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# ANIMAL IMAGERY, THE CHAKRA SYSTEM AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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This article is being published courtesy of Steve Gallegos and the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology for a number of reasons. 1) It outlines a good methodology that can be used in accessing, processing, transformation, and/or integration. 2) It fosters mindfulness throughout. 3) It incorporates safety, security, and non-violence throughout. 4) It works within as opposed to outside of conscious awareness. 5) It honors and depends upon the wisdom and power of the client's own organismic integrity. 6) It aims at reorganizing around more pleasurable, efficient, nourishing functioning. In short, it is a valuable and compatible way of working that Hakomi Therapists would do well to be aware of. Steve Gallegos, Ph.D. has a background in college teaching that has now given way to more time for writing and the private practice of psychotherapy. He has recently published with Teresa Rennick Inner Journeys: Visualization in Growth and Therapy. Requests for reprints of this article first published in the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 1983, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 125-136, should be addressed to Eligio Stephen Gallegos, 83 Hancock Street, Lexington, MA 02178.

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Contemporary Western culture has characteristically viewed the human being in terms of physical body parts (medical model), social/biological function (e.g., id, ego, super-ego), behavior patterns, emotions, aspects of awareness (conscious, preconscious, unconscious), or elements of imagination (archetypes).

By contrast, traditional Asian cultures have derived a view of the human being as comprised of energy, its movement and blockage. This is the view upon which acupuncture and the chakra system (Motoyama, 1981) are based. In Kundalini Yoga, for example, energy is said to be raised from the root chakra up through the various chakras to the crown chakra, with the energy in each chakra influencing attitudes, behaviors and awareness

(Radha, 1978). The first chakra is centered at the base of the spine and is concerned with one's groundedness and relation to the earth, security, and physical survival. The second chakra is centered in the gut, a few inches below the navel, and is the source of one's emotions and passions. The third chakra is located in the solar plexus and is concerned with power. The fourth is located in the heart and is the source of love and compassion. The fifth is in the throat and is involved with communication. The sixth is centered in the forehead and concerned with the intellect. The seventh is located at the top of the head and is concerned with one's relation to God, the Universe, the Eternal. Western psychologists have some difficulty accepting such theories, given the dominant culture's concern with philosophical materialism, and skepticism about the transferability of Oriental conceptions to Western therapeutic practice.

Recent work by the author attempts to combine both Western visualization therapy techniques (Assagioli, 1971; Shorr, 1983) with certain aspects of chakra theory, in the psychotherapeutic diagnosis and treatment of Western clients, in a Western setting. Specifically, a method of using animal symbolism and imagery in the expressive imagination of the client, has been developed for use in an otherwise standard therapy context. This method produces metaphoric descriptions related to the chakra system in a form that is readily understandable to the Western client and therapist, and which can serve as both a vivid diagnostic tool and a medium for effecting therapy and growth.

## PROCEDURE

If the client is already experienced in visualization the procedure may be entered into immediately. If not, then training in relaxation is necessary as well as some initial introduction to the process of visualization. The introductory procedure I characteristically use is that of having the client imagine he or she is a seed that has been

embedded in the earth through a cold winter. Gradually spring comes, the sun warms the earth, and the warm gentle rain begins to fall. The earth soaks up the moisture as does the seed. The seed casing then pops open and the seed begins to grow roots. The roots are nurturing, anchoring, and provide an intimate relationship with the earth.

Then a shoot begins to grow upward, breaks through the soil and begins to absorb the warmth and energy of the sun. As the energy is absorbed, the stem grows taller, eventually developing leaves and then a bud. The bud gradually opens to reveal a beautiful blossom. The blossom stands before the sun and thanks it for its energy. The sun replies, thanking the flower for its beauty.

This visualization can itself be used diagnostically in terms of the richness of the soil, the depth, strength and breadth of the roots, the strength and height of the stem, and the color, size, number of petals, etc., of the blossom, plus any interesting deviations that the client describes as having occurred in the plant's growth. The purpose of the imagery in this procedure is for the client to learn to allow the imagery its process while observing and reporting to the therapist.

