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Editors' Introduction

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Editors' Introduction

In this issue, we are pleased to offer the third of three parts of a major work by Elias Capriles offering a reframing of transpersonal theory from the perspective of Dzogchen Buddhism. His response to the field focuses specifically on critiques of the theories of Ken Wilber, Stan Grof, and Michael Washburn. In the course of expounding Dzogchen doctrines and explicating these critiques of leading transpersonal theorists, Capriles touches on a rich array of philosophical and psychological topics. As a practitioner of Dzogchen for more than thirty years, he brings both the articulate mind of a scholar and the experienced voice of a practitioner to his subject.

Although Capriles' words would be different, the thrust of his paper might be summarized something like this: Transpersonal psychology is valuable because it acknowledges and studies self-healing states of mind not recognized by standard psychology. As such, it is able to counter the tendency to pathologize spiritual and transpersonal experiences. In this way, the field may provide important support and context for individuals undergoing such experiences, and perhaps save them from unnecessary and therefore possibly detrimental psychiatric treatment. While transpersonal psychology thus has recognized the existence of higher and holotropic states of awareness, it is not yet able to discriminate adequately between the many different variations of such states. This leads to a number of problems. Perhaps the most vexing of these is that theorists within the field tend to misidentify as *nirvana* states that do not at all correspond with the characteristics of true Awakening. This does not invalidate transpersonal theories, but it does suggest that the works of major theorists such as Wilber, Grof, and Washburn should be reconsidered in this light.

From the perspective of Dzogchen Buddhism, which Capriles sees as the highest vehicle within Buddhism and the most direct path to Awakening, Wilber's model is the most problematic. Wilber, according to Capriles, misunderstands Awakening as a stage-like process in which a subject moves beyond conventional levels of development, when in fact it is a spontaneous unveiling of supreme reality in which the separate subject no longer exists. This Awakening is not the product of a process and therefore, when it occurs, it does so without reference to any stage-like developmental schema. Even if Wilber's model is compared with the levels of realization in known Paths of Awakening, which represent something quite different than a process of development as ordinarily conceived, the stages that Wilber proposed have no correspondence in content or sequence with those levels.

From the perspective of Western psychology, Wilber's effort to distill a variety of paths into a single model can be seen as a reasonable goal. Capriles concludes that what his visionary approach misses, however, is the great diversity that actually exists among different paths. For example, the state of *samadhi* sought by practitioners of Yoga results in a deep absorption in which active knowing and awareness of the sensory continuum cease. One is no longer able to function practically in the world. By contrast, both sensory and cognitive processes continue in nirvana, and the practitioner is not only able to function, but does so in enhanced ways. What differs is that the distinctions between subject and object, knower and known, have been absolutely eradicated. In a nirvanic state, there is not a subject who experiences nirvana: there is simply the arising of apparent yet transparent phenomena within the presence of supreme reality. Furthermore,

rather than bypassing the realm of ordinary sensory appearances, nirvana offers the opportunity for skillful and compassionate engagement with the suffering of the world. Given the vast difference between these spiritual goals—which are just two of many such different goals—any effort to synthesize them will necessarily be unsuccessful.

Capriles argues that, if Wilber's framework is deconstructed in this way, then concepts that rely on this framework should also be re-examined. For example, in light of a Dzogchen view of Awakening, neither the notion of a pre / trans fallacy, nor the debate over whether spiritual development is an ascending or descending process, has significance. Awakening, from Capriles' perspective, is the unraveling of the very context within which pre / trans and ascent / descent derive meaning. For all of these reasons, he argues that is difficult to conclude that the conceptual structure developed by Wilber has any meaningful application other than as a testament to one man's eloquent, but ultimately flawed, effort to wrest simple truth out of a complex world.

Grof's work, on the other hand, needs to be considered differently, according to Capriles. Grof's concept of *systems of condensed experience*, or *COEX systems*, suggests that clusters of emotionally relevant memories are stored together, constituting the deep woundings that distort personality and behavior, and that these clusters may be accessed and deep self-healing processes triggered through the therapeutic use of LSD or the practice of intense breathing techniques. Capriles agrees that such an idea might well find a place within a more inclusive psychology that seeks to trigger deep, self-healing processes. However, Capriles thinks it is crucial to distinguish between these intense self-healing states that Grof called *holotropic* states—or states tending toward wholeness—and the nirvanic states of Awakening. For example, one type of holotropic experience involves states in which the individual has an experience of connectedness, even of identity, with immeasurably larger aspects of life. While this is a type of *peak experience*, it is not Awakening for the simple reason that there is still a subject who feels at one, and an object—a cosmos—with which that subject feels connected and identified. The disparity between such states and nirvana can be highlighted by considering the other type of holotropic experience: those that involve terror, despair, guilt, or other types of extreme emotional suffering. These states involve great discomfiture precisely

because the mental subject has not dissolved. Since such experiences are seen by Grof as on a continuum with experiences of cosmic oneness, Capriles concludes that none of these states constitutes nirvana.

