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Western esoteric healing I: Conceptual background and therapeutic knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This article, the first of a two-part series, explores the subject of Western esoteric healing. First, conceptual background is offered on Western esotericism and traditions of esoteric healing. Second, the concept of therapeutic knowledge, which emerged from the philosophy of medicine and medical anthropology, is introduced and described in detail, including its application to the study of esoteric healing. Third, a taxonomy is proposed for sources of such knowledge in respective esoteric healing systems, traditions, or organizations. These sources are channeling, initiation, and empirical observation or validation. In the second article, examples will be given for each category of the taxonomy, followed by recommendations for further study.

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Adults in the U.S. who suffer from symptoms of physical or psychiatric disease have available a wide variety of diagnostic and therapeutic options. These include modalities associated with the mainstream of Western biomedicine, as well as other options that over the past decades have transitioned through various labels: holistic, alternative, complementary, and integrative.¹ According to a systematic review of global population data on utilization patterns, unorthodox modalities are increasingly relied upon in substitution for or alongside of conventional treatments.² The clinical efficacy of many by now have been empirically validated, but this has only modestly attenuated their perceived status among practitioners³ and patients⁴ as operating at the margins of Western medicine.

These include a subset of therapies (e.g., distant prayer, laying-on-of-hands) which engage a putative spiritual dimension of human experience. As with integrative therapies as a whole, this domain has seen its share of evidence-based research and validation studies, although these modalities and associated studies remain controversial.⁵ Further out on the margins lie a further subset, notably techniques of psychic and energy healing of various types: Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, bioenergetics, and so on.⁶ Even some proponents of a role for spirituality in medicine find these more “alternative” types of spiritual modalities too unorthodox for their tastes, for religious reasons, distancing themselves from them.⁷ Still, population studies suggest that such approaches are utilized by millions of people in the U.S.⁸ Lifetime and current prevalence of use vary across studies, but recent research suggests, for example, that as much as 6.1% of U.S. adults have at some point in their life sought medical care from a psychic healer.⁹

But that is not the end of this story. Another domain of healing is even more exotic to Western medical practitioners and consumers

than alternative therapies, healing prayer, and psychic healing or energy medicine. For the most part, these other modalities are less accessible to consumers and little research has attempted to validate their efficacy. Say what one will about the unorthodox therapies listed here, but one can locate practitioners easily (perhaps too easily, skeptics might counter), substantial rates of utilization have encouraged validation studies of their efficacy and bench studies of proposed mechanisms of action (notwithstanding attendant controversy over these studies), and lay consumers can find volumes of information on these techniques and philosophies readily accessible (although oftentimes unvetted in any conventional sense). This includes material that educates laypeople for self-application.

Such forms of healing are thus, on the whole, decidedly exoteric. That is, they are mostly out in the open, one can readily find places to receive such therapies or learn how to apply them, and the nuts-and-bolts mechanisms underlying their effects are not necessarily hidden behind secret rituals or initiations that the general public would not understand. But more esoteric forms of healing also exist, and although they are not as much on the radar of physicians, patients, and health services researchers, they are a part of the spectrum of healing options accessed by adults in the U.S. One could say that these represent the very furthest margins of the medical continuum. These therapies are the subject of this two-part series, including the present paper and a follow-up article to be published in a subsequent issue of *Explore*.

The esoteric and esoteric healing

The term *esoteric*, in contrast to *exoteric*, is used by religious scholars to refer to religious or wisdom traditions. The relation between exoteric and esoteric, in religious or spiritual context, has been

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characterized variously. For example, it is “illustrated by such well known antitheses as outer and inner, the bone and the marrow, the visible and the occult, the wide road and the narrow, letter and spirit, the rind and the flesh.”^{10(p.13)} Or more simply: “Esotericism begins where exotericism ends”^{11(p.17)} Esoteric paths have been identified for exoteric faith traditions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.¹⁰ Modern esoteric schools or lodges in the West follow in the traditions of Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Paracelsus, Boehme, Gurdjieff, Guénon, and others.¹²