The system and procedure developed for contacting what I think of as the personal characteristics of the chakra system are as follows: With the client fully relaxed with eyes closed, he/she is asked to concentrate his/her attention in the center of the forehead, and to become aware of all of the feelings in that area. The client is instructed to tell the therapist when attention is fully concentrated in the forehead. Upon this indication the therapist instructs the client to spontaneously allow that area and the attendant feelings to turn themselves into an animal in his/her imagination. The client is asked to tell the therapist what animal it is and to describe what it is doing. The animal is also asked its name and whether it has anything to tell or teach the client at this time. Following this it is asked if there is anything it needs or if there is anything the client can do for it.

The client is then asked if he/she is willing to do this for the animal, and if the response is positive encouraged to do so. If

the response is negative, the request and negativity are explored further. The animal is then thanked for being there and told it will be seen on a later occasion.

The procedure is repeated for the throat, heart, solar plexus, gut, and the pelvis-legs-feet. This provides a representative animal for the energies of the intellect, communication, heart-compassion, power, emotions and grounding-security. To date only a minimal amount of work has been done exploring the spiritual or crown chakra.

In subsequent sessions the animals are introduced to each other to observe how they interrelate and they are helped to work through any conflicts. Their counsel is then sought about which one of them needs most to grow and the others are asked to support that growth. The animals can also be used as a support system in working with any other material that emerges. One other avenue appears to be helpful in the client's growth: having the client become each of the animals, one by one, to gain an experience of that particular perspective. This is conditional upon each particular animal's acquiescence. Each animal is always treated with respect and dignity. The therapist must always remember that what is being ultimately dealt with are elements of the individual which may have been rejected and/or negated, and which need to be welcomed back into a harmonious integrated whole.

The growth that the animals undergo may be a growth in size or a transformation into a completely different animal. This growth has characteristically been followed by changes in the client's relationship to the environment in terms of thought, feeling, and behavior. The reverse is also true; changes that the client has undergone in everyday life may be reflected in changes in the animals or in their relationship to each other.

#### **GENERALIZATIONS**

The Intellect animal has characteristically been observed to be a bird, frequently an eagle or a hawk, or a large cat such as a lion or a lynx. It has also non infrequently been a monkey. Beyond this, individual aspects appear to be characterized. One of our clients was a young lady just graduating

from college, whose head animal was a fox. She had used her intellect very adaptively in learning to take tests and give teachers feedback they sought but had never encouraged her intellect to grow into its own dimensions. It roundly chided her for her neglect.

The Communication animal has generally been the least developed of the animals, frequently appearing as a snake, a turtle, a caterpillar, etc., indicative of primitiveness and defensiveness. This is usually one of the first animals to undergo growth and transformation; a snake becoming a bird, a turtle becoming a dolphin, a caterpillar becoming a white crane. It is possible that this lack of development is a cultural phenomenon; we may not learn to communicate as much as we learn how to not communicate, which is the origin of deception.

The Heart animal (love, compassion) has varied greatly and, in the few cases where there have been similarities, is either a lion or a bear. Beyond this, individuality emerges: a fish in an intensely Catholic person, a dove in a peacemaker, a chicken in a young teenager afraid of his emerging passions. Occasionally two, or even three, animals appear at a single chakra. This is possibly indicative of a divided energy which needs to be healed. The two animals may be indicative of a divided orientation or polarization: a perplexed husband with a lover whose heart animal is both a turtle deep in a canyon and a fledgling eagle on a high ledge. Circumstances may be that both animals are willing to merge voluntarily in which case a third animal emanates from their union. But most frequently there is a conflict that needs to be resolved first.

The Power animal seems highly individual, perhaps a wild stallion that needs to be tamed, or a sleek, black panther, or a rabbit. In several instances it has been a dragon. One minor generalization is that women appear to have a power that is hidden (a raccoon, an ostrich, a teddy bear) and which needs to be unmasked or developed. A young lady whose power animal was two rams butting heads had given half of her power to her lover and found herself in frequent conflict with him.

The Emotional animal appears frequently as a large or spirited animal (a whale, a gorilla)

and occasionally as an animal that is restrained: a caged tiger, a tethered or hobbled wild horse, a hibernating bear. One of the first tasks at hand may be to free or awaken the animal, but this is done only with the acquiescence and support of the other animals and after conferring with the animal as to why it is restrained. Typically the other animals rejoice at the freeing of their colleague.

