

## THE TRANSPERSONAL MOVEMENT: A HISTORY AND STATE OF THE ART

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In the late 1960s a small group of people met in the San Francisco Bay area in an attempt to expand the scope of Western psychology and culture which seemed to be overlooking some of the most meaningful and important dimensions of human existence. Born out of the laboratory and clinic, Western psychology and psychiatry had been dominated by behaviorism and psychoanalysis. These had contributed a great deal, but by focussing on simple, measurable behavior and on pathology, they had also overlooked a great deal, including psychological health and exceptional well being. Worse still, they had reduced or pathologized crucial dimensions of human experience such as spirituality and alternate states of consciousness to neurotic immaturities or random neuronal fireworks.

In many ways the early transpersonal pioneers were following the lead of other psychologists who, in the early sixties, had been motivated by similar concerns to form humanistic psychology (Wertz, 1992). Indeed several people—notably Abraham Maslow, Anthony Sutich and others (Sutich, 1969)—were key players in both movements.

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The theoretical work of Abraham Maslow, so central to humanistic psychology, was also to play a central role in the birth of the transpersonal movement. Maslow (1968) became increasingly interested in psychological health as opposed to pathology, and in a famous statement he concluded, “to oversimplify the matter, it is as if Freud supplied to us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half” (p. 5).

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The author would like to thank the many pioneers who have helped to create and support the transpersonal movement.

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One characteristic of Maslow's exceptionally healthy subjects—"self-actualizers" as he called them—was to prove catalytic for the birth of the transpersonal movement. This was the finding that these subjects tended to have peak experiences: spontaneous, ecstatic, unitive states of consciousness akin to those mystical experiences that have been widely reported and highly valued across centuries and cultures. Here was an indication that psychological health and potential might include possibilities undreamed of by mainstream or even humanistic psychology. Transpersonal psychology arose to explore these possibilities.

*whole  
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Initially it was thought that peak experiences were inevitably spontaneous, brief and virtually overwhelming. Subjects regarded these experiences as the high points of their lives, but also doubted if they could stand them for more than brief periods (Maslow, 1971). It was therefore somewhat of a shock when the early pioneers turned their attention eastward and found that Asian psychologies, philosophies, religions and contemplative disciplines contained detailed accounts, not just of peak experiences, but of whole families of peak experiences and systematic techniques to induce and sustain them.

#### THE VARIETIES OF STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

##### *Multiple States of Consciousness*

Over time more and more alternate states of consciousness were recognized and it was appreciated that many of these may be beneficial. This was in stark contrast to the conventional Western view which had long considered altered states to be relatively few in number and primarily pathological. Delirium and intoxication are two such examples. Indeed, our culture has a long history of resistance to even recognizing the existence, let alone the value, of alternate states.

One of the most dramatic examples of this resistance was that of the reaction to hypnosis and the British physician, James Esdaile. While stationed in India over a century ago, Esdaile discovered the remarkable capacity of hypnosis to reduce pain and mortality in surgical patients. So dramatic were Esdaile's findings that medical journals refused to publish his reports. On his return to Britain, Esdaile therefore arranged a demonstration before the British College of Physicians and Surgeons during which he amputated a gangrenous leg while the hypnotized patient lay smiling calmly. His colleagues' conclusion? Esdaile had paid a hardened rogue to pretend he felt no pain! As Charles Tart (1986, p. 80) commented, "They must have had very hard rogues in those days."

The net result of this resistance is that our culture is what anthropologists call “monophasic” as opposed to “polyphasic” (Laughlin et al., 1992, 1993). That is, we value and derive our world view almost exclusively from a single state: the usual waking state. By contrast, polyphasic cultures value and derive their world views from multiple states such as *ordinary waking, dreaming, and various contemplative states*. One of the goals of the transpersonal movement has therefore been to reduce this cultural myopia and to shift society, psychology and other disciplines from monophasic to polyphasic perspectives.

To summarize the story thus far, some of the transpersonal pioneers’ earliest discoveries centered on the value and variety of alternate states of consciousness. Specifically they discovered that there exist whole families of potential transpersonal states, that these states have been recognized and valued across centuries and cultures, but by contrast have largely been denied and dismissed in the West.

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#### *Differentiating States: Phenomenological Mapping*

The recognition of this richness and plasticity of consciousness led to the obvious question of how these alternate states, and also the disciplines that produce them, can be categorized and compared. One response is to lump them all together and to say of diverse states and disciplines that they are all just equivalent roads up the same mountain. In general systems terms, this is an argument for equifinality, the claim that diverse states and paths will invariably *culminate in the same common state*.

This was very neat but, unfortunately, very naive. Indeed it became increasingly apparent that the true situation is far more complex; there exist significant differences between the states of consciousness produced by different disciplines, but there also exist ways of categorizing and clustering these states. Phenomenological mapping and deep structural analyses provide the necessary methods for doing this.

