THE ART OF TRANSCENDENCE: AN INTRODUCTION TO COMMON ELEMENTS OF TRANSPERSONAL PRACTICES

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> We must close our eyes
> and invoke a new manner of seeing . . .
> a wakefulness that is the birthright of us all,
> though few put it to use.
> (Plotinus, 1964)

When historians look back at the twentieth century, they may conclude that two of the most important breakthroughs in Western psychology were not discoveries of new knowledge but recognitions of old wisdom.

further developmental possibilities

First, psychological maturation can continue far beyond our arbitrary, culture-bound definitions of normality (Wilber, 1980; Wilber et al., 1986). There exist further developmental possibilities latent within us all. As William James put it, "most people live, whether physically, intellectually or morally, in a very restricted circle of their potential being. They make use of a very small portion of their possible consciousness. . . . We all have reservoirs of life to draw upon, of which we do not dream."

Second, techniques exist for realizing these "reservoirs of life" or transpersonal potentials. These techniques are part of an art and technology that has been refined over thousands of years in hundreds of cultures and constitutes the contemplative core of the

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world's great religious traditions. This is the art of transcendence, designed to catalyze transpersonal development (Walsh, 1990; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). As such it is based on two fundamental assumptions about the nature and potentials of the mind.

The first assumption is that our usual state of consciousness is suboptimal. In fact, it has been described in terms such as clouded, distorted, dreamlike, entranced and largely out of control. This has been recognized by psychologists and mystics of both East and West (Huxley, 1945; Mikulis, 1991; Tart, 1986). For Freud (1917) it was the culture-shaking recognition that "man is not even master in his own house . . . his own mind," that echoed the *Bhagavad Gita*'s despairing cry two thousand years earlier:

> Restless (the) mind is,
> So strongly shaken
> In the grip of the senses:
> Gross and grown hard
> With stubborn desire. . . . .
> Truly, I think
> The wind is no wilder.
>
> (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1944)

In the words of Ram Dass (1975), "we are all prisoners of our own mind. This realization is the first step on the journey to freedom." Or as Pir Vilayat Khan put it even more succinctly, "The bind is in the mind."

training catalyzes transpersonal potentials

The second assumption is that although the untrained mind is clouded and out of control, it can be trained and clarified, and this training catalyzes transpersonal potentials. This is a central theme of the perennial philosophy. For Socrates:

> In order that the mind should see light instead of darkness, so the entire soul must be turned away from this changing world, until its eye can bear to contemplate reality and that supreme splendor which we call the Good. Hence there may well be an art whose aim would be to affect this very thing (Plato, 1945).

Likewise, according to Ramana Maharshi (1955), "All scriptures without any exception proclaim that for salvation mind should be subdued."

Although practices and techniques vary widely, there seem to be six common elements that constitute the heart of the art of transcendence: ethical training, concentration, emotional transformation, redirection of motivation, refinement of awareness, and the cultivation of wisdom. The purpose of this paper is to provide a synoptic introduction to the art of transcendence and its common elements in the hope of stimulating appreciation, research and practice of them.

Ethics

Ethics is widely regarded as an essential foundation of transpersonal development. However, contemplative traditions view ethics, not in terms of conventional morality, but rather as an essential discipline for training the mind. Contemplative introspection renders it painfully apparent that unethical behavior both stems from and reinforces destructive mental factors such as greed and anger. Conversely, ethical behavior undermines these and cultivates mental factors such as kindness, compassion and calm. Ultimately, after transpersonal maturation occurs, ethical behavior is said to flow spontaneously as a natural expression of identification with all people and all life (Radhakrishnan, 1929). For a person at this stage, which corresponds to Lawrence Kohlberg's (1981) highest or seventh stage of moral development—a stage that Kohlberg felt required transcendent experience—"Whatever is . . . thought to be necessary for sentient beings happens all the time of its own accord" (Gampopa, 1971).

Attentional Training

Attentional training and the cultivation of concentration are regarded as essential for overcoming the fickle wanderlust of the untrained mind (Goleman, 1988). As E.F. Schumacher (1973) observed of attention, "No topic occupies a more central place in all traditional teaching; and no subject suffers more neglect, misunderstanding, and distortion in the thinking of the modern world."

the fickle wanderlust of the untrained mind

Attentional training is certainly misunderstood by Western psychology, which has unquestioningly accepted William James' century-old conclusion that "Attention cannot be continuously sustained" (James, 1899/1962). Yet James went further: "The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgement, character and will. No one is *compos sui* if he have it not. An education which would improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. . . . It is easier to define this ideal than to give practical direction for bringing it about" (James, 1910/1950). Here, then, we have a stark contrast between traditional Western psychology, which says attention *cannot* be sustained, and the art of transcendence, which says that attention can and *must* be sustained, if we are to mature beyond conventional developmental limits.

