

**Enlightenment After the Enlightenment:
American Transformations of Asian Contemplative Traditions**

By

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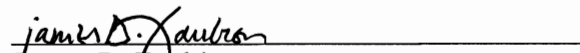
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ABSTRACT

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My dissertation traces the contemporary American assimilation of Asian enlightenment traditions and discourses. Through a close reading of three communities, I consider how Asian traditions and ideas have been refracted through the psychological, political, and economic lenses of American culture. One of my chapters, for example, discusses how the American Insight community has attempted to integrate the enlightenment teachings of Theravada Buddhism with the humanistic, democratic, and pluralistic values of the European Enlightenment. A second chapter traces the American guru Andrew Cohen's transformation from a Neo-Advaita teacher to a leading proponent of "evolutionary enlightenment," a teaching that places traditional Indian understandings of nonduality in an evolutionary context. Cohen's early period shows the further deinstitutionalization of traditional Advaita Vedanta within the radically decontextualized Neo-Advaitin network, and evolutionary enlightenment engages and popularizes another less-known but influential Hindu lineage, namely that of Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga. A third chapter examines contemporary psychospiritual attempts to incorporate psychoanalytic theory into Asian philosophy in order to reconcile American concerns with individual development with Asian mystical goals of self-transcendence. In

conclusion, I argue that the contemporary American assimilation of Asian enlightenment traditions is marked by a number of trends including: (1) a move away from the rhetoric and privileging of experience that scholars such as Robert Sharf have shown to be characteristic of the modern Western understanding of Asian mysticism; and (2) an embrace of world-affirming Tantric forms of Asian spirituality over world-negating renouncer traditions such as Theravada Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. I also reflect on how the cultural shift from the modern to postmodern has affected East-West integrative spiritualities.

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Contents

| | |
|---|---------|
| Introduction: Enlightenment After the Enlightenment | 1-28 |
| One: A Brief History of East-West Spirituality: From Colonialism to the Counter-Culture | 29-74 |
| Two: After the Ecstasy, the Laundry? The Domestication of the Dharma in West Coast Vipassana | 75-158 |
| Three: Divine Individualism or Mystical Humanism? A.H. Almaas's Diamond Approach | 159-197 |
| Four: What is Enlightenment? From Neo-Advaita to Evolutionary Enlightenment in the Life and Works of Andrew Cohen | 198-319 |
| Conclusion: Enlightenment Beyond the Enlightenment | 320-340 |
| Bibliography | 341-358 |

Introduction

Is there any room for a postreligious spirituality? I feel that what I have learnt is that our spiritual longing needs to be balanced by a healthy discrimination, a critical mind set, the courage to doubt...Perhaps while wooing the eastern Goddess of Enlightenment we shouldn't forget the roots of our own western enlightenment.¹

The Emperor of Enlightenment May Have No Clothes.²

Over the last ten to fifteen years, I began to notice the appearance of an increasing number of testimonies by Western practitioners and teachers within Asian religions and Asian-inspired guru or spiritual communities that questioned some of the fundamental tenets of these traditions particularly regarding the nature of liberation or enlightenment. Although there were variations, some definite shared themes emerged from these narratives: the Asian goal of complete enlightenment was an ideal rather than an actuality; one must give up the immature fantasy of the perfect guru; the spiritual path consisted of both self-development and self-transcendence and the personal individual must be incorporated within impersonal nondual ontologies; enlightenment experiences needed to be integrated into everyday life in the world; and Asian cosmology should be updated in light of Western scientific knowledge.

¹ Andre van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues: My Years With An American Guru* (New York: Monkfish Books, 2003).

² Jeffrey B. Rubin, *Psychotherapy and Buddhism: Towards an Integration* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1996), 83.

Similarly, a common portrait appeared of the figures making these claims. Many of these thinkers had travelled to Asia in the 1960s and 1970s and trained under some of the most renowned Asian teachers and gurus of that period. Others had practiced closely with and been sanctioned to teach by the major Asian gurus that came to America in the wake of the lifting of the Asian immigration laws in 1965. These students had become some of the most popular contemporary teachers and representatives of Asian traditions and had contributed greatly to establishing the practice of Asian religions in the West. As time past, however, it appeared that many of these figures had begun to find limitations in traditional Asian approaches. Despite many years of spiritual practice, they found it difficult to relate and integrate their profound contemplative experiences with everyday worldly life in the twentieth century. Many became further disillusioned with Asian enlightenment narratives after the series of guru scandals that rocked a number of North American Asian guru and spiritual communities in the 1980s, in which one after another of the greatest Asian teachers of the time were implicated in disturbing forms of sexual, alcoholic and power abuse.

In response to these events, many Western voices called for a new approach to or reconfiguration of enlightenment that was generally framed as a marriage of Asian enlightenment traditions with Western Enlightenment values and insights such as individualism, democracy, pluralism, psychology, and science. Some draw heavily on depth psychology, for example, and presented the goal of spiritual awakening as self-acceptance rather than self-transcendence, wholeness rather than perfection. Others suggested the need to restructure the outdated hierarchical guru-disciple model along more democratic and transparent lines and study under multiple “mentors” or “spiritual

friends” rather than submit to one absolute authority. All called for a more mature approach to enlightenment that included rather than ignored one’s human vulnerabilities and limitations.

Other participants however, were critical of the growing popularity of these East-West integrations. They lamented that the Asian enlightenment traditions were being diluted to appeal to a Western consumerist mentality. Far from producing a more mature and balanced perspective, the encounter of Asian contemplative traditions with Western values had resulted in a mediocre and materialistic spirituality neatly packaged for the American spiritual marketplace. Likewise, attempts to integrate the personal individual into impersonal Asian metaphysics merely confused self-transcendence with self-improvement, liberative spirituality with consoling psychotherapy. In the contemporary America spiritual climate, as one commentator sardonically put it, the great Eastern enlightenment teachings, “had become transmuted from the roar of the fire of liberation into something more closely resembling the soothing burble of a California hot tub.”³

As I followed this emic debate across the spiritual and therapeutic communities within which it was mainly occurring, I noticed a distinct and disabling lack of scholarly perspectives. This project is an attempt to rectify that absence. I have two main aims: First, to unpack and clarify the terms of this debate and ground it in some wider historical and socio-cultural context. Second, to evaluate the new forms of integrative religiosity that are being produced through an encounter of the Asian contemplative traditions with modern Western, and particularly American, cultural values and discourses. My basic research questions are as follows: how have Asian contemplative traditions been

³ Hal Blacker, “A Spirituality that Transforms: by Ken Wilber,” *What is Enlightenment?* Fall-Winter 1997 <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j12/wilber.asp>.

represented in America? Under what conditions has this growing and seemingly widespread American disillusionment with Asian enlightenment narratives grown? Are the complaints and criticisms of the Asian enlightenment traditions valid? How legitimate are the new integrative East-West forms of religiosity that have emerged in their wake? What exactly, in other words, has happened to enlightenment after the Enlightenment?

Categories and Definitions: Asian Enlightenment Traditions and Narratives

Before proceeding, however, clarification of definitions is necessary. In adopting the generic umbrella category of “Asian enlightenment traditions and narratives,” I am aware that I risk the ire of Asian religious scholars. As Richard King correctly points out there is a long history of debate and disagreement within Indian traditions concerning the nature of liberation or enlightenment or, what he calls, many different “epistemologies of enlightenment.”⁴ These very real and important differences are obscured when applying a generic label such as “Asian enlightenment traditions and narratives.” Thus I need to clarify immediately that I am reflexively adopting an emic term that while historically and philologically inaccurate in regards to classic Asian traditions nonetheless is commonplace and has real cultural currency. Many new forms of religiosity have developed in relationship to this category and while unpacking generic terms and exposing perennial assumptions is essential in understanding these new spiritualities, it does not explain them away.

The emic understanding of Asian enlightenment traditions can only be understood

⁴ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 183-184.

in the context of the modern construction of mysticism as a primarily experiential category. As many scholars have noted, the modern construction of mysticism is characterized by an almost exclusive emphasis on its experiential dimension to the disregard of its social, ethical and political aspects.⁵ As King adds, another prevalent theme within modern writings on mysticism is perennialism.⁶ There are different varieties of perennialism but the basic claim is that there is a common mystical core or transcendental reality underlying the diversity of philosophical, and religious traditions. This shared core is most often articulated as an impersonal monistic or nondual absolute consciousness.⁷

This modern experiential and perennialist mystical framework has been hugely influential in the presentation of Asian religions in the West. It can be found in Neo-Vedanta, particularly in the works of Sarvepalli Radhakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, and is present in D.T. Suzuki's popular decontextualized and experiential account of Zen Buddhism. The notion of a *philosophia perennis* is also a major theme in the works of the Theosophical Society and undergirds much of the New Age appropriation of Eastern religions within contemporary western culture. Particularly influential are Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, which champions Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism, and his *The Doors of Perception*, which compares his experiences on mescaline to Hindu and Buddhist soteriological goals.⁸ The perennial philosophy also reappears and is widely disseminated in psychological form in transpersonal psychology

⁵ Ibid., 161.

⁶ Ibid., 162.

⁷ For a summary of different perennial models see Jorge Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Psychology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 71-111.

⁸ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 162-163.

with the work of popular thinkers such as Ken Wilber.⁹

Hence, when western practitioners discuss Asian enlightenment traditions they have historically referred to an understanding of Asian traditions as filtered through the lens of the perennial philosophy. Enlightenment is then equated with a mystical experiential realization of the common monistic or nondual ground of these traditions. As William Parsons notes, however, from 1970 to the present, there have been a number of influential socio-cultural shifts and intellectual developments. These include unprecedented access to a plurality of Asian religious communities, the growth of departments of religious and comparative studies, significant improvements in translations, and increased scholarly specialization.¹⁰ As a result of these shifts there has been an increasing awareness of differences amongst Asian traditions. Many practitioners have a solid grounding in Asian traditions and scholastic knowledge of the different philosophical articulations of liberation. One often finds, for example, references to Buddhist debates about sudden and gradual enlightenment in contemporary spiritual texts. Similarly, there has been acknowledgement of the limitations of perennialism.¹¹

Despite this growing recognition of differences, however, contemporary East-West integrations still strongly privilege those Asian traditions that feature in the perennial philosophy. These include the nondual traditions such as Mahayana Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, and the Hindu tantric traditions. The monistic ontology of Advaita

⁹ William B. Parsons, "Psychologia Perennis and the Academic Study of Mysticism," in *Mourning Religion* eds. William B. Parsons, Diane Jonte-Pace and Susan E. Henking (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 97-123.

¹⁰ William B. Parsons, "Themes and Debates in the Psychology-Comparativist Dialogue," in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, eds. William B. Parsons and Diane Jonte-Pace (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 229-53.

¹¹ Ferrer, *Revisoning Transpersonal Psychology*, 86-95.

Vedanta is also heavily drawn upon and Theravada Buddhist maps of awakening, if not its pluralistic phenomenalism, are included. Thus in adopting the term Asian enlightenment traditions, I am referring mainly to these nondual and monistic traditions. Asian theistic traditions that advance a relationship with a personal deity as their ultimate soteriological goal such as Pure Land Buddhism and dualistic ontologies such as Samkhya yoga are, for the most part, ignored or excluded.

Academic Location: Between Asian and America; Traditional and New Religious Movements

One of the major difficulties I encountered when initially trying to tease out and clarify my research themes was locating them in a specific academic area. For example, although the integrative endeavors draw heavily on Asian ideas and practices and are pioneered and shaped by Americans with significant training and history in Asian traditions, they have developed in ways that move them outside of conventional traditional Asian boundaries into what is most commonly designated as American alternative spirituality or new religions movements. Finding an academic home for this project was therefore somewhat difficult: approaching the questions from the perspective of an Indologist or classical Asian religious scholar risked missing or dismissing the numerous Western influences at play in the debate while staying within the boundaries of American religion or New Religious Movements potentially underestimated the significance of the Asian history. I reconciled this dilemma through situating the debate and my project as cutting across two distinct but often overlapping fields within the

academic study of religion: Asian religions in America and American alternative religions or what Catherine Albanese has recently designated as American metaphysical traditions.¹²

In drawing from both of these fields, I suggest that the new forms of religiosity emerging from the encounter between Asian contemplative traditions and American religious and cultural values merit their own classification. Here I arrive at a parallel conclusion as a recent study of Hinduism in America by Lola Williamson. In her investigation of three Hindu meditation movement in America—Self-Realization Fellowship, Transcendental Meditation and Siddha Yoga—Williamson argues that these traditions comprise a new hybrid form of religion, what she calls “Hindu-inspired meditation movements,” which combine aspects of Hinduism with Western values, institutional forms, modes of teaching and religious sensibilities.¹³ Similarly, I designate and alternatively refer to the forms of religiosity emerging in the wake of the American transformation of Asian enlightenment traditions and narratives as East-West integrative traditions or “Asian-inspired American spiritualities.”

By virtue of occupying this interdisciplinary space, I believe this dissertation has the potential to contribute to several subfields fields within the academic study of religion, namely, Asian religions in America, American metaphysical traditions, New Religious Movements, Western Esotericism and Religion and Psychology.

¹² Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 8.

¹³ Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), ix-xii.

Three Case Studies: American Buddhism, Hindu-inspired Networks and Psychospirituality

As noted, when I first began to track reoccurring themes in contemporary debates on Asian spirituality, it was difficult for me to locate and contain them in a specific area of study. Put bluntly, the contemporary American appropriation of Asian enlightenment traditions is a notoriously eclectic and messy affair. The individual actors and communities involved in the dialogue have often practiced or still practice in more than one Asian or Asian-inspired tradition and borrow from numerous Western discourses such as psychology, science, and politics. As such it has been a constant challenge to organize and structure this project. This was exacerbated by the fact that my primary interest was in the common themes cutting across the traditions rather than any one of the many specific communities within which they were occurring.

After much reflection, I decided that the most useful way to tease out and analyze these central thematics was through detailed case studies. Through a close reading of three contemporary spiritual communities, I could consider the different ways that Asian enlightenment traditions had been refracted through the psychological, scientific, political and economic lenses of American culture. My plan was to use each community to explore a particularly dominant theme whilst simultaneously demonstrating the prevalence of a number of common issues.

The first community I chose was Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California whose co-founder Jack Kornfield has been at the forefront of many innovations within American Buddhism. Kornfield has called for an “embodied

enlightenment” that integrates profound meditative with the insights of western psychology and the challenges of daily householder life.¹⁴ Through an analysis of Spirit Rock, I will discuss how the American Insight community has attempted to integrate the liberation teachings of Theravada Buddhism with the humanistic, democratic, and pluralistic values of the European Enlightenment.

The second community I examine is A.H. Almaas’s Diamond Approach, which proves a useful example of the numerous contemporary attempts to incorporate Western depth psychology into Asian philosophies. The Diamond Approach proves a useful study of contemporary American psychospirituality on two counts. First, it attempts to reconcile American concerns with individual development with Asian mystical goals of self-transcendence through an incorporation of Asian and Western religious and secular models of subjectivity. Second, it utilizes psychoanalytic theory—ranging from Freudian to intersubjectivist perspectives—to elaborate on nondual Asian mysticism.

My third case study will trace the American guru Andrew Cohen’s transformation from a Neo-Advaita teacher to a leading proponent of “evolutionary enlightenment,” a teaching that places traditional Indian understandings of nonduality in an evolutionary context. Following Cohen’s own evolution, I argue, affords some fascinating insights into the transformation of Hindu concepts in America. His early period shows the further deinstitutionalization of traditional Advaita Vedanta within the radically decontextualized Neo-Advaitin network, and evolutionary enlightenment engages another less-known but increasingly influential Hindu lineage, namely that of Sri Aurobindo’s integral yoga. Cohen has also been the subject of much debate over the efficacy of importing a

¹⁴ Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993) and Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (New York: Bantam Books, 2000).

traditional Asian hierarchical guru-disciple relationship into a modern Western democratic culture.

A further advantage of examining these three specific communities is that there are numerous interconnections between the three: for example, both Spirit Rock and the Diamond Approach are located in the San Francisco Bay area and many teachers and practitioners at Spirit Rock have been or are presently students in the Diamond Approach. Cohen forms an effective counter-point because he has been critical of many trends emerging from contemporary East-West encounters such as the psychological and everyday-oriented spirituality represented by Spirit Rock and the Diamond Approach. Taken together, therefore, the three prove useful in offering a panoramic view of contemporary Asian-inspired American spiritual culture.¹⁵

There are benefits and disadvantages to this comparative approach. The major benefit is that it is more faithful to and reflexive of the eclectic religious phenomena under analysis and, as such, I believe, best captures its nature. As I will show, these themes cut right across the contemporary American assimilation of Asian traditions from Buddhist communities to transpersonal psychology, Western esotericism to Hindu-inspired networks, and therefore cannot be limited to a single tradition. A big disadvantage is that breadth and commonality often comes at the cost of focus and detail. One way I have attempted to mitigate this is by writing each of the three cases studies as stand-alone independent studies that locate each community within its own specific

¹⁵ It is little surprise that California features heavily in all three case studies given that it has historically been a privileged site for Asian religion in America and East-West spirituality. While the California location heavily shapes these traditions, however, their effects are felt way beyond the state. For a discussion of the spiritual landscape and heritage of California see Erik Davis and Michael Ravner, *The Visionary State: A Journey Through California's Landscape* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006).

historic religious lineage and evaluate each of them on its own terms. This means that a certain amount of repetition is unavoidable as I reflect on and revisit similar themes within each community and in the conclusion. While risking boring the reader, however, I also believe, that such repetition adds more weight to my conclusions. In short, then, the eclectic content of the project is both a strength and a weakness.

Dilemmas of a Scholar-Practitioner: Both/And or Neither/Nor?

What the scholar does within the subject-field depends upon where he is standing. Where he stands influences what he discovers. Furthermore, where he stands and what he discovers are implicit in what he is trying to do.¹⁶

In terms of my location as a researcher, I have practiced in various Asian and Asian-inspired groups in the West and Asia for over twenty years. Moreover, I have been a student for six years in one of the communities that I examine here: the Diamond Approach. I have also participated sporadically in the Insight community for over ten years and have attended various events at Spirit Rock and affiliated meditation groups in the San Francisco Bay area. Put bluntly, the main reason I wanted to explore the questions motivating this project was because they were my questions. Like many of the voices in this dissertation, I have struggled to reconcile my profound contemplative experiences in Asian traditions with their hierarchical and sexist institutionalized structures. To paraphrase Stephen Butterfield, I have moved, sometimes ricocheted,

¹⁶ Walter H Capps quoted in *Science of Religion, Studies in Methodology*, ed. Lauri Honko (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 180.

between the place of devotion and the place of doubt.¹⁷ I wanted to try and make sense of these different but equally pressing “truths” by placing my personal experiences in a wider philosophical and socio-cultural context.

It is no coincidence then that I sought out Jeffrey J. Kripal as my dissertation supervisor. I was inspired by Kripal’s radical claim that not only can professional scholarship and personal religious experience be mutually enlightening but that our present postmodern age demands an honest uniting of the two.¹⁸ Kripal has been one of the most vocal advocates of the scholar-practitioner and has advanced a utopian model of the “gnostic scholar.”¹⁹ This model is derived from Gilles Quispel’s distinction between faith, gnosis and reason.²⁰ Kripal reworks Quispel’s definition of gnosis to advance it as “a privileging of knowing over believing, an affirmation of altered states of consciousness and psychic functioning as valuable and legitimate modes of cognition and a critical but engaged encounter with the faith traditions themselves.”²¹ A gnostic approach to the study of religion goes beyond a faith-based study and a secular approach through the application of radical critical thought to religious and spiritual phenomena linked to a deep appreciation for the existential resources and ontological insights of the traditions. Being privy to both the insights of the contemplative traditions and the tools of the academy, the gnostic scholar, Kripal suggests, is in a privileged position to capture the multi-dimensional nature of religious phenomena.²²

¹⁷ Stephen Butterfield, *The Double Mirror: A Skeptical Journey into Buddhist Tantra* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1994).

¹⁸ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Places of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹⁹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections On The Study Of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²² *Ibid.*, 197.

