

Group Therapy Training at Naropa University's Contemplative Counseling Psychology Program

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This article highlights the group process training at Naropa University's master's program in contemplative counseling psychology. It provides an historical context and explains the classes and philosophy that make up a quality group training program. It details valuable contributions of Buddhist psychology to teaching students to become group leaders. Using student experience and clinical examples, the article highlights how several Buddhist concepts help train group leaders to be flexible and compassionate.

KEYWORDS: Group psychotherapy training; contemplative psychotherapy; mindfulness; Naropa University.

The master's program in contemplative counseling psychology (MACP) at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, is a three-year program that offers a licensable degree at the master's in counseling level: an MA in contemplative psychotherapy. Although this program is not specifically designed as a group psychotherapy training program, its unique structure and philosophical underpinnings make it a de facto high-quality training program in group dynamics and group process that results in many graduates focusing professionally on group psychotherapy. This article

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describes the MACP history and highlights the courses and Buddhist underpinnings that reflect its group training strengths. It also explores students' experiences and how they become inspired by group work. Finally, it offers some practical examples of how group dynamics are worked with.

HISTORY

Naropa University was originally founded as the Naropa Institute in summer 1974 by Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. Trungpa was a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master who escaped from Tibet in 1959 along with the Dalai Lama and many other prominent Tibetan Buddhists during the Chinese takeover of Tibet. At that time, Trungpa, who was about 16 years old, had been recognized as an incarnate of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism and had served as abbot of the Surmang monasteries in eastern Tibet. After spending time in India, Trungpa relocated to England, where he studied at Oxford and founded Samye Ling, a meditation center in Scotland. In 1970, he came to the United States, where he established a series of meditation centers now known as Shambhala International. Today, there are more than 170 such centers around the world. Trungpa eventually settled in Boulder, Colorado, and began realizing his vision for a learning center modeled after the Nalanda University, a famous Buddhist university in ancient India. Trungpa had attracted a following of artists, writers, and musicians, largely from the Beat era of the previous decade. With the help of committed followers, he took Naropa from a summer institute to an accredited, degree-granting institution. Today, the university has over 1,000 students in undergraduate and graduate programs on three campuses in Boulder.

In 1976, Dr. Ed Podvoll, a psychoanalytically trained psychiatrist, along with a few of Trungpa's students, created a master's program in Buddhist and Western psychology, now known as the MACP. This was the first degree-granting program at Naropa, and since its inception, it has sought to integrate Eastern and Western thought. As a nontheistic religion, Buddhism is frequently viewed as a philosophy or psychological system as much as a religion—at least as we think of religion in the West. The MACP, now in its 34th year, continues to evolve toward a full integration of Eastern and Western psychological thought.

GROUP WORK WITHIN THE MACP PROGRAM

The MACP is a three-year training program meeting all the requirements in Colorado (and in many other states) for credentialing as a Licensed Professional Counselor. In addition to the classes found in most counseling programs, MACP offers classes in Buddhist philosophy and how it interfaces with Western psychology. Several components of the program, described subsequently, focus on training in group dynamics, therapy, and leadership.

The Cohort Model

The cohort model is the foundation for the interactive dimension of the program. With the exception of Small Group Process and Clinical Tutorial, students spend the entire three years together in all of their classes. They take the same classes and proceed through the program as one cohort. As a result, the students get to know one another quite intimately and learn, in the context of the program, to address the interpersonal experiences that arise within their cohort.

The intensive interpersonal nature of the cohort model requires that the program address group process in its various forms and settings. As class members begin to engage directly with each other, the dynamic tensions that occur in any group or community become apparent. Because the program focuses on developing an awareness of one's direct emotional experience, the need to recognize and understand group tensions becomes paramount. As the MACP program developed, it became clear that specific venues were needed for exploring theoretical, emotional, and interpersonal dynamics. Numerous elements have been incorporated into the program to address group-oriented dynamics.