Being able to direct attention at will is so important because the mind tends to take on qualities of the objects to which it attends (Goldstein, 1983). For example, thinking of an angry person tends

to elicit anger while thinking of a loving person may elicit feelings of love. The person who can control attention can therefore control and cultivate specific emotions and motives.

Emotional Transformation

Ethical behavior and attentional stability facilitate the third element of the art of transcendence: emotional transformation. There appear to be three components to emotional transformation.

The first is the reduction of destructive emotions such as fear and anger, a process which is well known in mainstream Western therapy. Of course, what is implied here is not repression or suppression but rather clear awareness of such emotions and consciously relinquishing them where appropriate.

the cultivation of positive emotions

The second component is the cultivation of positive emotions such as love, joy and compassion. Whereas conventional Western therapies have many techniques for reducing negative emotions, they have virtually none for enhancing positive emotions such as these. In contrast, the art of transcendence contains a wealth of practices for cultivating these emotions to an intensity and extent undreamed of in Western psychology. Thus, for example, the Buddhist's compassion, the Bhakti's love, and the Christian's agape are said to reach their full flowering only when they unconditionally and unwaveringly encompass all creatures, without exception and without reserve (Kongtrul, 1987; Singer, 1987).

This intensity and scope of positive emotion is facilitated by a third component of emotional transformation: the cultivation of equanimity. This is an imperturbability that fosters mental equilibrium and as such it helps emotions such as love and compassion to remain unconditional and unwavering even under duress. This capacity is analogous to the Stoics "*apatheia,*" the Christian Father's "*divine apatheia,*" the Buddhist's equanimity, the contemporary philosopher Franklin Merrell-Wolff's "high indifference," the Hindu's *samatva* which leads to a "vision of sameness," and the Taoist principle of "the equality of things," which leads beyond "the trouble of preferring one thing to another."

Motivation

Ethical behavior, attentional stability and emotional transformation all work together, along with practices such as meditation, to redirect motivation along healthier, more transpersonal directions.

The net effect is a change in the direction, variety and focus of motivation as well as a reduction in its compulsivity.

Traditionally it is said that motivation becomes less scattered and more focused; the things desired become more subtle and more internal. Desires gradually become less self-centered and more self-transcendent with less emphasis on getting and more on giving. Supportive findings from contemporary research suggest that psychological maturity is associated with a shift from egocentric to allocentric (concern for others) motivation (Heath, 1983).

Traditionally this motivational shift was seen as "purification" or as "giving up attachment to the world." In contemporary terms it seems analogous to movement up Maslow's (1971) hierarchy of needs, Arnold Toynbee's process of "etherealization," the means for, and result of, a life-style of voluntary simplicity (Elgin, 1981), and the means for reaching the philosopher Kierkegaard's goal in which "purity of heart is to will one thing."

In addition to redirecting motivation, the art of transcendence involves reducing its compulsive power. The result is said to be a serene disenchantment with the things of the world which no longer exert a blinding fascination or compulsive pull. This is the Buddhist *nibbidda* and the yogic *viraga* and is the basis of the Athenian philosopher Epicurus' claim that the way to make people happy is not to add to their riches but to reduce their desires. This claim is explicitly formulated in the Buddha's Third Noble Truth which states that the end of craving leads to the end of suffering.

the reduction of compulsive craving

The reduction of compulsive craving is therefore said to result in a corresponding reduction in intrapsychic conflict, a claim now supported by studies of advanced meditators (Walsh, 1993; Wilber et al., 1986).

This is not to imply that redirecting motives and relinquishing craving is necessarily easy. In Aristotle's estimate, "I count him braver who overcomes his desires than him who conquers his enemies; for the hardest victory is the victory over self" (Schindler & Lapid, 1989).

Refining Awareness

The great wisdom traditions agree that in our usual untrained state of mind, awareness—both perceptual and intuitive—is insensitive and impaired: fragmented by attentional instability, colored by clouding emotions, and distorted by scattered desires. Accordingly

we are said to mistake shadows for reality (Plato) because we see "through a glass darkly" (St. Paul), a "reducing value" (Aldous Huxley), or "narrow chinks" (Blake).

The fifth element of the art of transcendence, therefore, aims to refine awareness. Perception is to be rendered more sensitive, more accurate, and more appreciative of the freshness and novelty of each moment of experience. Likewise, intuitive capacities, usually blunted or blinded, are to be cultivated (Vaughan, 1979). One of the primary tools for this is meditation.

