified our emotions accurately and softened them up so that they are not overwhelming, we can begin the next stage of recontextualization. This is an Air stage, where we start to loosen the ego's hold on its particular story of its experience of the drama of life. This "core defect" story may be an implicit and unconscious element that drives much of our everyday experience in subtle but imprisoning ways, and widening this story so that it begins to come into contact with successively wider layers of existence, from "just me" to family, friends, community, culture, world, and ultimately the realm of the spirit as well. This is not an exercise in fantasy, but rather should be undertaken with a sense of objectivity. Locating our own drama in its wider contexts helps free energy that is bound up in the ego as it broods upon itself, as if in a hall of mirrors where every image is a projection of aspects of the ego. By using our thinking to trace the threads of what seems to be at first merely personal elements of our story to the world at large, we lead ourselves to discover how our drama is actually a part of the whole flowing, turbulent atmosphere of the world itself.

Recontextualizing our core defect story in this way primes us for the second aspect of the Air element, which Greenspan identifies as "the way of non-action". Here we are called upon to simply sit with the emotion in this new, recontextualized space, without needing anything to happen. We must quietly wait in the unknown without going into our usual phases of reactivity, which serve to close the Airy space we have created in which *something might happen* in favor of a definite course of action that the ego is comfortably familiar with, but which leads nowhere. Sitting in the Air in this way is very difficult, but with practice we can slowly lengthen the time that we can tolerate not knowing while being present with the emotion. This is an excellent place for techniques of mindfulness, with the goal of affect tolerance.

We cannot stay in the Air for long – soon it is time for “the way of action”. Rather than devolve into habitual response patterns, we can reorient ourselves by willing actions that are ‘hygienic’ when we find ourselves in emotional difficulty. Even if we are consciously still embroiled in the emotion, if we can tap into the Fire of our will enough to *do* something that does not exacerbate the problem, particularly actions that are *service*-oriented, then the energy that would have been locked into habitual patterns becomes used consciously for transformation. This doesn’t have to be working in the soup kitchens, but can be a simple act of kindness. By changing our behavior, we automatically reorient our whole existential gestalt, including our physiology, emotions and thoughts. Even if the effects are subtle, doing service to others in this situation acts like a magic key that unlocks a door to our higher spiritual nature. *Acting* with integrity helps us to *feel* our integrity. Changing our actions helps derail the train of our emotions from its habitual track, and opens up the space for creativity and authenticity, but for this to occur, we must delve deeper into the Fire.

The final stage laid out by Greenspan is that of surrender. What is surrendering to whom? It is the ego that must surrender its stores of knowledge, opinions, habits, and modes of experiencing to the unknown, creative, undefined, aware Fire of the I-being. Trusting in the deep wisdom of our emotions lets us ride along with them – but in order to do this we must give up the idea that we will arrive at a *particular* destination.

Because the ego is built out of what comes from the past, it is very difficult for it to unlock the future by *giving it up for itself*. This relinquishing of the future is experienced like a burning in the ego, but this burning is accompanied by the transformative warmth of the I-being, which recognizes that “this too, shall pass”. It is our witness, a spiritual being among spiritual beings, which connects us to the larger spiritual context of our suffering, and provides lawful forces that

slowly but surely helps free our ego from its self-made prison. This is why Greenspan notes that “emotional energy in a state of flow moves automatically in the direction of healing, renewal, harmony, and transformation.” (2004, p.86)

The result of this process is both a greater connectedness to our emotions and a greater freedom from them. What used to be “my” emotions (the ego’s identification with the emotions) is slowly transformed into the capacity to see the objective nature lying behind the emotion *in the wider world*. This is the development of the feeling life, where “my suffering” is transformed into “world suffering”. Whereas our soul life began filled with pictures of itself in its own human drama, it can now be filled more and more with the archetypal forces that lie beneath not just the patterning of our own emotions, but the patterning of external world-processes as well. This allows us to feel our emotions – to have the sense that they have an objective nature within them, like a seed, which if we provide the proper nurturing environment, will become the seed of our own transformation.

The goal of emotional transformation, ultimately, is nothing less than spiritual transformation, and we can see that this spiritual transformation is coincident with physiological transformation as well. The human being is a complete package, whose various members are all integrated and connected. Recognizing the threefold nature of our willing, feeling, and thinking life helps us to address the process of soul transformation in a skilful way. Emotions, because they are connected to both the higher and lower parts of our soul as it meets our spirit and our body, can be best transformed through techniques that deal specifically with the challenges posed at each level. Focusing, schema work and mindfulness, and riding the emotional wave together form a complementary set of techniques that can be of great use, and can take us from the beginning stages of emotional transformation all the way to spiritual transformation.

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