According to a founder of contemporary esoteric studies, “esotericism” implies several things. First, it “conjures up chiefly the idea of something ‘secret,’ of a ‘discipline of the arcane,’ of restricted realms of knowledge”^{13(p.5)}; second, “a type of knowledge, emanating from a spiritual center to be attained after transcending the prescribed ways and techniques . . . that can lead to it”^{13(p.5)}; and third, the sum of “entire areas of material presenting common elements: a kind of unity of fact,”^{13(p.6)} along the lines of the “perennial philosophy” spoken of by mystics and said to underlie exoteric faith traditions.¹⁴ Elements include: (a) correspondences, symbolic or real, among parts of the seen and unseen universe; (b) a multilayered living nature, rich with meaning and imbued with accessible gnosis; (c) mediators—rituals, symbols, spirits—which can be summoned through imagination; (d) a possibility of transmutation from one state or level of knowledge to a “higher” state via inner experience; (e) concordance of content across outer spiritualities, as noted, in the form of a single “primordial tradition”; and (f) transmissibility of esoteric knowledge via formalized channels, paths, or initiatory experiences.^{13(pp.10–15)}

Scholarly writing on esotericism has evolved into a recognized field of study, focused mostly on older historical organizations and phenomena and less so on contemporary expressions of esoteric belief and practice related to phenomena such as medicine and healing.¹⁵ This scholarship references an “amorphous collectivity”^{16(p.479)} of what has been aptly termed “rejected knowledge,”¹⁷ from the perspective of mainstream history and religion (and medicine). Esotericism comprises “a confusing variety of practices and perspectives . . . [that] makes this field particularly difficult to categorize.”^{18(p.42)} This is reinforced by the secrecy which governs rites of initiation and keeps information¹⁹ on beliefs and practices from public dissemination.²⁰

In popular usage, too, *esoteric* seems to have several meanings. These include: (a) a category of content, such as found in New-Age bookstores (ufology, astrology, alchemy, secret societies); (b) arcane secrets, such as described in *The Da Vinci Code*; (c) inherent mysteries of the universe, as taught by occult philosophies; (d) gnostic ways of knowledge, as taught by initiatory orders like the Rosicrucians; (e) a quest for such knowledge, as written about by historians and contemporary authors; and (f) the sum of various Western traditions outside the mainstream (Christian Kabbalah, Hermeticism, Gnosticism, Rosicrucianism, Paracelsianism).^{21(pp.1–7)}

Use of the term *esoteric* thus implies many things, but besides a substantive body of information (“the esoteric”), including related to medicine and healing,²² it references phenomena that are hidden, secretive, under the surface, or out of normal view, as well as arcane, or understandable only by those with access to knowledge which gives a glimpse behind the curtain. Most pertinent for a discussion of healing is the idea of a transmissible body of information, of content, providing a recipient or initiate access to diagnostic or therapeutic knowledge not contained within exoteric medical systems or philosophies. The phrase *esoteric healing* thus involves application of the esoteric-exoteric dichotomy to medicine, although, as noted, this lies at the margins of medical scholarship and engages concepts unfamiliar to Western medical practitioners or scientists. Accordingly, it has not been subject to systematic study by clinical or biomedical researchers. The issue to be taken up here, in the context of healing, is how specifically access to such knowledge is obtained.

The phrase “esoteric healing” is most associated with 20th-Century occultist Alice Bailey, through her book of the same name.²³ Bailey used the phrase in reference to a particular occult philosophy, the Ageless Wisdom, transmitted to her—and other initiates—from the Spiritual Hierarchy, a network of discarnate masters. *Esoteric Healing* is a treatise on disease etiology and medical therapeutics, based on material channeled from these masters.