Meditators notice that both internal and external perception becomes more sensitive, colors seem brighter, and the inner world becomes more available. These subjective experiences have recently found experimental support from research, which indicates that meditators' perceptual processing can become more sensitive and rapid, and empathy more accurate (Murphy & Donovan, 1988; West, 1987; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

to keep one's attention in the present

As the psychiatric historian Henrie Ellenberger (1970) observed, "The natural tendency of the mind is to roam through the past and the future; it requires a certain effort to keep one's attention in the present." Meditation is training in precisely that effort. The result is a present-centered freshness of perception variously described as mindfulness (Buddhism), *anuragga* (Hinduism), the "sacrament of the present moment" (Christianity), the "draught of forgetfulness" in which one forgets the past and comes anew into each present moment (Steiner), and characteristic of self-actualizers (Maslow, 1971). Refinement of outer perception is said to be accompanied by a refinement of inner intuitive capacities. Contemporary researchers report finding "introspective sensitization" (West, 1987) whereas ancient wisdom traditions speak metaphorically of the development of an inner perceptual organ or the opening of an inner eye: the eye of the soul (Plato), the eye of the heart (Sufism), the eye of the Tao (Taoism), the third eye (Tibetan), or the Western philosophers' *nous* or *intellectus*. For an excellent review see Hustom Smith (1993).

When we see things clearly, accurately, sensitively and freshly, we can respond empathically and appropriately. Thus both ancient wisdom traditions and modern psychotherapies agree with Fritz Perls (1969), the founder of Gestalt therapy, that "Awareness per se—by and of itself—can be curative."

Wisdom

The sixth quality cultivated by the art of transcendence is wisdom. Traditionally, wisdom is regarded as something significantly more

than knowledge. Whereas knowledge is something we have, wisdom is something we must be. Developing it requires self-transformation. This transformation is fostered by opening defenselessly to the reality of "things as they are," including the enormous extent of suffering in the world. In the words of the Psalms, this is the recognition that "our lives are only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, our years come to an end like a sigh" (Psalm 90 HRS). "Who can live and never see death?" (Psalm 89 HRS).

In our own time it is existentialism that has emphasized this recognition most forcefully (Yalom, 1981). With its graphic description of the inevitable existential challenges of meaninglessness, freedom and death it has rediscovered aspects of the Buddha's First Noble Truth which holds that unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) is an inherent part of existence. Both existentialism and the wisdom traditions agree that, in the words of Thomas Hardy (1926), "if a way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst."

Whereas existentialism leaves us marooned in a no-exit situation of heightened awareness of existential limits and suffering, the art of transcendence offers a way out. For existentialism, wisdom consists of recognizing these painful facts of life and accepting them with authenticity, resoluteness (Heidegger), and courage (Tillich). However, for contemplative traditions this existential attitude is a preliminary rather than a final wisdom and is used to redirect motivation away from trivial, egocentric pursuits toward the contemplative practices that lead to deeper wisdom. Deeper wisdom recognizes that the sense of being marooned in a no-exit situation of limits and suffering can be transcended through transforming the self that seems to suffer (Vaughan, 1986). This transformation springs from the development of direct intuitive insight—beyond thoughts, concepts or images of any kind—into the nature of mind, self, consciousness and cosmos. This insight is the basis for the transrational liberating wisdom variously known in the East as *jnana* (Hinduism), *prajna* (Buddhism), or *ma'rifah* (Islam), and in the West as gnosis or *scientia sacra*. And with this liberation the goal of the art of transcendence is realized.

the art of transcendence offers a way out

DISCUSSION

These, then, seem to be six essential, common elements, processes or qualities of mind that constitute the heart of the art and technology of transcendence. Of course different practices and traditions focus more on some processes than on others. For example, Indian philosophy divides practices into various yogas (Feuerstein, 1989). All of them acknowledge ethics as an essential foundation. Raja yoga emphasizes meditation and the training of attention and awareness; Bhakti yoga is more emotional and focuses on the

cultivation of love; Karma yoga uses work in the world to refine motivation, and Jnana yoga hones the intellect and wisdom.

However, the capacities of mind developed by the art of transcendence are highly interdependent and the development of one fosters the development of others. This interdependence has long been recognized by both Eastern and Western philosophers who held that "every virtue requires other virtues to complete it" (Murphy, 1992, p. 558). Therefore, to the extent a tradition is authentic—that is, capable of fostering transpersonal development and transcendence (Wilber, 1983)—to that extent it may cultivate and balance these elements of the art of transcendence. Hopefully it will not be long before this art is better appreciated and its study and practice are widespread.

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