In the past most comparisons attempted only to say whether specific states were identical or different. However, phenomenological mapping is a method for mapping and comparing states of consciousness on multiple experiential dimensions, and it therefore allows more precise and *multidimensional comparisons*. For example, it has been claimed that shamanic, yogic and Buddhist practices result in identical states of consciousness. Witness for example the claims that “shamans, yogis and Buddhists alike are accessing the same state of consciousness” (Doore, 1988, p. 223),

and that the shaman “experiences existential unity—the samadhi of the Hindus or what Western mystics and spiritualists call enlightenment and illumination, *unio mystica*” (Kalweit, 1988, p. 236).

However, in point of fact, major differences emerge when we map states from these disciplines on multiple experiential dimensions. When key dimensions such as mental control, awareness of the environment, concentration, arousal, emotion, self-sense and content of experience are compared, then multiple differences between shamanic, yogic and Buddhist states leap into view.

TABLE 1  
COMPARISON OF THE SHAMANIC JOURNEY STATE WITH ADVANCED YOGIC AND BUDDHIST MEDITATIVE STATES

| DIMENSION                     | SHAMANISM   | BUDDHIST (VIPASSANA)<br>INSIGHT MEDITATION                              | PATANJALI'S YOGA   |
|-------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Control                       | ↑ Partial   | ↑ Partial   | ↑↑ Extreme control in some samadhis  |
| Awareness of Environment      | ↓ Decreased   | ↑ Increased   | ↓↓ Greatly reduced   |
| Concentration                 | ↑ Increased; fluid  | ↑ Increased; fluid  | ↑↑ Increased; fixed  |
| Arousal                       | ↑ Increased   | ↓ Usually decreased   | ↓↓ Greatly decreased   |
| Affect                        | + or -  | + or - (Positive tends to increase)                                     | Ineffable bliss  |
| Identity                      | Separate self-sense, may be a nonphysical “soul”                                    | Self-sense is deconstructed into a changing flux: “no self”             | Unchanging transcendent Self, or <i>purusha</i>  |
| OOBE (out of body experience) | Yes, controlled ecstasy (“ecstasis”)  | No  | No; loss of body awareness (“enstasis”)  |
| Experience                    | Organized, coherent imagery determined by shamanic cosmology and purpose of journey | Deconstruction of complex experiences into constituent stimuli and flux | Single object (“ <i>samadhi</i> with support”) or pure consciousness (“ <i>samadhi</i> without support”) |

The key point to phenomenological mapping is that it allows us to map, compare and differentiate states of consciousness on not one, but multiple experiential dimensions and with greater precision than has heretofore been achieved. The result is that we can better appreciate the richness and variety of transpersonal states as well as clearly differentiate them from pathological states such as schizophrenia, with which they have sometimes been confused (Walsh, 1990).

#### *Commonalities Among States: Deep Structural Analysis*

The recognition of the existence of these many states raises several questions. Can we make sense of this profusion of states? Can we identify commonalities and cluster states in some coherent manner? Are they related in some developmental sequence? Might

there be an overarching framework to provide a coherent understanding of their roles and relationships? In recent years the answer to all these questions has become “yes.” This is thanks largely to the work of Ken Wilber who has used the principles of developmental structuralism to identify similarities among states and to cluster them accordingly (Wilber, 1980, 1993; Wilber et al., 1986; Walsh & Vaughan, in press).

One of the key concepts of Wilber’s work is that of “deep structures.” This concept was introduced first in linguistics, but perhaps the easiest means of clarifying it is by analogy to the human face. Underlying the billions of unique human faces exist a small number of deep structures, e.g., ears, eyes, nose, mouth and hair. These few deep structures allow for a vast number of different faces (surface structures) and allow us to differentiate these faces from each other.

One of Wilber’s key contributions has been to apply this kind of deep structural analysis to states of consciousness. He suggests that underlying the vast array of states of consciousness are a relatively small number of deep structures. For example, the shaman seeing power animals, the Christian contemplative envisioning angels, and the Hindu practitioner merging with her *Ishta deva* are all clearly having different experiences. Yet at a deep structural level they are all seeing archetypal spiritual figures. Likewise, the Buddhist in *nirvana* and the Vedantist in *nirvikalpa samadhi* are both experiencing conditions in which no objects or images arise into awareness. The deep structure of their experiences is, therefore, similar or identical. Yet it is also clearly distinct from the deep structure of an archetypal spiritual figure.

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What this kind of deep structural analysis reveals is that it may be possible to cluster contemplative experiences and states and to identify a finite number of underlying deep structures. This in turn allows a typology of contemplative experiences and states. Wilber in fact has done just this.

While the innovation of applying deep structural analyses to transpersonal experiences is a remarkable contribution, Wilber has gone further to combine it with developmental analyses, thus yielding a powerful developmental structuralism. Wilber suggests that transpersonal deep structures and their corresponding states of consciousness may emerge in a specific developmental sequence consisting of several major stages. Three of the major stages are: a recognition of increasingly subtle realms of mind; next a going beyond all objects and appearances to pure consciousness; and, finally, the recognition of all objects and phenomena as creations or projections of consciousness. These three stages Wilber calls the subtle, causal and absolute.