Kripal's gnostic scholar can be seen as a contemporary heir to Mircea Eliade's new humanism. Underlying Eliade's history of religions methodology was a belief in the human being as *homo religiosus* and the irreducibility of the sacred. Eliade argued that cannot arrive at the total meaning of a religious phenomenon when it is reduced to its social, cultural, political, and economic expression or historic causes; religious phenomena must be taken rather on their own plane of reference, that is, as *religious* phenomena. The irreducibility of the phenomenon does not mean, however, that the historic element can be ignored. Religious phenomenon acquires its most complete meaning when set within the totality of the sacred and the historical. Moreover, for Eliade this methodology demanded a deep existential and experiential engagement with the phenomenon under analysis.²³

Although Eliade argued for the need to hold the phenomenological and historical in creative tension, his work has been criticized for privileging the phenomenological and tending towards the universal, ahistorical and acontextual.²⁴ An attempt to recover this creative tension and produce a more sophisticated both/and approach can be found in Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman recently edited collection *The Participatory Turn: Religious, Mysticism and Spirituality*.²⁵ This text articulates an emerging academic ethos in the field of religious studies that challenges the prevalent methodological dominance of the cultural-linguistic paradigm without returning to the disembodied, ahistorical and politically troubling "philosophy of consciousness" represented by thinkers such as Eliade. Ferrer and Sherman's basic project is the integration of religious experience and

²³ David Cave, *Mircea Eliade's Vision For A New Humanism* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 22-26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁵ Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman, *The Participatory Turn: Religious, Mysticism and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

practice with modern critical thinking and postmodern epistemological insights about the constructed nature of human knowledge. What emerges from this both/and endeavor is a pluralistic vision of spirituality that accepts the role of context and language in religious phenomena while simultaneously recognizing the importance of nonlinguistic factors in shaping religious experiences and affirming the ontological value of spiritual realities. Ferrer and Sherman argue that a participatory approach forges a methodological stance capable of integrating the strengths of engaged participation and critical distance and avoids an a priori hierarchical relationship between insider and outsider standpoints in the understanding of religious phenomena.²⁶

Inspired by this emerging both/and dialectic methodological approach, I began the project with many ideals and expectations. As often is the case, however, the reality, proved somewhat different. I soon discovered that both/and could easily slip into neither/nor and a creative tension could rapidly deteriorate into an antagonistic opposition. This particularly played out during my periods of participant-observation. Here the actual lived reality of the theoretical ideal of uniting radical criticism with religious experience clashed in a way that is not fully acknowledged or attended to in the largely analytical model of Ferrer and Sherman's participatory turn. While Kripal, on the other hand, has written extensively about the risks of "the serpent's gift", warning that such a both/and position can exile the scholar from both the professional zone of pure reason and the comfort zone of his or her religious tradition, he gives little practical advice on how to negotiate ethnography under such circumstances.

To better illuminate this clash and how it plays out in fieldwork, I want, therefore, to briefly turn to related discussions of the insider-outsider and participant-observation in

²⁶ Ibid., 1-43.

the social sciences. The advantages and disadvantages of the insider-outsider have been the subject of a long and heated debate across the social sciences.²⁷ The epistemological and theoretical transformations in social science in recent decades have steadily eroded the dominance of traditional positivism and resulted in a period of experimentation and diversity in regards to participation/observation. However, one of the major issues remains how to negotiate a working balance between scholarly distance and close engagement, criticism and sympathy.

For a researcher with established ties to the community, such as myself, the issue of critical distance becomes particularly pronounced. On the one hand, one risks loss of perspective from over-involvement and identification with subjects and, on the other, one risks alienation from religious identity and community as a result of critical perspective. Nancy Ramsey Tosh, who has reflected intensively on her experiences as both a scholar and practitioner of Witchcraft, articulates many of the dilemmas inherent in this “dual identity.”²⁸ As Tosh notes, operating with a “dual identity” is a constant struggle and, one, sometimes, so disorientating that she could not observe or participate with any success. At times, one identity simply overwhelms the other. Moving back and forth between religious experience and personal vulnerability to critical analysis and rational clarity is a daunting task. Furthermore, one faces potential hostility from the religious community if research threatens to reveal sensitive or discrediting information and one can encounter suspicion and stigmatization from academic community for not being sufficiently objective. As David Bromley notes,

²⁷ For a clear summary of some of the most central issues see David G. Bromley and Lewis F. Carter, eds., *Toward Reflexive Ethnography: Participating, Observing, Narrating* (Amsterdam: JAI, 2001), 1-36.

²⁸ Nancy Ramsey Tosh, “Mirror Images: Wicca From the Inside Out and Outside In,” in *Towards a Reflexive Ethnology*, 197-222.

Having a foot in both social worlds means that such conflicts are not simply cognitive inconsistencies; they are ongoing emotional and moral quandaries as well. And to have dual identities that are in many respects irreconcilable leaves one in the position of being part of two worlds without being fully integrated in either.²⁹

I accounted all of these issues first-hand in my fieldwork with the Diamond Approach. Occupying a dual identity as scholar and practitioner produced several tense and unpleasant encounters with teachers and fellow students of the Diamond Approach. Many questioned, for example, whether I was experienced enough to write about the school. I had a particularly stressful encounter with the one of the main teachers of the group when she implied I needed permission from the school to publish my research. At times the intensity of the experiences within the group made observation impossible and I had to put my field-notes aside and postpone plans to conduct interviews during retreats. At others, I found myself overcome with skepticism and disillusionment as I internally historicized and corrected statement after statement made by the teachers. I contemplated leaving the group several times and seriously doubted the possibility of ever truly achieving a both/and perspective. As Benjamin Zablocki puts it, particularly with religious ethnography, the problem of simultaneously maintaining a sympathetic existential stance and a critical evaluative stance is a formidable challenge.³⁰

²⁹ Bromley and Carter, *Towards a Reflexive Ethnology*, 24.

³⁰ Benjamin Zablocki, "Vulnerability and Objectivity in the Participant Observation of the Sacred," in *Towards a Reflexive Ethnography*, 223-245.

In short, occupying the both/and space of the “gnostic scholar” produces ongoing intellectual, moral and spiritual conflicts that are not easily reconcilable. For all its difficulties, however, I do remain convinced of the value of a both/and perspective. In the end, I believe, the question of what kind of knowledge we are interested in is the determinative one. If we take seriously the experiential, phenomenological or ontological aspects of religion, knowledge of these is available to the practitioner in a way that will always elude the non-practitioner. Putting such knowledge in conversation with critical theory allows, or at least moves towards, a way of understanding religious phenomenon from both, as Kripal puts it, “the inside-out and outside-in.” It promises, if not always delivers, a hermeneutics that can ultimately encompass, understand and explain the most data.³¹ Moreover, such a both/and position should not be understood as a compromise between the emic or etic but rather as a fundamentally distinct epistemology that cannot be captured by categories of “insider” and “outsider” or “etic” and “emic.”³² Borrowing from an analogous psychoanalytic intersubjective theory, it is a position that produces new knowledge or a third category that is not simply the sum of the two but a new creation, what Thomas Ogden called “the analytic third.”³³ As such, while fully cognizant of the difficulties, I continually strive for a both/and perspective: both a “hermeneutics of suspicion” that submits the traditions to the lens of critical theory and a “hermeneutics of sympathy” that remains open to their phenomenological or ontological insights. I locate myself in the same both/and space: both a scholar and a practitioner, an insider and an outsider, a critic and a caretaker.

³¹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Inside-Out, Outside-In: Existential Place and Academic Practice in the Study of North American Guru-Traditions,” *Religious Studies Review* Vol 25 No. 3 (July 1999): 233-238.

³² I am indebted to Jeffrey Kripal for making this more explicit in my approach.

³³ Thomas Ogden, “The Analytic Third: An Overview,” in *Relational Psychoanalysis: The Emergence of a Tradition*, eds., Stephen Mitchell and Lewis Aron (Hillsdale, New York: Analytic Press, 1999), 459-491.

Basic Orientations: Taking Contemporary Spirituality Seriously

Given my history and location in these traditions, it should be clear that I approached this project with a fundamentally sympathetic attitude to contemporary East-West integrations. This is not to say, however, that I gloss over erroneous contemporary claims to historicity or unreflexively perpetuate perennial categories. I think that it is essential to trace historic discontinuities and expose naïve claims made by these traditions to accurately represent historic traditions. However, revealing modern categories or contemporary concerns at work does not necessarily equate, as has been too often the case, to dismissing them. I have become particularly disinterested in and frustrated by scholarship that relies on and perpetuates a dichotomy of “pure” or “authentic” tradition versus “corrupt” and “inauthentic” modern as its central analytical framework. I view this as a reductive, simplistic and essentially lazy analysis that flattens the multi-dimensionality of the religious phenomena at hand and arrogantly dismisses the very real concerns, dilemmas and struggles of the individual actors and communities involved within it. It also privileges a largely constructed sanitized and static past as a source of religious authority and curiously implies religious eclecticism, borrowing and creativity as a sole product of modernity.

I argue, instead, that these new traditions should be interrogated and evaluated on their own grounds rather than against some privileged pure past classical form. In this I align myself with a recent body of work that questions the assumptions of an analytic approach that negatively evaluates contemporary innovations against some ideal classical

form. Mark Singleton, for example, advances a particularly eloquent and persuasive articulation of this perspective in his recent study of modern yoga.³⁴ Singleton states that he has avoided a common methodological approach that negatively contrasts “modern yoga” against presumably more authentic, older forms of “classical” yoga. As he notes, implicit in this approach is the assumption that modern yoga is flawed precisely to the extent that it departs from the perceived tradition. Such a perspective, however, gives insufficient recognition to the plurality and mutability of premodern forms of yoga and to the fact that “Indian tradition” itself has been subject to fragmentation, accretion and innovation in much the same way as “modern yoga.” By privileging a firsthand familiarity with the primary classical sources, it also places the writer on the “scholastic moral high ground,” that is, he or she, gives the impression of “knowing better” what constitutes authentic yoga than those unversed in this learning but nonetheless deeply embedded in modern yoga.

As Singleton stresses, rejecting a “gold standard” approach to yoga is not to embrace the kind of relativism that regards all truth claims about yoga in the modern period as “true,” in the sense of being accurate historical or philological statements about tradition. However, the practices themselves cannot be written off as lacking interest or validity merely on the grounds of their divergence from “traditional yoga.” Here Singleton follows Geoffrey Samuels who has insisted that modern yoga and Tantra has become a significant part of contemporary western practices of self-cultivation and

³⁴ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13-16.

should be judged in own terms and not in terms of its closeness to some presumably more authentic Indian practice.³⁵

I could not agree more with Singleton and Samuels. Moreover, I believe that a crucial element of analyzing these traditions on their own terms involves taking their theologies seriously. Here I am aligned with Mary Farrell Bednarowski who called for scholars to take the theologies of new religious movements seriously in what was a groundbreaking approach to nontraditional religion at that time.³⁶ Bednarowski sees theology as a creative and constructive enterprise, which she defines broadly as the “general task of ordering reality in light of that which the particular systems understands as the ultimate measure of all things.” In her study of six new religious movements from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Mormonism, Christian Science, Theosophy, the Unification Church, Scientology, and New Age thought—Bednarowski sets herself three aims: (i) to provide information about the beliefs of the new religions; (ii) to see the ways that the new religions provide alternative answers to theological questions; and (iii) to speculate about some of the cultural influences that have enliven the theological imagination in America to the point where it can no longer be sustained within the boundaries of orthodoxy.³⁷

Bednarowski reflects intelligently on the cultural circumstances from which new religious movements have emerged—namely, pluralism, science, evolution, materialism, psychology and environmental concerns—and how they are tied to pivotal historical events, scientific discoveries and political and economic developments. As she states,

³⁵ Geoffrey Samuels, *Asian Medicine, Tradition and Modernity* (Special Yoga Edition) 3.1: 177-188.

³⁶ Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, x-xi.

however, whatever the combination of historical, sociological and psychological factors and complexities that have contributed to the formation and growth of new religions in the last one hundred and fifty years, the theological dimensions of these traditions must not be ignored. Bednarowski demonstrates how such theologies have attempted to address the inadequacies of existing orthodox systems and produce new models that make sense in face of new cultural developments. New religions theologies contain implicit and explicit critiques of prevailing religious models and so rather than being relegated to the margins should be respected as their conversation partners.³⁸

Fortunately much has changed in the study of new religious movements since Bednarowski's 1989 study. More scholarship has appeared that legitimates new religious movements and discusses the significant effect they have on mainstream culture and traditional religion.³⁹ Nonetheless, with some notable exceptions such as Wouter Hanegraaff's monumental study of the New Age, there still remains a relative dearth of studies that focuses on the belief systems of these new traditions.⁴⁰ I will attempt to fill that gap by following Bednarowski's threefold aim to provide a sustained analysis of the theologies or metaphysics of the East-West integrations, situate them in relationship to their historic predecessors, and to illuminate the cultural influences that have enlivened them. In short, I will endeavor to provide both a cultural and metaphysical reading of

³⁸ Ibid.,

³⁹ See Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Volume 2: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (New York: T & T Clarke International, 2005); Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp eds., *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Lynne Hume and Kathleen Philips, eds., *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴⁰ Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

contemporary Asian-inspired spirituality, one that notes how their metaphysics are shaped by but not reducible to cultural trends.

Methodology: Between the History of Religions and the Social Sciences, Textual Analysis and Ethnography

I originally conceived of this dissertation as a history of religions project using textual analysis as the primary methodology. However, as the project developed, I decided to also utilize ethnographic methods. The decision to combine textual analysis with fieldwork was due to several factors. First, as I was already deeply immersed in the milieu of contemporary Asian-inspired spirituality and had many contacts among teachers and practitioners, it seemed dishonest and redundant not to fully include and make more explicit what was always going to be an implicit shaping. Second, I had become aware of gaps between how the traditions appeared from a textual perspective and how they actually functioned as living practicing communities. Using ethnographic information could, I felt, bridge this disjuncture to give a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional picture of the traditions.

Third, I became increasingly more convinced of the importance in of the types of questions that a social scientific perspective asked. This interest was largely due to my participation in a Mellon interdisciplinary seminar under the direction of anthropologist James Fabion.⁴¹ Reading through many religious history texts with Fabion afforded me a different perspective on the project. I noticed, in short, that anthropologists were asking

⁴¹ Andrew W. Mellon Research Seminar, "Religious Biopolitics: Transcendental Hygienics: Past, Present and Future." Rice University, 2007-2008.

different questions of the material such as who is practicing in these traditions and why, and what types of socio-cultural subjectivities are produced and maintained through such practices? Taking seriously these questions was a somewhat a disorienting experience and one I had some initial resistance to mainly because I feared that this would lead to a reductive approach to the Asian-inspired traditions: one that would reduce them to their demographics. On deeper reflection, however, I realized that far from closing down the study, employing different methodologies had the potential to open up the data to a more nuanced multi-layered hermeneutic. Moreover, if I was committed to a perspective that took both ontology and culture seriously, and aimed to illuminate the dialectical relationship between the two, who was participating and why, was a profoundly important and relevant question.

Once I had decided to include ethnography, the next question was what specific methods to employ. My primary tool has been participant-observation, which I was already heavily engaged in. I equivocated on using questionnaires mainly because of the practical difficulties of distribution and collection given the decentralized nature of contemporary spirituality and the fact that participation within them occurs on many levels that are difficult to track. As a trial run I inquired if I could distribute questionnaires to collect large-scale demographics of participants from the Diamond Approach but was informed by its head office that this would be too difficult. As such, I opted for loosely structured interviews. These interviews ranged from between one and half and three and half hours and were conducted face-to-face in participant's homes or over the telephone. The research was conducted sporadically over a period of five years between 2005-2010 including two three-month research trips to San Francisco. During

this period I visited many practice sites, spoke with representatives of the traditions, attended retreats, daylong and evening events, and read primary literature produced by the communities.

Another important point to note is whose voices are and are not heard in this project. In retrospect, I see that I began this project with an assumption that the major players and innovators within these integrative traditions determined the “true” or “real” meaning of them. I have been, in other words, concerned with evaluating the ideas from the perspective of the actors who have pioneered them such as the teachers and senior students. Much less present, and I fear a significant weakness of the project, is the voice of the casual practitioner. For example, I initially focused on securing interviews with teachers and community leaders within these traditions rather than the “regular” participants. Although I had numerous informal conversations with participants, conversations that have certainly shaped my interpretations, they are definitely underrepresented in this project. In becoming aware of this towards the end of the project, however, I have come to the conclusion that the “meaning” of any religious phenomena is varied and occurs on multiple levels and that it is vital to include voices from different levels of participation. As I think ahead to improving the dissertation, undertaking more formal interviews with participants and considering their interpretations alongside those of teachers or major figures would be very beneficial.

In summary, then, I would describe this project methodologically as a textual analysis that is supplemented by an ethnographic component. At times, I have been troubled that the latter leans towards more of a “recreational ethnography” than the sustained fieldwork that the complex subject matter deserves. Still, the material I

gathered from interviews has proved indispensable in questioning and refining discourse analysis. Moreover, as I have been participating in contemporary Asian-inspired spirituality for over twenty-years, I could not underestimate the role personal immersion, informal contact and participant-observation has had in shaping my interpretations and theses.

Primary and Secondary Sources

The major source of information for the three case studies comes from primary material. As far as I am aware, none of the three traditions I examine here—Spirit Rock, Andrew Cohen and the Diamond Approach—have been studied before. As Catherine Albanese writes studying what she calls the American metaphysical traditions requires a certain amount of ingenuity. Due to their decentralized nature, it necessitates, as she puts it, “poking around in less studied and formally documented spaces, and it will certainly require a ‘creative’ reading.”⁴² I have used a wide variety of primary sources, including numerous books and articles published by current and former participants and materials produced by the traditions in the forms of journals, publishing catalogues and advertisement flyers. I also draw extensively on the Internet, which hosts numerous websites and blogs and even functions as a practice site with the advent of virtual retreats, events and webcast teachings.

In addition I have also relied upon a wide variety of secondary sources cutting across Asian religions and American spirituality. One of the benefits of researching contemporary spirituality at this particular time is that the last ten years has seen a

⁴² Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 8.

significant shift in how alternative spirituality is viewed academically. The emergence of a number of academic texts, journals and fields of study such as Western Esotericism shows that nontraditional religiosity is gaining ground as a legitimate area of study.⁴³

Short Map and Chapter Outline

Chapter one sets the scene by providing some historic context for contemporary East-West integrations. Although many of the initiators are oblivious to the fact, I show that they are continuing or reacting against themes that have marked not only the reception of Asian traditions in the West but also the colonial encounter between India and the West. I include within this chapter both a brief historic narrative and a review of some of the major analytic frameworks and categories that have been advanced to interpret the Euro-American assimilation of American religion. The latter will function as working frameworks against which I will consider each of my case studies.

Chapter two will examine the contemporary American assimilation of Buddhism through a focus on Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Chapter two turns to the encounter of Western depth psychology and Asian nondual mysticism through a focus on the Diamond Approach. Chapter three traces Andrew Cohen's evolution from a teacher of Neo-Advaita to evolutionary enlightenment in order to show the different ways Hindu concepts such as *advaita* and the guru-disciple relationship have been reconfigured in America.

In my conclusion, I briefly revisit and reflect on the main common themes that have emerged from my three case studies. First, I will explore the interplay between

⁴³ See *ibid.*, for example.

culture and ontology that I have discovered across my three communities and which supports Kripal's Tantric transmission thesis. Second, I will consider how the cultural shift from the modern to postmodern has affected East-West integrations. Third, I will offer a couple of suggestions for the future development of East-West integrative spiritualities and note how promisingly such directions are already being pursued by contemporary communities. Here I address some socio-cultural critiques of Asian-inspired spirituality by calling on communities to pay more attention to accessibility and diversity and bridge the gap between the ideal and actuality of the democratic and social justice ethos motivating certain innovations. I also argue that the most successful forms of East-West integrations are those that maintain a dialectical tension between tradition and modernity and integrate elements of modernity without sacrificing the contemplative depths of the Asian traditions.

Chapter One

A Brief History of East-West Spirituality: From Colonialism to the Counter-Culture

Many contemporary East-West integrative spiritualities claim that they are pioneering a new form of dialogue between Western modern discourses and Asian spirituality. This, however, is far from the case as integrative East-West forms of spirituality have been produced both by Westerners interested in Asian religions and Westernized Asians since the mid-eighteenth century. In fact, as I will show, the Asian religious forms that many contemporary Westerners have inherited, far from being classical expressions of Asian traditions, are themselves products of earlier modernization processes. In this chapter, I want to offer a broad context for the development of East-West integrative spirituality in America by giving a brief historic narrative and glancing at some of the key secondary works analyzing the Euro-American encounter with Asian religions. For purposes of brevity, this sketch will by no means be a comprehensive or exhaustive one. By detailing some of the major figures and movements, however, I hope to give a clear sense of the common themes that have characterized the history of East-West integrations in America and the major analytic categories that have been applied to them. For heuristic convenience, I will organize these into three major historic periods: European foundations, and American “first-wave” and “second wave” currents. My aim is to follow the narrative from its eighteenth-century European colonial foundations up to the American counter-culture of the late 1960s and 70s, the decades that birthed and shaped the three communities I examine.

