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Sensory Dots, No-Self, and Stream-Entry: The Significance of Buddhist Contemplative Development for Transpersonal Studies¹

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Based on the author's nearly 50 years of meditation, it is observed that as a given alternative state is accessed and used over the span of years, experiences and capacities within that state are not merely static but may themselves shift as a practitioner develops neuropsychologically. An ethnographer using a substance within the context of a cultural practice may gain helpful direct insights into that cultural practice, but the researcher may fail to realize that the state attained by a novice may be substantively different from that gained by an elder or shaman with years of experience in the practice. The author's meditation led to insight that visual and other phenomenal experiences are constructed out of sensory particles, or sensory dots. This practice later led to a state in which pure awareness was aware only of itself, and to an experiential realization of the Buddhist teaching of no-self.

Keywords: *polyphasic culture, Buddhism, phenomenology, stream-entry, sensory dots, no-self*

*Far better than sovereignty over the earth, or far better than going to the abodes of the devas,
or far better than ruling supreme over the entire universe, is the attainment of Sotāpatti Fruition.*
The Buddha, *Dhammapada*, verse 178

*A monk once went to Gensha, and wanted to learn where the entrance to the path of truth was.
Gensha asked him, "Do you hear the murmuring of that brook?" "Yes, I hear it," answered the
monk. "There is the entrance," the Master instructed him.*

C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, ¶878

Ethnographers often work among what I call *polyphasic* cultures²—that is, among peoples who consider experiences had in alternative states of consciousness to be both real and significant. Hence, an experientially grounded ethnography will inevitably have to incorporate the more transpersonal domains of experience, and the realizations and psychological transformations that stem from such experiences. However, despite such realizations often finding their way into cultural expressions as narratives, mythopoeic symbolism, ritual enactments and art, the significance is often missed due to the lack of requisite transpersonal experience on the part of the fieldworker or lab researcher. As my colleagues and I have argued many times elsewhere, the study of transpersonal experiences requires transpersonal methods (Laughlin, 1989, 1994a, 2011; Laughlin, McManus, & d'Aquili, 1990). Simply put, if I want to know, I have to do what is necessary

to know. As Ken Wilber (2005) suggested in his book, *A Sociable God*, one begins the process of inquiry with the injunction, "If you want to know this, do this" (p. 156). When one does "this" (i.e., meditate, dance, take the magic herb, carry out the ritual) then certain experiences arise as a consequence, and then perhaps a conversation ensues with one's host or guide, one learns what those experiences mean both for oneself and for one's host culture.

In this paper I want to share how transpersonal experiences arising for me along a path of spiritual inquiry may, in retrospect, be understood as part of a single maturational process. I will describe several experiences I have had over the course of nearly 50 years as a meditator, and roughly 35 years as a Buddhist insight meditation practitioner, seven years of which were spent as a Tibetan Tantric Buddhist monk. I want to sketch these experiences in order to show how one follows the other

in a *retrospectively* obvious and causally efficacious way. I will take the reader from my realization of the pixelated nature of sensory experience, through the realization of the impermanence of the self to the experience of what Theravada Buddhists call “stream-entry,” the first conscious experience of Nirvana. I offer this description, not to replace the necessity of directly experiencing these way-points (after all, “if you want to know this, do this”), but rather: (1) to sensitize transpersonal anthropologists and other researchers to the developmental dimension of transpersonal experiences, and (2) to underscore the empirical evidence for states of consciousness that transcend sensory experience. The terminology I will use will be from both Theravada Buddhism and Husserlian phenomenology. Although the goals of Buddhist and Husserlian phenomenology are different, I am mixing their terminology here because: (1) both held sway in my own development, and I have used both frameworks in making sense of my experiences, (2) both Theravada Buddhist methods and Husserlian methods constitute transcendental phenomenologies (Hanna, 1993a, 1995; Larrabee, 1981),³ (3) both methods are productive of good science (Chavan, 2007), and (4) in some cases the Husserlian interpretations and terminology are less loaded with ideological baggage than are Buddhist accounts.

Learning To Meditate

I was originally taught to meditate by one of my professors, the late Dr. LeRoy Johnson, while doing graduate work in anthropology at the University of Oregon in 1967. LeRoy showed me how to sit in half-lotus position and focus attention on the rising and falling of my belly. I quickly learned that with increasing concentration to the exclusion of distractions (other objects, verbal chatter, etc.) came a deeper and deeper calm leading to single-minded bliss-states I would later learn were typical of absorption states (*samādhi*, *jhāna*; see Gunaratana, 1988; Snyder & Rasmussen, 2009), and that the practice was in fact *samatha*—cultivation of single-mindedness leading eventually to a special state of complete calm and one-pointed concentration that Buddhists call *upacara samādhi*, or “access concentration,” so named because the mind is free to choose to concentrate upon an object or remain indifferent to the object, and thus may choose to enter absorption states or not.

But I am getting ahead of my story. At the time I learned to easily enter *samādhi* using belly concentration,

I knew nothing about Buddhism or insight meditation, and simply meditated to relax and enter bliss-states as a palliative to the rigors of graduate school. I became adept at what I later understood was, from the Buddhist point of view, *frozen-ice samādhi*—frozen, because the state of mind is utterly devoid of any burning questions that would lead to any insight into the nature of mind. Inevitably, I grew bored with bliss-highs and dropped meditation work for the following decade or so.

When I took up meditation again, it was because I was having experiences that triggered avid questions about consciousness. A years-long process of unfolding dream-work that I have described in detail elsewhere (Laughlin, 2011, pp. 409–421), accompanied by taking up *hatha yoga* practice, lead eventually to spontaneous transpersonal experiences and serious questions about mind that had been absent from my earlier so-called frozen ice attitude. I sought and found guidance from Buddhist teachers⁴ in Canada under whose tutelage I learned the causally entangled relationship between tranquil single-mindedness (*samatha*) and mindfulness (or *vipassana*; see Goleman, 1984; Solé-Leris, 1986; Thanissaro, 1997; Johansson, 1969. pp. 88–102S). It was during lengthy meditation retreats, ostensibly under the influence of Buddhist methods and guidance, that I learned to establish what Edmund Husserl (1989) liked to call the *phenomenological attitude*—that is, the suspension of everyday conditioned interpretations of, reactions to, and beliefs about the world and the self (i.e., the *natural* and *personal attitudes*) and the cultivation of a series of *epochés*⁵ that allows the contemplative to study aspects of consciousness through direct introspection (Husserl, 1931; Kockelmans, 1967; Miller, 1984; Schmitt, 1959). This shift in consciousness is not a momentary choice, but involves a fundamental reorganization of perception with life-long consequences. Arthur Deikman (1982) has argued that mature contemplation involves a process of *deautomatization*, “an undoing of the automatic processes that control perception and cognition” (p. 139)—a freeing-up, as it were, of natural attitude conditioning requisite to the development of the phenomenological attitude.

Any discernable attribute of consciousness may be bracketed, deautomatized, and studied using mindfulness methods. For instance, one may choose to isolate the color red and study the gradation of hues cognized as red, or the feelings evoked by reddish hues. Or, one may choose to bracket the relationship

between visual patterns on a page and the meaning they evoke as words. Wine tastings under a sommelier are essentially phenomenological exercises leading to a more sophisticated understanding of the flavorful nuances of wine. The potentially bracketable qualities and processes of experience are virtually endless. However, some foci are more auspicious than others, depending upon the goal or ideology associated with the meditation being practiced. In Buddhist psychology, focusing upon the impermanence of phenomena is more important and developmentally productive than focusing upon discrete qualia. In Husserlian terms, this whole process of self-inquiry is called *phenomenological reduction* (Held, 2003, p. 21), the intent of which is to learn to parse raw sensory presentation (the *things themselves*) from knee-jerk interpretation.