- *Community-Diversity.* This class, offered in the first semester, explores the theory and dynamics of community-building as the students are themselves forming a community of their cohort. It also presents theories and approaches to diversity dynamics, including the group dynamics inherent in diversity issues such as subgrouping, scapegoating, and hierarchy.
- *Small Group Process.* Students are divided into small groups of six to nine students (depending on class enrollment), in which they study their own process and communication styles within the group setting. The primary goal is for students to develop awareness of their own feelings and impulses in the moment-to-moment movement of the group. These groups are designed, when feasible, to have the same leader and group members for three years.
- *Large Group Process.* This class serves as a process group for the entire cohort. Students study and reflect on the developing process and dynamics across the entire group.
- *Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy.* This is the core group theory class. Group dynamics—such as resistance, transference, and countertransference; cohesion; subgrouping; and scapegoating—are studied in detail, along with leadership styles and dynamics. Students also practice leading mock groups. The class revisits the concepts of community and diversity dynamics as initially presented in the first-semester class, now informed by the students' growing knowledge of the language and theory of group dynamics.

- *Maitri retreats.* Students do a meditation retreat each year at the Shambhala Mountain Retreat Center. The first- and second-year retreats are four weeks long, whereas the third-year retreat is one week. These retreats typically give rise to many intra- and interpersonal issues, and the retreat faculty deals with group dynamics as they arise in this intensive setting.
- *Clinical Tutorial.* During the internship year (the third year), the class is divided into groups of three students, tutored by two faculty members. Students present cases and situations from their internships and are encouraged to bring the transference-countertransference situations from their clinical work into the tutorial group. Fellow students use the feelings induced by the presenter to help understand the emotional dynamics of the case. As a result, the tutors are frequently called on to work with the group dynamics that arise in these sessions.
- *Discussion groups.* Finally, most courses include discussion groups in which the students talk and interact around the material presented in each class. This frequently induces group dynamic issues that must be addressed in the moment by the instructor. In essence, then, throughout the three-year program, students are exposed to group dynamics in classes specifically designed to teach group dynamics and, indirectly, through a multitude of actual group experiences.

Buddhist Underpinnings and Their Relevance to Group Training

The 2,500-year-old Buddhist tradition of studying the mind has produced time-tested teachings for understanding our own minds and working with others to cultivate sanity and decrease psychological suffering. As such, it is uniquely relevant for training psychotherapists. MACP uses several key Buddhist concepts to help students better understand group dynamics and develop important group leadership skills.

Students learn central Buddhist concepts through class material and through specific practices, including *shamata-vipassana* meditation, experiential exercises, and visualization practices. Buddhist psychology concepts that are particularly relevant in group include brilliant sanity, ego, mindfulness, *maitri*, and interconnectedness. These are not merely intellectual concepts but are offered as a framework for understanding experience. These concepts, which become very relevant to the students' experiences as group members and leaders, are integrated into their work with clients.

Brilliant Sanity and Ego

Contemplative psychotherapy is rooted in the view that our fundamental nature is open, clear, and compassionate (Wegela, 1996). This inherent nature is called *brilliant sanity, basic goodness, or Buddha nature*. In the first Buddhist Psychology class,

students are introduced to this foundational view of contemplative psychotherapy. They are taught to see basic sanity in others, which helps them see beyond habitual patterns that obscure perception of our brilliantly sane, awake nature. Brilliant sanity is obscured by what Buddhists refer to as *ego*. From a Buddhist psychology perspective, suffering is caused by our erroneous belief in a separate, solid, unchanging self. This leads to a repetitive struggle to maintain ourselves in a certain way. Instead of recognizing the process involved in giving our experience meaning, we relate to ourselves as a "thing" with fixed properties and problems. Galin (2003) wrote that

the self is seen not as an entity . . . but as a dynamic process, a shifting web of relations among evanescent aspects of the person such as perceptions, ideas, and desires. . . . The self is only *misperceived* as a fixed entity because of the distortions of the human point of view. (p. 108)

This misperception of a fixed self is what Buddhism means by the term *ego*.

These foundational Buddhist teachings are woven throughout the MACP curriculum. The view of human nature as compassionate, clear, and open, but obscured temporarily by *ego*, encourages students to pay attention to moments of clarity, openness, and connection as they occur for group members, enabling them to support those members with skillful interventions. Helping clients cultivate an awareness of this innate wisdom is a primary goal of contemplative psychotherapy.

Group leaders steeped in this Buddhist training develop empathy and compassion for their group members because they are trained to see through the content to the confusion that causes individuals to suffer and harm their interpersonal relationships. As group leaders, they believe that no matter how triggering any individual is, that person is fundamentally sane. Interventions can then be made to reflect the seed of sanity that appears on the surface as destructive interpersonal dynamics.

Groups often trigger defenses and habitual patterns. Understanding *ego* helps group leaders see their own desire to hold a position in the group, which can limit movement and flexibility. Having a foundational view of basic goodness can help students cultivate compassion for themselves and others in group contexts and enable them to take risks and to test projections, expectations, and assumptions.