Before proceeding, however, it is essential to clarify the parameters and definitions of my investigation. It has been commonplace within the academic study of Asian religions in America to differentiate between Euro-American and immigrant communities. Although recent scholarship has begun to exert analytic pressure on this division by either drawing attention to groups that do not fit into either category or showing how characteristics that have traditionally been exclusively identified with one group are now appearing in both, in terms of my object of focus, East-West spiritualities, it is fair to claim they remain located in the Euro-American lineage.⁴⁴ As such my attention will be restricted to this lineage and within this stream I will be paying attention almost exclusively to sympathetic and affirmative East-West encounters, which means that I will not discuss negative reactions to Asian religions such as issued in critical Christian missionary or popular media accounts. This does not imply that negative accounts did not have any affect on the formation of East-West spiritualities but rather that they were not major players in the dialogue and for purposes of brevity will not be considered here.

In terms of definitions, a word on the use of the terms “East” and “West” is necessary. As J.J. Clarke notes utilizing terms such as the “East”, “Orient” and “West” threatens reducing endless complexities and diversities into falsifying unities. It also encourages the construction of East and West as “eternally transcending contrasting

⁴⁴ For a threefold typology of Buddhism in America see Jan Nattier, “Who is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America,” in *The Faces Of Buddhism in America*, eds., Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 183-195. For accounts that disrupt the Euro-American/immigrant divide in Buddhist communities see Jeff Wilson, *Mourning the Unborn Dead* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

opposites.”⁴⁵ Noting these risks, I follow Clarke in his advice to hold such terms lightly and “under erasure”, and, in most incidents, reproduce them as emic terms and, in others, employ them reflexively as useful expository devices.

European Foundations: Colonialism, Orientalism, the Enlightenment and Romanticism

The American assimilation of Asian religions can only be understood adequately when placed in the wider context of the European colonial domination of Asia and the imperialist expansion of the West. The West’s encounter with Eastern religion between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries occurred during the period of colonialism, a period of global history that witnessed the rapid expansion of western military and economic power over the nations of South and East Asia. Colonialism was characterized by the exertion of Western Christian superiority and the general attitude of the public, traders, politicians and colonial administration was a mixture of Western ethnocentrism, patronizing chauvinism and racist contempt.⁴⁶

Yet paradoxically, as J. J. Clarke notes, while the West exerted its political and cultural hegemony over the East, it also simultaneously admired and elevated it.⁴⁷ In what Clarke calls the “romanticisation” of the East and the “oriental enchantment” much of the West’s interest in the “mystical and transcendent” East has been guided by a desire to utilize it as a “corrective mirror” for its own cultural and spiritual malaise.⁴⁸ Indeed, as

⁴⁵ J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London and New York, Routledge, 1997), 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-34.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 19. As Clarke notes the western construction of East as “other” and the essentializing of East and West into two simple and opposite categories has a long history and can be traced to the epic conflict

the Indologist Wilhelm Halbfass observes, the East has functioned as “the goal and referent of Utopian projections, and of searching for the identity and origins of Europe, of European self-questioning and self-criticism.”⁴⁹ This search for western identity and remedy through the mirror of its Eastern “other” is evident to varying degree in both the Enlightenment and Romanticism, two of the central cultural and philosophical channels through which the Euro- American assimilation of Asian religions has occurred.⁵⁰ As I will show, Enlightenment and Romantic discourses have greatly shaped the modern presentation of Asian religions and the creation of East-West integrative spiritualities by both Euro-Americans and Westernized Asians.

The Enlightenment Search for a Rational and Scientific Religion

The Enlightenment refers to a period of western cultural, philosophical and political history in the eighteenth-century that above all was defined by a belief in the supremacy of reason as the primary source of knowledge and authority. A broad cultural movement spanning France, England, Germany, and America and including figures such as Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Voltaire, and Thomas Paine, the Enlightenment represented values of reason, progress, equality, optimism, and freedom from superstition, authority and tradition. The aim of early Enlightenment figures such as Descartes and Kant was to ground religion on the secure and natural foundation of reason. Kant, for example, distinguished between a desirable natural religion, signifying

between the Hellenes and Persians. Here the “othering” of the East takes a negative form: the passive, emotional and weak East is the inferior shadow of the active, rational and heroic West. *Ibid.*, 3-5.

⁴⁹ Wilhelm Halbfass, *Indian and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 369.

⁵⁰ I will later argue that Western esotericism constitutes a third channel.

those universal religious sensibilities that could be verified empirically and a problematic revealed or institutional religion that was based on superstition and tradition. In essence, Enlightenment thinkers approached faith as something eminently human and natural and wanted to establish a religion that was rational, ethical and in alliance with the emerging scientific paradigm.⁵¹

As Clarke details, the Enlightenment encounter with the East, especially China, begins with the voyages of global exploration and the subsequent expansion of European economic and political power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Within this context, he discusses how numerous pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment philosophers such as Montaigne, Leibniz, and Voltaire were attracted to Confucianism and saw it as mirror to critique the philosophical and institutional limitations of the West and instigate social reform. These thinkers, in short, interpreted Confucianism in accordance with Enlightenment values. Voltaire, for example, argued for the superiority of Confucianism over Christianity because it was based on rational principles not superstition. He portrayed Confucius as an archetypal rationalist and ethicist and Confucianism as a tolerant religion without dogma and priests.⁵²

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, French sinophilism had run its course and a new negative picture of China as a corrupt and decadent civilization emerged. Nonetheless, Enlightenment ideals and the search for a rational and scientific religion would continue to have a significant impact on the presentation of Asian religions in the West. Asians gurus in America would present Hinduism and Buddhism as essentially

⁵¹ Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 12-24.

⁵² See Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 37-53 for a detailed description of the Enlightenment encounter with China.

universal, scientific and rational forms of religion; Unitarianism, the earliest group in America to favor Asian religions, would champion the ethical and rational elements of Hinduism; The Buddha would be heralded as the revolutionary liberator of a corrupt caste system and meditation would be decontextualized and framed as a scientific enterprise. All of these examples clearly reflect the continuing refraction of Asian religions through an Enlightenment lens.

Affirmative Orientalism, Mystical India and the Romantic Search for Wholeness

While the Enlightenment's interest in China anticipates many themes that appear in later American encounters with Asian religions, without doubt, the most influential current flowed from the European Romantic embrace of India that began in the mid-eighteenth-century. Just as China had earlier been an object of fascination for Enlightenment figures, the transcendent and mystical dimensions of India religious and philosophical thought enthralled the Romantics and helped quench what Clarke describes as their "metaphysical thirst."⁵³ Indeed, the influence of Romanticism is so pervasive on East-West integrative spirituality that the movement's initial encounter with India merits a substantial analysis.

A broad literary and cultural movement, Romanticism developed in response to dissatisfaction with Enlightenment rationality and the materialist worldview it birthed and is characterized by a belief in the primacy of the imagination, a celebration of intuition and the emotions, a quest for wholeness and a privileging of the uniqueness of the individual. Romanticism is associated with the philosophical position of idealism, a

⁵³ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 38

perspective that privileges Spirit (*Geist*) or mind or consciousness as the ultimate nature of reality. Drawing on Neoplatonic notions of emanation from and return to the divine, Idealists interpreted the process of history as the unfolding and self-revelation of Spirit.⁵⁴

The study of religion was an important part of the Romantic quest for an alternative to Enlightenment rationality and Romantics understood the different world religions to be progressive expressions of this divine unfolding and ultimately rooted in the same sacred essence. They attempted to protect religion and sacred from the rationalist-empirical critique of the Enlightenment by casting aside its dogmatic trappings and locating it in the private realm of human subjectivity and experience. Following Friedrich Schleiermacher, who defined religion as an feeling of total dependence on the infinite, Romantic thinkers claimed that the true essence of religion was to be found not in the secondary overlay of religious doctrine or tradition but rather within a universal human experience of the divine.⁵⁵

The Romantic encounter with Indian religions was facilitated through the commercial interests of Europe, particularly through the East India Company, that provided the main passage of ideas between Europe and India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The most influential phase of Indic studies began with the arrival of British civil servants in Calcutta in the 1780s.⁵⁶ The journals, texts and translations produced by figures such as William Jones and Charles Wilkins had a considerable influence on the Romantics.

⁵⁴ Arthur McCalla, "Romanticism" in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, eds., Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), 365-379.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 378.

⁵⁶ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 57-59.

As Clarke notes, the Romantic enthusiasm for India was generated by a mood of disillusionment with the materialist and mechanistic philosophies that came to prominence in the Enlightenment period. The Romantics deployed India primarily as a means of treating what were seen as the deep-seated ills of European culture and was thus both idealized and distorted. In their embrace of India, the Romantics exemplified an approach to the East that has been identified as “affirmative orientalism”, a perspective that frames East and West as mutually complementary opposites. The West is characterized as masculine, rational and ethical and the East as feminine, mystical and intuitive and the marriage of the two produces the ultimate cultural and human unity and wholeness.

The Romantics, then, saw India as the archetypal realm of spirit and believed that it possessed a perennial wisdom that had been lost in the West. They selectively identified Indian religious and philosophical thought with the monism found within the Upanishads and Advaita Vedanta, the philosophical school that systematizes its monistic strands. The Romantics were attracted to the Upanishadic teaching that the multiplicity of the world as it appears through the senses is an illusion (*maya*) and that all that truly exists is the absolute, or *Brahman*, a unitary pure consciousness, which is identical to *atman* (the individual soul). *Brahman* was understood to parallel the role which spirit or mind played in German idealism. The reading of the Upanishads within the Vedanta tradition offered the Romantics, in other words, a philosophy that resonated with their own metaphysical assumptions and provided an alternative to the materialism that had come to dominate the Enlightenment.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Ibid., 60-61.

The Romantic embrace of Indian philosophy, as Clarke rightly notes, was limited in numerous respects. The Hindu teachings they drew upon were torn from their complete religious and cultural matrix, reconstructed out of highly selective textual fragments and approached through inadequate translations and philological methodologies. The Romantics were highly selective in those aspects of Asian religions that they focused on, ignoring ritual and cosmology. Furthermore, these teachings were approached not in the spirit of objective scholarship but rather as instruments through which to offer a cultural critique the Enlightenment worldview.

In spite of these limitations, however, Clarke argues it is difficult not to feel admiration for the attempts of the Romantics to integrate these remote ideas within the horizon of modern thinking. He points out that their deployment of Indian thought as a critique of a certain kind of mechanistic way of thinking is of more than a passing historic interest. The impact of Romantic Orientalist on the development of comparative studies and the formation of linguistic studies was immense and constituted an important foundation for the development of Orientalist scholarship later in the century.⁵⁸ To this I would add that the Romanticism has played a seminal role in East-West integrative spirituality in America, with a lineage running from the Transcendentalists to the 1970s counterculture being saturated in Romantic themes and values. Before tracing this American lineage, however, it is essential to reflect further on the colonial context in which Romanticism occurred and consider the different readings of the Romantic narrative of “the marriage of the East-West” that characterizes, to various degrees, each of the communities I examine.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 69-70.

The Oriental Renaissance or Orientalism? Political and Socio-Cultural Contexts of East-West Spirituality

The Romantic enthusiasm for Indian literature and religion has been celebrated in Raymond Schwab's epic *The Oriental Renaissance*. In 1950, Schwab revived the term "oriental renaissance" to argue that the Romantic introduction of Indian thought into European philosophical concerns from the late eighteenth century onward amounted to a cultural revolution and renewal of the same order as that of the Renaissance of fifteenth-century Italy. He interprets the Romantic encounter with the East as primarily positive, challenging Western assumptions of intellectual superiority and ushering in new forms of consciousness and possibility.⁵⁹

However, the story of the relationship between the West and the East, of course, is not only one of religious exploration, renewal and creativity but also a shameful one of colonial exploitation and oppression. The oriental renaissance occurred during an historic period that saw the rise of the European nation-states and their economic and political domination of the world. Numerous studies have drawn attention to the ways in which oppressive and racist attitudes are only found in the historic institution of Empire but are also firmly inscribed in Western discourse on many levels. These voices argue that from the Romantics onwards, Asian religions have been commodified and expropriated in ways that reflect and reinforce imperialist expansion.⁶⁰

Most influential amongst such studies is Edward Said's *Orientalism*. First published in 1978, this text delivers a powerful critique of Western representations of the

⁵⁹ Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Re-Discovery of India and the East 1680-1880* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

⁶⁰ For a summary of these studies see Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 16-34.

Orient arguing that they consist of “a system of ideological fictions” whose purpose is to reinforce and justify Western colonial power. Said argues that the relationship between East and West in the modern period is, in the final analysis, “a relationship of power, domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony.”⁶¹ In strong contrast to Schwab, Said’s evaluation of oriental discourses, such as Romantics affirmative orientalism, is entirely negative and critical.

Said’s study was concerned with the Islamic world but a number of scholars have followed him in applying his colonial discourse analysis to Buddhism, Hinduism and Chinese religions.⁶² Particularly notable is Richard King’s *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and The Mystic East*, which draws on post-colonialism, post-structural and subaltern studies to incisively analyze the ways that Western constructions of the “mystic East” are embedded in a field of power relations and have reinforced colonial and postcolonial regimes of domination.⁶³

Most relevant for our purposes here are a number of studies that examine contemporary East-West encounters in America through a Saidian post-colonial lens.⁶⁴ In his reflections on South Asian American communities, Vijay Prashad, for example, critiques the “U.S. orientalism” evident in a lineage that runs from the Transcendentalists to the New-Age that is united by the belief that “the cultural wealth of India could transform the alienated America into a spiritual and yet material being.”⁶⁵ Prashad also notes how Indian gurus and “god-man” such as Swami Vivekananda have been complicit

⁶¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 5.

⁶² See Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 23.

⁶³ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and The Mystic East* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁶⁴ For a sardonic take on the 1960s and 1970s counterculture embrace of Asian mysticism and gurus see Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (New York: Vintage International, 1979).

⁶⁵ Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2000), 3.

in perpetuating the Romantic view of East as essentially spiritual and West as essentially materialistic. Such thinking, he argues, ignores the multitudinous realities of India and the devastation wrought on the subcontinent by capitalism and colonialism.⁶⁶

In a similar vein, Hugh Urban draws attention to the ways in which popular American appropriations of Tantra occurs in the wider context of the adaptation and exploitation of traditional religion in late capitalism. Such a process, Urban claims, is a form of neocolonialism and cultural imperialism; yet another example of the West's exploitation of the East's sacred heritage. It masks the deeper socioeconomic disparity that continues to structure relationships between East and West and ignores the forces of neocolonialism and cultural exploitation that continue to rule much of the late-capitalist global marketplace.⁶⁷

Such studies are important in redrawing attention to the undisputable historic fact that the modern Western embrace of Asian religions has been shaped to some degree by colonial concerns and ethnocentric biases.⁶⁸ They also point to the continuing insidious legacy of colonialism and cultural exploitation inherent in much of the corporate marketing of Eastern spirituality in late-capitalism.⁶⁹ However, while recognizing that orientalist discourses can only be understood adequately within the framework of colonialism, I dispute the claim that such encounters can be entirely reduced to a monolithic narrative of power and domination and that models of the "mystics East" are purely Western constructs that have solely served as a rationalization of colonial

⁶⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁷ Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 262-263.

⁶⁸ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 8.

⁶⁹ See also Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

domination. I agree rather with Clarke who interprets the range of attitudes that have evinced in the West toward the traditional religious and philosophical ideas and systems of South and East Asia in a more complex, nuanced and positive way.⁷⁰ Clarke suggests that such discourse often tends to confront the structures of Western knowledge and power and to engage with Eastern ideas in ways that are more creative, textured and reciprocal than are allowed for in Said's analysis:

Orientalism, I shall argue, cannot simply be identified with the ruling imperialist ideology, for in the Western context it represents a counter-movement, a subversive entelechy, albeit not a unified or consciously organized one, which in various ways has often tended to subvert rather than to confirm the discursive structures of imperial power.⁷¹

From a similar perspective, Jeffrey Kripal argues that while one must remain attentive to the continuing insidious legacy of colonialism in forms of religious assimilation and appropriation, it is also important to remember that Orientalism cannot be simply identified with a structure of (western) domination and (Asian) oppression. Kripal suggests rather that the mutual encounters of the West and Asia is an exceedingly complex historical, philosophical, and religious phenomenon and that through such an encounter Western thinkers often sought to challenge or subvert Western chauvinisms and ethnocentric tendencies. More specifically, Kripal suggests that the American encounter with Asian cultures brought with it major repercussions that positively and

⁷⁰ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment* 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

permanently transformed the forms of consciousness that were now available in America to individual cultural actors. From the Transcendentalists, through the counter-culture of the 1960s and 70s, to the New Age, he frames the transformation of the American soul through Asian religious worlds as a positive story of cross-cultural encounter, creative interpretation, and mutual transformation that left none of the cultures involved unaffected.⁷²

My position is similar to Kripal's although less unequivocally embracing. My reservations with his affirmative interpretation are that he tends to overplay the "mutuality" in the relationship between East and West in failing to fully acknowledge power disparities within that encounter, and that he does not interrogate fully just who are (and, more pointedly, who not are not) included, primarily for socio-economic reasons, in the category of "individual social actors" that such new forms of consciousness are actually available to.⁷³

Despite these hesitations, however, I am certainly more convinced by Kripal's reading of East-West spirituality than accounts such as Prashad and Urban's that reduce such encounters solely to socio-economics and race politics. In addition to oversimplifying the encounters, such essentially pessimistic analyses fail to acknowledge, to any significant degree, the religious creativity, phenomenologically transformative, or ontological dimensions of these integrative spiritualities. They also assume and impose a materialist metaphysics that the object of their analysis themselves dispute. As I will discuss further in my case studies and conclusion, I suggest the challenge for both the

⁷² Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Asian Religions in America syllabus," Rice University Spring 2008

⁷³ In fairness Kripal does recognize that the clientele of Esalen have been overwhelmingly white and middle-class but I would like to see him problematize this fact more. Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2007), 400-403.

practitioner and scholar of such forms of East-West spirituality is to keep both an ontological and political, transcendent and material perspective, in some form of critical tension; that is to say, to neither ignore or neglect socio-cultural or ontological realities and the complex ways they interact. At this stage, however, it is sufficient to note the contrasting theoretical analyses of East-West spiritualities, as we turn to a brief history of such lineages in America.

The “First Wave” of East-West Integrations in America

As Carl T. Jackson has shown, American contact with Asia was limited before the eighteenth-century.⁷⁴ Unitarianism can be credited with being the earliest religious group in America to favor and bring public attention to Oriental religion at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Unitarianism is a liberal Protestant denomination that is defined theologically by its rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity in favor of the belief that God is one person. Unitarianism interprets Jesus Christ as an exemplary ethical human being and moral exemplar rather than the divine Son of God. It developed and gained popularity during the Enlightenment period and shares its values of reason, ethics, tolerance and science.⁷⁵

Accordingly, Unitarians embraced those elements of Hinduism that they saw as compatible with these Enlightenment and liberal Protestant values. The focus of Unitarian interest in Asian religion began with Rammohan Roy, the founder of the Brahmo Samaj, a Hindu reform movement established in 1843 that combined values of

⁷⁴ Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought*, 1-19.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 20-35.

East and West. In a number of tracts published between 1815-1820, Roy called for a return to what he believed was the true pure monistic faith of early Hinduism and a rejection of the polytheism and idolatry that dominated later Hinduism. He was attracted to the ethical and rational teachings of Christianity and adopted a similar perspective to the Unitarians that eliminated the Trinity and miracles. On hearing of Roy's approach, American Unitarians hoped that he could be recruited to spearhead the establishment of Unitarianism in India and began to nurture close contact with him. Their goal never transpired, however, as Roy ultimately distanced himself from Unitarianism because of its privileging of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, as Kopf points out, three simple but radical ideas would continue to link the Unitarianism and Roy. The first was the notion of a liberal religion or rational faith free from metaphysics, rituals and myths. The second was the idea of social reform and the extension of human rights to all levels of society. The third was the idea of universal theistic progress or the perfectibility of mankind through the joining of rational religion and social reform.⁷⁶ Such Unitarian principles would strongly influence the universal Neo-Vedanta theology Roy fashioned.⁷⁷ Moreover, as De Michelis points out, if Roy's Neo-Vedanta was strongly influenced by Unitarianism, so was Emerson's Transcendentalism strongly influenced by Roy's Neo-Vedanta.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengali Renaissance* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1979), 3 quoted in De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 54-55.

⁷⁷ Summary of Rammohan Roy and Unitarianism is derived from Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 32-40 and De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 52-56.

⁷⁸ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 55.