As any seasoned meditator will attest, all sorts of strange sensory experiences arise during the maturation of contemplation. Many of these experiences are what Buddhist psychology calls *signs* (*nimitta*), some of which are what may be called *countersigns* (*patibhaganimitta*) for the particular meditation object upon which one is focused (see Buddhaghosa, 1991; Laughlin, McManus, & Webber, 1985; Snyder & Rasmussen, 2009, pp. 57–63). Regardless of the object of concentration (breath, heartbeat, water, flame, sensations arising from the soles of the feet, *kasina* practice⁶, so forth), eventually most meditators will experience imagery that is associated with that object. For instance, many who meditate upon the breath moving in and out of the nostrils see bubbles of one sort or another (“fish eggs,” “bubble wrap,” so forth). Meditation on other objects may result in intricate lacy patterns, smoke, various light phenomena, and so forth. These are the countersigns of the object of consciousness. They are causally and unconsciously associated with the object, but are not logically predictable from the object. Objects are associated with numerous countersigns, and these countersigns tend to indicate stages in the development of the meditation. Every Zen *koan* has its countersign(s) and by reporting these to the teacher will determine where the meditator is along the path of contemplative maturation. Frequently, the arising of countersigns are interpreted by meditators as transpersonal experiences. Viewed in this way, the range of transpersonal experiences had by a serious practitioner over time may be considered as way stations along a maturing spiritual path.

Sensory Dots, No-Self, and Stream-Entry

If, instead of remaining focused on the original object (breath, eidetic image, sensations at the bottom of the feet in walking meditation, etc.), the meditator shifts focus to the countersign, applying sufficient intensity of concentration may lead to absorption (*jhāna*) into the sign—that is, the collapsing of the watching-watched (subject-object) duality. Absorption is a natural function of an interested brain. One normally experiences absorption when watching a movie in a cinema, or while engrossed in a good book. But the kind of absorption I am describing here is into an image produced wholly within the mind’s eye. Moreover, the concentration may well be beyond the intensity one normally brings to reading or watching a film. In addition, the sign is usually simple and not very dynamic. Again, the sign is associated with the original object—it is a sign *of* the object.

Absorption states are frequently numinous, especially for beginning meditators. Among other things, the *jhānas* are often accompanied by bliss (*pīti*) of varying intensities, dynamics and locations in the body. Meditators may describe themselves as feeling a frisson, a “rush,” joyous, centered, exhilarated, pleasurable, ecstatic, and so forth. The loci of bliss may be in the so-called *chakras* (energy centers in the body), perhaps also flowing up or down the central channel. For the duration of the absorption and for a period afterwards, the meditator feels good, comfortable, tranquil and energized (Laughlin, 1994b). Buddhist meditators are taught to utilize these experiences to energize their insight practice—like plugging-in to a psychic battery—but not to make the mistake of considering the absorption state as the goal of insight practice, no matter how numinous the experience. When I was early on practicing frozen-ice *samadhi*, I had become essentially a *pīti*-junkie.

Apprehending Sensorial "Dots"

The pursuit and maturation of the phenomenological attitude typically produces a state of mind marked by astonishment and wonder—what Zen practitioners call the *beginners mind* (Suzuki, 1970)—and by a cognition relatively free of the constraints of received, culturally conditioned frames of reference (the natural attitude of everyday consciousness; see Fink, 1981). This freedom allows the inner-directed study of the factors of consciousness as objects of awareness, rather than conditioned attention to phenomena naïvely presumed

in the natural attitude to be “out there” somewhere and requiring response (see Funke, 1981). The contemplative comes to realize that each and every state of mind is componential and unitary. In addition, the contemplative can slow the process of neurocognitive entrainment down to the very simple so as to discern the atomic levels of experience: pixels, temporal epochs, impermanence of objects, purity, parallel processes, componential nature of the empirical ego, or *me* (and cognized ego, or *I*), and visible and invisible causation.

This is a very crucial point, for even if one has access to the very finest neuroscience available, if the phenomenological data remain naïve (pre-epoché, pre-reduction, natural attitude laden), it is very likely the neurophenomenology will be naïve as well—and very likely erroneous. For example, it is apparent to most mature contemplatives known to the author that at some point in their meditative careers they came to realize that sensory data are pixelated, particulated, or granular to perception (Laughlin, 1992; Laughlin, McManus, & d’Aquili, 1990). In other words, there comes a time when many contemplatives reach a specific epoché within which they are able to perceive that their entire sensorium (multimodal sensory field) is made up of points (dots, granules, particles, *bindus*, *yods*, and so forth). After the epoché, the sensorium is experienced as a field of flickering, pulsating pixels that is perceptually and cognitively distinguishable into sensory modes, and within sensory modes into forms and events. The fundamental act of perception is the abstraction and reinforcement of invariant features within the order of an unfolding and dissolving field of dots (see Gibson, 1979). In my experience, apprehending the pixelated nature of the senses is easiest to realize visually, but eventually sounds, tastes, touches are all made up of sensory particles. Once one realizes this epoché, one may easily apprehend the granular texture of the sensorium at will. Furthermore, when concentration upon sensory molecular pixels reaches a sufficient intensity, awareness of gross sensory objects is lost, including the ego (see below).

Whether or not a theorist has attained this dot epoché is evident by how they experience and think about their own consciousness, and what understanding of consciousness they project upon others. For instance, David Chalmers (1996), the Australian philosopher of mind, has famously defined what he called *the hard problem* of consciousness. By that he meant, after all

the mental functions are explained by reference to their underlying neurophysiology, the fact of experience remains a puzzle.

Why is it that when our cognitive systems engage in visual and auditory information-processing, we have visual or auditory experience: the quality of deep blue, the sensation of middle C? It is widely agreed that experience arises from a physical basis, but we have no good explanation of why and how it so arises. Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? (Chalmers, 1995, p. 201)

Nowhere in his presentation of the “hard problem” did he evince the epoché noted above. He did not seem to realize that his patch of “deep blue” is (1) pixelated, and (2) a cognitive operation of his own brain. A patch of blue is the brain’s symbolic representation of electromagnetic energies striking the retinae and mediated by special networks of cells. In other words, blue dots are the brain’s way of representing a specific range of observable electromagnetic frequencies to itself. When one realizes that all sensory experience is a cognitive act on the part of the brain, then the so-called hard problem vanishes, or is at least rendered much easier.

No-Self

Realizing that sensory experience is pixelated, and that pixels and fields of pixels arise and pass away each and every moment of consciousness leads quite naturally to understanding that all things constructed from these sensorial dots are likewise impermanent, including all thoughts, images, feelings, somatic sensations, perceptual qualia, and so forth. This is one route to realizing that everything one is conditioned to associate with the ego—the personal or participating self, that which seems to be me—is also impermanent. Thus it is not surprising that disciplined contemplation will eventually lead to the fall of the illusion of the permanent ego. This indeed happened in my case. Sometime around 1980 I was meditating in a hotel room on the Rue des Ecoles near the College de France in Paris when I suddenly realized (an instantaneous intuitive insight) that all sensory modes are pixelated. Prior to that I had assumed that only visual sensations were made up of dots. The “Rue des Ecoles realization” (as I have called it ever since) led directly to the realization of *no-self* soon thereafter.

There is no better example of the transformational capacity of self-reflection than the realization of no-self

(or *not-self*; see Thanissaro, 1999); that is, the realization that there is no such thing as an empirical ego, no permanent soul-entity, no little homunculus sitting inside the brain watching the sensorial movie. One realizes that the belief in a permanent ego is an artifact of cultural conditioning that is easily dispelled by phenomenological self-reflection—by disciplined introspection leading to direct experiences that bring one’s received self-model into question. Because the realization of no-self is derived empirically—that is, introspectively—it is safe to say that any cultural tradition that encourages self-reflection as a path to self-knowledge and wisdom will lead inevitably to apprehending that nothing that arises in consciousness is permanent. This realization is not a matter of taste, not a matter of opinion or ideological commitment, not a matter of cultural custom, but rather is one of empirical *seeing* of the self as it really is, a transcendental and dynamic self-system.