In addition, Capriles points out that Grof made no proper distinction between states obtained through the use of psychedelic substances and those gained through effective spiritual practice. As such, he implied that such drugs may promote genuine spiritual development. However, Capriles asserts that the use of such chemicals brings the user no closer to Awakening, and carries the risk of producing dangerous psychotic states. A similar issue pertains to Grof's work on the study of *spiritual emergence* and *spiritual emergency*. Capriles recognizes that this valuable initiative can provide much-needed support for individuals immersed in crises, increasing their chances of emerging more whole from the difficult passage; however, he rejects that such episodes are markers on a path leading to Awakening. Capriles' consistent issue with Grof's work, then, is that holotropic states, drug-induced psychotic experiences, and mental crises arising from a variety of sources are not adequately identified by Grof as processes that happen entirely within the conditioned mind. Capriles emphasizes that, although some of these may be beneficial for promoting valuable self-healing, self-healing should be clearly delineated as a process that is wholly distinct from Awakening.

Capriles acknowledges that Washburn's model is intuitively closer to Buddhist concepts in that the spiritual journey is not seen as a path of development, but instead one in which the ego returns to the Ground from which it arose, and from which it has become estranged. Furthermore, Washburn seems to trace a quite genuine process of inner integration in which mind and body are reunited in a new and higher form of psychic organization, and finally he does not claim that this process leads to Awakening and admits that it only rarely leads to mystical illumination. Capriles concludes that all of this makes Washburn's theoretical structure more humble and more transparent in its claims. But, from Capriles' Dzogchen perspective, Washburn's major shortfall is not in what he admits within his theories, but in what he excludes. Because Washburn frames engagement with spirituality as a journey that begins with the nascent ego of the infant, and ends with an ego that has become an instrument of the Ground, Capriles concludes this implies that the goal and aim of human spirituality pertains entirely to the domain of the ego. This position effectively excludes the Path of Awakening,

in which the ego is seen as not merely brought to heel, but utterly eradicated. As such, Capriles sees Washburn's system not as inaccurate in its content, but distorted by its limited context.

In a similar sense, Capriles concludes that Washburn falls prey to the common transpersonal tendency to oversimplify spiritual processes and rejects Washburn's suggestion that all forms of meditation may be usefully classified within just two categories—receptive meditation and concentrative meditation. This is because, for example, one practice of what might be called receptive meditation may have as its goal something radically different than other practices included in the same category, and might in fact even be more closely related in terms of its goal to some concentrative practices than to other receptive practices. For this reason, the simple distinction between receptivity and concentration may be no more helpful for distinguishing between the many forms of meditation than classifying people by whether their navels go in or out.

In his critiques of Wilber, Grof, and Washburn, Capriles writes as a traditionalist, and the Dzogchen teachings of his lineage—passed to him through Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche—serve as the unwavering reference point for his engagement with the transpersonal field. He presents his perspective as *metatranspersonal* because he considers the doctrines and practices of Dzogchen as belonging to an entirely higher level than transpersonal theory. He holds Dzogchen as a path that leads to true Awakening into the perfectly nondual states of *nirvana*, while he sees transpersonal theories as generally reflecting experiences that do not reach above the higher levels of *samsara*, the states of the relative and conditioned mind.

In the spirit of a traditionalist, Capriles' thread of criticism closely follows the contours of Dzogchen doctrine. Those aspects of theory that are consistent with Dzogchen are praised, those that conflict are denounced, and the positions of Dzogchen are frequently reasserted. Yet the discussion flows into numerous fascinating and highly-informative digressions that, together with the central critical engagement with transpersonal theorists, challenge the transpersonal project in refreshing and stimulating ways.

The topics engaged in this paper are complex, and Capriles' voice as a detail-focused non-native English speaker has its own particular flavor that cannot easily be divorced from its core content. For these reasons, certain idiosyncracies and deviations from the standard APA

style of the journal have been allowed and there has been minimal editorial input on anything other than some modest attempts at standardization. We consequently recognize this piece, and the previous pieces written by Capriles in this journal, as likely difficult to read. However, we think it presents an important substantive challenge to much of contemporary transpersonal studies and hope readers will find this both edifying and thought provoking. As editors, we ourselves have at times struggled with understanding some of its intricacies, and do not claim to fully comprehend all contained within, but we unwaveringly conclude that it was a struggle well worthwhile. In this sense, sometimes one reads a paper and is left with more of an intuitive sense of its importance, despite not being able to rationally assimilate and accommodate its entirety: such is this work by Capriles.

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