*Subtle States* When contemplative practices are effective, when the usual raucous mental activity is stilled, when the mind quiets and becomes more sensitive, then, say various traditions, an inner world of subtle mental phenomena emerges into awareness. These mental phenomena may be formless as in the light and sound of Shabd and Nad Yoga or the emotions of love and joy in the Buddhist Brahma Viharas. On the other hand, the mental phenomena of these subtle stages may take specific forms such as the archetypal images previously described, including the shamans' power animals, the Christians' angelic figures, or the Hindus' Ishta devas.

*Causal States* After subtle states have deepened and stabilized, then causal states devoid of any objects, images or phenomena may arise. This is the unmanifest realm of pure consciousness, spirit, or *geist* which is said to be the transcendental source or ground of all phenomena. This causal condition is variously described as the abyss of Gnosticism, the Atman of Vedanta, the Nirvana of Buddhism and the Tao of Taoism.

*The Ultimate Condition* In the ultimate condition, objects and images now reappear but are instantaneously recognized as expressions, projections or modifications of consciousness (Avabhasa, 1991). Now it seems that there is only consciousness manifesting itself as the universe. This is variously described as Zen's One Mind, Aurobindo's supermind, Hinduism's Brahman-Atman or Sat-Chit-Ananda. Consciousness is said to have awoken and to see itself in all things; to recognize itself in and as all worlds, realms and beings of the universe; unbound by space, time and limits of any kind because it creates space, time and limits; both transcendent to the world and fully immanent as the world. This is said to be the final realization of enlightenment, salvation, Wu, Moksha, Fana; the end of all seeking, the goal of all goals, the *summum bonum*: the highest goal and the highest good of human existence.

consciousness  
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#### *Stabilization and Return*

Whatever state or stage a particular discipline and its practitioners aim for, after it has been experienced initially there still remain two further tasks. The first is to stabilize transitory altered states as enduring altered traits, to extend peak experiences into plateau experiences, or, as Huston Smith (1976) so eloquently put it, "to transform flashes of illumination into abiding light." In traditional terms, the challenge is to transform the Christian mystic's rapture into deification, the Buddhist's prompted consciousness into unprompted or spontaneous consciousness, or the TM meditator's transcendental consciousness into continuous cosmic consciousness.

The next challenge is to bring this light back to the world for the benefit of all. "What a man takes in contemplation," urged Meister Eckhart, "he must pour out in love" (Stace, 1987, p. 338). Beyond initial illumination and even abiding light lies the challenge of sharing it. For this there are numerous metaphors. For Plato it was the reentry into the cave; for Christians it is "the fruitfulness of the soul" in which the divine marriage of mystical union bears fruit in the world, while in the oxherding pictures of Zen it is "entering the marketplace with help-bestowing hands." Joseph Campbell described this phase as "the Hero's return," while the historian Arnold Toynbee named the cycle of inner search and outer service "the cycle of withdrawal and return" and claimed that it was characteristic of those people who contributed most to humankind.

#### ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE LABORATORY

Enlightenment sounds like a nice theory, but it begs a question. Is there any supporting evidence for it, or is it merely a pleasant fantasy? In recent years both supportive analogies and laboratory findings have become available.

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From the laboratory comes evidence of heightened awareness in both waking and sleeping states. Tachistoscopic studies of advanced meditators who had reached at least the first of the four Buddhist stages of enlightenment revealed enhanced perceptual processing speed and sensitivity (Brown et al., 1984a,b). Rorschach tests showed a particularly interesting pattern. They suggested that these enlightened subjects were not necessarily free of normal psychological conflicts around dependency, sexuality and aggression. However what was striking was that they showed little defensiveness and reactivity to these issues (Brown & Engler, 1986; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984).

Enhanced awareness may also occur during sleep. In the TM tradition the first stage of enlightenment is named cosmic consciousness and is defined by the unbroken continuity of awareness during waking and sleeping states. Preliminary EEG studies of an advanced practitioner who claimed to have reached this state were supportive (Gackenbach & Bosveld, 1989, 1993).

The awareness that one is dreaming during dreams is known as lucid dreaming and may offer an excellent analogy or metaphor for enlightenment. Lucid dreaming has been advocated for hundreds of years by Yogic, Sufi and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. However it was dismissed as impossible by Western psychologists until the 1970s when it was demonstrated in the laboratory (LaBerge, 1985; Gackenbach & Bosveld, 1989; Walsh & Vaughan, 1992, 1993a).

During lucidity, subjects “awaken” in their dream. At that moment dreamers are startled to recognize that what formerly seemed an unquestionably objective, material and independent world is in fact an internal, subjective, immaterial and dependent mental creation and that they are the creators, not the victims of the dream. At that point they can, if they so choose, begin a variety of meditative spiritual practices within the dream (Kelzer, 1987; Norbu, 1992).

Just how far this discipline can be taken is indicated by advanced practitioners such as Tibetan dream yogis, Aurobindo (1993), Rudolph Steiner (1947), and perhaps also Carlos Castaneda (1993), although Castaneda’s work is highly controversial (Kremer, 1992). In Tibetan dream yoga, practitioners are first taught to become lucid in their dreams and then to use the dreams as part of their meditative practice. Lucidity is then cultivated in nondream sleep so that the yogis seek to remain continuously aware twenty-four hours a day. Meanwhile during daylight hours they cultivate the awareness that their waking experience is also a dream (Dalai Lama, 1983; LaBerge, 1985, 1993). The ideal result is unbroken awareness twenty-four hours a day, the sense that all experience is a dream, and ultimately “the Great Realization.”