Anatta

The best known tradition of self-reflection leading to the realization of no-self, and the elevation of that realization to a cornerstone of an ethno-phenomenology, is the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* (also known as no-self or selflessness; see Austin, 1998; Carlisle, 2006; Collins, 1982; Federman, 2011; Flanagan, 2011, pp. 93–98; Harvey, 1995; Metzinger, 2009; Morris, 1994; Smith, 2010; Thanissaro, 1999). In Theravada Buddhism, the realization of *anatta* occurs automatically as a fruit of insight meditation (*vipassana*). In a famous treatise on insight meditation, the great Burmese meditation master, Mahāsi Sayādaw (1994), noted that the belief in a permanent ego falls away during stage four of a 19-stage maturation process leading to the realization of Nibbāna (Nirvana) and its fruits. What Mahāsi’s discourse obviously implies is that personal identification with an enculturated self-model is common to all people everywhere, even in Buddhist societies. This is a point that ethnographer Melford Spiro (1993) made about his Burmese Buddhist hosts. Aware of the central teaching of *anatta*, he wished to see how that teaching influenced peoples’ self-understanding. Spiro noted that:

After a few months into my field work . . . it became apparent that I would have to change my research plans because I discovered that the Burmese villagers with whom I lived and worked do not internalize the doctrine of *anatta*. Instead, they strongly believe in the very ego or soul that this doctrine denies.

They do so on two accounts, experiential and pragmatic. First, because they themselves experience a subjective sense of a self, the culturally normative concept of an ego-less person does not correspond to their personal experience. Second, and perhaps more important, they find the doctrine of selfless person not congenial to their soteriological [expectation of salvation] aspirations. (Spiro, 1993, p. 119)

Spiro’s findings among the Burmese mirror my own among Tibetan Buddhist monks. Individuals rising to the realization of no-self are exceptional in any society; even those who’s local epistemology or ethnopsychology describe the emptiness of the transcendental self. Tibetan Buddhist monks may learn texts by heart that extol the virtues of realizing no-self (the *anatman*), but few actually practice the advanced insight meditations leading to this realization. Indeed, if the realization of no-self were all that easy, disciplined methods leading to that realization would be irrelevant.

No-Self in the West

Practitioners of certain Western phenomenological and spiritual traditions have reached the same realization based upon meditations focusing upon the impermanent contents of the empirical ego. The great phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl, concluded from his own introspection that the ego is essentially empty of content and is really no more than an enduring point of view upon ever-changing content—a *transcendental ego* as Husserl liked to say, tongue in cheek (see Husserl, 1989, pp. 103–104). The ego is an ineluctable focus of intentionality, a perpetual orientation of attention, perception, feeling, and cognition directed toward the world of experience (Husserl, 1969, p. 23). A meditator inevitably comes to this conclusion because she or he finds that every content one focuses upon as “me”—as “my” self—is impermanent; that is, all contents arise and pass away within the sphere of consciousness; hence, the old Sufi saw: *you can’t step in the same river twice*. All that remains of “my” self is an enduring point of view always present within the stream of consciousness, a point of view that is devoid of permanent content, and yet is identical to the unity of each moment of consciousness (see Husserl, 1970, p. 545).

Meditation and the Neural-Self

What one is able to learn from the maturation of awareness reported by advanced meditators fits well with how the neurosciences describe how the brain

develops consciousness. Insight meditation of any kind is essentially the disciplined turning of the spotlight of consciousness upon the internal processes of the transcendental self. It is clear now from research on the neuropsychology of meditation that the process of introspection is one that involves a reorganization of the *neural-self* (Davidson, 1976; Damasio, 2003, 2010; Deshmukh, 2006; Luders, Clark, & Toga, 2011; Luders et al., 2012; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991; Varela & Shear, 1999; Xu et al., 2014). Moreover, this picture is consistent with Carl Jung's insistence that when one takes an active role in one's own *individuation* (maturation of the psyche), one ends up a qualitatively different person than if one's individuation unfolds unconsciously (see e.g., Jung, 1967, paragraph 241).

A self-aware neural-self is different both experientially and structurally than a non-aware self or empirical ego. Indeed, neuropsychologically speaking, awareness of self is mediated differently than awareness of the Other (Decety & Sommerville, 2003). The introspective mind-state is mediated by a discrete organization in the brain (Heatherton et al., 2006), and as that system of networks develops through repetitive application of self-awareness, the introspective faculty grows, strengthens, and reorganizes (Goldberg, Harel, & Malach, 2006; Gusnard, Akbudak, Shulman, & Raichle, 2001; Murphy & Donovan, 1999). As more is learned about how the brain mediates its own self-reflection, there is a concomitant and growing realization among researchers of the value of introspective, phenomenological, and meditative research in science (Tart, 2001; Wallace, 2007, 2009).

Parenthetically, clinical psychologists have studied an interesting syndrome that seems relevant to the neural underpinnings of no-self—so called *depersonalization syndrome* (Sierra, 2009). The condition has its roots in early childhood, and onset after middle-age is rare. It appears to be a consequence of childhood anxiety (Lee, Kwok, Hunter, Richards, & David, 2012), and there is no generally recognized treatment for the disorder. Normal children and young adults may also experience recurrent episodes of depersonalization. Moreover, researchers have experimentally induced the state in normal subjects using the drug flumazenil, a GABA_A receptor antagonist (Cerqueira, Hallak, Crippa, & Nardi, 2012). Depersonalization is a disorder experienced as a detachment of awareness from emotions

(sometimes referred to as a numbing of emotions) and the sensorium (sensory experience being, as it were, at a distance and unreal; sense of disembodiment). Brain imaging studies have shown that there is no damage to sensorium or limbic structures leading to the suggestion that depersonalization is a state of dissociation of the awareness structures of the brain from those mediating the senses and feelings. In studies in which normal subjects were given repeated electrical shocks, the subjects reported distinct depersonalization—a phenomenological remove from sensorial experience—and this was accompanied by a dramatic flattening of sympathetic nervous system reactivity (Oswald, 1959). The best guess at present, based upon neural imaging studies, is that depersonalization is mediated by prefrontal cortical structures mediating awareness that disassociate themselves from emotional and sensory inputs—that is, they inhibit lower areas such as the insula and amygdala. It is also significant that the degree of severity of specific symptoms like de-realism, threatened self, panic attacks and the like will vary across cultures, and is especially related to individualist vs. collectivist constructions of the self (Sierra & David, 2007). It is entirely possible that the mechanisms responsible for depersonalization are active in the realization of no-self, as well as other meditation-related transpersonal experiences, although the motivation would be entirely different. As Castillo (1991) has noted for the practice of Hindu yoga:

Yogis experience themselves as dual entities. That is, they have two coconscious selves—a self participating in the world, and an uninvolved observing self—both aware of each other. To yogis this is experienced as "true renunciation"—that is, the renunciation of the participating self through identification with the observing self. This subjective experience serves to illustrate the power of culture in the constitution of experience and behavior. (p. 1)

It is also significant that as reorganization of the neural-self progresses, direct experience may produce dissonance relative to culturally received categories and local models of self and consciousness. Indeed, as Murphy and Throop (2010) have shown, received categories may become fuzzy in the extreme in order to remain adaptive to changing experience and neuropsychological maturation (see also Kosko, 1993; Laughlin, 1993; Rosch, 1978). For example, in many cultures it is difficult and perhaps even irrelevant to make crisp distinctions among

alternative states of consciousness. For instance, Barbara Herr (1981, p. 334) has described the fuzzy boundaries Fijians draw between what in Western psychology are called dream, hallucination, and vision. Bill Merrill (1992) has described similar fuzziness of such categories among the Ramámiru people of Mexico.

A crisp distinction between dreaming and meditation becomes moot as well in the experience of advanced meditators in Western society. For instance, RM, a close friend of mine and one of the most advanced meditators I have known, shared this dream sequence with me:

I am looking down a long ramp. It is bright daylight, a blue white light. Attractive females appear before me beckoning me down the slope. I know these women, but not by name. They call me on, then as I get close they fade and another appears. The pace is slow and deliberate, no hurry. The sequence eventually fades to light.