According to Bailey, basic causes of disease arise from pathological states (e.g., disruption, congestion, over- or under-stimulation) associated with the Theosophical concept of four interpenetrating subtle bodies or energy sheaths or layers (etheric, astral, mental, causal), the *Āyurvedic* concept of seven major *chakras* or energy centers or vortices, and the occult concept of seven Rays or streams of radiating energy through which aspects of manifestation come into being, as well as sequelae of individual and group *karma*, including related to past lives. Bailey includes hundreds of pages of material on factors and techniques associated with healing, based on metaphysical laws and rules, information formative for the emergence of holistic medicine over the next few decades. Much of what constitutes New-Age thinking on healing, regardless of school or philosophy or modality, especially theories and methods of energy healing such as in Healing Touch,²⁴ was influenced by Bailey’s ideas, whether explicitly acknowledged or not.

This usage of *esoteric healing* is referenced today in various systems of energy healing and New-Age therapeutic modalities.^{25,26} Typically these therapies are proprietary and seek to imply an imprimatur from Bailey.²⁷ Other healers cite Bailey’s use of the phrase as background in discussions of theoretical foundations of their own approach.²⁸ Some occult writers use the phrase generically in referring to any unorthodox health-related belief or practice associated with an organization, leader, or philosophy that teaches about, represents, or is identified with subject matter that could be considered esoteric.²⁹ For example, Dion Fortune spoke of esoteric healing as “beginning where orthodox medicine stops . . . or based on esoteric principles of which the orthodox are ignorant,”^{30(p.18)} without reference to Bailey. Connection of the phrase “esoteric healing” to Bailey and to occult philosophy and practices has been met with alarm in some faith communities, including among conservative evangelicals and Christian apologetical authors.³¹

For the two papers in this series, esoteric healing is defined simply as a category of diagnostic and/or therapeutic systems or philosophies based on concepts bearing the same relationship to mainstream biomedicine as that between esoteric and exoteric religions. In some instances, the beliefs and practices of esoteric healing are the very same ones found in esoteric spirituality. Just as there are distinct esoteric spiritual traditions, regardless of the reality of a single perennial philosophy, so too are there diverse esoteric traditions of healing. These include identifiable kabbalistic, mystery-school, gnostic, brotherhoods, Eastern and Western mystical, shamanic, and New-Age traditions.³² Whether these converge about a common core of beliefs or practice—a perennial medical philosophy, if you will—is not an issue taken up in this paper.

This working definition thus differentiates esoteric healing from alternative-but-exoteric forms of diagnosis and therapy (e.g., chiropractic, iridology, and macrobiotics) and from the expanse of indigenous/shamanistic healing traditions. Not everything “woo-woo” is necessarily esoteric, strictly speaking, nor is everything studied by ethnographers. Some New-Age therapies, for example, may be unorthodox and engage strange concepts from the perspective of biomedicine, but are not intrinsically esoteric. Use of a crystal pendulum to diagnose diseases in oneself or a client is certainly off the beaten path, but multiple books are available in the Eastern philosophy section of any shopping mall bookstore. Likewise, availability of weekend workshops on Native American healing rituals held in backrooms at metaphysical bookstores or massage centers and open to the public argues against describing such practices as hidden, secretive, and arcane.

At the same time, these conceptual boundaries are more pragmatically drawn than cast in stone. Scholars have identified, for example, both neopagan, magickal, and ritual elements, on the one hand, as well as New-Age influences such as new-paradigm science (or pseudoscience) teachings about healing within contemporary Western esotericism.³³ Other diverse influences are apparent, too, such as a visible erotic or sexual subtext.³⁴ All of this makes defining the topic of Western esoteric healing—in general and for purposes of this series of papers—an inexact science. This particular exercise is thus intended as a starting point for further exploration.