The Grounding animal has usually been an animal that is sure-footed, or that lives close to the earth: a prairie dog, a rabbit, a mountain goat, a deer, antelope, or kangaroo. This is characteristically a beautifully supportive animal, and may teach the client how to run or how to be at home in nature. One individual whose other animals were all large, powerful animals, had as a grounding animal a rabbit. In an imagined council of the client's animals the rabbit expressed a fear of the others because they were all so big and powerful. The others all expressed support and encouraged the rabbit to grow to be their equal, whereupon the rabbit grew to be a giant rabbit, ten feet high, who was extremely settled and no longer afraid.

Mention must be made of the intensity of feeling and emotion that these animals draw up and of the deep warmth and support that is felt from them. Of course, this is a factor that appears to be characteristic of visualization in general, that feelings are much closer to images than they are to words or descriptions.

Frequently the animals will bring up unfinished business. One individual, whose head was an owl looking at the full moon, had as a heart animal a raven that seemed to be alternately black and white, and who was quite angry. When the raven was asked what he needed, he said he wanted the client to give him his head. The client suddenly recalled a situation of several years past where he had decided to allow his heart to be his guide, but after getting into a dangerous and frightening situation, became very calculating, always seeking reassurance. Upon questioning about this old event the raven indicated that he had specifically led the client into that situation to teach him how to surmount fear but the client had not trusted him adequately. They had been at

odds since that time. The client apologized and acknowledged that he had gone back on his commitment to his heart whereupon the raven became settled, took on a brilliant black sheen with feathers tipped in white, and took the client for a long flight. From that day the client's relationship to his wife changed from apprehensiveness to rich involvement.

One exciting aspect of this work is that the client is well able to observe where a difficulty occurs and can marshal the support of the remainder of his energies rather than nebulously identifying completely with the difficulty. This more direct use of the client's energies is also extremely helpful for the therapist and it is not unusual for significant changes to occur in a single session.

Another area where this approach is extremely helpful is in understanding relationships between individuals. Frequently people who are close will observe that they have similar animals. Or if there are areas of conflict, they can localize them specifically. A man and wife who frequently argued were found to have as Communication animals a snake which was frequently sneaky, and a white stallion that tended to stomp on snakes. In processing, the snake encompassed her Power and Emotional animals whereupon it turned into a bird. The bird and stallion got along well and the couple's arguments came to a halt.

#### **CASE STUDY**

As an illustrative example, I present here a case study of Jane Doe. When I met her she had been in therapy for five years. Her symptoms were depression, self-negation, and suicidal tendencies. Previous therapists had encouraged Jane to enter into "non-suicide" contracts and she admitted to me at the end of her therapy that she had restipulated the contract almost daily in order to keep from committing suicide. She was 34 years old, divorced, with two children. Her manner was intense and her voice was high-pitched. She initially expressed fear of me. I assured her that I respected her and trusted her ability to grow, and would do nothing to threaten or pressure her, which she accepted. She told me at the time that she hated herself because she was not perfect. I told her that I felt each human being was a beautiful

flower deep inside. She replied that she was sure there was no flower within herself. I had her do a visualization for getting in touch with that inner flower. Jane expressed surprise at what she had seen: a tiny baby.

At our next meeting I explored her history. She had grown up on a remote ranch in northern Wyoming. Her mother was dominating, usually angry, and defensive. Jane felt she had never been good enough for her mother and had not been wanted from the time she was born. Her older sister had a personality similar to that of her mother. Her father was passive and quiet.

She said she felt like she was nothing. Her existence was a deep dark well with a lid over it. The only delight there had been in her early life was when her father took her hunting or fishing with him. Although he was also reticent with her, on these occasions she felt he truly cared for her. When asked if she could give each of these little girls a different name, this one she called "Richness." The other's name was "Nothing."

She also expressed a tendency to want to withdraw into a corner where she would be safe. I assured her she was free to retreat to the corner whenever she wished as she was also free to come out of that corner, and I encouraged her to practice both of these movements so they could both become voluntary.