Mindfulness and *Maitri*

Students are taught that mindfulness facilitates awareness of brilliant sanity and distortions of *ego*, and it helps us see more clearly. *Mindfulness* is our capacity to observe without criticism. It is taking a balanced interest in things exactly as they are. Formal mindfulness awareness practice, in the form of sitting meditation, is a cornerstone of the MACP. Although meditation practice is usually done sitting on a cushion, mindfulness training continues off the cushion as well, with students bringing it to their everyday activities and their experience

of being with others. It is a course objective in the group process classes.

Cultivating mindfulness creates more self-awareness in the leader as well as greater awareness of group dynamics and processes. It helps leaders avoid reactive interventions and provide more attuned, thoughtful responses that take into account group-level dynamics and interpersonal and individual considerations. Mindfulness helps a leader refrain from acting impulsively on the induced emotions that can arise in groups. By modeling reduced impulsivity and a more thoughtful response to dynamic situations, leaders can demonstrate a new and powerful way of relating to personal experience.

Mindfulness also orients group leaders to the present moment. Thus relational dynamics can be identified and worked with as they manifest in the here and now, and the commitment of attending to the present moment acts as a counterpoint to our natural tendency to become entrenched in identifications and fixed interpretations.

The Buddhist notion of *maitri* is another key element in the MACP training. *Maitri* means "loving kindness" (Wallace, 1999); it refers to an attitude of openness and warmth we can bring to our experience. Students are encouraged to relate to themselves and others with *maitri*. It serves as an antidote to self-aggression, that is, negative self-talk or self-evaluation. Ironically, increased awareness can lead to increased self-aggression when individuals see their own habitual patterns clearly and judge their efforts to change as inadequate. In group contexts, having *maitri* facilitates acceptance of ourselves as we are. It is a powerful antidote to a group leader's own self-judgment. One author remembers, as a student, seeing numerous powerful demonstrations of *maitri* by her Small Group Process leader. If a group member reacted strongly to the leader's intervention, the latter gave the member space to voice feelings and would respond candidly about process related to that particular intervention. The leader took ownership when an intervention had negative consequences or seemed misattuned and was not defensive or self-aggressive in exploring it.

Interconnectedness

From a Buddhist perspective, we are not separate but interconnected and interdependent. As with systems theory (Montero & Coleman, 2000), this view supports students in "thinking group" and focusing their attention on group-level dynamics and interpersonal processes. Understanding interconnectedness helps students have compassion for themselves and others. Through their experience in the group portions of their training, they recognize and understand experientially that our basic nature is fundamentally sane and that we all want to be free of suffering. Group leaders trained in this view are skilled at spotting the interconnected causes that contribute to each moment of interaction between group members. An individual

is part of a living system, and how he or she feels and communicates in a group is affected by others in the group and the group-as-a-whole.

MACP GROUP DYNAMICS IN ACTION

The MACP cohort model and classes that utilize the group format in the pedagogical structure promise that students will recognize the dance of the intra- and interpersonal dynamics during their three-year program (Kaklauskas & Olson, 2008; Nimmanheminda, 2008). Students often enter the program with strong hopes that the experience will be deeply transformative personally. Their primary initial transference to the program itself is often what Young-Eisendrath (2003) referred to as the *containing-transcendent transference*. Here students project onto the program their own "potential for wisdom and compassion . . . and [their] inherent capacity (however unconscious or nascent) to transcend suffering" (p. 305). Gradually, through the interpersonal dynamics that occur during the classes and groups, transferences become more diverse and are directly related to each student's specific background and character. Projective identification dynamics are activated, and unconscious images, feelings, and states are projected onto others, who may then be induced to enact roles.

The group process classes, as well as the other group-oriented classes of the program, often reveal participants' suffering and character styles. These aspects of the program entail self-reflection and mutual inquiry, both of which awaken students' ability to recognize the moment-by-moment interpersonal events and relational configurations involved in being human. Students can become familiar with their own and with others' minds and repeatedly see the interdependent as well as selfless (i.e., empty of any inherent reality) nature of those experiences. They learn what Harry Stack Sullivan recognized, which is that "mind always emerges and develops contextually in interpersonal fields" (Mitchell & Aron, 1999, p. xv).