The phrase Western esoteric healing is used here simply in reference to medical- and healing-related teachings of systems of spirituality classified by scholars and esotericists as part of the Western esoteric or mystical tradition.³⁵ This has been defined as “nondenominational groups with a strong intellectual emphasis on occult or metaphysical instruction from amongst the teachings” of those esoteric traditions that have emerged in the West.^{32(p.105)} These include concepts, theories, and practices taught by Theosophy, Golden Dawn, Anthroposophy, Inner Light, Lucis Trust, Ordo Templi Orientis, and various neopagan groups. Western esoteric healing thus refers to one historically and geographically constructed category of unorthodox therapeutic systems or approaches, albeit comprising considerable diversity in teachings and practices.

Western esoteric healing is one category in a broader universe of non-mainstream therapeutic systems—a heuristic label rather than a real, tangible “school.” There is no one authoritative informational source, codified set of beliefs or practices, or place to become credentialled in something called Western esoteric healing. Much like the related New-Age healing phenomenon, first described over 30 years ago,³⁶ esoteric healing is a label that scholars, practitioners, and laypeople sometimes use to reference loosely related phenomena. Such meta-categories are useful for organizing population data on the utilization of respective healing practices, such as how “New Age” classifies energy healers and psychic healers and the like. But that does not mean that such a label denotes a single, universally recognized system or modality.^a

Because there is no one thing universally recognized as Western esoteric healing, per se, it is not a simple matter to parse this construct as one would for a more tangible class of alternative therapeutic modalities (e.g., bodywork) or one with widely acknowledged conceptual boundaries even if rejected by biomedicine (e.g., homeopathy). This phrase names a realm of healing-related systems and practices with overlapping non-exoteric sources of therapeutic knowledge and many similar beliefs and practices. These include a variety of principles (e.g., *karma*, reincarnation, conscious evolution), anatomical features (e.g., thought forms, *chakras*, subtle bodies), spiritual practices (e.g., astral projection, skrying, craftwork, meditation), and absent healing methods (e.g., focused intention, visualization, affirmation, distant healing).³²

The knowledge underlying Western esoteric healing thus derives from an intellectual space outside of contemporary biomedicine, even outside of current practice standards of integrative medicine. The questions focused on here are: What is the source of this knowledge? What makes therapeutic knowledge “esoteric”? Where does it come from? How is it accessed? This is key to differentiating types of healing traditions within the Western esoteric context.

The remainder of this first paper unpacks these questions and offers insight into what makes Western esoteric healing and its concomitant therapies and teachings explicitly esoteric. By focusing on sources of esoteric wisdom related to medical therapeutics, the beginnings of a taxonomy of subtypes will be proposed. In the second

paper, examples will be given pertaining to each category of the taxonomy, and an agenda for follow-up investigation will be outlined.

Esoteric healing and therapeutic knowledge

While scholarship on esoteric religion occupies a small but growing academic niche,³⁷ research and writing on medical or health-related dimensions of the esoteric sector are relatively sparse. The subject of esoteric themes in medicine and healing has been broached in a few notable places, such as in anthropology³⁸ and religious studies,³⁹ and by metaphysical authors such as Manly Hall.⁴⁰ Two recent contributions summarized the history, principles, and healing-related teachings of a variety of esoteric traditions, including Western mysticism,³² and identified ancient traditions of healing from throughout the world, including Europe and the Americas.⁴¹

In surveying systems of healing which could reasonably be located within a Western esoteric category, many organizations and philosophies come to mind. These include, for example, initiatory orders, occult brotherhoods, Spiritists, trance-channelers, neopagans, and alien contactees. Documentation of their healing philosophies or modalities, via historical works, research studies, and writings of respective founders or teachers, reveals great variety in origins, theories, techniques, popular dissemination, public reputation, and evidence of efficacy. Many systems or approaches are *sui generis*, incomparable to anything else in the medical realm, conventional or unorthodox, esoteric or exoteric. For example, etiologic and therapeutic information channeled from incarnate entities belonging to the White Brotherhood of ascended masters⁴² does not seem comparable to the functional skillset of a master practitioner of European *bio-energo* therapy.⁴³ But, in the present context, both qualify as significantly esoteric and of Western origin, and so they would be considered somewhat of a piece.