Transcendentalism: The American Romantic Lineage

While Unitarians were the first group to bring Asian religions to public attention during the early years of the nineteenth-century, it was a former Unitarian minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalist movement that he pioneered that represented the first serious attempt at joining Asian philosophical/ religious teachings and Western thought.⁷⁹ As Clarke notes, during the middle years of the nineteenth-century there began to develop “one of the most remarkable and influential conjunctions of Eastern and Western ideas, associated first and foremost with the names of Emerson and Thoreau.”⁸⁰

Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were the founders and leading figures of the philosophical, cultural and literary movement known as Transcendentalism. Philosophically, Transcendentalism is defined by a belief in the essential unity and spiritual nature of the universe, a conviction of the ultimate goodness and perfectibility of man, and the supremacy of intuitive over rational thought. At the heart of Transcendentalism is a search for a universal spiritual experience that is not exclusive to any religious institution but which expresses a metaphysical truth that transcends religious creeds and dogma. In many ways, Transcendentalism can be thought of as a continuation of the European Romantic movement. Like Romanticism it developed as a reaction against disenchanted, pessimistic and conservative worldviews, in the American case Lockean materialism, utilitarianism and Calvinistic Christianity, and sought inspiration in Neo-Platonic and mystical traditions.

⁷⁹ My summary of the Transcendentalism and its encounter with the East is derived from Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Jackson, *Oriental Religions and American Thought*.

⁸⁰ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 84.

Transcendentalists also followed the Romantics in turning to the East for inspiration and affirmation. According to Carl Jackson, Emerson was the first American philosopher and public figure to attempt to reconcile Eastern and Western values and ideas.⁸¹ Hindu philosophy played an important supporting role in the thinking of Emerson, with references and concept appearing both his poems and influential essays such as “Fate”, “Illusions” and “Immortality.” Emerson found many parallels and affirmation for his major philosophical views within certain strands of Hinduism, particularly Vedanta. As an idealist, he believed that reality was essentially unitive and spiritual. Central to his philosophy was the “over-soul” a universal mind and the fundamental unity of reality that overcome distinctions between the divine and human, spirit and matter. The Vedantic doctrine of the monistic identity of Brahman with atman resonated nicely with the Emerson’s over-soul and his philosophical idealism as it had done a generation before for the German Romantics. Emerson also discussed parallels between his concept of illusion and the Hindu concept of maya and between his notions of fate and compensation and Hindu notions of karma and reincarnation. However, it must be noted that Emerson differed from Hinduism in his need to affirm the liberty and uniqueness and sacrality of the individual. Unlike Hindu monism in which the individual is subsumed, Emerson sought to maintain a space for the individual within a unitive metaphysics.

Emerson was also far from unequivocally affirming of Eastern religious traditions. He was highly critical of the ceremonial and ritual aspects of Hinduism and its caste system. He was also adverse to what he understood as Hindu quietism and resignation and what he mistook as the nihilism of the Buddhist goal of nirvana. Emerson utilized, in other words, those elements of Hinduism that reinforced his own metaphysical

⁸¹ Jackson, *Oriental Religions and American Thought*, 57-58.

assumptions and disregarded and critiqued those elements that appeared irrelevant or in opposition to it.

Reflecting on Emerson's turn East, one must also point out that his understanding was severely limited. To begin with he only had access to a limited and selective number of texts, most of which were inadequately translated, and he approached these texts not on their own terms but rather in order to assimilate their concepts to his own. Emerson was also guilty of mythologizing the East, which for him was a spiritual archetype or idea rather than a geographical historic reality. Yet for all these limitations, Emerson's influence cannot be discounted. As Jackson states, he holds a unique place in the history of American encounters with the East because he was the first figure to seriously attempt to reconcile East and West and herald a future world civilization that would be based on a fusion of East and West. In the lineage of "affirmative orientalism." Emerson wanted a synthesis between the intellectual and rational West and the spiritual and intuitive East, one in which the East was to complement rather than replace the West. He envisioned the reconciliation of the Orient and Occident, spiritualism and materialism, as a golden age that would take place in America, the new Eden, and signal the transcendental unity of all religions.

Other leading Transcendentalists were also attracted to and had an influence on the presentation of Asian religions in America. Like Emerson, Thoreau was enthusiastic about the East, although his interest was less in Eastern metaphysics than ascetic yogic methods. He has the distinction of being the first recorded American to practice yoga in 1849. While post-war Transcendentalists such as James Freeman Clarke and Samuel Johnson helped established the comparative study of Asian religion in America. Clarke's

Ten Great Religions published in 1871, for example, was a pioneering text in the study of religion and the century's most popular work on Asian religion for a general audience.⁸²

Returning to Emerson, however, as Clarke and Versluis both recognize his reading of Asian religions was strongly influenced by Neo-Platonism and perennialism. These two philosophies shape both Romantic interpretations and what has been identified as an overlapping but also independent lineage and third current in the Euro-American reception of Asian traditions, namely Western Esotericism.

Western Esoteric Lineage: Theosophy, New Thought and Metaphysical Asia

Numerous studies such as those by Schwab and Said have discussed the influence of Enlightenment, Romantic and liberal Protestant discourses on the shaping of Asian religion between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. More recent scholarship, however, has pointed to the influence of another important but neglected lineage, that of "Western esotericism."⁸³ Indeed Western esotericism can be rightly thought of as a third determinative channel through which Asian religions have been filtered through in America. As such it necessitates some sustained attention.

The academic study of Western esotericism is a relatively recent occurrence having been established by European scholars such as Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff in the 1990s.⁸⁴ Faivre locates the historical and cultural roots of esotericism to

⁸² For details of the second cycle of Transcendentalists see Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*, 235-304.

⁸³ For example, Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, Williamson, *Transcendent in America*, Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* and Kripal, *Esalen: America and The Religion of No Religion*.

⁸⁴ This summary of Western esotericism is derived from Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga* (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 9-12.

Greek and Roman antiquity. He defines esotericism as a distinct “form of thought” that is marked by four to six characteristics: (i) Correspondences: the belief that the universe is an ensemble of secrets to be decoded and that these secrets are structured along the lines of a macrocosmic-microcosmic model; (ii) Living nature: a panentheistic vision of a complex, hierarchical cosmos permeated with spiritual forces; (iii) Imagination and mediations: the possibility of mediation between the higher and lower worlds by the way of rituals and imagination, which is considered the most potent organ of gnosis; (iv) Experience of transmutation: the transformational experience of gnosis; (v) The praxis of concordance: the tendency to establish commonalities between different traditions as classically expressed in the *philosophia perennis* doctrine; and (vi) Transmission: the succession of knowledge from master to disciple by way of initiation.⁸⁵

Building on and refining Faivre, Hanegraaff draws attention to several important post-sixteenth century developments in esoteric worldviews that resulted in a distinct form of “modern esotericism.” He dates the beginnings of modern Western esotericism to the founding of the Florentine Platonic Academy in the late fifteenth century that was entrusted to the care of Marsilio Ficino and traces it to contemporary New Age forms of religiosity. Modern Esotericism is produced by the encounter of traditional esotericism with Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment processes, an encounter that resulted in the “secularization of esotericism”, which attempted to update traditional tenets and make them relevant to a modern worldview. This, Hanegraaff points out, resulted in the addition of four characteristics to those Faivre had delineated: (i) The emergence of an esoteric worldview based on causality; (ii) The study of comparative religion; (iii) The

⁸⁵ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 10-14 quoted in De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 21-23.

incorporation of evolutionary theory; and (iv) The psychologization of spirituality and the sacralization of psychology.⁸⁶

Also particularly relevant for our purposes here is Catherine Albanese's recent cultural history of a distinctively American branch of Western esotericism or what she calls American "metaphysical traditions." In a lineage stretching from colonial New England to the Californian New Age, and including traditions as diverse as Mormonism and New Thought, Albanese shows how American metaphysical traditions express a distinct American religious mentality that is characterized by four themes: mind, correspondence, energy and healing. Mind refers essentially to a spectrum of consciousness and its latent psychic cognitive capacities and correspondence to the traditional esoteric macrocosmic-microcosmic model. Energy signifies a divine and dynamic influx circulating between corresponding dimensions and emerges as a distinct metaphysical category in the early twentieth century. Healing replaces salvation as the primary soteriological trope and includes spiritual, somatic and material prosperity and wholeness. Albanese also notes how metaphysical traditions are strongly flavored by American cultural values such individualism, pluralism, anti-authoritarianism, egalitarianism, democracy and pragmatism.⁸⁷

As I will discuss, the modern esoteric worldview and those American metaphysical traditions that participated in and promoted it have played a seminal role in shaping the Euro-American assimilations of Asian religions. The unacknowledged role of modern esotericism in the construction and presentation of Hinduism in the West has been brought to attention by Elizabeth De Michelis groundbreaking study of modern

⁸⁶ Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), quoted in De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 24-27.

⁸⁷ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 1-20.

yoga, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism*. As De Michelis correctly notes, one crucial interlocutor that has been consistently overlooked in this East-West encounter is Western esotericism.⁸⁸ She laments the neglect of the Western esoteric lineage in accounts by Schwab and Mircea Eliade that dismiss esoteric traditions such as the Theosophical Society and fail to acknowledge the significance ways they have shaped modern presentations of Hinduism. Such “intellectual myopia” towards esotericism, De Michelis bemoans, has been pervasive in the study of modern and contemporary Hinduism. Recovering the esoteric influence, however, is essential as modern forms of Hinduism such as those presented through the Brahma Samaj were in dialogue and close creative contact with Western esoteric currents from 1845 onwards and have been fundamentally impacted by them.

The dialogue between American metaphysical traditions and Asian religions can be traced to the Theosophical Society, which was founded in New York in 1875 by Madam Helen Blavatsky, a Russian immigrant, and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, an American lawyer, who had met a year earlier through their mutual participation in Spiritualist circles.⁸⁹ The term theosophy means “divine wisdom” and was adopted by Blavatsky and Olcott to signify a link with the Neoplatonic and gnostic traditions of the fourth-century. The central doctrine of Theosophy is the *philosophia perennis* or the belief that all religions are expressions of a fundamental universal spiritual or gnostic wisdom. It has three stated objectives (1) To form a universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or color (2) To encourage the study of

⁸⁸ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 9-12.

⁸⁹ The summary of Theosophy and the East is derived from Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga* and Jackson, *Oriental Religions and American Thought*.

comparative religion, philosophy and science (3) To investigate unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.

The early years of the Theosophical Society were marked by an interest in Western esoteric traditions such Neo-Platonism, hermeticism, the Kabala, spiritualism and ancient Egypt was favored as a privileged place of sacred knowledge. However, after Olcott and Blavatsky travelled to India in 1878, a strong South Asian influence permeated Theosophy doctrine and Tibet and the Indian Himalayas replaced Egypt as the primary geographical repository of perennial wisdom. As Clarke notes, Blavatsky's writings became increasingly infused with Oriental ideas and were an amalgam of Buddhist philosophy, Hindu Vedanta and Western esotericism combined with contemporary evolutionary ideas. In attempting to define her ideas in Asian terms, Blavatsky made extensive use of such ideas as *karma*, *maya*, karma, reincarnation and meditation, terms which the Theosophical Society were, in large part, responsible for introducing into the European vernacular. However, while preaching a universalist philosophy, Blavatsky held Christianity in contempt and reproached it for betraying the esoteric truths preserved in the East. It was to the Orient that the West must turn in order to recover the source of true wisdom.⁹⁰

Theosophy promulgated, in other words, an essentially Westernized version of Eastern wisdom engineered for the purpose of promoting Western esoteric ideas. Although it was criticized by numerous figures of the time, its impact was significant and it proved highly effective in promoting an early form of East-West spirituality. At the height of its popularity it has over 45,000 members. It also established a well-respected reputation on the Indian sub-continent and not only contributed to an East-West counter-

⁹⁰ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 87-90.

culture in the West but also gave substantial assistance to the revival of Hinduism and Buddhism in Asia. The first American to become a Buddhist on Asian soil, Olcott, for example, helped initiate the revival of Buddhism in Ceylon. His protégé, Buddhist monk Dharmaphala, who later split from Theosophy, was instrumental in the revival of Buddhism across Asia and was one of the primary representatives of Buddhism at the influence World Parliament of Religions, in Chicago in 1893. As Stephen Prothero discusses Olcott was a major cultural broker between the Occident and Orient and was responsible for what Prothero calls a “creolization” of liberal American Protestantism and Buddhism, in which Buddhist ideas or vocabulary were filtered through the deep structures of liberal Protestantism and Western esotericism.⁹¹

Albanese examines how American metaphysical tradition such as Theosophical Society have been a major filter for the assimilation of Asian religions in America, producing what she calls “metaphysical Asia,” namely, the refashioning of Asian religious and philosophical ideas through an American metaphysical filter.⁹² She notes how in late-nineteenth century America, the imagined otherness of Asia was channeled into culturally available templates provided by liberal Protestantism and metaphysical traditions. Albanese examines how Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888 a year after she arrived in India, offered a reading of Asia that met American metaphysical requirements. In this text, Blavatsky weds Asian religious discourse with Western esotericism and Darwinian evolutionary theory to reveal the “secret doctrine” of Asia that, in turn, would provide the vocabulary for a generic metaphysical discourse well beyond Theosophical circles. In the “metaphysical Asia” produced by Blavatsky, Asian

⁹¹ Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington & Indianapolis Indiana University Press, 1996).

⁹² Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 330-393.

historical particularity was erased and ideas such as karma and reincarnation were offered as universal concepts. Albanese convincingly argues that the general American metaphysical project of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries would continue to sound themes and enact Asias that originated in the Blavatsky opus.

Another important American metaphysical tradition in the construction and dissemination of “metaphysical Asia” is New Thought. According to Carl Jackson, New Thought broadcast the doctrines of the East provided by the Theosophical Society to a much wider audience. New Thought was a loosely structured, mind-healing philosophy that originated in the United States in the nineteenth century. It is often traced to mesmeric healer, Phineas Quimby who developed a system of mental and physical healing based on the idea that all illness resides ultimately in the mind. New Thought is based on idealist philosophy and its main tenets are the inherent divinity of human beings, the spiritual nature of the universe and the human potential to access peace, health and prosperity.⁹³

As Williamson notes, New Thought was also heavily influenced by Theosophy and accepted Theosophical influenced readings of Hindu ideas such as reincarnation, samsara, and moksha. India and Western worldviews are densely interwoven in New Thought and the many groups with which it was associated. New Thought was in its heyday at the same time as Americans were introduced to religions of Asia at the World Parliament of Religion in 1893. It provided a platform for early Indian teachers in the US. When Swami Vivekananda, for example, visited in 1899-1900, he spent six months lecturing to New Thought and Unitarian groups in California.⁹⁴

⁹³ Jackson, *Oriental Religions and American Thought*, 172-173.

⁹⁴ Williamson, *Transcendent in America*, 32-34.

Western Esoteric and American metaphysical traditions, therefore, can be rightly thought of as third current or channel alongside the Enlightenment and Romanticism discourses, which it they also draw from, in the Euro-American reception of Asian religions. Not only did Western esoteric ideas theoretically influence the presentation of Asian religions by Westernized Asians and vice versa, but participants in metaphysical traditions provided the main audience and institutional support for what has been identified as the “first wave” of Asian teachers and gurus in America.⁹⁵

The World's Parliament of Religions and the First Wave of Asian Missionary Gurus

Metaphysical traditions were involved in a seminal event for Asian religions in America towards the turn of the nineteenth century, the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, held in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition in Chicago.⁹⁶ The driving force behind the parliament was Charles Carroll Bonney, a Unitarian minister who was also a follower of the esoteric Christian Emmanuel Swedenborg. Although Burrows publicized the parliament as a pluralistic event, Richard Seager has drawn attention to his liberal Protestant agenda and inclusivist approach in which Asian religions were assimilated into liberal Protestant discourse.⁹⁷

Yet, as Albanese notes, Barrows declaration that the parliament intended “to show to men, in the most impressive way, what and how many important truths the various Religions hold and teach in common” moved the event outside of liberal Protestantism

⁹⁵ See Polly Trout, *Eastern Seeds, Western Soil* (California: Mayfield Publishing, 2001).

⁹⁶ For a definitive account of the Parliament see Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁹⁷ Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen Prothero, *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 127-129.

inclusivism.⁹⁸ From a metaphysical angle, Albanese highlights another implicit agenda of the parliament, the theosophical aim of promoting perennialism under the rubric of comparative religion. There was a strong Theosophical presence among the Asian speakers and Theosophists themselves, along with Christian Scientists, were given a separate “denominational congress.”⁹⁹ She claims, “Something akin to the immanent theology of Swedenborg and most of the metaphysicians ran through the organizing ideology of the entire World’s Parliament event.”¹⁰⁰

The parliament was unique in being the first event on American soil in which Asian teachers and gurus represented their own traditions. Among the Asian religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Confucianism were represented with Buddhism having the largest contingent. Those speakers who were to have arguably the most impact on Asian religions in America after the parliament, were the Theravadin Buddhist monk and Olcott’s Theosophical protégé, Anagarika Dharmapala, the reform-minded Japanese Zen abbot Shaku Soen, and the Hindu Vedanta representative and first Hindu missionary to the US, Swami Vivekananda.¹⁰¹ The papers presented by these three speakers clearly demonstrated the influence of Enlightenment values. Dharmapala presented a westernized picture of Buddhism as compatible with science and evolutionary theory.¹⁰² Similarly, Soen insisted that, “Buddha’s teaching are in exact agreement with the doctrines of modern science.”¹⁰³ Vivekananda promoted Hinduism as a “universal religion” that was dedicated to the perfectibility of man and claimed that

⁹⁸ Barrows quoted in Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 334.

⁹⁹ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 323-334.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹⁰¹ See Tweed and Prothero, *Asian Religions in America*, 130-140.

¹⁰² Anagarika Dharmapala, “The World’s Debt to Buddha” in Tweed and Prothero, *Asian Religions in America*, 133-137.

¹⁰³ Soyen Shaku, “Reply to a Christian Critic” in *ibid.*, 137-139.

differences in religions could be accounted to the same truth manifesting in difference circumstances.¹⁰⁴

Prior to the parliament, the American encounter with Asian religions was a literary affair. Vivekananda and Soen, however, stayed in the US and initiated lineages that would determinatively shape East-West landscapes. They, and the Asian teachers who arrived closely behind them, have been identified as the “first wave” of Asian gurus in America.¹⁰⁵ To get a taste of how these “first wave” gurus presented Asian religions, I want to look in more detail at the key figures of Vivekananda and Soen.

Swami Vivekananda and Neo-Vedanta in America

Narendranath Datta, the future Swami Vivekananda, was born in 1863 in Calcutta. In contrast to his mother who was known for her “deep and traditional piety,” his father was described as having “rational and progressive ideas” and Datta received a British education through which he became well versed in Western philosophy.¹⁰⁶ He joined the Hindu reform movement the Brahma Samaj in his twenties and became a disciple of the Bengali guru Ramakrishna who would later be adopted as the spiritual head of Vivekananda’s Neo-Vedantic Ramakrishna movement. Vivekananda significantly departed from Ramakrishna, however, in his desire to reconcile Western concerns for social reform with the ontological monism of Advaita Vedanta.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Swami Vivekananda “Hinduism” in *ibid.*, 130-133.

¹⁰⁵ For further details of first wave of Hindu gurus see Trout *Eastern Seeds, Western Soil*.

¹⁰⁶ For biographical details of Vivekananda see De Michelis *The History of Modern Yoga*, 91-110.

¹⁰⁷ For an illuminating comparison of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda’s views of the relationship between mysticism and ethics see Jeffrey J. Kripal “Seeing Inside and Outside the Goddess: The Mystical and the Ethical in the Teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda,” in *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical*

After his successful reception at the World Parliament of Religions, Vivekananda stayed and toured around America between the years of 1893-95, earning himself the distinction of being the first missionary Hindu guru in US. Far from teaching classical Hinduism, however, Vivekananda presented a modern form of Hinduism known as “Neo-Vedanta” or “practical Vedanta” that combines Indian monistic mysticism with Western social activism. As many scholars have discussed, in order to make it palatable to Western audience, Vivekananda demythologized Hinduism and his version of Neo-Vedanta was markedly absent of the devotionism that one finds in the teachings of his guru, Ramakrishna. He presents Hinduism as universal and scientific and a viable choice for modern Western people.¹⁰⁸

Vivekananda’s teaching draws from classic texts such as the *Upanishads* and Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* but re-models Hinduism based on Enlightenment, Romantic and esoteric discourses. The basic message of his Neo-Vedanta is that all religions are different paths to the same goal, which conveniently is identified with the absolute monism of Vedanta. Yet while affirming the monism of Vedanta, Vivekananda adds numerous Western values such as universalism, science, ethics and tolerance, into his Neo-Vedanta philosophy. As Williamson notes, motivated by the conviction that the West needed the spiritual renewal provided by the East and the East needed the humanitarian activity of the West, Vivekananda’s intention, like that of Roy’s and Emerson’s before him, was to create something new that united the best of both cultures.

Status of Mysticism, eds., Jeffrey J. Kripal and William G. Barnard (New York and London: Seven Bridges Press, 2002), 230-264.