The final step leads to the Great Realization, that nothing within the *Samsara* (existence) is or can be other than unreal like dreams. The Universal Creation, with its many mansions of existence from the lowest to the highest Buddha paradise, and every phenomenal thing therein, organic and inorganic, matter or form, in its innumerable physical aspects, as gases, solid, heat, cold, radiations, energies, electronic elements, are but the content of the Supreme Dream. With the dawning of this Divine Wisdom the microcosmic aspect of the Macrocosm becomes fully awakened; the dew drop slips back into the Shining Sea, in Nirvanic Blissfulness and At-one-ment, possessed of All Possessions, Knower of the all-Knowledge, Creator of All Creations—the One Mind, Reality Itself (Evans-Wentz, 1958).

#### OUR USUAL STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Clearly the human condition offers possibilities far beyond those that are usually recognized. From this it follows that what we have called “normality” is not the peak of human development but rather may represent a form of developmental arrest. Maslow (1968, p. 16) summarized the situation well by saying, “Certainly it seems more and more clear that what we call ‘normal’ in psychology is really a psychopathology of the average, so undramatic and so widely spread that we don’t even notice it ordinarily.”

Indeed the world’s wisdom traditions are in widespread agreement that our usual state of consciousness is not only suboptimal but significantly distorted and dreamlike. In the East the dreamlike characteristics of our usual state have been called *maya*, or illusion,



while in the West they have been variously called a consensus trance (Charles Tart), a verbal trance (Fritz Perls), hypnosis (Willis Harman), a collective psychosis, or shared insanity.

Usually the dream goes unrecognized for several reasons. We all share in it; we have been hypnotized since infancy; and we live—each and every one of us—in the biggest cult of all: cult-ure.

The message of the great spiritual traditions can therefore be summarized very easily: Wake up! Wake up from your suboptimal entranced state of consciousness; wake up to your true nature; wake up to the fact that you are more than this body and are not only more than you think but more than you can think; wake up to the recognition that, as William James said, “there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness against which our individuality builds but accidental forces, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother sea.”

#### THE ART OF TRANSCENDENCE

Given that there exist developmental possibilities far beyond those we have taken to be the ceiling of human potential, and that these possibilities include enlightenment, the obvious practical question is, “how can we realize these potentials for ourselves?” The answer is that one takes up a practice, a transpersonal discipline, a yoga capable of catalyzing transpersonal development.

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There is, however, a difficulty with traditional spiritual disciplines. While they are time-tested, they are often far from clear, being couched in outdated esoteric language and saddled with centuries of nonsensical accretions. The transpersonal movement would therefore make a valuable contribution if it could identify the essential common elements, processes or practices that constitute authentic contemplative disciplines. Now that nearly all of the world’s contemplative and spiritual traditions are available to us for the first time in human history, we can in fact do this. Preliminary research suggests that there are six common elements: ethical training, attentional stabilization, emotional transformation, redirecting motivation, perceptual refinement, and the cultivation of wisdom. Space limitations do not permit discussion of them here, but descriptions are available elsewhere (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a, b).

#### NEW UNDERSTANDINGS OF RELIGION

These discoveries and others allow us novel and vitally important insights into the fundamental nature and purpose of authentic religious traditions. Here “authentic” is being used in Wilber’s

(1983a) sense of “capable of effecting transcendence.” For now we can recognize that at their contemplative or mystical core, authentic religions contain specific practices and roadmaps: practices to train the mind and induce transcendent altered states that culminate in enlightenment, salvation, or *moksha*; roadmaps to map these states and describe the experiences, insights and understandings that they offer.

Transpersonal research suggests why these contemplative disciplines have been so misunderstood. One of the key findings associated with alternate states of consciousness is state specificity: the finding that insights and learning acquired in one state may be only partially accessible in others. Since at their contemplative core religions are multistate disciplines, this means that their wisdom may be partly “state-specific” and comprehensible only to the degree that we ourselves have directly accessed, and been transformed by, these states (Tart, 1983, 1992; Walsh, 1989a; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a). For as Aldous Huxley (1945, p. vii) concluded, “Knowledge is a function of being. When there is a change in the being of the knower, there is a corresponding change in the nature and amount of knowing.”

#### THE STATE OF THE WORLD

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While these twenty-five years have been a time of enormous learning and major breakthroughs for the transpersonal movement, they have also been a time of increasing desperation and degradation for our world.

The population explosion has been mind-boggling. During these twenty-five years the world’s population has increased by two billion people, and this in spite of the fact that approximately half a billion people have died of malnutrition and starvation. This inconceivable mortality amounts to some 50,000 deaths each day and is equivalent to the number of deaths from a holocaust every four months.

Our environment is under enormous and increasing ecological strain. Forests are disappearing, pollution increasing, resources depleting, species are becoming extinct at a rate unequalled since the death of the dinosaurs, and ozone depletion, unrecognized twenty-five years ago, now constitutes a major environmental and health hazard (Barney, 1993; Brown et al., 1993; Goldsmith, 1993).