Before scholars can proceed to discuss the meaning or medical or religious implications of such phenomena, we must first deal with the “what” of this type of healing. Can we identify classes or categories that differentiate these approaches along an axis that helps us make sense of their appeal, constituencies, and persistence in the face of religious and medical marginality?

Perhaps the most meaningful way that these systems or approaches differ is in the source of their *therapeutic knowledge*. This concept references the body of medical knowledge, both diagnostic and therapeutic,^b that underlies respective systems, philosophies, or schools of healing or medical practice.⁴⁴ In the contemporary West, academic scholars⁴⁵ and popular writers⁴⁶ for decades have compared and contrasted aspects of the therapeutic knowledge of the competing biomedical and humanistic models or medical worldviews on the basis of their distinct and even orthogonal metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, ontology, and practice standards.⁴⁴

Respective therapeutic knowledges consist of explanatory schemes and substantive informational content that together make sense of observations about health and disease and provide guidance in diagnosing and treating symptomatic patients.⁴⁴ Therapeutic knowledge provides explanations for medical observations, whether causal (helpful for diagnosis), functional (helpful for identifying mechanisms underlying pathophysiology), or narrative (helpful for treating patients more humanely and empathically).

According to Marcum,⁴⁴ diagnostic knowledge is based traditionally on discursive knowledge, grounded in logic and seeking to provide rational understandings of the “how” of a medical case presentation or disease. In modern biomedicine, such knowledge is derived from a combination of symptom reporting from patient histories and narratives and information obtained through biomedical technology. Knowledge about treatment efficacy is obtained via a

^a This paper is thus not asserting a unique ontological category of phenomena self-labelled “Western esoteric healing” which is non-redundant in every way with all other categories or taxonomies of unorthodox therapies.

^b By convention and for simplicity, both dimensions of medical knowledge are referred to here collectively as therapeutic knowledge.

combination of biomedical research (especially clinical trials), biomedical technology (used, for example, to garner information relevant to pathology), and patient narratives (to understand the parameters of patients' suffering for purposes of input into therapeutic regimens).

Sources of therapeutic knowledge, as well as its content, are useful to consider in documenting and describing medical philosophies or schools. This entails focused analysis of sources of sanctioned information supported by consensus as describing diagnostic and therapeutic reality within respective healing systems. Therapeutic knowledge exists for every system of healing, exoteric or esoteric. This includes Western biomedicine no less than, say, the body of diagnostic and therapeutic information promulgated through the thousands of trance readings on health and healing transcribed from the famous "sleeping prophet," Edgar Cayce.

The concept of therapeutic knowledge has been engaged in scholarship in the philosophy of medicine^{44,47,48} and medical anthropology,^{49,50} notably in ethnomedical studies.⁵¹ There is precedent for its application to "esoteric medical and therapeutic knowledge,"⁵² in contrast to modern biological knowledge.⁵³ While the phrase "therapeutic knowledge" is not used by Murdock,⁵⁴ the concept is seen in his analysis of sources of unorthodox medical knowledge in his global survey of theories of illness using the Human Relations Area Files. This includes his differentiation of theories of disease causation into natural and supernatural categories, the latter comprising mystical, animistic, and magical subcategories and further sub-subcategories.

Sources of therapeutic knowledge

Historical streams of therapeutic knowledge—the concept used broadly to designate the knowledge base of etiology, diagnosis, treatment, and course of disease—can be identified for non-Western systems (e.g., *Āyurveda*, *Unani*, traditional Chinese medicine), contemporary Western schools or philosophies (e.g., osteopathy, naturopathy, chiropractic), and folk traditions (e.g., Native American and indigenous African healing). Modern biomedicine also constitutes such a stream, operating with hegemony in the West since the end of the 19th Century.⁵⁵

This section and the follow-up paper emphasize extant traditions of esoteric healing in the same global West, systems or philosophies operating in an alternate universe alongside biomedicine but largely invisible to practitioners and patients.^c A taxonomy is introduced that distinguishes among these systems on the basis of respective sources of therapeutic knowledge.