A few nights later, I had another dream in which I enter a large space, like a gym, no ornaments or distractions. Ahead, I see an older man playing basketball with a few young boys, and I walk up to them. The older master notices me approaching and asks “are you interested?” I don’t need to answer verbally, it is understood, I am interested. He leads me to a side room. I sit, and he holds up a platter of small objects. I am to choose one. The master moves the platter to my forehead, and I am led to choose a small black bowl. The third eye is now fully open with light streaming. The master’s voice says “you have chosen death.” Everything dissolves into light and I am aware now of moving from a lucid dream state into fully conscious meditation with full concentration and at one with the universe, *samadhi*. The meditation now had its focus, or *koan*, the question had been answered. Calm, peaceful, abiding. To be reborn or to redefine ourselves, we need to experience the death of the self. We need to leave behind the constructs that impede our ability to see the true nature of mind.

The “true nature of mind” to which RM alluded is in part the inherent impermanence of any and all content in the stream of consciousness, including anything that might correspond to a fixed, enduring soul, ego, self, or identity. This does not mean that all of the feelings, perceptions, self-concepts, habits, and so forth that

used to define the “me” somehow magically vanish. The sequelae of realizing no-self really involve a years-long process of disengagement from and identification with those mental factors. What falls away is the belief that there exists a single seamless person, a permanent “me,” that is at the center of all this mental and physical conditioning. What does remain is Husserl’s transcendental ego (see above), the inevitable pure subjectivity in each moment of consciousness.

Stream-Entry

The penultimate experience in Theravada Buddhist *vipassana* meditation is *sotāpatti* (stream-entry) or *nirodha-samapatti* (cessation). A meditator who has attained stream-entry is called a *sotāpanna*, or stream-winner. In Japanese Zen, this experience is called *satori* or *kenshō*. Whatever term used, this experience is considered to be the first conscious absorption into and realization of Nirvana (see Amaro & Pasanno, 2009; Bodhi, 1999; Khema, 1994; Thanissaro, 2012a, 2012b).

The Samye-Ling Retreat

My own experience of stream-entry occurred in 1982 toward the end of a two month retreat at Kagyu Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist meditation center in southern Scotland. At the beginning of the retreat I was alternating two types of meditation, one being a Tibetan Tantric meditation upon a deity known as Khorlo Demchog, a standing, blue, fierce, male figure embracing the red female deity Dorje Pakmo in sexual union while they dance together in flames. I was not using the complex instructions (*sadhana*) for the construction of the image of the deities. I was simply working from a photograph of the scene and internalizing it until I was able to evoke the eidetic image at will and in detail without the picture (another kind of *kasn.a* practice; see above).

With this retreat my consciousness seemed to have “learned set” (as Harry Harlow used to say) and the visualization meditation developed far more rapidly than during previous occasions. After a period of days, the Demchog/Dorje Pakmo imagery took on a life of its own and the meditation no longer required evoking the eidetic image. The dancing couple would pop up and move around my sensorium performing different positions and movement that became meaningful to me at an intuitive level. The imagery was never so strong that I could hallucinate the imagery with my eyes open. The imagery was more like a dream or vision.

Because I was heavily influenced by C. G. Jung, I had always assumed that male and female deities in sexual union (*yab-yum*) were a symbolic representation of the male and female aspects of my own unconscious. Their movements, interactions, postures, and so forth communicated to me what the relationship between my male and female (the latter my *anima*, as Jung called the cross-sex aspect of the male psyche; see Laughlin, 2001) processes were up to in the moment. The dancing imagery became more and more autonomous, and I became more and more comfortable with the meditation taking its own course. Eventually, the imagery began to simplify and the humanoid imagery transformed into two spheres of light (*bindus*, in Buddhist terms; Tibetan: *thig le*), one blue and the other rose, that danced (moved, circled) around each other, sometimes separating, sometimes merging, sometimes one bigger than the other. Sometime later a much smaller third sphere would appear between the blue and rose spheres, usually a golden color. I interpreted the appearance of the third sphere as representative of my self-awareness (or watcher), identifying neither with the male nor the female aspect.

After a period of days, if I tried to construct the eidetic image of Demphog/Dorje Pakmo, the spheres would immediately pop up to take their place in the sensorium. I was no longer able to hold a complex *yab-yum* image of any kind without an immediate transformation of the imagery to spontaneous *bindu* imagery—a process I have learned to interpret as simplification and purification of countersigns (*patibhaganimitta*; see above). Interestingly, the *bindus* became permanent. To this day, some thirty-plus years later, all I have to do is close my eyes and concentrate on the inner screen of the visual sensorium and the *bindus* appear, and their activity reflects the state of my consciousness at the moment. At some point in this retreat I realized how the so called yin-yang symbol may have originated in the direct experience of ancient Chinese contemplatives.

The second type of meditation I used during the Samye-Ling retreat was mindfulness of the breath (*ānāpānasmṛti*), as taught in Theravada Buddhism. I would either focus my attention upon the breath entering and leaving a nostril, or follow the breath down to the pit of my stomach and then lodge my focus on one of the chakras along the central channel as I imagined it to be, just forward of my spine. I would often visualize a tiny pea-sized blue bubble (*bindu*) with a Buddha figure in it moving up or down the central channel, or

situated in a chakra.⁷ I used the breath concentration to deepen the calm and increase the concentration that I was using in the *yab-yum* work. Meanwhile, there were other interesting experiences going on as well, especially while dreaming (see Laughlin, 2011, Chap. 13 for more details). These were directly related to the core work of the two alternating meditations I planned to do throughout the retreat.

However, as the two previously distinct meditations developed—or, perhaps more accurately, as my consciousness developed during the course of the meditations—they merged into a single exercise of awareness that led eventually to stream-entry. Whether beginning with the *yab-yum*, or the breathing meditation, I quickly would reach the state of access concentration (*upacara samadhi*; see above). In that state I had the choice of meditating upon any aspect of consciousness to the exclusion of all else. The instructions one receives in Buddhist meditation training (so-called *pith instructions*) is that regardless of what the original meditation, once access concentration is reached and stabilized, the focus of concentration should shift to the arising and passing of phenomena. I followed this instruction assiduously, and as the retreat proceeded, more and more time was spent in this state and upon this focus. I had realized some time before the retreat that if sufficient concentration were focused upon an object or other aspect of phenomena, an absorption experience would likely arise. As I have said above, in access concentration, the mature contemplative can choose to enter or avoid absorption (the *jhānas*; see above)—using absorption and its numinous qualities to energize the main focus of meditation, whatever that may be.

Stream-Entry

The constant, unremitting, and concentrated focus of awareness upon arising and passing in access concentration was usually upon the field of sensorial particles, and the residue of the two types of meditation had simplified into a choice between concentrating on the blue and rose spheres and what they were telling me about the mind-state at the moment, or subtly shifting focus to the arising and passing of the particles that made up the sensorium in all modes (visual, auditory, tactile, somaesthetic, feelings, so forth), including constituting the spheres. I spent most of the time for days opting to focus on the arising and passing of these sensory dots. Eventually a sudden realization arose (instantaneous intuition) that there was actually no arising, and that

the entire sensorium was passing. From that moment my meditation focused upon the passing of the field of sensorial particles. This shift in awareness, be it ever so subtle, led within hours to stream-entry. One moment I was concentrating on the passing of sensorial dots, the next the entire sensorium fell away like a vast cosmic “dump” and all that remained was diamond-clear awareness with no sensory field whatever. The experience must have been momentary, but during its duration there was no sense of time, no sense of space, no arising or passing of phenomena, no thoughts, no feelings, no movement, no desires or aversions, no choice, no coming or going—total liberation from the tyranny of phenomena over consciousness. The experience is ineffable simply because the only way to describe it to others is by way of metaphors, which of course are drawn from the experience of phenomena. There is no way to speak of Nirvana, save by the use of words that connote sensory objects or concepts. Even the word Nirvana itself is a metaphor, meaning to blow out the flames of desire and aversion. For that duration there was not a scintilla of phenomenal reality. There is just what I would call pure awareness with only itself as object.