¹⁰⁸ See for example, Carl Jackson, *Vedanta for the West* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

Accordingly, she reads Vivekananda as the founder of the first Hindu-inspired meditation movement rather than classic Hinduism in the US.¹⁰⁹

Indeed Vivekananda played a foundational role in the lineage of East-West spirituality both theoretically and institutionally. As De Michelis uncovers he creatively combined numerous western esoteric discourses with classical Hindu concepts to produce a “quasi-materialist Naturphilosophie” that was re-presented to the West as an exposition of classical Hinduism.¹¹⁰ Such a teaching resonated with his audience, which was drawn largely from liberal “spiritual seekers” populating New Thought and Theosophical circles. This Neo-Vedanta/metaphysical lineage would continue to shape popular understanding of Asian spirituality during what I’m identifying as the “second wave” period from the 1950s-1970s, particularly through the literary products of Aldous Huxley, Gerald Heard and Christopher Isherwood who all had strong ties with one of Vivekananda successors, the charismatic and liberal-leaning Swami Prabhavananda who ran the Vedanta Society of South California until his death in 1976.¹¹¹

Shaku Soen, D.T Suzuki and Experiential Zen in America

A similar picture emerges when we turn to the first wave of Buddhist teachers in America. Buddhism did not initially capture the Euro-American imagination in the same way as Hinduism mainly due to the fact that between the years 1840-1870 European scholars portrayed it as atheist, nihilistic and passive. Around the 1870s, however, by

¹⁰⁹ Williamson, *Transcendent in America*, 34.

¹¹⁰ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 91-148.

¹¹¹ See Jackson, *Vedanta for the West*, 121-123 and Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, 87-94.

separating Buddhist philosophy and ethics, liberal Protestants found a way to reconcile what they saw as Buddhist nihilism with their commitment to theism, activism, optimism and individualism. Due in large part to interest from the Unitarians and the Free Religious Association, the last decades of the century saw a remarkable reversal of fortune and the emergence of a “vogue of Buddhism” in America. During this time, the Buddha was presented as a great reformer, the “Luther of his day” and Buddhism as the “Protestantism of the East” because of its rejection of the antiquated caste system and its focus on individual salvation. In a typology that supports the three main influences on East-West spirituality identified in this chapter, Thomas Tweed discriminates three distinct types of Buddhist converts during this period: Esoterics, Romantics and Rationalists.¹¹²

It was against this background that Soen would initiate the first Zen Buddhist lineage in the US. As David McMahan notes, Soen was among a number of early Western admirers and modernizing Asians who tried to separate the empirical and pragmatic philosophy of Buddhism from what they considered to be its idolatrous and superstitious elements.¹¹³ In the post-Meiji period, many Japanese adherents of Zen advocated the modernization and revitalization of the tradition and some saw the West, and especially US, as the place where this could flower.

Soen, the first American Zen missionary to America and the first to publish a book on Zen in English, set the stage for how Zen would be interpreted in America. As McMahan discusses, Soen presented Buddhism in a very modern light. He attempted to

¹¹² Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844-1912* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

¹¹³ David McMahan, “Repacking Zen for the West,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, eds., Charles Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 218-229.

align the Buddhism with the scientific spirit of the times, giving it an intellectual credibility that was eroding in Christianity among the intellectual elite. He displayed an empirical orientation, presenting karma as “natural law” and “moral law” that led to an enlightenment in which all great men –including Jesus Christ and George Washington— participate to some extent but which the Buddha embodies most completely. These themes would set the tone for the interpretation of Zen and Buddhism in the West.¹¹⁴

Also important was Soen’s friendship with Paul Carus, a Buddhist sympathizer and the editor of the Open Court Press that published a number of early books on Buddhism such as *The Gospel of The Buddha* in 1894.¹¹⁵ In 1897, Soen sent one of his senior students and lay disciples who had also been his translator at the World Parliament, D.T. Suzuki to live and work with Carus.¹¹⁶ A prolific writer and lecturer, more than anyone Suzuki furthered the process begun by Soen of attempting to extrapolate the essence of Zen from the religious institution of Buddhism. He presented Zen as the pure experience of an unmediated encounter with reality and a spontaneous living in harmony with that reality. He identified Zen with a universal mystical experience that was at the heart of all religious traditions. Rather than an historical religious tradition, therefore, Suzuki presented Zen as an ahistorical essence of spirituality.¹¹⁷

Like Vivekananda, Suzuki also had links with the metaphysical traditions. His wife, Beatrice Erskine Lane was a Theosophist and the couple regularly moved in Theosophical and metaphysical circles. Suzuki’s presentation of Zen also hugely

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 220.

¹¹⁵ See Paul Carus, “The Dharma” in Tweed and Prothero, *Asian Religions in America*, 148-151.

¹¹⁶ For an account of their time together see Rick Fields, *How The Swans Came To The Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1992), 136-140.

¹¹⁷ McMahan, “Repacking Zen for the West.” 221-222.

influenced Alan Watts who met Suzuki while he was lecturing in England and who would help disseminate Suzuki's experiential Zen to a wider audience in the late 1950s and 1960s.¹¹⁸ Similarly, influential students of Suzuki's such as famous psychoanalysts Eric Fromm and Karen Horney and artists such as John Cage would move Zen further into a psychological and experiential direction.¹¹⁹ Through these different cultural channels, and his many books, Suzuki's experiential and mystical presentation of Zen would play an influential role in American understandings of enlightenment in the 1960s and 1970s.

These snapshots of Vivekananda and Suzuki hopefully give a clear sense of the ways in which the first wave of Asian missionary gurus draw from Enlightenment, Romantic and esoteric discourses to construct and promote integrative East-West forms of spirituality that were mistaken by their audience as classical or traditional expressions of Asian religions. As we shall see these integrative forms were then inherited and extended in the "second wave" period between the 1960s and 70s, decades that witnessed an explosion of interest in Asian religions and a blossoming of East-West spirituality.

The "Second Wave" of East-West: Beats, Hippies, and the Human Potential Movement

As Clarke reports, during the twentieth-century the West was beset by a period of deep cultural questioning. The modern world was characterized by social, cultural, and intellectual transformations that produced a sense of existential uncertainty expressed in terms like "anomie" and "alienation," and led to a questioning and unprecedented

¹¹⁸ Fields, *How the Swans Came To The Lake*, 186-188.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 204-206.

fragmentation of traditional Western beliefs and values. Above all, the century witnessed a collapse of spiritual authority and a crisis of religious faith. For many, Western worldviews were simply seen as not working any more, a situation that encouraged the exploration of Eastern religions to find an alternative vision.¹²⁰

The quest for East alternative worldviews was particularly evident during the decades of the late 1950s to the 70s, a period in which what I am identifying as “the second wave” of East-West integrations flourished. A number of socio-cultural shifts occurred during this time that facilitated the turn Eastwards. These included an increasing questioning of traditional Western beliefs and values, a profound disillusionment with the mainline churches, the lifting of the 1965 Asian immigration barrier, and the appearance of charismatic Asian gurus and talented Indologists in the university, such as Mircea Eliade and Frederick Spiegelberg.¹²¹

Themes of a Western spiritual crisis and the quest for an alternative Eastern vision in the works of literary figures such as Aldous Huxley and Herman Hesse had a powerful impact on the imagination of audiences from the 1950s onward. This period witnessed a rapid growth of interest in Eastern ideas amongst both intellectuals and an educated public as evident in the emergence of the Beat Generation in the 1950s. The Beat movement, which centered on bohemian literary and artist communities in the USA, and was inspired by the American transcendentalists and the existential movement in France, played an important role in promoting Eastern mysticism as a means to attain personal authenticity and creativity. The writings of figures such as Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg embraced to various degrees elements of Buddhism, Hinduism and

¹²⁰ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 96-97.

¹²¹ Kripal, *Esalen: American and the Religion of No Religion*, 127.

Taoism.¹²² The Beats were particularly attracted to Zen Buddhism with its emphasis on spontaneity and immediate enlightenment. Snyder, who had first encountered Zen Buddhism through the writings of D.T. Suzuki, drew on Buddhism, Taoism, Native American and ecological models.¹²³ Kerouac came to Buddhism through Thoreau's *Walden* and, interspersed with the Catholicism, which he would fully return to at the end of his life, Mahayana Buddhist concepts and scriptural references littered many of his works, such as his novel *Dharma Bums* (1958).¹²⁴

The vision of Buddhism that appears in Beat writings is, therefore, far from an orthodox one, being refracted through the Beat values of spontaneity, freedom, anti-authoritarianism and ecstatic experience. As such, it has been rightly pointed out that the Beats, for the most part, misunderstood or distorted traditional Buddhism. Charles Prebish, for example, accuses them of ignoring “the very basis of Zen monastic life and its incumbent discipline”, and of transposing the ‘ecstatic quality’ of Zen experience into inappropriate alcoholic terms.¹²⁵ Rather than being a portrayal of classical Buddhism, then the Beats assimilation of Buddhism is better appreciated as a creative fusion of East-West within the metaphysical Asia lineage.

The Beat movement was a precursor to the counter-cultural of the 1960s and 70s, which witnessed a flowering of East-West integrations. As Clarke notes, the hippie phenomena of these decades was in many ways a continuation and apotheosis of the Beat movement. At the socio-cultural level it represented a counter-culture that reacted

¹²² Carole Tonkinson, *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1995).

¹²³ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 103-104.

¹²⁴ Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Viking Press, 1958).

¹²⁵ Charles Prebish, *American Buddhism* (Massachusetts: Duxbury Press, 1979), quoted in Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 104.

against the standardization and competitive materialism of conventional culture, at the philosophical level a radical critique of scientific materialism, and at the religious level a search for a new spiritual enlightenment. Fundamental to this spiritual quest was the assimilation of Eastern philosophies and practices with books such as the *I Ching*, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Bhagavad-Gita* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* making their appearance in Western bookshops.¹²⁶

A key figure straddling the Beat and hippie movements was Alan Watts. Thomas Tweed and Stephen Prothero identify him as “perhaps the most influential popularizer of Asian religions of his generation.” Watts referred to his own hybrid form of spirituality as “between Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism, with a certain leaning towards Vedanta and Catholicism, or rather the Orthodox Church of Eastern Europe.” He was a prolific writer and charismatic lecturer of Eastern religions and his influential translations of Zen and Taoist ideas into Western discourses, in best-selling text such as *Psychotherapy: East and West*, had a wide impact.¹²⁷

Watts also participated in another popular counter-culture gateway to Asian religions and East-West integrations: the psychedelic movement.¹²⁸ Links between psychedelics and Asian mysticism can be traced to Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* in which he compared his experience on mescaline to Buddhist, Hindu and Christian soteriological goals.¹²⁹ The relationship between psychedelic and mystical experience was further explored by a group of Harvard psychology professors, Timothy

¹²⁶ Ibid., 104.

¹²⁷ Williamson, *Transcendent in America*, 43-44.

¹²⁸ Alan W. Watts, *Psychotherapy: East & West* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1961).

¹²⁹ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception: Heaven and Hell* (London and New York: Harper Collins, 1979).

Leary, Ralph Metzner and Richard Alpert.¹³⁰ These figures found parallels to their drug-induced altered states of consciousness in the mystical traditions of Asia and turned to Asian religious texts to provide a framework for their mystical ventures on LSD. Drawing heavily from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, they produced a popular manual called *The Psychedelic Experience* that compared the psychedelic journey to the Tibetan Buddhist bardo stages between death and rebirth and, in doing so, introduced many young people to a psychedelic-flavored Buddhism.

Also significant was the journey of Alpert from Harvard professor to American Hindu guru. After his psychedelic experimentation resulted in the loss of his university position, Alpert travelled to India in 1967 where he became a devotee of a Hindu guru called Neem Karoli Baba and was given the new name of Baba Ram Dass. Ram Dass returned to America and has been very influential in popularizing a Hindu-inspired spirituality. He published several books including the counter-culture classic *Be Here Now*, which features Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist concepts and psychologized discourse and exemplifies the type of integrative East-West spirituality of the period.¹³¹ This widely read book first published in 1971, had sold nearly a million copies by the time of its forty-third printing in 2001.¹³²

Moreover, as Lola Williamson points out, when Ram Dass told his peers that meditation and not drugs offered a path to higher consciousness many of his generation listened to him.¹³³ Without doubt many of those who had come through the psychedelic

¹³⁰ For details of psychedelic explorations see Neville Drury, *The Human Potential Movement* (Dorset: Element Books, 1989), 52-70.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 37-39.

¹³¹ Ram Dass, *Be Here Now* (New Mexico: The Lama Foundation, 1961).

¹³² Christopher Key Chapple, "Raja Yoga and the Guru," in *Gurus in America*, eds., Thomas A. Forsthoeffel and Cynthia Ann Humes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 16.

¹³³ Williamson, *Transcendent in America*, 46.

era and now wanted non-drug ways of attaining higher consciousness turned East for its rich knowledge of mysticism and spirituality.¹³⁴ Like Ram Dass, some of these figures travelled to Asia in the 60s and 70s and brought back the spiritual teachings and practices they found there. Many American Buddhist teachers, who trained in Asia, for example, had their first glimpse of enlightenment through psychedelic states.¹³⁵

The Second Wave of Asian Missionary Gurus

The second-wave of East-West integrations was not limited to Euro-Americans figure however. The passing of the 1965 immigration act saw an influx of Asian gurus and teachers into America. Just as Vivekananda and D.T. Suzuki had done earlier, such gurus promoted an essentially modernized and westernized vision of Asian enlightenment traditions that placed a universal mystical experience at the core of all religions and framed meditation techniques as scientific tools for accessing higher states of consciousness.

As Cynthia Humes and Thomas Forsthoefel note, those Indian gurus who came to America brought a conceptual cultural matrix that interfaced with the dominant American matrix.¹³⁶ Such gurus rarely presented a traditional form of Hinduism but rather adapted it in various creative ways to be more suitable for an American audience. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, for example, the founder of the Transcendental Meditation Movement was

¹³⁴ Drury, *The Human Potential Movement*, 91.

¹³⁵ Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey eds., *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002).

¹³⁶ Forsthoefel and Humes, *Gurus in America*, 1-13. They trace the 'second wave' of Hindu gurus in America, the first being the seminal transmission that began with Swami Vivekananda at the World Parliament of Religion in 1893.

skilled at adapting Hinduism to his American audience, consciously marketing a spiritual movement less bound by culture or ethnicity. Humes demonstrates how he creatively used the universalism implied by Advaita Vedanta to thrust Hinduism into the global marketplace of ideas. Maharishi taught Americans that classical programs of renunciation could be discarded and “cosmic consciousness” freed of its cultural baggage could be attained by the simple recital of a manta.¹³⁷ Another skilled popularizer of Asian mysticism was the Indian philosophy professor turned guru Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh who was known later in life simply as Osho. Osho captured the imagination of numerous western devotees through his iconoclastic brand of spirituality that combined Asian mysticism, Western depth psychology, material wealth and sexual enjoyment. As Hugh B. Urban acknowledges, Osho developed a unique and successful brand of “Neo-Tantra” or “religionless religion” and was one of the most important Asian figures in the transmission of Tantra to the West.¹³⁸

Mention should also be made of Haridas Chaudhuri, an Indian philosopher and follower of Sri Aurobindo, who had elaborated a vision of complementary Eastern and Western spiritual and cultural values. In 1951, Chaudhuri was invited to teach, alongside Watts, at the newly formed American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco. Shortly after his arrival, he founded the Cultural Integration Fellowship to promote his the integration of the unique values of East and West and this center would serve as the first port of call for many visiting Indian gurus in the 1960s. After the American Academy folded due to financial constraints, Chaudhuri began another academic institute that would eventually morph into the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). CIIS

¹³⁷ Cynthia Anne Humes “Maharshi Mahesh Yogi: Beyond the TM Technique,” in *Gurus in America*, eds., Forsthoeffel and Humes eds., 55-80.

¹³⁸ Hugh B. Urban, “Osho, From Sex Guru to Guru of the Rich,” in *ibid.*, 169-192.

has been a major center for integrating Eastern mysticism and Western depth psychology and many of its faculty have been active in the Asian-inspired transpersonal movement.¹³⁹ Chaudhuri offered an early articulation of the “integral,” which, as we shall see in the chapter on Cohen, has come to prominence in contemporary integrations. Jeffrey Kripal describes his system as “an artful synthesis of Aurobindo’s Tantric yoga, evolutionary biology, the Western practice of social reform, and psychoanalysis.”¹⁴⁰

From the Human Potential Movement to Transpersonal Psychology

Two regular visitors to the Cultural Integration Fellowship, Stanford graduates, Michael Murphy and Richard Price would also play a seminal role in fostering East-West integrations. In 1962, Murphy and Price founded the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. As Kripal notes, Murphy envisioned Esalen as an Aurobindoan marriage of East and West; a type of intellectual ashram where Western and Eastern thinkers and practitioners could meet and fuse the best of both cultural worlds. It would also birth the Human Potential movement, which was central in translating Eastern religions in the West. The title “human potential” was supplied by Aldous Huxley, whose 1944 text *The Perennial Philosophy* laid the early metaphysical foundation for Esalen and the Human Potential movement.¹⁴¹ There are different forms of perennialism but the basic belief is that the same mystical experience or ultimate reality—in Huxley’s case a Neo-Vedantic

¹³⁹ Vern Haddick ed., *Unity in Diversity: 50 Years of Cultural Integration and More* (San Francisco: Cultural Integration Fellowship, 2004).

¹⁴⁰ Kripal, *Esalen*, 480.

¹⁴¹ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy: An Interpretation of the Great Mystics, East and West* (London and New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

monism—lay at the core of all religious traditions.¹⁴² A place of spiritual and psychological eclecticism and experimentation, Esalen would host numerous intellectual, scientific, artistic and religious figures including key figures involved in East-West integrations, such as Huxley, Watts, and Chaudhuri.

Yet just as it drew liberally from the traditions of the East, Esalen was also deeply committed to the Western values of democracy, individualism and pluralism as evident in its three basic ground rules: (i) No single individual or tradition would be allowed to dominate; (ii) religious dogma would be treated metaphorically; as psychology in nature and never taken literally; and (iii) Religious authoritarianism would be rejected in favor of democratic visions. Kripal reads Esalen as a unique American mystical tradition; a utopian experiment suspended between the ontological revelations of Asian mystical traditions and the democratic, scientific, and pluralists revolutions of modernity.¹⁴³

Esalen provided a venue for workshops and seminars by many of the major figures associated with humanistic psychology. Humanistic psychology is presented as the “third force of psychology” and is, in large part, a protest against the limitations of earlier psychoanalytic and behavioral schools. It owes its development to the efforts of Abraham Maslow and Anthony Sutich who together began the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* in 1961 and the American Association of Humanistic Psychology in 1963. The aim of humanistic psychology was to focus on the higher potentials of human beings. Maslow advanced a “hierarchy of needs” model which culminated in the “being-values” of “self-actualization.” “Self-actualizers” have access to “peak experiences,” a generic category that includes the type of unitive mystical experience associated with Asian

¹⁴² Kripal, *Esalen*, 87.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

religion. Maslow's distinction between "mystical" and "institutional" forms of religion further reinforced the decontextualization of Asian mysticism from its religious and cultural matrix.¹⁴⁴

As Clarke notes, while the major proponents of the humanistic psychology such as Maslow, Rollo May and Carl Rogers, did not study Eastern religion closely, the whole flavor of their enterprise, with its emphasis on self-actualization and the exploration of higher realms of consciousness has an Eastern tang.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, as Neville Drury points out Sutich brought a profound interest in spirituality and mysticism to the humanistic field. He had a long-standing interest in Eastern and Western mysticism, was particularly influenced by Swami Ashokananda of the San Francisco Vedanta Society, and was widely read in the fields of yoga, Vedanta, Theosophy and Christian Science.¹⁴⁶

Influenced by Huxley and Watts, Sutich increasingly felt the need to blend humanistic psychology and Asian mysticism. This resulted in the emergence of the "fourth force" of transpersonal psychology in 1969. As the term suggests, transpersonal psychology refers to states beyond the personal ego. It seeks to broaden the scope of traditional psychology by incorporating mystical states from the wisdom traditions of the East. In an early description of transpersonal psychology, Sutich states its objective as the exploration and cultivation of higher stages of consciousness including self-transcendence, mystical experience, and unitive consciousness.¹⁴⁷

Transpersonal psychology has borrowed heavily from Eastern traditions and their sophisticated cartographies of consciousness and contemplative techniques. As Warwick

¹⁴⁴ Abraham Maslow, *Being, Religious Values, and Peak Experiences* (London and New York: Penguin Compass, 1970).

¹⁴⁵ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 158-159.

¹⁴⁶ Drury, *The Human Potential Movement*, 34-35.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-39.