Meanwhile the insanity of weapons and wars continue. During these twenty-five years the world has spent over *ten trillion dollars* on arms, and the 1993 expenditure alone will exceed one trillion

dollars. If one spent a million dollars a day since the birth of Christ, one would still not have spent a trillion dollars. Yet the Presidential Commission on World Hunger (1979) estimated that it would cost only six billion dollars a year to eradicate starvation worldwide, an amount equal to less than one week's arms expenditure. This is insanity and immorality on a scale unmatched in human history.

And yet our problems are still solvable; we still have a small window of opportunity. For example, the Worldwatch Institute points out that we already have within reach the technological means necessary for handling our population and energy crises (Brown, 1993).

The best means that has been found for reducing explosive population growth is simply to make education available to third-world women. When these women are no longer dependent on producing large numbers of children to obtain status and security but instead can obtain these, and satisfaction as well, through education and work, then their birthrates plummet.

Likewise the photovoltaic production of solar energy is fast approaching fossil fuel costs. Relatively minor investments, especially when compared with the billions going to support fossil and nuclear energy, could make solar energy economically viable. When coupled with electrolysis of water to produce hydrogen fuel, this could dramatically reduce pollution, the greenhouse effect, and resource depletion. These are clearly low cost, win-win solutions from which everyone and our planet stand to benefit.

What these analyses show is that the crucial factors that will decide the fate of our species and our planet are not so much technological as they are psychological and spiritual. For the first time in human history nearly all our global problems are human-caused. Problems such as overpopulation, pollution, resource depletion, and environmental degradation all stem from human behavior and therefore reflect the psychological forces within us and between us (Elgin, 1993; Walsh, 1984, 1989b, 1993). The state of the world now mirrors the state of our individual and collective minds, and what we call our global crises are actually global symptoms.

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The state of the world is insane in many ways because our usual state of mind is insane. We see ourselves as separate "skin encapsulated egos," to use Alan Watts' term, inherently out for number one, and the world reflects this isolative, competitive viewpoint.

But a transpersonal vision offers a more healthy and hopeful perspective. This perspective shows our interconnection and unity with all humankind and life and offers the practices and disciplines with which to realize that unity for ourselves. From this experience

of interdependence and unity, ecological concern and compassionate action spring spontaneously. This recognition and concern are the basis of deep ecology and of the emerging field of transpersonal ecology (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Fox, 1990,1993).

Clearly we are in a race between consciousness and catastrophe. The critical questions of our time, therefore, are: 1) Can we develop a critical mass of aware, involved people? 2) Can the transpersonal vision be communicated widely enough and effectively enough by each of us to help avert catastrophe and to transform the forces of destruction into forces for awakening and wellbeing?

The time is short and the problems massive. If we are to succeed, we will need a massive mobilization of all our resources—individual and cultural, inner and outer, personal and transpersonal—a mobilization that Peter Russell (1993) refers to as “An Inner Manhattan Project.”

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Such a project is the challenge of our time. Whether we are equal to this challenge will determine whether we create a sustaining and sustainable society or make of our planet a poisoned, polluted, plundered wasteland. For we have the power to do both.

#### SUMMARY

What then have we achieved in twenty-five years?

We started with the recognition there is more to human beings and the human possibility than had been recognized, and that this “more” includes peak experiences.

From thinking that there was only one type of peak experience, we have come to recognize whole families of such experiences and have developed ways to map and compare them.

We have recognized that ours is a monophasic culture and suffers accordingly, and we have worked to transform it into a polyphasic culture.

We have identified common structures underlying apparently widely differing experiences and thereby have been able to cluster transpersonal experiences and states into specific types.

We have mapped transpersonal development beyond what was formerly considered the ceiling of human possibility and have found preliminary evidence of common psychological and spiritual developmental sequences across traditions.

We have discovered common elements and processes across the world's authentic spiritual disciplines and recognized that these disciplines constitute an art and technology of transcendence. Moreover, we have gathered laboratory evidence of the efficacy and benefits of these disciplines and now have hundreds of studies on meditation alone.

We have gained new understandings of the nature and purpose of contemplative practices and have recognized that, at their contemplative core, the great religions provide roadmaps and techniques to describe and induce transcendent states of consciousness.

We have recognized that transpersonal psychologies and philosophies such as Vedanta, Buddhism, Sufic and Christian contemplative traditions—which together constitute the perennial philosophy and perennial psychology—are multistate and state-specific disciplines. Hence, due to the constraints of state-specific learning, they have been much misunderstood and underestimated by individuals and cultures without direct contemplative experience of the states of consciousness they induce.

We have begun to apply these novel perspectives to our global crises and in so doing have created transpersonal ecology.

We have also explored other implications and applications and created other disciplines as well. These include transpersonal anthropology, sociology, psychiatry and psychotherapy, exploration of clinical disorders such as addiction and spiritual emergencies, and research in fields such as near-death experiences, psychedelics, somatics, philosophy, education and meditation (C. Grof, 1993; Grof & Grof, 1990, 1993; S. Grof, 1988, 1993; McDermott, 1993; Murphy, 1992, 1993; Murphy & Donovan, 1989; Laughlin et al., 1992, 1993; Ring, 1980, 1993; Rothberg, 1986; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; West, 1987; Wilber, 1981, 1983a,b; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a).