The moments following stream-entry were filled with inexpressible joy, for with the memory of the experience was simultaneous comprehension of its significance—that I had won through to the essence of mind, that I had realized *sotāpatti* (Mahāsi Sayādaw, 1994) Very soon after this realization, within minutes as I recall, I understood completely why the masters taught that three fetters automatically fall away as a consequence of one’s first experience of stream-entry (see, e.g., Thanissaro, 2012b): (1) belief that I exist as a permanent phenomenon (for me this had largely fallen away earlier; see above), (2) doubt about the goal of Buddhist meditation, and (3) belief that rituals or other practices are the goal of the path to liberation. As the *Alagaddupama Sutta* notes, “In the Dhamma [the Buddha’s teachings] thus well-proclaimed by me—clear, open, evident, stripped of rags—those monks who have abandoned the three fetters, are all stream-winners, steadfast, never again destined for states of woe, headed for self-awakening” (Thanissaro, 2004). From my experience of the moments just following stream-entry, I had acquired apodictic knowledge of what constitutes the goal of Buddhadharmā, and that any practice that does not aid in attaining stream-entry

Sensory Dots, No-Self, and Stream-Entry

is false and a hindrance to the path. I also understood the truth of the words one of my teachers, Namgyal Rinpoche, had said to me, “Complex meditations are for dull minds.”

Consequences of Stream-Entry

There have been for me numerous consequences of the experience of stream-entry—usually summarized as the fruits of stream-entry (Sanskrit: *sotāpatti phala*). For one thing, I came to understand that realization of sensorial dots is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for stream-entry. All that is absolutely required is the ability to enter access concentration and tenacious concentration upon the arising and passing, and then the passing of phenomena. Others would seem to have experienced stream-entry in something like the way I did. For instance, Ekaku Hakuin (2010) wrote that: “At around midnight on the seventh and final night of my practice, the boom of a bell from a distant temple reached my ears: suddenly, my body and mind dropped completely away. I rose clear of even the finest dust. Overwhelmed with joy” (p. 23). In addition, Robert Bellah (2008) related the experience of an eighteenth century Zen monk and teacher, Ishida Baigan, who, after meditating for years, had this experience:

Late one night, he lay down exhausted, and was unaware of the break of day. He heard the cry of a sparrow in the woods behind where he was lying. Then within his body it was like the serenity of a great sea or a cloudless sky. He felt the cry of that sparrow like a cormorant diving and entering the water, in the serenity of a great sea. After that he abandoned the conscious observation of his own nature. (pp.201–202)

For another thing, meditation for me boiled down to whatever work I have had to do to become centered and tranquil enough to enter access concentration, and then to focus upon the passing of phenomena. This work has continued to mature in very subtle ways. Very recently I came close to entering the stream for a second time, an event that is called *phalasamapatti*, or *attainment of fruition* (Mahāsi Sayādaw, 1994, p. 34). This occurs when the knowledge of Nirvana, or the stream (the cognitive fruits), has matured sufficiently that one may re-enter the stream with greater awareness than the first time, and without aversive reactions that will hinder the letting go into the stream (Mahāsi Sayādaw, 1994). This happened for me in this way:

I became lucid in a dream in which I was meditating (I believe I was in a temple of some kind) and turned my attention to the passing away of dream phenomena. So intense did the concentration become that I was no longer dreaming, but was in access concentration watching the field of dots that constituted hypnopompic imagery, and then the field of dots alone without form—the imagery had fallen away. At a particular moment, I realized I was headed back into stream—I recognized the symptoms as the field of dots began to “dump” so that all that remained before the mind’s eye was rapidly passing sensorial dots. My foreknowledge of the experience of entering stream, which had been absent when I experienced *sotāpatti*, got in the way of letting go. At the last moment there was a small but sufficient aversive reaction to stop the process leading to *phalasamapatti*.

Despite having hindered the process of letting go into the stream, I experienced intense joy and after some moments realized that, while my clinging to phenomenal reality was still too strong to allow the experience a second time, the bonds are weakening and I am getting closer. I also realized that it is only that aversion, that clinging to phenomena (or form; Mahāsi Sayādaw, 1994, p. 34), that stands in the way of my being able to enter the stream at will, and remaining there if I chose.

Within a week or so of leaving Samye-Ling for the United States, some of the other consequences of stream-entry began to present themselves, some of them in the dream state. One particularly memorable dream occurred while I was staying in Philadelphia:

I dreamed that I was standing hand in hand with my child self under a fiery arch that had morphed from two enormous serpents that had arisen on each side of us and touched their heads above us. I was lucid and watching the scene from a position behind the fiery portal and my dream selves, so I could see they were located on a vast plain upon which stood the ruins of a city. I knew in the dream that I was looking at the transformation of myself after the realizations of the past [Samye-Ling] retreat. I was beginning to awaken from the dream and was in a hypnopompic state when a fiery golden chariot being drawn by huge golden horses appeared out of an intense, almost blinding golden light, and a

deep, booming voice called out, “Read Ezekiel!” This image could not have lasted more than a few seconds, but I awoke knowing that I had not (and indeed have never since) experienced a dream like that. (Laughlin, 2011, p. 191–192)

I did not own a Bible and did not recall ever reading the book of Ezekiel, although I might have encountered the fiery chariot motif in my childhood Methodist bible classes. I obtained a copy of the Old Testament later that same day and was astonished when I read of God appearing before the prophet in the form of a fiery chariot pulled by *Chayot* (mystical angels), and that much of the book was about the destruction of the old Jerusalem and the construction of the City of God upon its ashes. I also noted that the creatures pulling the chariot in my dream were definitely horses, and not the mythical angels of the Biblical imagery. This dream happened over thirty years ago, and it is still as clear, numinous and meaningful to me today as it was then. For me, this was clearly an indication that the stream-entry experience was resulting in transformations at a very deep level of my psyche.

Discussion

Turning the subjectivity of transpersonal experiences into publically available, scientifically useful data is sometimes not an easy thing to accomplish (Rock & Laughlin, 2014). I once addressed this issue as the “problem of the phenomenological typewriter;” namely, presuming that ethnographers, by means of participant observation, successfully attain the experiences intended by mythic drama, ordeal, drug trip, ritual and other methods of an alien culture’s religion, how then do they describe those experiences so that they become publicly available data (Laughlin, 1989)? As an anthropologist, my commitment has been first and foremost to science—to grounding experiential anthropology in a Jamesian “radical empiricism,” if you will (James, 1912/1976; Laughlin & McManus, 1995; Taylor, 1996). By that I mean that no experience had by human beings from whatever cultural background is too outré to be included as data under scientific scrutiny.

Ineffability and Poetics

The rarer the experience (a commonplace in the study of mystical and transpersonal experiences), the harder it is to render the information gleaned from the experience into a scientifically comparative form.

All too often the description of a rare experience is set aside as somehow too anecdotal to be considered scientific. This is especially true in the present case, for any attempt to describe “path moment” (*sotāpatti*) in natural language will perforce require that one resort to similes and metaphors—even the terms “path” and “moment,” “stream” and “enter”, are similes. Indeed, with respect to the direct experience of *sotāpatti*, there is no path, no stream, no entering, no time-consciousness, no space (thus the term “empty” is also just a simile)—in fact phenomenally speaking, there is no anything save awareness .