Fox notes “thinkers with interest in transpersonal states of being have generally felt it necessary to look to Eastern thought as a source of conceptual language, theoretical models, and practical guidance.” Ken Wilber, one of the early leading theoreticians of transpersonal psychology, describes his work as the “psychology perennis”, an integration of Eastern wisdom traditions with western psychology in order to produce a “full-spectrum” model of human development. Wilber’s transpersonal “spectrum of consciousness” is a prime example of East-West integration: it advances a perennial philosophy, privileges nondual mysticism and offers a techno-scientific approach to accessing the higher states of consciousness.¹⁴⁸

The Homogenizing and Decontextualization of the Enlightenment Traditions

As Williamson notes, what figures like Huxley, Watts and Wilber did was to promote a perennial vision of the mystical and transcendent East that essentially ignored historical disputes and philosophical differences between and within Asian traditions. Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism at this time, she correctly recognizes, were often viewed in the American public imagination as if they exist outside of cultural and sociological realities. Asian gurus teachers who came to the West and presented only the meditative practices of their traditions, calling them empirical or scientific, also reinforced this. One of the results of this decontextualization of meditative practices from their traditional context is that the different Asian traditions that arrived in America in the twentieth century have become homogenized in the minds of many Westerners.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 159.

¹⁴⁹ Williamson, *Transcendent in America*, 44.

Such a view is continuous with the first wave of Asian-inspired American spirituality. The Theosophical Society had always mixed Hinduism and Buddhism so that both became rather nebulous terms. The very different meditation traditions that exist in Japan, Tibet, India and Southeast Asia were often lumped together as “wisdom of the East” or the “enlightenment traditions.” This, Williamson speculates, may be how the term “enlightenment” widely used by followers of Hindu-inspired meditation movements even though it is a Buddhist term came into use. The different philosophical systems were reduced to a common denominator—the ultimate mystical experience of enlightenment—and in their quest for this enlightenment experience, individuals indiscriminately drew on many different Asian systems.¹⁵⁰

A related point is made by De Michelis who notes that in the western “cultic milieu” it is not Buddhism and Hinduism in their totality that are distributed but rather the Neo-Buddhist or Neo-Vedantic versions of them. These modern versions represent both religions as essentially spiritual and mystical and the more complex and culturally layered religious contents that are rooted in the traditions classical periods are either discarded or over-simplified. Most westerner practitioners, however, have misidentified these modernized versions as representative of historic Buddhism or Hinduism.¹⁵¹

As I will show in my case studies, each of the communities I examine inherits this modernized perennial understanding of “enlightenment” the “Asian enlightenment traditions.” Indeed it is during the decades of the 1960s and 70s that two of the three traditions I explore took shape. Spirit Rock grew out of a California meditation group that began in the early 70s and Hameed Ali, the founder of the Diamond Approach, was a

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵¹ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 73.

student of Claudio Naranjo, who ran workshops at Esalen before starting his own psychospiritual group in Berkeley. The main point to note here is that the Asia they first encounter is already a westernized and modernized Asia, a hybrid East-West fusion. As we shall see, this will shape contemporary integrations, which can be understood as both continuing and reacting against the modernization process.

Chapter Two

After the Ecstasy, the Laundry? The Domestication of the Dharma in West Coast Vipassana Buddhism

In his series of popular American Buddhist texts, Jack Kornfield, former Theravadin monk and founding member of the American Insight Meditation Society, calls for an “embodied enlightenment” that integrates profound meditative attainment with the insights of western psychology and the challenges of daily household life.¹⁵² Kornfield has been at the forefront of a movement within American Buddhism that is committed to integrating the enlightenment teachings of Buddhism with the humanistic, democratic and pluralistic values of the European Enlightenment. Within this movement there has been a reconfiguration of the Buddhist goal of enlightenment as a transcendental condition that demands a renunciation of the world to an embodied enlightenment that affirms everyday life in the world as a site for awakening. Supporters of this integrative approach defend their innovations as “skilful means” that overcome the limitations of traditional Buddhism, such as sexism, hierarchy and dogmatism, and make it more accessible and relevant to contemporary western practitioners.

The domestication of the dharma seen within such developments, however, has been subject to a number of critiques from both within and outside the Buddhist communities. While practitioners might claim that their innovations improve traditional

¹⁵² Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993) and Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (New York: Bantam Books, 2000).

Buddhism by making it “nonsectarian” and “psychologically astute,” Stephen Prothero declares that they have merely transformed a religion deeply suspicious of the self into a vehicle of self-absorption. Prothero decries what he dubs as “Boomer Buddhism,” accusing it of being diluted, commercial and accommodating Buddhist practice to the “banalities of contemporary American life.”¹⁵³ In a related vein, Helen Tworok, editor of the popular Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*, has cast suspicion on what she views as the contemporary denigration of enlightenment, “Yet enlightenment—oddly enough—has become all but a dirty word. . . . The quest for enlightenment has been derided of late as the romantic and mythic aspiration of antiquated patriarchal monasticism.”¹⁵⁴ Tworok laments that the pursuit of enlightenment, traditionally the pinnacle of the Buddhist quest, has been replaced by an approach that emphasizes the importance of awareness in everyday householder life. From these perspectives, therefore, contemporary attempts to integrate enlightenment with everyday life have resulted merely in a mediocre and compromised approach to practice that co-opts traditional forms of Buddhism to the materialistic values of American middle-class culture.

What then are we to make of the contemporary integrative ethos in American Buddhism? Should we dismiss the domestication of the dharma as a dilution of traditional Buddhist practice and goals? Or should we appreciate innovations as aiming to provide a more pragmatic “skilful means” approach to Buddhist practice in (post)modern western culture? This chapter will explore these questions through a detailed analysis of one prominent strand within American Buddhism—what I identify as

¹⁵³ Stephen Prothero, “Boomer Buddhism,” *Salon.Com*, February 2001.
<http://archive.salon.com/books/feature/2001/02/26/buddhism/index.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Helen Tworok, *Zen In America: Five Teachers and the Search for an American Buddhism* (New York: Kodansha International, 1994), 258.

“West Coast Vipassana Buddhism”—that has been at the forefront of contemporary innovations. I specify west coast Vipassana because as I will discuss, the east coast Insight community, centrally located in Barre, Massachusetts, has been more hesitant about certain west coast developments. Through a focus on the major base of west coast Vipassana, namely, Spirit Rock meditation center, in Woodacre, California, two affiliated Spirit Rock Insight groups and a number of key representative texts, I will examine and evaluate some of the major structural and thematic developments initiated by west coast Vipassana Buddhism.¹⁵⁵

Map and Methodology

The debate over contemporary American Buddhist innovations is often framed as a conflict between traditional and modern forms of Buddhism. However, as I will discuss, this is somewhat misleading because the “traditional” Southeast Asian Theravadin teachers of the American Insight community are themselves part of a movement that has been identified as “Buddhist modernism” and that has been differentiated from traditional or historic Theravadin Buddhism.¹⁵⁶ The first section of this chapter aims therefore to clear the ground by clarifying between the different strands of Theravada Buddhism at play in the debate. Following George Bond, I distinguish between three developmental phases of Theravada Buddhism: Canonical, Traditional and

¹⁵⁵ I will capitalize Vipassana when referring to the community to delineate it from the practice of vipassana.

¹⁵⁶ This is also the case for the related debate within Zen Buddhism. See Robert H. Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience,” *Numen* 42, no. 3 (1995a), 228-283.

Modernist.¹⁵⁷ I then move to a more detailed analysis of the two immediate Theravadin lineages of the American Insight community: the Burmese tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw and the Thai Forest tradition of Ajahn Chah. Distinguishing between the preceding forms of Theravada is, I will show, essential to understanding and evaluating west coast developments.

The next section of the chapter offers a detailed description of the structural and thematic innovations affected within west coast Vipassana Buddhism. I discuss the beginnings of the American Insight community with the establishment of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts. Next, I trace how the wishes of a number of Insight community members to create a “wider dharma stream” that focused more on the issue of integrating meditation practice with daily household life resulted in the founding of Spirit Rock meditation center. I offer a detailed description of the organizational context and general ethos and teaching format of Spirit Rock and then turn to a close reading of the major innovative themes that have emerged alongside traditional Theravada teachings within west coast Vipassana Buddhism.

The final section of the chapter is concerned with evaluating west coast Vipassana developments. I consider a number of critiques leveled against these innovations from both within and outside Buddhist communities. The primary objection is that American Vipassana Buddhist innovations reflect a corruption of authentic traditional Buddhist practice by western Romantic, humanistic, individualistic and psychological values. While acknowledging the influence of these modern western discourses, I make a case for the legitimacy of certain west coast developments, namely the inclusion of the

¹⁵⁷ George Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Response* (Columbia: University of South Carolina. 1988).

personal self and the attempt to integrate meditation with everyday life, on pragmatic and ethical grounds. Finally, I borrow from Jeffrey J. Kripal's recent work on Esalen to creatively frame west coast innovations as reflecting a distinctively American Tantric orientation with Tantra here referring not to historic practices of Tantric Buddhism but rather a broad spiritual perspective that insists on the essential unity of the transcendent and immanent.

Methodologically, I combine textual analysis and ethnography. I have conducted participant-observation at Spirit Rock and related Insight events and affiliated groups in the Bay Area for over a period of four years. Given the decentralized and deinstitutionalized nature of the American Insight community collecting demographic data and information on participants is a challenge. While I was unable to collect any large-scale demographic information, my participation at a range of events gave me insight into the background, motivations and concerns of American Insight students. My fieldwork also includes interviews and informal conversations with Spirit Rock and IMS teachers, and Spirit Rock community leaders.¹⁵⁸

Three Developmental Phases of Theravada Buddhism: Canonical, Traditional and Modernist

American Insight teachers and participants often contrast “traditional” Theravada—using this designator to refer to their immediate South-Asian lineages—with their own “modern” adaptations and innovations. However, framing American developments solely in terms of tensions between traditional and modern perspectives is

¹⁵⁸ Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone during May-August 2008.

misleading because the “traditional” Southeast Asian Theravadin teachers of the American Insight movement are themselves part of a movement that has been variously identified as “Buddhist modernism” or “revival or reformist Buddhism” and that has been differentiated from traditional or historic Theravadin Buddhism. Untangling the different strands of Theravada Buddhism is necessary for a more nuanced hermeneutics of west coast developments because, as I will show, while west coast Vipassana has, to a large degree, continued and radicalized the modernization process initiated by its Asian predecessors, in certain areas it can also be interpreted as recovering, although now cast in a modern register, certain traditional concerns and aspects that were neglected within the Asian Buddhist modernist movements. Hence what appears at first glance to be an increasing departure from traditional Buddhism is a more complicated process that involves both an extension and a critique of Asian Buddhist modernization and reformation processes. Similar trends have been respectably noted by David McMahan and Jeff Wilson, who show that the Euro-American adaptation of Buddhism is not a progressive linear movement away from traditional Asian elements towards phenomena seen as more American and modern, but increasingly demonstrates an interest in more traditional elements discarded in the initial modernization process.¹⁵⁹

The first task at hand, therefore, is to differentiate between the different strands of Theravada Buddhism. In the following section, I draw heavily on George Bond’s examination of the modern Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka. As Bond notes, attempting to define original Theravada is a difficult process, as every definition reflects only one possible interpretation of what is an always developing, ambiguous religious tradition that contains many dialectical tensions. As such, he suggests that a more useful strategy

¹⁵⁹ Wilson, *Mourning the Unborn Dead* and McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.

is the historical approach employed by a number of scholars who, rather than look for a pristine early Buddhism to contrast with modern Buddhism, divide Theravada into at least three developmental phrases: (1) canonical Buddhism, the early Buddhism reflected in the Tipitaka or Pali Canon; (2) traditional or historic Buddhism, the postcanonical Theravada established during the Asokan period (c. 268-233) and continued by the Pali Commentaries; and (3) twentieth-century modern Theravada, the Buddhism of revival and reformation.¹⁶⁰ I offer a brief and broad outline of the first two categories and then I move to a more detailed consideration of the third including a focused analysis of the two immediate Theravadin lineages of the American Insight community.

Early or Canonical Buddhism

The Pali Canon is the only complete canon of an early Buddhist school that survives in its original Indian language. It consists of three sections and, for this reason, is known as the *Tipitaka*, or the “Three Baskets.” In the Theravada school all of the three baskets are said to have come directly from the Buddha or from teachings he approved. The first basket is the Vinaya Pitaka, which treats issues of monastic discipline. The second is the Sutta Pitaka, which is a section of Discourses or Sayings of the Buddha. Finally, of later origin is the Abhidhamma Pitaka of the Higher Teaching. This basket contains more philosophical teachings on such things as the nature of causation and

¹⁶⁰ Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, 23.

analyses the building blocks or “dhammas” that constitute the psychophysical world. It represents a systematization and clarification of the teachings of the suttas.¹⁶¹

According to Bond, early or canonical Buddhism is the most difficult form to define because of the size of the Pali Canon, the diversity of teachings within it, and the absence of a set of precise criteria for distinguishing early from later material. Since Max Weber, the scholarly consensus has been that early Buddhism represented a religion of individual liberation for ascetic renoucers. Kitsiri Malalgoda, for example, describes it as “contemplative...asocial and apolitical in its orientation.”¹⁶² S.J. Tambiah, however, has properly warned that this picture represents an oversimplification, since the early Pali Canon indicates that early Buddhism had well-developed views of social and political matters. He persuasively argues that Weber overstated the extent to which early Buddhism was limited to ascetics.¹⁶³ Still, as Paul Williams points out, the Buddha was an ascetic renouncer and his main teaching was a gnostic soteriology concerned with individual liberation from the cycle of rebirth.¹⁶⁴

Traditional or Historic Theravada: The Gradual Path of Purification

Traditional Theravada refers to the development of Buddhism after the early canonical period, beginning from the time of the Indian emperor Asoka around 268-233 CE. The primary source for traditional Theravada is the commentarial literature, particularly the *Visuddhimagga* or *The Path of Purification*, attributed to the fifth-century

¹⁶¹ Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 17.

¹⁶² Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, 23.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁶⁴ Williams, *Buddhist Thought*, 12.

Sri Lankan monk Buddhaghosa (409-431 CE). Traditional Theravada also continued to develop through a number of other important postcommentarial texts, subcommentaries and Sinhalese prose religious classics. Although there were discontinuities and developments from the time of Buddhaghosa to nineteenth-century colonialism, these commentaries and related works established the basic outline and structure of traditional Theravada.

Bond explains traditional Theravada as representing a reinterpretation of early Buddhism in response to a particular kind of social context. He refers to the work of Louis Dumont, who describes the Indian cultural context of early Buddhism as consisting of two categories of people: world-renouncers and people in the world. Each group had its own corresponding religious practice and goal. The renouncers followed ascetic “disciplines of salvation” which aimed for the supramundane goal of liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The people of the world or householders practiced religious forms such as ritual and morality that were associated with the mundane plane and aimed at worldly benefits and the accruing of karmic merit for good future rebirths.¹⁶⁵

Bond employs the categories of renouncers and householders as loose guides to explain the emergence of traditional Theravada, claiming that tensions between the two served as the major catalyst for its development. While early Buddhism was chiefly concerned with renouncers, as the tradition developed it was increasingly called on to address the social and religious needs of people in the world. The hermeneutic strategy employed by traditional Theravada to balance the different needs of renouncers and householders was the gradual path of purification. This path, given classic form in Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*, represents the hallmark of traditional Theravada. It

¹⁶⁵ Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, 24-5.

enabled the commentators to accommodate both groups by subsuming the mundane goals of the householders under the supramundane goal of Nibbana and its ideal religious type, the arahant or the perfected being. This is illustrated in two of its main features, the threefold training and the two levels. The threefold training, which provides the basic scaffolding for Buddhaghosa's text, consists of three kinds of perfections that must be developed for liberation: perfection in morality, perfection in concentration and perfection in wisdom. In traditional Theravada only the training in morality is available to the layperson; the perfections of concentration and insight are reserved for the renouncer.

Central to traditional Theravada, therefore, is the division and strict separation of two levels: the mundane (*lokiya*) and the supramundane (*lokuttara*). One can only enter the supramundane level when one has advanced sufficiently on the mundane path. As articulated by Buddhaghosa, the path to purification consists of seven difficult stages, with the first six of these pertaining to the mundane levels. Such a gradual hierarchical structure posits Nibbana and arahantship as remote and implausible goals or transcendental ideals. Hence, within traditional Theravada a vast gulf of imperfection separates ordinary people (both householders and renouncers) from the arahant and fosters a basic pessimism about individual improvement.

The cosmological hierarchy of the gradual path was reproduced institutionally with the monks having elite status as representatives of the Buddha and mediators of his teachings, the dhamma. Michael Ames shows that the hierarchical emphasis of traditional Theravada laid the foundations for a fourfold system of religious vocation. Monks are divided into hermit monks and village monks, and the laity is divided into

devotees and householders with each category having a specific religious vocation corresponding to spiritual aptitude and ability. Theoretically, hermit monks and lay devotees are to practice meditation, village monks are to focus on scholarship, and householders are to engage in merit-making. In practice, however, Ames notes that most monks and lay-people are concerned with the mundane goal of merit-making. With Nibbana cast as such a remote ideal, both groups, but particularly householders, need ways to address their immediate worldly needs and future rebirths. As such, Ames argues, merit-making rituals became integral to traditional Theravada.¹⁶⁶

The gradual path, therefore, provided a means of balancing the path of renunciation or world-rejection with that of world-accommodation. As Bardwell Smith notes, “the radical separation of the worldly from the sacred leads, ironically, to an ethic of accommodation.”¹⁶⁷ Bond summarizes traditional Theravada as representing an interpretation and domestication of early Buddhism for traditional village-centered South-Asian society. Its gradual path integrated the supermundane quest for liberation with the mundane needs of people in the world. In terms of its relationship to canonical Buddhism, traditional Theravada employed the gradual path as a hermeneutical strategy for organizing the diverse material in the Pali Canon and within the “dialectical tensions” of the Pali Canon one can find support both for and against the gradual path.

Modern or Reformist Theravada Buddhism

¹⁶⁶ Michael Ames, “Magical-Animism and Buddhism: A Structural Analysis of the Sinhalese Religious System,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 23 (1964), 28.

¹⁶⁷ Bardwell Smith, “Towards a Buddhist Anthropology: The Problem of the Secular,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. XXXVI no. 3 (1968), 255-275.

A number of studies have examined what has been variously labeled as “Buddhist modernism” or “Buddhist revival and reformism” across Southeast Asia. These studies have noted that Buddhism modernism arose as a result of a number of factors, but principally due to the clash between traditional Buddhism and the intellectual and cultural forces of modernity. As David McMahan usefully traces, the term “Buddhist modernism” was established as a scholarly category by Heinz Bechert in his *Buddhism, Staat und Gesellschaft* (1966). Bechert describes Buddhism modernism as a reformist movement spanning a number of geographical areas and schools that reinterpreted Buddhism as a rational religion and was linked to social reform and nationalist movements, especially in Burma and Sri Lanka. Buddhist modernism focused on meditation and the rediscovery of canonical texts and deemphasized ritual and folk beliefs and practices. Also crucial to Buddhist modernism is an abolishing of the traditional separation of the mundane (*lokiya*) and supermundane (*lokuttara*) levels and the undermining of differences between the roles of the layperson and the monk. This resulted in less importance being placed on the monastic community and the increase of power of the laity.¹⁶⁸

Bond’s study of the Buddhist reform movement in Sri Lanka serves as a useful illustration of the major themes and characteristics of Southeast Asian Theravada modernism. Bond views the reinterpretation and revival of Theravada as a Buddhist response to the revolution of modernization. He traces an urban lay reformation, heavily influenced by western humanism, from its initial manifestation as “Protestant Buddhism,” the response of early reformers who began the revival by both reacting against and

¹⁶⁸ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 6-7.

imitating Christianity to its more contemporary manifestation in the Vipassana Bhavana movement, the resurgence of meditation among the laity.

Bond utilizes Robert Bellah's category of reformism to delineate a number of themes that characterize the reformist viewpoint and differentiate it from traditional Theravada. First, central to the reformation movement is an emphasis on scripturalism. No matter what their ideological stance, most reformers have turned to the canonical texts rather than the later commentaries to legitimate their reinterpretations. Rather than see their transformations as innovative, reformers understand their project as being a return to an earlier more original and pure form of Buddhism. Second, the reformist agenda is marked by a stance of world-affirmation in contrast to the tendency towards renunciation that shapes early Buddhism or the world-accommodation that emerges within traditional Theravada. Third, reform movements are characterized by rationalism and individualism. Fourth, such movements advocate universalism and minimize hierarchy. Fifth, they devalue meditation and ritual. Sixth, they display an achievement-centered orientation.¹⁶⁹

Rejecting the gradual path of traditional Theravada, reformers are optimistic about the possibility of attaining Nibbana in this life-time. Most radically, they believe that arahantship is not reserved for the renouncers but is also possible for the laity. The transformation of the traditional role of the laity is at the heart of the reformation movement. As Bond shows, most of the reinterpretations of traditional Theravada have been affected by and on behalf of the laity. This is illustrated by the Vipassana Bhavana or Insight Meditation movement that has been a major force within the reformation tide. The Vipassana Bhavana movement began in the 1950s and was heavily influenced by the

¹⁶⁹ Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, 35.