At our next individual session I asked her to place the chairs in the room to represent a position of family members at home. Mother and sister chairs were placed in the center of the room, her own and her father's were placed in two corners. As a newborn baby her position was at the center of the room, but in that position she immediately felt jealousy from her mother and sister. As she removed herself to the corner, she felt her father also move to a corner in silent support of her.

In the Visualization--this was done in a group setting resulting in less initial information than is usually derived from an individual setting--Jane's Intellectual animal was a giant eagle. She was standing below it and could only see its legs and lower body. Its first words were to tell her

how dumb and stupid she was. In dismay she asked why it was saying that to her. It replied that it wanted to give her an example of what she does to herself.

Her Communication animal was a weasel, and at this she felt demeaned.

Her Heart animal was a dead dog, encrusted with a fungal growth, lying on a stone slab in a cave. She was visibly disturbed at this.

Her Power animal was a white bird in a cage, which when released from the cage became a large dragon roaring in anguish. Its anguish was over the dead dog.

Her Emotional animal was a small fuzzy bear who reached inside of her and removed a small blue stone which he then showed her. Its soft glow illuminated the room with a good feeling.

Her Grounding animal was a porpoise.

At this first council meeting the animals agreed that their first task was to bring the dead dog back to life. They all gathered around the dog, whereupon an infant child appeared. Jane immediately recognized the infant as a fetus she had aborted at the age of 19, and over which she had come to feel extremely guilty and had continuously condemned herself. There was also a 15-year-old boy present whom she recognized as the aborted fetus had it be allowed to live and grow. The boy told her that he was not angry at her, that he was comfortable where he was, and that Jane had to accept what she had done without condemnation. After great internal struggle, acknowledging her immaturity at the time she had the abortion, she "owned" her part in it.

Upon this the dragon ceased its lament, the weasel turned into a swan, and the dog regained its life. The animals rejoiced in celebration. Her voice developed a mellow gentleness.

On a subsequent occasion, Jane came to see me quite depressed. She said the 15-year-old boy had been presenting himself in imagination, wanting her to go with him. She refused and was quite fearful. In a visualization she agreed to go with the boy only if

she could take the dog with her. He agreed and led her over a hill. At this point the boy began to change, growing large and frightful. Jane recognized him as her anger against herself. Her initial response was to attempt to suppress him but he only grew larger. Her other attitude was to escape from him but she knew he would pursue her. At my encouragement she asked him if he would be willing to help her grow and he agreed, whereupon she embraced him and he immediately dissolved. She felt strong and settled, and the dog took on an extraordinarily beautiful glow.

At a subsequent meeting Jane confessed that she was upset because her dragon, to whom she had become fondly attached, had begun to change, and she was trying to resist the change, wanting to keep him as he was. He had already lost his scales and his body had become rather hairy; she knew his legs were trying to grow longer. She was very sad at this and demanded that he stop changing, upon which all the other animals became passive and unresponsive. We discussed her difficulty in letting go, and she agreed to engage in a visualization where she allowed the dragon to leave. She told him goodbye and he went over a hill. I encouraged her to fully experience the sadness of letting go and she cried. A moment later a brown winged horse flew toward her and she knew this was her power animal transformed. He took her for a ride to a distant valley where she found a small girl named Richness who was herself.

A month later she came to see me and reported that her thoughts of suicide has become very intense. In discussing them she also revealed to me that they had always been accompanied by a feeling of terror. Upon closer questioning she revealed that whenever she felt the terror her thoughts immediately went to suicide. We agreed to meet the following week to do a visualization where she would encounter her terror directly, and I asked her to reaffirm her nonsuicide commitment.

When we next met she reported having experienced intense anxiety during the intervening week, with several sleepless nights.

In the visualization we first gathered all her animals together and asked them if this would be an appropriate time for Jane to

encounter her terror. All acknowledged that the time was propitious except for the eagle; he remained silent. They were all then asked if they would support her in the encounter and they all said they would.