In categorizing Western esoteric healing, therapeutic knowledge was chosen for two reasons, one substantive and one pragmatic. First, this concept speaks to the source of authority for medical knowledge—where such information comes from and its imprimatur. Second, it is more reliably gleaned from written descriptions of these systems than other concepts that might also differentiate among them (e.g., related to geographic or chronological origins, which may be heavy in mythology and thus historically or scientifically unverifiable).

The taxonomy proposes three sources of therapeutic knowledge for Western esoteric healing:

A channeled source of therapeutic knowledge. This category of therapeutic knowledge is derived from personal contact with otherworldly or other-dimensional sources. Such contact may occur within a Western religious context or via another type of experience, spiritual or secular in content or origin. This may include one-off systems

or philosophies with founders who received special gnosis propagated via a defined teaching on healing.

Examples include knowledge concomitant to contactee experiences with aliens, discarnates, angels, or higher-dimensional beings, or with one's "higher Self" or other spiritual entities, including God. In the second paper in this series, the medical and healing-related beliefs and practices of several groups will be detailed, including Brazilian Spiritists, popular discarnate entities whose writings are sources of therapeutic information, alien contactees in the West since the 1950s, and readers of the Akashic records.

An initiatory source of therapeutic knowledge. This category of therapeutic knowledge is derived from an ur-tradition of some kind. From there, it has been passed down in graded fashion from master to *chela* (Sanskrit for "initiate"), often through stepped initiatory rituals. In contrast to the previous category, such knowledge may be of long-standing origin, or make claims of such, and may have created a recognized community of practitioners and formalized training and/or certification program.

Examples include knowledge gained through study of methods of diagnosis or healing taught by occult, magickal, and metaphysical orders or schools. In the second paper, information about medicine and healing will be provided for two prominent esoteric institutions, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which dates to the late 19th Century, and the various groups carrying on traditions of alchemy over the past few centuries.

An empirical source of therapeutic knowledge. This category of therapeutic knowledge is derived from or validated by systematic observation or scientific investigation. This may occur via scholarly deduction, experimental study, or explicit reference to scientific-but-arcaic principles, mainstream or marginal. Such knowledge may have piqued the interest of medical practitioners, who then incorporate it into their clinical practice.

Examples include Western physicians who practice medicine in conventional settings but emphasize theories or techniques originating outside the officially sanctioned knowledge base of biomedicine. There are also mainstream practitioners with otherwise orthodox practices who occasionally borrow diagnostic or therapeutic tools from the alternative-medicine sector, such as homeopathy or Chinese medicine or energy healing, making use of them as needed based on considerations outside of standard practice norms. The second paper will exemplify this with material on Theosophy, Anthroposophy, and medical astrology.

These categories are put forth here for heuristic reasons, to provide a helpful framework to describe and to compare and contrast systems of esoteric healing encountered in the West. For each respective example of esoteric healing, information will be provided on its (a) history, (b) constituent beliefs and practices, and (c) source of therapeutic knowledge. Examples will also be given of organizations or traditions that draw on multiple sources of therapeutic knowledge, including medical and healing teachings of Edgar Cayce, Rosicrucianism, the Lucis Trust Arcane School, and the many traditions of subtle-energy medicine.

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^c A brief note on what is *not* covered here: (a) Eastern traditions of esoteric healing, such as Tibetan,⁵⁶ *Āyurvedic*,⁵⁷ or East Asian⁵⁸ systems, although Western traditions may incorporate their concepts, such as *chakras*;⁵⁹ (b) those energy healing modalities based on (mostly) scientifically validated mechanisms, such as bioelectromagnetic medicine;⁶⁰ and (c) garden-variety integrative medicine modalities without an explicitly esoteric source.

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