Burmese Theravada meditation revival. It bypassed the commentaries that define traditional Theravada and returned to the early suttas of the Pali Canon.

Bond outlines the five foundational beliefs of the Vipassana movement. First is the belief in the plausibility of arahantship and Nibbana for both monks and laypeople. Second is the belief that renunciation is not necessary for attaining Nibbana and the consequent reinterpretation of the spiritual path in pragmatic, this-worldly terms, such as the application of meditation to daily life. Third is a reordering of the relationship between scholarship and meditation. The Vipassana movement holds that a prerequisite study of the scriptures is not necessary for the practice of meditation or the attainment of Nibbana. This produces and reflects a conflict between scholar-monks and meditation-monks and is contrary to the traditionalist understanding that the primary task of the monks is Buddhist scholarship. Fourth, the laity is encouraged to meditate rather than be confined to their traditional practices of merit-making and morality. Fifth, while there is still a place for the traditional practices of *dana* (generosity) *sila* (morality) and ritual, the main focus is on the practice of vipassana meditation.¹⁷⁰ The Vipassana Bhavana movement illustrates, therefore, a shift from a traditionalist Theravada of merit-making and scholarship to a reformist Theravada of meditation and experience.¹⁷¹

In terms of legitimating their reforms, Bond notes that two main strategies have been employed. First, the reformists are solid scripturalists who find their charter in the early Buddhism of the Pali Canon. As noted, the Pali Canon contains many ambiguities and dialectical tensions and can support diverse interpretations. Bond agrees with the reformists that their innovations can be defended as legitimate interpretations of the early

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 130-176.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 172.

tradition. He suggests that the reformist ethics of self-cultivation finds support in the early period when the path was considered open to all and the sangha was a fourfold group of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen.¹⁷² A second legitimating strategy of reformists is to point to the actual experiences of modern-day meditators. Reformists argue that the meditative attainments of contemporary practitioners prove that an exclusive focus on vipassana is a much more efficient method of attaining liberation than the constant deferral of the gradual path. Winston King, for example, confirms that in Burma a general consensus exists that for modern people in the contemporary age, vipassana is the best method for achieving enlightenment.¹⁷³

Similar conclusions to Bond are reached in a more recent study by Donald Swearer, who has examined how the rapid changes within Southeast Asia since the end of World War II, dramatized by war, political revolution, the end of colonialism and the impact of the world market economy, have transformed traditional Theravada.¹⁷⁴ Although reform is not new to Buddhist history, Theravada sanghas in Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand have experienced unprecedented changes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, largely due to Western influences. Swearer focuses on the changing roles of the monk and laity and reform movements within the sangha. He outlines two major issues within the monastic community: the implementation of a stricter code of monastic conduct, and the rise of the forest-dwelling tradition associated with meditation practices. He examines how the latter, in particular, has played a major role in promoting reform movements in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma. In terms of changes to the laity, Swearer

¹⁷² Ibid., 172.

¹⁷³ Winston L. King, *Theravada Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), 168-170.

¹⁷⁴ Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of South-East Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

also delineates two major themes. First, he shows that boundaries between the laity and monks have become blurred. The ideal of Nibbana and the practice of meditation associated with its attainment once exclusively identified with the monastic vocation have become available to the laity. Second, he demonstrates the emergence of lay meditation organizations that assume the social service responsibilities traditionally associated with the monastery. These lay associations are consistent with the modern reformist tendency to interpret the tradition in pragmatic and ethical terms.

Between Mahasi Sayadaw and Ajahn Chah: The Primary Theravada Lineages of the American Insight Community

The main Southeast Asian Theravada teachers of the American Insight community were key figures in the twentieth-century Theravada reform movements. The American Insight community has two main Theravada lineages: the Burmese lineage represented by the monastic lineage of Mahasi Sayadaw and the lay lineage of U Ba Khin, and the Thai forest tradition lineage as represented primarily by Ajahn Chah. After glancing at the wider historic and cultural context of Buddhist modernism in Burma and Thailand, I offer some brief biographical details of the main Asian teachers of the American Insight community and a more detailed examination of their particular approach and teaching style. This will enable us to see how west coast Vipassana positions itself in relation to its immediate Theravada lineages and how it both continues and reacts against Asian Buddhist modernism.

The Burmese Lineage: Mahasi Sayadaw and U Ba Khin

Swearer notes that the late nineteenth century saw a renewal of Theravada Buddhism in Burma that was linked to the rise of nationalism in the late colonial period. He states that this revival was marked by two major developments: the implementation of a stricter code of monastic conduct, and the emergence of a mass meditation movement for the laity that was influenced by the forest-dwelling ideal associated with meditation practice.¹⁷⁵ A more recent study by Ingrid Jordt discusses how the modern Burmese mass meditation movement developed as a reaction to British colonialism. Jordt argues that the integration of a practice-orientated Buddhism into nation-state building following independence was fuelled by a prophecy of an “original society” in the early Buddhist suttas that attempted to secure a cosmic moral order in face of overwhelming sociopolitical transformations. She theorizes the “vipassana revitalization” movement as a grassroots process by which the purification of the state occurs by means of the purification of the citizenry and that completes the ternary order of sangha, state and laity.¹⁷⁶

Jordt’s study is particularly useful because of its close examination of Burma’s largest meditation center, the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha (MTY) in Rangoon, which was established by Mahasi Sayadaw, who was arguably the most influential Theravada teacher of the east coast American Insight community. Jordt shows that MYT greatly differs from the traditional Burmese monastery in terms of its exclusive focus on meditation, the massive participation of the laity, and the principle role of monastics as

¹⁷⁵ Swearer, *The Buddhist World of South-East Asia*, 129-131.

¹⁷⁶ Ingrid Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 24.

meditation teachers. MTY also contravenes traditional Burmese religious and cultural ideals in that its model religious figure is not the forest-dwelling monk but the layperson engaged in full-time pursuit of Nibbana in a bureaucratically organized urban center. This mass scale pursuit of enlightenment primarily by laypeople who are educated but not trained in the scriptures is unprecedented in Buddhist history.¹⁷⁷

Jordt credits the institutional emergence of the new Buddhist lay dominated meditation movement to the undertaking of three men: the wealthy philanthropist Sir U Thwin, Burma's first Prime Minister U Nu, and Mahasi Sayadaw, a monk renowned for his meditation expertise.¹⁷⁸ In 1948, U Thwin donated five acres of land to build a meditation center in Rangoon. In 1949, he and U Nu invited Mahasi, who was greatly respected for his mastery of Buddhist scriptures and his meditative expertise, to come and direct the center. Born in 1904, Mahasi undertook full monastic ordination at the age of twenty and received various honors in his study of Buddhist scriptures. Eight years after ordination, he began to focus on meditation practice and studied under the guidance of the renowned forest-dwelling monk Mingun Jetawan Sayadaw.¹⁷⁹ Mingun had been a student of Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923), who was famous for teaching the Abhidhamma and meditation to lay-people as well as renunciates.¹⁸⁰

Through an analysis of the Pali scriptures and his own meditative practice, Mahasi aimed to discover the quickest method for attaining enlightenment. He focused on a line in the Dhammayada Sutta that guaranteed the attainment of sotapanna, or stream entry, the first of the four stages leading to Nibbana, in just seven days if one

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁷⁹ Biographical details from Swearer, *The Buddhist World of South-East Asia*, 130 and the "Buddha Sasana Organization," <http://www.mahasi.org/>.

¹⁸⁰ Jordt, *Burma's Mass Meditation Movement*, 23.

continually practiced vipassana. As such, Mahasi eschewed the traditional preliminary practice of samatha or calming meditation in favor of the immediate practice of satipatthana vipassana or insight meditation as prescribed in the Mahasatipatthana Sutta.¹⁸¹ He advocated the intensive practice of vipassana during silent retreats that could last up to several months with a daily schedule of between sixteen to eighteen hours of sitting and walking meditation. The primary aim of Mahasi's approach was to attain sotapanna. He claimed that the laity could directly experience advanced stages of realization without studying the scriptures or renouncing the world.¹⁸² With his exclusive focus on vipassana, Mahasi downplayed or eliminated many traditional Theravada practices such as scholarship, Devotional exercises, and merit-making activities.

Within a few years of Mahasi's arrival at MYT, a number of similar meditation centers with Mahasi-trained monastic teachers were established all over Burma. Centers in which Mahasi's method was taught also appeared in neighboring Theravada countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka as well as Indonesia and India.¹⁸³ Two Mahasi trained teachers, Anagarika Munindra and Sayadaw U Pandita, were primary teachers of the founders of the American Insight community.¹⁸⁴ The Bengali Anagarika Munindra was a close disciple and lay attendant of Sayadaw and spent several years in Burma under his direction studying the Pali scriptures and practicing and teaching satipatthana vipassana. Munindra, or Munindraji as he was affectionately known, returned to India in 1966 and began to teach at the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya where he introduced many

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁸² At MYT and its branch organizations more than one million people are said to have reached the first stages of enlightenment. Ibid., 17.

¹⁸³ A number of scholars have noted the influence of the Burmese meditation movement on Theravada reformist movements. See Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, 131-136.

¹⁸⁴ Biographical details from "Buddhist Masters and their Organizations," <http://www.buddhanet.net/masters/mahasi.htm>.

westerners to vipassana. Amongst these were Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg and Jacqueline Mandel who co-founded IMS. Munindra was Goldstein's main teacher and he and his student Dipa Ma, an Indian widow, were two of the guiding teachers of the American Insight movement.¹⁸⁵

Born in 1921, Sayadaw U Pandita ordained as monk at the age of twenty and was an accomplished Buddhist scholar before he began to practice satipatthana vipassana under Mahasi in 1950. He established a number of Mahasi centers in Sri Lanka and became the head abbot of the main Mahasi centers in Burma.¹⁸⁶ He has since opened his own meditation center outside of Rangoon where he teaches the Mahasi method of intensive meditation practice. Monastic-lead retreats have a daily schedule from 3.00 am to 10.am and include between twelve to fourteen hours of meditation.¹⁸⁷ U Pandita is renowned for his rigorous, demanding and precise teaching approach and for his emphasis on ethical conduct as the foundation of vipassana practice. He has had a significant influence on Goldstein and Salzburg and the East Coast Insight community.

S. N. Goenka and the U Ba Khin Lineage

The second Burmese teaching lineage comes through the householder S.N. Goenka, who was a student of the famous lay teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899-1971). U Ba Khin was a civil servant who became the Accountant General in 1948 on the day Burma gained independence. He began meditation primarily under the guidance of the

¹⁸⁵ Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 28-29.

¹⁸⁶ See "Buddhist Masters and their Organizations," <http://www.buddhanet.net/masters/mahasi.htm>.

¹⁸⁷ For details about the Saddhamma Foundation, a Buddhist non-profit organization formed in 1989 to support Sayadaw U Pandita see http://www.saddhamma.org/html/about_saddhamma.shtml.

lay teacher Saya Thetgyi, who was a student of the monastic Ledi Sayadaw. U Ba Khin began teaching meditation to his colleagues and eventually became a renowned meditation teacher, one of the leaders of the vipassana-centered reform movement. He played an important role in the Sixth Buddhist council of 1954-1956. He presented vipassana as a nonsectarian universal practice that was available to all people and encouraged meditation as part of a daily routine for householders. The form of vipassana he taught was based on “scanning”, the systematic application of attention through the body to become aware of the changing play of physical sensations in order to have a direct realization of impermanence.¹⁸⁸ A father of five, U Ba Khin held a number of government posts and combined teaching meditation with his work and family responsibilities. In 1952 he established the International Meditation Center (IMC) in Rangoon and, after retiring from government service in 1967, spent the last four years of his life teaching vipassana full-time.¹⁸⁹

One of U Ba Khin’s most influential students is the Indian lay teacher S.N. Goenka. Goenka, a successful businessman and one of the leaders of the Hindu community in Burma, studied with U Ba Khin for fourteen years before returning to India in 1969 where he began teaching U Ba Khin’s scanning style of vipassana. He presents vipassana as a nonsectarian scientific technique and distinguishes it from organized religion. The Buddha, Goenka declares, did not teach Buddhism but rather the Dhamma which is “a universal remedy for universal problems.” He stresses that vipassana can benefit anyone regardless of their religious denomination. It is a “method of mental

¹⁸⁸ Jack Kornfield, *Living Dharma: Teachings of Twelve Buddhist Masters* (Boston & London: Shambhala Press, 1996), 235-238.

¹⁸⁹ Biographical details from “The Vipassana Research Institute”, <http://www.vridhamma.org/Teachers-3.aspx>.

purification which allows one to face life's tensions and problems in a calm, balanced way.”

Goenka continues the Burmese focus on intensive meditation practice. He teaches vipassana on ten-day residential retreats with a daily schedule that runs from 4.00 am to 9.00 pm, with around eleven hours of meditation. The first few days are spent developing concentration, six days are spent practicing vipassana, and the last day is devoted to the concentration practice of metta or loving kindness. While all meditators are required to follow the five precepts, these are explained as scientific, rational and pragmatic rules that foster vipassana practice rather than being “negative expressions of tradition, orthodoxy or blind faith in some organized religion.” In keeping with the rational and pragmatic ethos all rituals, devotional activity and even religious ornaments are banned from the retreats.¹⁹⁰

Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg studied with Goenka in Bodhygaya, India in the 1970's. They incorporated components of his retreat format, particularly the practice of metta or loving-kindness, into their retreat structure at IMS. Another American based vipassana teacher, Ruth Denison, who was one of the first teachers at IMS, was a student of U Ba Khin.¹⁹¹

The Thai Forest Tradition: Ajahn Chah

¹⁹⁰ Information and quotes from Goenka's official website “Vipassana Meditation Website,” <http://www.dhamma.org>.

¹⁹¹ Ruth Denison, “Bowling to Life Deeply: An Interview with Ruth Denison,” *Insight Journal* Volume 8 (Spring 1987), 3-6.

The second major lineage for the American Insight movement, particularly the West Coast community, comes from the Thai forest tradition, specifically from the lineage of Ajahn Mun and, his student, Ajahn Chah. Like Sri Lanka and Burma, Theravada Buddhism experienced a major reformist impulse in Thailand in the nineteenth century. The impetus for this came when the future monarch, Mongkut (Rama IV, reign, 1851-1868), initiated the Thammayut Sect while he was a monk (1824-1851). During his monastic tenure, Mongkut engaged in an intensive study of the Pali scriptures and sent a number of monks to Sri Lanka to bring back Pali scriptures. As the name Thammayut (“those adhering to the law”) suggests, Mongkut advocated a stricter adherence to the monastic disciplinary rules.

Furthermore, as in Burma and Sri Lanka, reformist trends in Thai Buddhism are particularly indebted to the forest tradition of Theravada Buddhism. The 1920’s and 1930’s witnessed significant changes in Thailand, most notably the overthrow of the monarchy in 1932. During this period, two monks, differentially indebted to the Theravada forest tradition, began careers that greatly affected Thai Buddhism. One of these, Ajahn Mun became a noted Thammayut meditation teacher in northeast Thailand. Prior to Ajahn Mun and his teacher Ajahn Sao, forest monks in Thailand were noted for their magical power and lax vinaya discipline. Ajahn Sao and Mun attempted to correct this by applying the Thammayut approach to the forest life. In short, they brought together two major reformist elements of late nineteenth century Theravada Buddhism, strict observance of the vinaya and a rigorous focus on meditation practice, to reform the

Thai forest tradition. They also affirmed that Nibbana was attainable in the present life.¹⁹²

The Ajahn Mun lineage with its ideal of a simple ascetic life has attracted a wide following in Thailand and the West. His disciple Ajahn Chah has had a huge influence on the American Insight community. Born in 1918 in a small village in Northeast Thailand, Ajahn Chah ordained at the age of twenty and his early monastic life followed a traditional pattern of studying Buddhist teachings and the Pali scriptural language. After the death of his father, Chah became disillusioned with the limits of his scholastic knowledge and set off on a pilgrimage in search of a more direct understanding of the Buddhist teachings. After receiving teaching instruction from Ajahn Mun, he spent seven years practicing in the ascetic forest tradition in the jungle. In 1954 he was invited back to his village to establish a monastery that is now known as Wat Pah Pong and from which over one hundred other branch monasteries have since developed in Thailand. In 1967 an American monk Ajahn Sumedho came to practice under him, followed by a number of other western bhikkhus and in 1975 Wat Pah Nanachat, the first monastery in Thailand to be run by and for English-speaking monks, was established with Ajahn Sumedho as its abbot.¹⁹³ Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho and a number of other monks trained by Ajahn Chah have since established monasteries in North American, Australia, New Zealand and Europe.¹⁹⁴ Monastics in Ajahn Chah's tradition live a simple ascetic lifestyle with a strict adherence to the vinaya.

¹⁹² Swearer, *The Buddhist World of South-East Asia*, 131-132.

¹⁹³ Biographical details of Ajahn Chah from Forestsanga.org, <http://www.forestsanga.org/aboutchah.htm>

¹⁹⁴ In 1979 Ajahn Sumedho established Chithurst Buddhist monastery in Sussex, England. For details see "Cittaviveka Chithurst Buddhist Monastery," <http://www.cittaviveka.org/>.

Ajahn Chah was known for his simple, direct style of teaching and his practical, balanced approach to practice. Describing his teacher, Ajahn Sumedho notes, “The essence of the teaching was rather simple: be mindful, don't hang on to anything, let go and surrender to the way things are.”¹⁹⁵ This focus on non-attachment was central to both practice and experience. Ajahn Chah rarely spoke about the attainment of any specific level of realization nor did he advocate any special technique or intensive retreat practice. If his students were attached to formal meditation or spiritual experiences, he would provide a corrective teaching as a balance: “He sometimes initiated long and seemingly pointless work projects, in order to frustrate their [his students’] attachment to tranquility.”¹⁹⁶ Rather than focus exclusively on formal meditation, Ajahn Chah encouraged students to maintain mindfulness in all daily activities. He insisted that living mindfully in monastic community was as much a part of practice as formal meditation.

Jack Kornfield trained as a monk with Ajahn Chah for a number of years in Thailand and has been very influenced by his communal and integrated approach to Buddhist practice. The Thai forest tradition of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho maintains an on-going relationship with the American Insight community. A number of monks, including Ajahn Sumedho, give retreats at IMS and Spirit Rock. Special mention should also be made of Abhayagiri Monastery in Redwood Valley, California, which has close links with Spirit Rock. The co-abbot of Abhayagiri is the British monk Ajahn Amaro who is on the board of directors at Spirit Rock, directs their family program and teaches there regularly.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Roger Wheeler, “Ajahn Sumedho Interviewed,” Forestsanga.org, <http://www.forestsangha.org/sumedho24.htm>.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ For further details see “Abhayagiri Monastery,” <http://www.abhayagiri.org/>.

Ajahn Buddhadasa

Another Thai monk that has influenced the American Insight community, and particularly west coast Vipassana, is Ajahn Buddhadasa. Buddhadasa began to systematically reinterpret Theravada Buddhism in the 1930s and came to national prominence in the 1970s. He presented a modernist interpretation of Buddhism that attempted to show its compatibility with modern scientific rationalism, render its highest goals accessible to ordinary people, and demonstrate the integral relationship between liberation and social justice. Central to Buddhaghosa's reconstruction was the attempt to abolish the traditional radical separation of the mundane and supermundane realms and to locate the everyday world as the true site and concern of Buddhist practice and realization.¹⁹⁸

Peter Jackson convincingly argues that two broad themes underlie Buddhadasa's reinterpretations. First, is his desire for Buddhism to conform to rational and scientific standards of argumentation that resulted in his systematic demythologization of Buddhist cosmology into psychology. Second, is his wish to make Theravada relevant to the socioeconomic and cultural climate of contemporary Thailand, particularly through showing the compatibility of individual liberation and the progressive development of society.¹⁹⁹ As Jackson notes, however, Buddhaghosa's desire for a rational and socially relevant Buddhism demanded a departure from traditional Theravada teachings.

Subsequently Buddhaghosa rejected the entire Abhidhamma, one of the three "baskets"

¹⁹⁸ Peter Jackson, *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand* (Chiang Mia: Silkworm Books, 1987), 119-121.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

of the Pali Canon, and Buddhaghosa's authoritative commentary *The Path Of Purification* drawing instead from Mahayana teachings to support his alternative Theravada hermeneutic.²⁰⁰

As I will later argue, west coast developments follow Buddhaghosa in a number of ways. Jack Kornfield spent time practicing with Buddhaghosa and includes him in the dedications of both his seminal west coast texts *A Path with Heart* and *After the Ecstasy the Laundry*. Other senior teachers in the Insight community, such as Guy Armstrong who is on the teachers' council at Spirit Rock, and Christopher Titmuss, a British teacher who was an early visiting teacher at IMS, spent time as ordained monks at Wat Suan Mokkh, the monastery Buddhaghosa established in 1932 in Chaiya, South Thailand.