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In short, during its first twenty-five years transpersonal psychology has become an international, interdisciplinary transpersonal movement.

We have also begun to understand what has been regarded for centuries as the *summum bonum*: enlightenment or liberation; and we have found laboratory evidence of remarkable skills and capacities in enlightened people.

We have even begun to suspect that the most profound and radical claims of the perennial philosophy may be correct and that it may in fact be true that

*The kingdom of heaven is within you (Christianity).*

*By understanding the Self all this universe is known (Upanishads).*

*Atman (individual consciousness) and Brahman (universal consciousness) are one (Vedanta).*

*God dwells within you as you (Yoga).*

*Look within, you are the Buddha (Buddhism).*

*Heaven, earth and human are of one body (Neoconfucianism).*

*Those who know themselves know their God (Islam).*

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Our task, then, is to realize the transpersonal vision for ourselves through practicing a transpersonal discipline; to test and refine this vision through study, reflection and critical thinking; to embody and express it in our lives; to share and communicate it where we can; to use it to help the healing of our world; and to let it use us as willing servants for the awakening and welfare of all.

This is the transpersonal vision. This is what we have been privileged to help birth during its first twenty-five years. Who can even guess what the next twenty-five years will bring? Our challenges are matched only by our opportunities.

Our world is in grave danger. But our world also rests in good hands, because, ultimately, it rests in yours.

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## ON TRANSPERSONAL DEFINITIONS

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In recent years there has been renewed interest in defining the field of transpersonal psychology. This reflects the continuing maturation of the field as well as the perceived need for clear definitions in order to increase consensus within the field and communicate effectively with those outside it.

There have been several recent studies of the various definitions and the ways they have changed over the last quarter century (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992; Lajoie, Shapiro & Roberts, 1991; Vich, 1992). These studies suggest that, while definitions converge on several key themes, they show significant variation and continue to evolve. This evolution reflects the open-minded spirit with which the field and its early definitions were formulated. Early pioneers explicitly recognized the value of openness to change and individual interpretation (*The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 1969, p. i; Sutich, 1975, 1976).

*the  
value  
of  
openness  
to  
change*

Surveying these definitions provides an overview of beliefs about the nature of the field. Lajoie and Shapiro (1992) found that five themes occurred most frequently. These were: states of consciousness, highest or ultimate potential, beyond ego or personal self, transcendence, and spiritual.

In reviewing definitions for the preparation of a new edition of *Beyond Ego*—now called *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal*

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*Vision* (Walsh & Vaughan, 1980; 1993)—we found a persistent problematic theme in many definitions. Therefore we want briefly to describe this theme and its potential dangers, and to offer definitions which hopefully reduce these difficulties.

The problem is that many definitions appear to be highly “theory-laden” and sometimes “metaphysically laden”—that is, these definitions imply, either overtly or covertly, a commitment to certain conceptual, theoretical and metaphysical beliefs and presuppositions.

There is wide agreement that there are no theory-free facts. All concepts are partly theory-laden. Indeed, theoretical holism argues for the organic character of thought, claiming that concepts cannot be understood in isolation: their meaning derives from the theoretical system in which they inhere.

*practical  
holism*

Practical holism goes further. It argues that since thinking proceeds in social contexts, meaning derives from these contexts. According to this view, an idea reflects more than the conceptual gestalt of which it is a part. It also reflects the social world out of which this gestalt is born. Dimensions of this social world that philosophers regard as important include Wittgenstein’s “forms of life,” Heidegger’s “historical horizons” and “ways of being-in-the-world,” whose “micropractices” (Foucault) give these gestalts their meaning.

Moreover, we all labor under the limitations of our own “horizon” (Gadamer) or “template” (Heidegger) constituted by our cultural practices and prejudices. Presumably we are always limited by these horizons or templates to some extent, at least in our usual state of consciousness.

Some philosophical, religious and transpersonal scholars would argue that these limitations can be escaped in certain transrational, transconceptual experiences. However this point is currently debated by constructivists who argue that *all* experiences are constructed and conditioned by inescapable individual and cultural factors. (For an excellent review of this debate, see Rothberg, 1989.)

Setting aside the debate concerning the extent to which we can escape our conceptual systems, it is clear that we can escape some beliefs, and that excessive theoretical and metaphysical presuppositions can be dangerous, especially when they go unrecognized. Presuppositions seem to function as cognitive biases that shape selective attention, perception, memory and interpretation. As such they tend to reduce cognitive flexibility and openness to novel

experiences that contradict the presuppositions (Langer, 1989). In other words, presuppositions bias the processing of new data by a process known as proactive inhibition.

Beliefs adopted prematurely constitute “premature cognitive commitments” (Langer, 1989) that inhibit the later adoption of more adequate theories. In a research field such as transpersonal studies, premature cognitive commitments presuppose conclusions that would be more appropriately determined by research findings.