Always keeping in mind *that there is no such thing as an experience that admits of one and only one interpretation*, one nonetheless develops a basis in transpersonal experiences for understanding how particular metaphors come to stand for what are largely ineffable states. Take for instance anthropologist, Carol Laderman’s (1988, 1993) experience while researching Malay shamanic healing. She found that Malays were reluctant to talk about their experiences of the “Inner Winds” that arise during ritual trance states. “They told me that the only way I could know would be to experience it myself” (1988, p. 805). Eventually, her teacher led her through a ritual that resulted in her entering a trance state. “At the height of my trance, I felt the Wind blowing inside my chest *with the strength of a hurricane*” (1988, p. 806; emphasis added). When she described this experience to her informants, they responded with comments like, “Why do you think we call them Winds?”

This issue has been tellingly addressed by *anthropological poetics* (aka *ethnopoetics*; see Brady, 1991; Diamond, 1986; Hymes, 2003; Tedlock, 1999), a field that studies the many ways language is molded to express experiences across cultures—“...focusing in particular on the oral communication of proverbs, laments, prayers, praises, prophecies, curses, and riddles shaped by the spoken, chanted, or singing voice” (Brady, 2008, p. 296). Actually, all experiences are ineffable in that more is left out than can be expressed. Another way to say this is that while experiences are information rich, cognition and language are relatively information poor. The problem in communication is for the speaker to send sufficient information—the right information—to trigger (or “penetrate to”) a much larger field of information in the mind of the hearer (Laughlin, 1989). The challenge is even greater with communicating transpersonal

experiences such as those I have described here. As most societies are to some extent polyphasic, people who have extraordinary experiences face the challenge of finding a language to share the subjective, and express the expressible. They often have recourse to poetics, which in all likelihood was the first and oldest art form, for it allowed the sharing of not only sensory aspects of alternative states of consciousness, but also intuitive knowledge. The Buddha himself reputedly used poetry to communicate such knowledge. The *Udana* (included in the *Sutta Pitaka*) is partly in verse, one of which expresses a consequence of Awakening (Buddha, 1997, Ud 2):

When things become manifest
To the ardent meditating Brahmin ,
All his doubts then vanish since he has known
The utter destruction of conditions.

The Buddha’s verse does *not* express a rational conclusion that because the conditions causing phenomena have been *de-structured*, one therefore logically concludes her doubts about the path were unfounded. Rather, it is an expression of the fact that with the first stream-entry experience, doubt about the path automatically drops away. It is an intuitive knowing that may give rise to poetic expression via imagination, metaphor and insight. Poetics is born of the challenge of expressing and sharing the ineffable. All societies have their poetic forms for just this purpose. Yet in modern technocratic societies, a schism has been erected between poetic expression and science. This humanist-scientist dichotomy stands as a hindrance to doing transpersonal science, for it fails to rise to the challenge of sharing the most effective uses of esoteric language as scientifically useful data. Yet there is no reason (other than ideological loyalty) that transpersonal researchers cannot embrace what my friend and colleague, Ivan Brady calls *artful science*—a methodology that is grounded in the media of poetics. Specifically addressing anthropologists, Brady (2005) notes that artful science:

...pursues knowledge mostly ignored or formally discounted by the extremes of logical positivism. It advocates as a complement (not as a replacement) to a kind of knowing and reporting that (a) promotes phenomenology as a philosophy that puts the observer (the seeker, the knower) upfront in the equation of interpreting and representing experience; (b) pushes interpretive anthropology back into the

loop of sensual experience, a body-centered position that includes a consideration of but transcends the sweeping metaphor that everything (e.g., people, landscapes) can and should be rendered as texts to be interpreted; (c) finds some continuity in the structures and orientations of body-roundedness and myth despite important limitations posed by language itself and by epistemic interference between the present and our preliterate past; and (d) gives poets special cachet through their offering forms of knowing and saying (robust metaphors and more) that can engage the senses and visions of being-in-place in ways that both exceed and complement more conventional strategies in anthropology and history. (pp. 981–982)

This approach is especially useful for transpersonal researchers interested in understanding the religious art and architecture of prehistoric peoples, as well as the textual expressions of transpersonal experiences by long dead literate peoples.

More on Methods

Thus far there are no technological methods that may independently measure the activity of the brain while, say, an *arhat* (Pali: *arahant*; a person who is never apart from the stream; indeed may be said *to be one with the stream*) is absorbed in Nirvana. She cannot take a camera with her and record the experience. She cannot tape record her description of the experience as it occurs. She cannot draw or paint the experience in other than metaphorical terms. Most importantly, we do not know how the brain mediates stream-entry. Is *sotāpatti* mediated by isolating prefrontal cortical attention structures from the structures mediating the sensorium? Or does the sensorium simply cease to function for the duration of the experience, leaving in its wake something like “pure” consciousness, consciousness with only itself as object? We do not yet know. We do have a literature pertaining to the psychology of post-stream-entry *sotāpanna*. For example, Full, Walach, & Trautwein (2013) interviewed advanced Burmese Theravāda Buddhist meditators who presumably had experienced stream-entry in order to establish whether meditation at this level of maturity leads to significant and permanent changes in perception. They found: “Changes could be identified concerning the quality of perception, especially in aspects of clarity; comprehension of interdependences in perception processing, i.e., mental condition and

perception; successive cessation of a subject/object-based perception; and finally, a nonconceptual perception including the deconstruction of the notion of I, self, or me” (Full, Walach, & Trautwein, 2013, p. 61). But the authors caution that their study could not parse-out cultural conditioning that may have influenced their data. I would add that being labeled a *sotāpanna* may in some cases be due to status factors in Burmese monastic culture—a way of acknowledging advanced status as a meditator or teacher—and is not a guarantee that the individual has actually experienced stream-entry. Again, there is as yet no independent method of measuring stream-winners.

Obviously there is also no way to draw a random sample from a known universe of stream-winners among all peoples everywhere. Thus the use of parametric statistics in analyzing the data from a non-random sample of stream winners, even when available (as in the study above) would be invalid. Does that mean that the study of rare states of consciousness cannot in principle be “scientific?” Hardly. To require quantitative experimental evidence in such cases would amount to the most absurd kind of scientism, one that denies the foundations of all scientific disciplines in naturalistic research. By such an account, most of Darwin’s work aboard the *Beagle* would not make the grade. In fact, as William James argued, much can be empirically learned from individual experiential case studies, and trait comparisons between such studies, even when the experiences are rare and the universe of such cases remains unknown. The great neurologist, V. S. Ramachandran addressed this issue in the following way: “By way of analogy, imagine that I cart a pig into your living room and tell you that it can talk. You might say, ‘Oh really? Show me.’ I then wave my wand and the pig starts talking. You might respond, ‘My God! That’s amazing!’ You are not likely to say, ‘Ah, but that’s just one pig. Show me a few more and then I might believe you’” (Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1999, p. xiii). Neuroscience,⁸ as with transpersonal studies, is grounded in single case studies; often in-depth qualitative explorations upon which later multiple case meta-analyses are founded.

Developmental Perspective

If there is a single lesson I have drawn from reflecting on the signal experiences I have had over the course of a lifetime of meditation, *it is that the processes of neuropsychological development are pivotal to both spiritual awakening and transpersonal studies*. Even when

ethnographers appreciate the cultural significance of transpersonal experiences and even leave themselves open to having such experiences themselves (imbibing the host's *entheogens*, or religiously important psychotropic drugs, participating in the local healing and other rituals that evoke extraordinary experiences, or in the present case, taking on the process of meditation), they have all too often failed to realize that transpersonal experiences may occur for their hosts in a developmental continuum from, say, those associated with initiation early in life to those typical to elder masters and shamans (see Assagioli, 2007; Chinen, 1985; Wilber, 1996). In other words, spiritual paths are developmental processes with various experiences marking way points along the path to full maturation. An American learning to become a lucid dreamer, for instance, is a far cry from being a dream shaman. In spiritual awakening, transpersonal experiences may be both symptomatic of one's level of maturity, and the cause for a change in self-understanding.