For example, in a recent third-year group, a student had the following experience. He routinely spoke at the beginning of each group and said that he felt "unable" to remain quiet. However, as his mindfulness of himself and the group increased, he began experimenting with refraining from talking. He then noticed that when he held back, other group members would encourage him to speak by asking him questions. If he did not respond or responded minimally, he found that more aggression and hostility were directed toward him. Members would accuse him of being angry and of somehow scaring them. When placed in the hot seat, he felt a strong induction to talk, but instead of responding impulsively, he remained curious and mindful. He saw a repetition of his role as the family savior and mediator. He realized he often rescued others by speaking up or challenging the leader, just as he had protected his siblings. He was able, with help from the leader and group, to drop this role and recognize the group's sharing of responsibility for the pattern. In

MACP terms, this student and the whole group learned that they can be induced by one another's behavior, words, and unconscious actions. This student connected with his brilliant sanity to release an old pattern and become more flexible, a fundamental lesson for a group leader who works with countertransference.

As this example demonstrates, processing transferences, projections, and various group dynamics can be evocative and challenging for many students. It does not take long for students' *containing-transcendent transference* to break down amid the inevitable disappointments and frustrations inherent in the MACP program. Regarding disappointment, Trungpa is reported to have likened disappointment to the catalyst that drives exploration and change. Through the experience of intensive group training and its teachings, students often come face to face with the gap between their fantasy and the reality of community, whether as a whole cohort or in a small group process.

The group process leader's interventions usually have the goal of activating curiosity and acceptance rather than proposing an interpretation. Though a leader's interventions may sometimes help reveal subconscious material, they usually focus on surface events—such as verbal, nonverbal, and paralinguistic communications—to help students become more aware of intrapsychic dynamics and interpersonal actions in the here and now.

For example, in a Small Group Process class, several students grew angry with the leader for not acting on their feedback. The leader felt that these students were enraged and knew that inviting them to talk might elicit strong reactions or cause them to feel too vulnerable. One student became sullen and withdrawn. Rather than intrude on the student's process, the leader made an observation about his behavior, noting that the student crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. The member looked at the leader and was clearly struggling with whether to talk. When he finally spoke, he expressed anger and disappointment in the leader. The leader encouraged his words. By observing physical behavior and not shying away from the potential anger, he gently invited that student to be more present with his feelings and to choose whether to speak. After some discussion, the student was able to reflect more on his own process. He noted a tendency to withdraw when he felt angry because he feared his anger was dangerous and would lead to abandonment.

Though making meaning, creating understanding, and resolving projections and transferences are not the primary goals of these groups, these actions occur naturally as a product of the mindfulness and verbalization practice. Through this process, lost idealizations and shifting transferences are grieved, and previously projected bad parts may be recognized and integrated. The leader becomes an imperfect ally who is good enough to help students experience their brilliant sanity, their ego, and their interdependence. New kinship transferences can form, with individuals feeling empathy for others from whom they were previously estranged. For some students, their experience of themselves changes significantly, and their identifications and boundaries become more flexible, expansive, and resilient. New relationships may form.

When any of the aforementioned experiences are worked with in Small Group Process, the onus is on training and cultivating discipline, which is central to Buddhist contemplative practices. This priority is reflected in the Small Group Process syllabus goals of practicing mindfulness, awareness, and skillful communication. However, the practice of discipline is not an end but a means to the practice of psychotherapy. The program strives to work actively with the interdependence between self-growth and helping others. The ability to confront one's own demons—fears, rage, narcissism, greed, and so on—is recognized as a prerequisite for helping others to do the same.

CONCLUSION

The core principles of Buddhist psychology described earlier—brilliant sanity, the insubstantiability of self (ego), mindfulness, *maitri*, and interconnectedness—are the essential elements of training in the MACP program. They provides students with an understanding of the nature of mind and are foundational to skills for working with others and group leadership. As a result of the strong, group-oriented culture of the program, many students explore further involvement with group therapy and dynamics following graduation. Typically, the program's group training inspires 5–10 students annually to attend the American Group Psychotherapy Association's (AGPA) annual conference, this despite the monetary cost and interruption in studies. Many students go on to become active AGPA members. On graduation, many students seek out group-oriented employment settings.

This program is always evolving. As awareness of the nuances and complexities of the interactive nature of the program increases, the departmental leadership team develops and reformulates classes so that the inter- and intrapersonal development for students can occur in a natural and integrated manner. We hope this article provides insight into this unique training program for group psychotherapists.

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