A further problem with theory-laden definitions is political. When a definition entails a commitment to a specific theory or world view, it can alienate people who might otherwise be sympathetic to the field. Critics can also attack the validity of the field by attacking the validity of the presumed worldview. A notable example is Albert Ellis’ (1986) dismissal of transpersonal psychology partly because, according to him, transpersonalists believe that “all living and inanimate things merge into one fundamental unity” (p. 149). Ellis’ critique is wildly erroneous in many ways (Walsh, 1989; Wilber, 1989). However, it does point to the dangers of misunderstanding that accompany definitions that entail a particular worldview. (For a humorous response to Ellis, see Wilber, 1989.)

*definitions  
that  
entail  
a particular  
world-view*

#### COMMON COGNITIVE COMMITMENTS IN TRANSPERSONAL DEFINITIONS

Let us then examine some of the (premature) cognitive commitments that recur in definitions of transpersonal psychology. These include assumptions about the nature of ontology, the “Self,” ultimate values, highest potentials, states of consciousness, and health.

Ontological assumptions include the presupposition that “a transcendent reality underlies and binds together all phenomena” (Transpersonal Psychology Interest Group, 1982, p. 1). Likewise, several definitions refer to a transcendent “Self,” a reference which would trouble Buddhists, for example.

Other definitions indicate that transpersonal psychology represents a contemporary exploration of the perennial philosophy (Hutchins, 1987). However, there are many contemporary philosophical criticisms of the perennial philosophy and attendant claims (Rothberg, 1986). Exploring the precise relationship between transpersonal psychology and the perennial philosophy is an important task for future research (Wilber, 1990, 1993a, b), but assuming the nature of the relationship in current definitions may be premature and problematic.

Several definitions refer to ultimates, suggesting that transpersonal psychology's primary concern is with ultimate dimensions of human experience (Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, 1991) and "humanity's highest potential" (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992). There are significant problems here (Chaudhuri, 1975), and the term "ultimate" was therefore dropped from *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology's* statement of purpose in 1973 (Sutich, 1975). For example, how does one know or demonstrate that one is dealing with ultimates or highest potentials? In addition, much of the field focuses on concerns that are clearly not ultimate.

altered  
states  
of  
consciousness

Many definitions define transpersonal psychology in terms of the study of altered states of consciousness (see Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992). Probably most transpersonalists would agree that altered states are important, but they do not necessarily define the field. For example, some topics may not necessarily be associated with altered states, and the highest degrees of realization may entail, not so much an altered state, but the ground out of which all states arise (Wilber, 1983). There is also a debate over whether the dominant paradigm for transpersonal studies should be altered states of consciousness or developmental structures of consciousness (Wilber, 1993b).

Other definitions assume the field is centrally concerned with psychological health and well-being (Hutchins, 1987; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980). Our own definition in *Beyond Ego* said that the field was "concerned with the study of psychological health and well-being." It therefore framed transpersonal phenomena in a health paradigm rather than, for example, in a developmental paradigm. In doing so it implied that transpersonal experiences are intimately linked to psychological health, whereas it is increasingly clear that the relationship is more complex (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993, section 6, Problems on the Path; Wilber et al., 1986).

The assumptions implied by these transpersonal definitions are not necessarily wrong. However their validity should be researched and assessed rather than presupposed.

In light of these caveats we would like to propose some definitions which hopefully entail fewer presuppositions, are less theory-laden, and more closely tied to experience. In addition, since transpersonal studies have expanded beyond the founding field of transpersonal psychology, we also propose definitions of related disciplines.

## DEFINITIONS

*Transpersonal experiences* may be defined as experiences in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (trans) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos.

*Transpersonal practices* are those structured activities that focus on inducing transpersonal experiences.

*Transpersonal disciplines* are those disciplines that focus on the study of transpersonal experiences and related phenomena. These phenomena include the causes, effects and correlates of transpersonal experiences and development, as well as the disciplines and practices inspired by them.

*Transpersonal psychology* is the area of psychology that focuses on the study of transpersonal experiences and related phenomena. These phenomena include the causes, effects and correlates of transpersonal experiences and development, as well as the disciplines and practices inspired by them (see, for example, Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

*transpersonal  
experiences  
and  
related  
phenomena*

*Transpersonal psychiatry* is the area of psychiatry that focuses on the study of transpersonal experiences and related phenomena. Its focus is similar to transpersonal psychology with a particular interest in the clinical and biomedical aspects of transpersonal phenomena (see, for example, Lukoff, Lu & Turner, 1992).

*Transpersonal anthropology* is the cross-cultural study of transpersonal phenomena and the relationship between consciousness and culture (see, for example, Laughlin et al., 1992, 1993).

*Transpersonal sociology* is the study of the social dimensions, implications, expressions and applications of transpersonal phenomena (see, for example, Wilber, 1983).

*Transpersonal ecology* is the study of the ecological dimensions, implications, and applications of transpersonal phenomena (see, for example, Fox, 1990, 1993)

The *transpersonal movement* is the interdisciplinary movement that includes various individual transpersonal disciplines (see, for example, Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

## DISCUSSION

These definitions describe the focus and purpose of transpersonal disciplines while making minimal theoretical and metaphysical presuppositions. However, obviously they are not final.