With respect to the Buddhist path, my old friend and meditation teacher, Tarchin Hearn has noted (personal communication, 8 May 2014):

Many people can apprentice in a spiritual system and become adepts and teachers of that tradition. Not so many people can as a result of their practice, transcend or go beyond the very tradition that nourished them. Buddhism teaches us how to live well in the present moment. It doesn't know what will unfold in the moment to come. This universe has not yet arisen. Namgyal Rinpoche once suggested to me that I should study Buddhism, realize it and walk on and then I should study Western traditions, realize them and walk on. I've come to realize that the "walking on" is the forefront of this evolving universe in the collaborative act (with everything and everyone else) of creative being. Put in another way, when I was young I thought that I needed to understand and perhaps even master Buddhist teaching. I had no idea that Buddhist teaching was an attempt to skillfully nudge me towards a way of being and a field of questioning that, at the time, I was not able to even imagine and that today I discover hour by hour.

Numerous ethnographers have worked among peoples with polyphasic cultures. Relatively few of them have gone so far as to participate in a culture to the extent of attaining the alternative states that ground each of the

host's worldviews. This is the common pattern among ethnographers who have studied shamanistic religions, many of which require initiation into the proper use of entheogens and secret ritual practices, a process of apprenticeship that may last for years (see the articles by Robin Rodd, an ethnographer who has apprenticed to a South American shaman; Rodd, 2002, 2006; Rodd & Sumabila, 2011). There are cases in which the society's mythological system may reflect a developmental progression of understanding and realization from the simple levels of childhood through to the comprehension of the master. For instance, Dan Jorgensen (1980) discovered that the mythology of the Telefolmin people of Papua New Guinea have something on the order of ten distinct levels of complexity ranging from many short "just-so" stories for children to a master's level in which all the many myths are integrated into a single story that takes days to narrate.

The course of meditational maturation—of *meditative individuation*, to wax Jungian for a moment—is perhaps one of the most empirically available, because more and more dedicated meditators have become what the late Eugene d'Aquili and I liked to call *mature contemplatives* (d'Aquili, Laughlin, & McManus, 1993; Laughlin, McManus, & d'Aquili, 1990, Chap. 11). We now have sufficient evidence from psychological and neuroscience research supporting the notion that meditation results in changes in perception, attention, affect, and cognition (see Baron Short et al., 2010; Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti 2011; Garland, Gaylord, Boettiger, & Howard, 2010; Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007; MacLean et al., 2010; Murphy & Donovan, 1999; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). It also seems very likely, as suggested by Ledi (2007), that most really significant changes in neurophysiological, psychological, and cognitive functions caused by meditation will be found among mature contemplatives. For instance, it is far easier for me to enter access concentration now than when I first experienced it so many years ago. Still, I am unable to access that state at will, a skill that is prerequisite for an *arhat*, which I am decidedly not. Notice that when I got close to a second absorption into the stream (*phalasangamapatti*), there was sufficient aversion to letting go of phenomena to thwart the process. What I learned from this "near miss" is that my "clinging" to phenomena—to sensorial productions—and my emotional reaction to sudden transformations in consciousness have not matured sufficiently to allow the

experience to occur. The recognition of what was about to happen emotionally hindered the happening. I am able to project to a time when, should I live long enough, the emotional reaction will be either gone or of insufficient intensity to thwart another entry into the stream.

Origins and Pervasiveness of Meditation

Meditation—defined as the “sustained awareness aimed at nonreactive and nonattached mental observation, without cognitive or emotional interpretation of the unfolding moment-to-moment experience” (Braboszcz, Hahusseau, & Delorme, 2010, p. 1910)—is neither a recent phenomenon, nor was it first invented by Eastern spiritual traditions (Goleman, 1996). Indeed, most of the classic meditations used by the Buddha in his teaching were inherited from traditions that were ancient even in his time (Gunaratana, 2002; Wynne, 2009). As C. G. Jung (as cited in Hannah, 1981, p. 3) noted years ago, human beings have very likely been meditating for millennia—possibly as long as humans have been both self-aware, and able to share and discuss subjective experiences such as fantasies, visions, dreams, hallucinations, drug induced imagery, as well as meditative “countersigns”, and so forth. Of course we will never know the precise evolutionary Rubicon leading to a “meditative brain,” for, short of a time machine, this momentous event will remain a matter of speculation and theory (Filmer-Lorch, 2012, pp. 6–7).

However, I would argue that prior to a certain point in prehistory, virtually all human cultures would have been polyphasic in their world view, grounded in their belief that experiences had in alternative states of consciousness are but different perspectives on reality (Laughlin, 2013). Many cultures would have discovered the practice of intense concentration upon images and other somatic phenomena available to their mind’s eye, and this perhaps widespread practice could well have influenced the evolution of certain cognitive functions (see Mithen, 2003; Rossano, 2007). Doubtless also, meditation of various types would have played a central role in ancient shamanic mysticism and healing (Lewis-Williams, 1992, 1997; MacDonald, Cove, Laughlin, & McManus, 1987; Pearson, 2002, p. 95; Peters, 1989; Winkelman, 2010, pp. 72–73). The fact that countersigns often arise as a consequence of intense concentration upon any object, it is suggestive that many shamanic healing traditions involve the healer or diagnostician meditating upon (“reading”) some pattern; per example, bones, entrails, sandals, stones,

crystals, skrying bowls thrown on the ground, starlight passing through a crystal, images in a skrying bowl, and so forth. Of course, there is no way to know for sure when shamanism first became linked with meditation practices (Lewis-Williams, 1997).

A pivotal distinction must be made here: Whereas most shamanic meditation practices very likely involved following and interacting with dynamic imagery in much the same way that C. G. Jung advocated in his method of *active imagination* (see Jung, 1997; Von Franz, 1997[1979]), Hannah (1981), Buddhist mindfulness discourages interacting with imagery, except in Tantric traditions where more shamanic methods are used solely to energize the real work of mindfulness training, the realization of stream-entry, and cessation of phenomena. Keep in mind that the Buddha considered clinging to (dialoguing with) phenomena was a major cause of suffering (*dukkha*), and he wished to discover the “builder” of phenomena by snuffing out this clinging and thereby embracing cessation (Rahula, 1974). As far as I know, no known shamanic tradition is founded upon the realization, or even the knowledge of stream-entry. But again, for the methodological reasons mentioned above, we simply cannot know for sure.

Husserlian and Buddhist Methods

As noted above, I recognized many parallels between Buddhist mindfulness practices and Husserlian transcendental phenomenology. Indeed, I early on suspected that Edmund Husserl was to some extent what Buddhist psychology calls a *pratyekabuddha*, or “self-awakener.” This is someone who is so sufficiently advanced in mindfulness that they rediscover the development of the path of awakening all by themselves with no instructions or teachers. It was clear to me that using either Buddhist mindfulness or Husserlian “reduction” would inevitably lead one into the same transpersonal domains of self-awareness (Hanna, 1993b), and lead to the most accurate phenomenological understanding of consciousness. Moreover, considering Husserl as a *pratyekabuddha* seemed to me to explain why so many of his students and followers failed to “get it” with respect to actually attaining the phenomenological attitude and transpersonal comprehension. This failure is at the very core of Husserl’s disappointment with his protégé, Martin Heidegger, who ran off to teach university philosophy before becoming a mature contemplative (see Husserl, 1997). Others of Husserl’s students (e.g., Eugene Fink, Gerhard Funke, Ludwig Landgrebe) did hang around

Husserl and did do the requisite mindfulness work, and their comprehension of, and reflections upon the phenomenological attitude are very useful to meditators wishing to understand Husserlian methods (see Fink, 1995; Funke, 1987; Landgrebe, 1973).