I then asked her to allow her terror to present itself to her as an image in her imagination. It appeared immediately as a large, bearded man cracking a whip. He looked much like her father. She asked why he was cracking the whip. "So you'll be afraid," he replied. She asked what he wanted of her. He replied, "I want you to disappear." When she asked if he would be willing to give her his energy for her growth, he answered that he would not. I then had her ask him to tell her when he first appeared in her life. She immediately saw herself as a very small child, together with her sister, jumping on a bed, making noise and having fun. Her mother was sick in bed in an adjacent bedroom. Her father suddenly appeared in the doorway, enraged. He removed his belt and whipped them both brutally, leaving welts and blisters on her body.

I then asked her to take any animals with her that she wished and return to that early scene to heal the two girls and the father. She took the dog and flying horse with her. The dog licked both girls' wounds, which nealed them, and the father was also healed of his rage.

She returned to the cave with the animals where Terror was also waiting. He was now tiny. She asked again if he would give her his energy for her growth. He refused and grew big again. I had her ask him to show her the second time he came into her life.

She saw a scene of herself as a small child with her hands tied behind her back. She didn't know the circumstances. I had her see the scene just prior to this. She saw many people at her parent's home. It was a party. She went to the bathroom by herself, proud that she was doing this alone, but she emerged without her panties. Her parents were shocked, spanked her and tied her hands behind her back. She didn't understand why they were upset as she thought she was doing something good.

I had her return to the scene, taking any animals she wished, to heal the little girl and the parents. She took the swan and the

bear and at the last minute had the dog come also. There were so many people that she couldn't seem to do anything. The swan then engaged them and kept them occupied while she untied the girl's hands and soothed her. She had both parents lie on the floor. The bear unzipped their chests and with his jewel erased something from the heart of each.

Upon return to the cave I had her ask Terror to show her the third time he entered her life. She then saw numerous events of chastisement, punishment, rejection as if they were being projected on the wall of the cave. I had her ask all the animals to stand with her and beam a healing light on the scenes. At the end of this procession of events Terror was gone, the whip lying on the floor, and her father, clean-shaven, was standing before them, hat in hand, staring at the floor. The animals informed her that she needed to unravel the whip and macrame it into a wall hanging. She engaged her father's help in doing this. It became a wall hanging that she suddenly recognized as one she had made five years earlier while in a psychiatric ward. All the animals then danced in celebration with Jane and her father.

When I saw her two weeks later, she was amazed that there had been no further thoughts of suicide, as these had been so omnipresent for the past five years. There was a clear, direct look in her eye, her voice was calm and settled and she told me that several friends had commented on how changed she looked. The small fuzzy bear had grown to full size, and each animal had a blue, glowing jewel in its heart. She felt deeply joyful.

## DISCUSSION

The uniqueness and individuality of each of the animals is difficult to convey in words. The animals have their own personalities and specific orientations as much as individual human beings do, but they seem naturally oriented toward preferring cooperating with each other. They are occasionally overjoyed when first encountered as having finally been given recognition, and they are quite aware of their value to the individual. One woman's emotional animal was an octopus. She was horrified because she interpreted that as

meaning she was emotionally clinging and she began to cut the octopus' arms off. It was horrified at this, chastised her, and told her that it was through the tentacles that she maintained contact with others and should be appreciative of them.

The animals also become intimately comforting and the client gains a great sense of richness from their presence. As the animals learn to love and support each other, love and care appear more frequently in the client's life. In fact, some very recent work has involved asking the animal that most needs to grow to stand in the center of a circle with the client and the other animals around the periphery. The peripheral participants are asked to beam their love and support at the center animal as if it were a light. In some cases this alone has been adequate to induce a transformation.

The transformation can be sudden--a turtle suddenly exploding into an elephant, for example. Or it may also take some days to occur during which the client is aware that the animal is changing and may be aware of certain parts but is unable to tell what the animal is becoming. Not infrequently the animal will disappear, only to reappear later as a different animal.

And the animal is also independent of memory. Occasionally a client will forget what a certain animal was, especially early in the imagery, but when he goes to meet the animal, recognizes it immediately when it is seen.

## CONCLUSION

This therapeutic process was initially developed when the author observed similarities between the chakra system and the totem poles of the Northwest Coast American Indians. This therapeutic process also acknowledges a relationship between those tribal Indian transformation rituals and modern psychological transformation. This relationship is being explored in a separate paper. In any case, it is possible that the use of animal imagery, as metaphoric description, may be of therapeutic value in other systems as well.

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