It is important to note what these definitions do *not* do. They do not exclude the personal or interpersonal, limit the type of expansion of identity, tie transpersonal disciplines to any particular philosophy, belief system or worldview, or limit research to a particular method, art, or discipline.

Contrary to the assumptions of some critics (e.g., May, 1986), transpersonal disciplines do not exclude or invalidate the personal. Rather, they set personal concerns within a larger context that acknowledges the importance of both personal and transpersonal experiences. Indeed, one interpretation of the term transpersonal is that the transcendent is expressed through (trans) the personal.

*what  
these  
definitions  
do  
not  
do*

Likewise, the definitions do not specify limits on the direction or extent of expansion of the sense of identity. Some ecologists emphasize the importance of horizontal expansion of identification to encompass the earth and life, while simultaneously denying the value or validity of vertical transcendence (Fox, 1990, 1993). On the other hand, for some spiritual practitioners this vertical expansion of identity to encompass transcendent images and realms is central, while others value identification with both the vertical (transcendent) and the horizontal (immanent).

These definitions do not commit the transpersonal disciplines or their practitioners to any specific interpretation of transpersonal experiences. In particular they do not tie the disciplines to any particular ontology, metaphysics or worldview, nor to any specific doctrine, philosophy or religion. By focussing on experiences, the definitions allow for multiple interpretations of these experiences and the insights into human nature and the cosmos that they offer. Transpersonal experiences have long been interpreted in many different ways and this will doubtless continue. A transpersonalist could be religious or nonreligious, theist or atheist. A definition of transpersonal disciplines that focuses on experience thus makes room for a range of diverse, but valuable and complementary views.

Finally, these definitions do not place limits on the methods or disciplines for studying or researching transpersonal experiences. Rather, any valid epistemology is welcome. In practice, transpersonal researchers have encouraged a uniquely eclectic, interdisciplinary, integrative approach which makes appropriate use of all the so-called "three eyes of knowledge": the sensory, introspective-

mental, and contemplative (Wilber, 1990). This is in contrast to many other schools that effectively advocate or rely on a single epistemology. For example, behaviorism has centered on sensory data and science; introspective schools such as psychoanalysis have emphasized mental observation, while yogic approaches focus on contemplation. To date, the transpersonal disciplines are unique explicitly in adopting an eclectic epistemology which seeks to include science, philosophy, introspection and contemplation, and to integrate them in a comprehensive investigation.

Whatever understanding of humankind and the cosmos transpersonal disciplines may eventually unveil, to date they stand alone in the scope of their search. They advocate an eclectic integrative quest that includes personal and transpersonal, ancient and modern, East and West, knowledge and wisdom, art and philosophy, science and religion, sensory observation and introspection. Only by such a comprehensive approach can we hope for a vision that reflects the extraordinary richness and possibilities of humankind and the cosmos: a transpersonal vision.

#### *Relationship to Religion*

Several transpersonal topics overlap with areas of religious studies. This raises the question of the relationship of transpersonal disciplines to religion. Of course, much depends on definitions. As Ken Wilber (1983, p. 55) points out, "One of the great difficulties in discussing religion . . . is that it is not an 'it.' In my opinion, 'it' has at least a dozen different, major, largely exclusive meanings, and unfortunately these are not always, not even usually, distinguished in the literature."

*overlap  
with  
areas  
of  
religious  
studies*

One simple stipulative definition of religion is "concerned with, or related to, the sacred." Since some, but not all, transpersonal experiences are experiences of the sacred, and since some, but not all, religious experiences are transpersonal, there is clearly some overlap between transpersonal experiences and religious experiences (Walsh, 1990). However transpersonal disciplines are also interested in transpersonal experiences that are not religious, and in research, interpretations, psychologies and philosophies devoid of religious overtones. Transpersonal disciplines espouse no fixed creed or dogma, demand no particular religious convictions, espouse an open-minded scientific, philosophical and experiential testing of claims, and usually assume that transpersonal experiences can be interpreted either religiously or nonreligiously according to individual preference. Transpersonal disciplines and religion should therefore be regarded as distinct fields with partially overlapping areas of interest and also significant differences. Likewise, although they share some areas of interest, transpersonal



psychology, sociology and anthropology are distinguishable from the psychology, sociology and anthropology of religion.

#### SUMMARY

We have attempted here to acknowledge the pioneering contributions of those who have sought to define the field of transpersonal psychology while pointing to the dangers of theoretical presuppositions inherent in some of these definitions. We then offered definitions of a variety of transpersonal disciplines which we hope are less theory-laden and more focussed on experience.

Of course, the definitions offered here are not final. They too will doubtless yield in their turn to more refined definitions born of more comprehensive viewpoints.

And yet if we only knew how each loss of one's viewpoint is a progress and how life changes when one passes from the stage of the closed truth to the stage of the open truth—a truth like life itself, too great to be trapped by points of view, because it embraces every point of view . . . a truth great enough to deny itself and pass endlessly into a higher truth (Satprem, 1969, p. 84).

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