At the time I was reading Husserl's books, it was part of the English-speaking Husserlian zeitgeist that he had not come into contact with Buddhism, or the Pali Canon, for he never mentions Buddhism in any of his major writings. Some scholars had acknowledged the similarities and differences between Husserlian phenomenology and various forms of Indian philosophy (e.g., Mohanty, 1972). Turns out, however, that Husserl did engage with the Buddhist literature—the Pali Canon had just been translated into German—and he even wrote a short note expressing his feelings about what he had read. Thanks to Fred Hanna (1995), we have an English translation of that 1925 note entitled “On the Teachings of Gotama [Gautama] Buddha.” In that note Husserl seems to thoroughly identify with the aims and methods of Buddhist phenomenology:

That Buddhism—insofar as it speaks to us from pure original sources—is a religio-ethical discipline for spiritual purification and fulfillment of the highest stature—*conceived of and dedicated to an inner result of a vigorous and unparalleled, elevated frame of mind, will soon become clear to every reader who devotes themselves to the work.* [emphasis added] Buddhism is comparable only with the highest form of the philosophical and religious spirit of our European culture. It is now our task to utilize this (to us) completely new Indian spiritual discipline which has been revitalized and strengthened by this contrast. (as cited in Hanna, 1995, p. 367)

One important factor influencing my use of Husserlian methods was the simple fact that, coming from a wealth of experience while practicing Buddhist mindfulness (*vipassana*), Husserl's methods of bracketing, “reduction,” the epoché, returning “to the things themselves,” etc., were perfectly transparent. Despite his turgid prose, it was blatantly obvious to me what Husserl's project was about. I do not intend to get further into Husserlian methods here, because that would take us on another tangent—besides, my colleague Jason Throop and I have engaged in that discussion elsewhere (Laughlin & Throop, 2009). Suffice to say here, as Hanna (1995) wrote: “Eugen Fink once told Dorion Cairns

‘that the various phases of Buddhistic self-discipline were essentially phases of phenomenological reduction’ (Cairns, 1976, p. 50). This statement is especially significant in light of the fact that Fink was Husserl's chief assistant, and was considered by Husserl to be his most trusted interpreter” (Hanna, 1995, p. 366). It is thus also significant that Husserl considered the effort and dedication of attaining the phenomenological attitude results inevitably in psychological development. Again, as Hanna (1995) notes: “Husserl claimed side benefits of phenomenological seeing in terms of self-exploration and self-development. He said that the insights gained from performing the transcendental phenomenological method of seeing brings about ‘a complete personal transformation’ (Husserl, 1970[1936], p. 137)” (p.369).

There is one other important factor that I do need to emphasize, and that is, I can find no evidence that Husserl himself experienced stream-entry. His use of the concepts of “transcendental phenomenology” and “pure consciousness” refer more to something like access concentration, a state few of his students and followers apparently developed. His descriptions of that state involve the falling away of all preconceptions, all discursive knowledge, and a complete openness to intuitive insight. His project was fundamentally different than the Buddha's in that Husserl wished to explore the essential structures of phenomenal consciousness, and was not guided into a course of meditation that would lead him, or any of his students so far as I know, to *sotāpatti*; that is, transcending phenomenal experience. Moreover, my hunch has always been that, given Husserl was perhaps a *pratyekabuddha*, he found it easier to enter access concentration without the disciplined calming and centering exercises (*samatha*) required by most of us to reach that state (see also Hanna, 1995, p. 371).

Conclusion

I have had numerous transpersonal experiences over the course of the last half-century of phenomenological exploration, especially while dreaming (see Laughlin 2011, Chap. 13). What I have described above are three of the most seminal experiences arising during the course of mindfulness work—the realization of sensorial dots, of no-self, and of stream-entry. These three were not only real experiences, they were “seal” experiences, ones that resulted in permanent transformations in my perception, self-knowledge, and phenomenological insight. They are also understandable as way stations along a path

of gradually developing, intuitive understanding of how consciousness works. I do not mean to imply that discerning sensorial dots or no-self are either necessary or sufficient conditions for attaining stream-entry (hence, a non-linear process). It is clear from the literature that stream-entry can be attained without either previous realizations having occurred. In those cases, the realization of no-self, if it has not occurred previously, is an inevitable consequence of stream-entry. Also, stream-winners may never actually realize that all phenomena are “built” of sensorial dots. What I am able to say from my own experiences is that, in my case, one realization followed the other in a sequence that, in retrospect, appears to have been the result of a maturation of introspective view. What does seem to be a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for stream-entry is the maturation of access concentration, for only in that state will the consciousness be able to let go into the experience of absorption without being hindered by aversion.

My suspicion is that I came to realize sensorial dots and no-self independently of attaining stream-entry because I was working as much from a neurophenomenological perspective as from Buddhist mindfulness (Laughlin, McManus, & d’Aquili, 1990). What I was doing was bracketing processes that were integral to perception and interpretation. I also did this with respect to time-consciousness in a way that is not required in Buddhist mindfulness, but is fundamental to Husserlian phenomenology (Laughlin, 1992; Laughlin & Throop, 2008). Nonetheless, in retrospect, it is clear to me that one realization set me up for the next, and continues to do so in a complex process of phenomenologically-oriented neurocognitive development.

Any subjective, “first-person” methodology is only useful for a science of consciousness if it produces reports that lead to further research. At the same time, and speaking in favor of radical empiricism, research based upon poor phenomenological descriptions will also produce poor science. As Dhananjay Chavan (2011) notes,

Whatever may be one’s view of consciousness in the natural order, there is probably a need for systematic first-person methods to study our subjective mental states and correlate them to physical states (brain states) which can be empirically characterized. Given the bewildering variety and range of conscious mental states it seems unlikely that any methodical observation can be made of one’s subjectivity without

proper training and grounding in formalized first-person methods. (p. 248)

This said, it is hard for me to visualize a method for studying the neuropsychological underpinnings of the *sotāpatti* experience, for it lasts but a moment, is unpredictable, and very likely cannot occur when the meditator is wired up or lying flat-out in a fMRI machine. But technological problems aside, this is no reason why the experience cannot be considered as scientifically relevant.

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Notes

1. This paper grew from a presentation delivered at the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness meetings, Chicago, IL, November, 2013.
2. As opposed to what I call *monophasic* cultures—those like modern China, mainstream America, and other technocratic societies that do not credence experiences had in alternative states of consciousness, that do consider such experiences as unreal (see Laughlin, McManus, & d'Aquili, 1990, pp. 293–295).

3. The methodology used by the Buddha, termed *vipassana*, is nothing less than a phenomenology of mind. Indeed *vipassana* is “the first historical attempt to map the human mind in a thorough and realistic way without admixture of metaphysics and mythology” (Nyanaponika Thera, 1998).
4. My first Buddhist meditation teacher was the Venerable Tarchin Gelong (aka Tarchin Hearn), an English born Canadian and an accomplished insight meditator, and my second was Tarchin’s own guru, Venerable Namgyal Rinpoche, who was also a Canadian born meditation master who had been recognized by the 16th Karmapa as a reincarnated *tulku*, or bodhisattva. I later went on to study under the great Sakya lama, Venerable Chogye Trichen Rinpoche, who was also my preceptor when I became a monk in the late 1970s at Lumbini, Nepal.
5. Husserl’s concept of the (or an) epoché derives from the Greek *epoché*, meaning *suspension* (Husserl 1931). A contemplative enacts an *epoché* every time she or he brackets” (isolates, distinguishes, highlights) some aspect of experience and quarantines it from influencing the outcome of self-study.
6. A *kasina* is a colored disk used to meditate on color or element. They are used to stimulate an eidetic image that becomes the real object of concentration (see Buddhaghosa, 1991; Zajonc, 2009, Chap. 4).
7. This is a variation of breathing concentration combined with visualization that I learned from a monk in Thailand, a member of the *sangha* at Wat Pak Nam temple in Bangkok. Each monk carries a small clear marble enclosing a golden Buddha figure which is used as a *kasina*. I have also used blue and red marbles as visualization devices.
8. Consider the impact of the strange case of Phineas Gage upon 19th century neuropsychology (Macmillan, 2000).
9. Verse 154 of the *Dhammapada* reads: Oh housebuilder! You are seen, you shall build no house again. All your rafters are broken, your roof-tree is destroyed. My mind has reached the unconditioned (Nibbana); the end of craving has been attained.

About the Author

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