American Insight Continuities and Discontinuities with Asian Buddhist Modernism

The main Southeast Asian Theravada teachers of the American Insight community, therefore, were key figures in Asian Buddhist modernist and reform movements. As Gil Fronsdal notes, teachers such as Mahasi, U Ba Khin, Goenka, Ajahn Buddhadasa and Ajahn Chah emphasized meditation practice and direct experience and downplayed or discarded many of the traditional aspects of Theravada Buddhism. They offered their teachings freely to anyone interested and seemed to have had little interest in converting westerner students to Buddhism. While the monastic sangha remains central to Theravada in Southeast Asia, the inclusion of the laity in the ultimate soteriological path made it much easier for the western teachers to dispense with monasticism. Thus, as Fronsdal correctly points out, when the first American vipassana teachers returned to the

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 69.

US they brought with them a vipassana practice already stripped of its traditional Theravadin context.²⁰¹

Yet while the Burmese Theravada teachers were major figures in Asian Buddhist modernism, they also retained more conservative elements associated with traditional form of Theravada. In the next section of my chapter, I will explore how the reception of these more conservative, or what were thought of as “traditional,” aspects of the Burmese lineage and their exclusive focus on meditation practice lead to something of a split in the American Insight community and the development of what I am identifying as “east coast” and “west coast” Vipassana. I will begin by discussing the establishment and development of “east coast” Vipassana at IMS. Next, I will consider certain tensions between traditional and innovative factions within the Insight Community. Finally, I will turn to a close examination of Spirit Rock showing how, particularly in regards to gender, embodiment and pluralism, it has radicalized the modernization process initiated within Asian Buddhist modernism. In addition to progressing the modernist narrative, however, I will also argue that west coast Vipassana has also attempted to recover some other traditional associated aspects that were neglected in the Burmese privileging of meditation by drawing more on the communal Thai Forest lineage of Ajahn Chah. In this respect, I will argue, Spirit Rock can be read as both a further extension and critique of Buddhist modernism.

The Insight Meditation Society: East Coast Vipassana

²⁰¹ Gil Fronsdal, “Life, Liberty and The Pursuit of Happiness in the American Insight Community” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth .K. Tanaka (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 163-180.

The Insight Meditation Society (IMS) was established on May 19, 1975 in order to “provide a secluded retreat environment for the practice of meditation in the Theravada Buddhism tradition.” A letter was sent to possible contributors in November describing the purpose of the center and requesting donations toward the purchase of a building.

In January 1976, IMS acquired a mansion that had been a former Catholic seminary and school on seventy-five acres of rural farmland in Barre, Massachusetts.²⁰² The teachers, and a small group of volunteer staff, moved in the following month on February 14th²⁰³

Three of the co-founders and leading teachers of IMS, twenty-nine year old Joseph Goldstein, twenty-eight year old Jack Kornfield, and twenty-one year old Sharon Salzberg had recently returned to North America after spending several years in Asia being trained by Theravadin monastic and lay teachers. In 1971, Salzberg and Goldstein met on a ten-day vipassana retreat taught by Goenka in Bodh Gaya, India. It was Salzberg’s first meditation retreat; she had traveled to India after becoming interested in Buddhism on an Asian philosophy course at the State University of New York, in Buffalo. Goldstein, who had been introduced to Asian religion as a philosophy undergraduate major at Columbia University, first began exploring Buddhism as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand where he was stationed in 1965. Two years later, on his second visit to Asia, he met his first teacher Munindra, who taught in the Burmese tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw, in Bodh Gaya, India. Goldstein and Salzberg spent several years in Asia practicing in the Burmese lineages of Sayadaw and Goenka.²⁰⁴

In 1974, shortly after their return to the US, Goldstein and Salzberg were invited by former Harvard psychologist, turned Hindu teacher Ram Dass to teach vipassana at

²⁰² Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood*, 29-30.

²⁰³ Information from the “Insight Meditation Society.Org,” accessed July 2, 2009, www.dharma.org.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

the newly established Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. It was here that they met Kornfield, an American who had recently disrobed as a Theravadin monk. Kornfield had been invited to teach vipassana at Naropa by its founder, the Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, after they met at a party in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1973. Kornfield shared a similar background to Goldstein. He was from an upper-middle-class Jewish family on the East Coast and had become interested in Asian religions as an undergraduate in Dartmouth College. After a stint in the Peace Corps in Thailand, he ordained as a monk in Thai forest tradition of Ajahn Chah and spent several years in monasteries in Asia before returning to the US.²⁰⁵

The friendship and teaching partnership formed by the Goldstein, Salzburg and Kornfield was, as Wendy Cadge notes, to shape much of the way Theravada Buddhism was taught to white people in the United States for the next decade.²⁰⁶ The vipassana classes at Naropa were a great success, and for the next two years, the three fledgling teachers traveled around America offering vipassana retreats. These retreats were a hybrid of Burmese forms. The basic practice taught was the Mahasi method but the retreat structure was modeled on the ten-day retreats taught by Goenka. Instead of giving the full vipassana instruction all at once, as in the Mahasi meditation centers, instructions were offered progressively over the first days of the retreat, similar to Goenka's format. Also, while Mahasi never taught metta or loving-kindness meditation with vipassana, each American Insight retreat ended with a guided loving-kindness meditation, as was the case in Goenka's courses.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 78.

²⁰⁶ Cadge, *Heartwood*, 28.

²⁰⁷ Fronsdaal, "Insight Meditation in the United States," 174.

In order to provide a more stable and supportive meditation environment, Goldstein, Kornfield and Salzberg and Jacqueline Schwartz, who had also practiced vipassana in India with Goldstein and Salzburg, began a search for a permanent retreat facility. This led to the purchase of the site in Barre, Massachusetts that remains the current site of IMS. Accounts of the teaching ethos and style of early IMS generally tend to stress its continuation of the Buddhist modernization process. Fronsdal, for example, notes that the early American vipassana teachers went even further than their own Asian teachers in presenting vipassana practice largely independent of traditional Theravada. Teaching as laypeople to an almost exclusively lay audience, they freely adapted vipassana practice to American culture and language.²⁰⁸ Kornfield explains that the early teachers wanted to simplify the teachings and practices to make them accessible as possible. As he puts it, “We wanted to offer the powerful practices of insight meditation, as many of our teachers did, as simply as possible without the complications of rituals, robes, chanting and the whole religious tradition.”²⁰⁹ Discarding what they thought of as unnecessary Asian cultural baggage, the first white American vipassana teachers were concerned with transmitting “the dhamma” or the essential teachings of Buddhism in a container that was more suitable for the West.

Yet, while IMS attempted to make vipassana accessible to an American audience, teachers were also anxious to keep IMS grounded in Theravada Buddhism and preserve the lineages they had inherited. That grounding, Goldstein reflects, has been a source of institutional focus and strength: “It was a conscious choice to have it not become a center where even very enlightened teachers from a range of traditions would come. We felt

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 166.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 167.

that it would really dilute the vision.”²¹⁰ According to Kornfield, when IMS started it was a Maharsi-orientated centre because Salzburg and Goldstein had done most of their training through the Burmese tradition. One of IMS two main foundational principles, however, was to offer access to multiple Theravada lineages as they themselves had studied under different teachers and viewed a plurality of lineages as a healthier approach. Their other main principle, Kornfield notes, was to teach retreats collectively as they believed that a teaching team model was a more intelligent way of holding power in the West.²¹¹

Several months after the building was purchased, the center offered teacher-led courses and self-retreats. Retreats typically ran for ten days during which participants’ maintained complete silence and followed a typical daily schedule of around ten hours of sitting and walking meditation.²¹² A three-month retreat, modeled after the three-month rain retreat taken by monastics in Southeast Asia, also took place every fall from September through December. Kornfield, Goldstein, Salzburg, Schwartz, Ruth Denison and a few other westerners who had trained in Asia taught many of the early courses. Connections between the IMS teachers and their teachers in Asia were strong and lasting. Sayadaw, U Pandita, U Silananda, Munindra, Dipa Ma, and Ajahn Chah, visited IMS in the late 1970s and 1980s, and the teachers at IMS returned to Asia to practice with their teachers.

The numbers of retreats and practitioners at IMS increased throughout the 1980s, By the end of the decade, IMS was advertising for an executive director and associate

²¹⁰ Cadge, *Heartwood*, 29.

²¹¹ Kornfield, “A Vision for Spirit Rock,” accessed July 2009, <http://www.spiritrock.org/display.asp?pageid=478&catid=1>.

²¹² “Insight Meditation Society,” accessed June 2009, http://www.dharma.org/ims/ai_factsfigures.html.

director, in part to lead the organization through a master development plan in the 1990s. An executive director was appointed in 1990, and the center became more professionally organized and operated. It presently offers two meditation centers, the Retreat Center and the Forest Refuge, both of which are advertised as offering “retreats rooted in the Theravada Buddhist teachings of ethics, concentration and wisdom.”²¹³ Retreats at the Retreat Center are designed for both new and experienced practitioners and last from a weekend to three-months but most often run between three and nine days. A typical daily retreat schedule starts at 5:00 am and finishes at 10:00 pm. They consist of around ten hours of sitting and walking meditation, an evening dharma talk and individual and group interviews. Participants maintain silence, undertake the five precepts and sleep in simple single or double same-sex rooms. In 2003 the Forest Refuge opened in order to provide an environment where experienced vipassana meditators could undertake personal retreats within a supportive environment. The duration of personal retreats ranges from one-week stays to periods of a year or more.²¹⁴

In 1989, Goldstein and Salzberg helped establish the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies (BCBS) located just half a mile away from IMS. Founded to “provide a bridge between study and practice, between scholarly understanding and meditative insight,” BCBS is grounded in Theravada Buddhism but calls for dialogue with other schools of Buddhism and contemporary academic fields.²¹⁵ While IMS is focused on retreat practice, Salzberg describes one of the functions of BCBS as helping westerners understand and deepen their connections to their Asian Buddhist heritage:

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Annually, almost 2,700 retreatants (or ‘yogis’ as they are called) participate in such programs – 2,300 at the Retreat Center and 400 at the Forest Refuge. “Insight Meditation Society,” <http://www.dharma.org/index.html>.

²¹⁵ See “BCBS,” <http://www.dharma.org/bcbs/index.html>.

When we started IMS,” she explains, “it was basically something we did [i.e., meditation practice]. We had no sense of history. We had very little sense of a connection to a tradition in Asia although we had all learned and benefited a tremendous amount from our time in Asia. And there was very much a sense of, well, we’re here today and may not be here tomorrow...And things went on like that for many years. The times have changed a lot since then and our relationship to the teachings and the traditions have changed a lot. I think now as we start this place we have a greater sense of history and of planting seeds with this center that will be long enduring and have a very great impact on the transmission of those teachings to this country.²¹⁶

Tensions between Preservation and Innovation in the American Insight Community

As IMS has developed, therefore, it has strengthened its ties with Theravada Buddhism and become increasingly concerned with issues of preservation. Yet this has not been the sole narrative of the Insight community. In the 1980s, a number of disagreements and tensions between what can be thought of as traditional/conservative and modern/innovative factions at IMS led, at one point, to a split within the American Insight community and the development of what I am identifying as “east coast” and “west coast” Vipassana communities.

As I will discuss, on one level, west coast Vipassana can be read as a further radicalization of Asian Buddhist modernism in that it rejected the more traditional and

²¹⁶ Cadge, *Heartwood*, 30.

conservative aspects of the Burmese Theravada lineages that dominated IMS. For while the Burmese Theravada teachers bequeathed the emerging American vipassana community a modernist form of Buddhist practice, in other respects, particularly in attitudes toward gender, the body and the world, they retained certain conservative elements associated more with traditional Theravada. For example, although Mahasi Sayadaw's focus on meditation practice and experience is characteristic of Buddhist modernism, in other aspects his approach is consistent with the world-negating strands of early Buddhism and the cosmological framework of traditional Theravada. Mahasi often stressed the need to escape the cycle of rebirth and presented the six realms of existence in its traditional cosmological form rather than translating it into the psychological discourse characteristic of Buddhist modernism.²¹⁷ He also gave traditional Theravada dharma talks on the repulsive nature of the body.²¹⁸ Similarly, U Pandita was known for his strict ascetic approach to practice and his focus on liberation from rebirth. Burmese attitudes towards gender were also conservative with a strict gender hierarchy and segregation maintained on retreats.

For some members of the American Insight community, the more traditional and conservative aspects of their Burmese teachers proved problematic. One Spirit Rock teacher I interviewed, for example, shared his struggles with the segregation of sexes and attitudes towards gender on a U Pandita retreat at IMS. In 1983, Jacqueline Schwartz-Mandel, one of the co-founders of IMS, resigned due to what she felt was the inherent sexism in traditional Theravada. Schwartz-Mandel, who continues teaching vipassana, explains that she left IMS and Theravada Buddhism because, "As a woman I could no

²¹⁷ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 45.

²¹⁸ Jack Kornfield, *Living Dharma: Teachings of Twelve Buddhist Masters* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1996), 56.

longer represent a tradition which taught and believed women to be of a lesser birth and life and whose texts contain very clear discrimination against women.”²¹⁹

Another major issue of contention in the Insight community was the Burmese focus on formal meditation practice and the intensive retreat model. As I will discuss in more detail, a number of disagreements over these issues arose between Kornfield and Goldstein. While Goldstein and Salzburg were increasingly adopting the traditional style of U Pandita, Kornfield became frustrated with the Burmese approach and wanted to develop a more “heart-centered and psychologically integrative approach to practice.”²²⁰ This split eventually culminated in Kornfield’s decision to leave IMS. He moved to California in the fall of 1984 where he was instrumental in establishing Spirit Rock meditation, the main base of west coast Vipassana. As James Coleman notes, although IMS and Spirit Rock share similar organizational structures, they have taken distinctively different directions. Under the leadership of Goldstein and Salzburg, IMS has remained close to traditional vipassana practice, while, Spirit Rock, strongly influenced by Kornfield, has incorporated the insights of other spiritual traditions and western psychology.²²¹ Hence, IMS and east coast Vipassana has a reputation for being more conservative and preserving traditional Theravada Buddhism and Spirit Rock and west coast vipassana is considered to be at the forefront of an integrative East-meets-West American Buddhism. It is to a close examination of the latter that I will now turn.

Spirit Rock Meditation Center: West Coast Vipassana

²¹⁹ Sandy Boucher, eds., *Turning the Wheel: American Woman Creating the New Buddhism*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 38-39.

²²⁰ Helen Tworokov, “The Sure Heart’s Release: From Forest Monastic to Socially Engaged Householder: an interview with Jack Kornfield,” *Tricycle* (Summer 2000), 37-45.

²²¹ Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 78-79.

In *A Vision For Spirit Rock*, a talk originally delivered to the Spirit Rock Board of Directors and later printed in September 2006 edition of the Spirit Rock newsletter, Kornfield reflects on the history, present ethos and future direction of Spirit Rock. Interestingly, in explaining differences between Spirit Rock and IMS, rather than frame these in terms of tensions between traditional Asian and modern American forms of Buddhism, Kornfield expresses them as reflecting differences between the Burmese and Thai lineages of the American Insight Community. As he correctly notes, there is tremendous disagreement and conflicts in the Theravada tradition. Indeed Kornfield's own two main teachers, Mahasi Sayadaw and Ajahn Chah, disagreed on both the nature of and path to enlightenment. Mahasi's focus was on intensive meditation practice geared at profound spiritual experiences, whereas Ajahn Chah's emphasis was on non-attachment and the embodiment of nondual awareness in daily communal activity. By adopting the Mahasi retreat model rather than Ajahn Chah's way of communal living, Kornfield felt that the IMS had paid insufficient attention to "the integration or the embodiment of dharma outside of retreat," and it soon became clear to him and others that these issues needed to be addressed.²²²

After ten years at IMS, therefore, a group of teachers, including Kornfield, James Baraz, Sylvia Boorstein, Howard Cohen and Anna Douglas, began to create a "wider dharma stream" that focused more on issues of integrating practice with daily life. Some of these teachers were members of a Californian vipassana sitting group that had begun in 1974 and had taken the name "Dharma Foundation" in 1976. Renamed as "Insight Meditation West" (IMW) in the 1984, the group spent five years looking for land to build

²²² Kornfield, "A Vision for Spirit Rock."

a west coast meditation center. In 1988, with the help of donors, IMW bought 410 acres of sacred Native American land from the Nature Conservancy in Woodacre, Marin. In 1990 a temporary meditation hall, administrative office and caretakers quarters were built. In 1996, in honor of the Native American heritage of the land, IMW changed its name to Spirit Rock Meditation Center. In 1997 the ground breaking ceremony for Spirit Rock's residential retreat center was held and it opened in July 1998.²²³

The day-to-day operations of Spirit Rock are run by a paid staff of over thirty paid staff and a large body of volunteers. Spirit Rock has two major decision-making bodies: a Board of Directors and a Teachers Council. The twenty-two member volunteer Board of Directors, which is comprised of teachers and sangha members and supported by a number of committees, is the central decision-making body for Spirit Rock. The responsibility for the spiritual direction and vision of the center and its meditation programs falls to the Spirit Rock Teaching Council. This is a collective of twenty lay teachers and one monastic, Ajahn Amaro, who is the co-Abbot of Abhayagiri Monastery in Redwood Valley, California. A few of the senior lay teachers have trained and been ordained in monasteries in Asia; others have received formal teacher training from the senior teachers at Spirit Rock.²²⁴ One of the most striking characteristics of the teaching council is the large percentage of teachers who have had training in psychology and are practicing psychotherapists. Another noticeable feature is that many teachers declare that they are influenced by the nondual teachings of Advaita Vedanta, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism.²²⁵ James Barez, one of the senior teachers at Spirit Rock, also draws attention

²²³ See the "The Organization," <http://www.spiritrock.org/display.asp?pageid=4&catid=1>

²²⁴ Kornfield has been instrumental in the development of teacher training programs and a teacher code of ethics for the Insight community.

²²⁵ See "Teachers Biographies," <http://www.spiritrock.org/display.asp?pageid=18&catid=4&scatid=8>.

to the fact that unlike IMS, the senior teachers at Spirit Rock are married and have children, and that this has influenced the general ethos and programs offered at Spirit Rock.

Spirit Rock Teaching Ethos: The Mandala of Preservation and Innovation

Spirit Rock declares that its “teachings are grounded in the essence of the Buddha’s teaching in the Pali discourse,” but that it also significantly departs from Theravada Buddhism in drawing from a number of other spiritual and psychological traditions and offering a range of innovative and eclectic programs. This is reflective of what Kornfield describes as Spirit Rock’s embrace of “dharma diversity” and its dual commitment to both preserving its Theravadin lineages and a willingness to be innovative. Spirit Rock’s programs can be plotted along a preservation-innovation spectrum. This spectrum is framed in a number of different ways at Spirit Rock: as different dharma strands, as the addition of “metta, Ajahn Chah’s nondual perspective and western psychology” to the Burmese intensive retreat model that predominates at IMS and, most often, through the symbol of the mandala.

Spirit Rock is presented as a living mandala with “the Dharma of Liberation” at its center and six key outer elements: retreats, study, integration, hermitage, service, and right relationship. Retreats fulfill a primary goal of Spirit Rock, which is to offer intensive training in vipassana practice. Study includes both traditional and contemporary Buddhist literature. Integration provides training in the integration of dharma practice with daily life and action in the world. The hermitage offers the

opportunity to experience the simplicity of a Buddhist renunciate life, but one, unlike traditional forms, “based on appropriate non-sexist principles.” Service as a fundamental part of the dharma extends to the Spirit Rock sangha and the wider community. Right relationship draws on the wisdom of the Noble Eightfold Path and a commitment “to the ongoing process of developing democratic and cooperative forms for decision-making with which to guide the organizational affairs of our community.”²²⁶

The joint commitment to preservation and innovation is also reflected in the different types of programs offered at Spirit Rock. These include residential retreats, daylong events, weekly classes and benefit workshops. As Kornfield notes, to preserve the Theravada tradition the majority of residential retreats focus on the classical Theravada practices of vipassana, the four foundations of mindfulness and the concentration meditations of the brahma-viharas or the four divine-abidings. There are also a few joint retreats that combine mindfulness with other spiritual practices such as mindfulness and yoga or mindfulness and the enneagram. The residential retreats follow a similar style to those offered at IMS. The day begins at 6:00 am and ends at 9:00 pm with seven sitting and six walking periods of vipassana practice and a mindful work period.

The more innovative programs are hosted as daylong events. These cover a wide range of subjects from qigong to sacred sexuality, from mindfulness and creativity to “the Neuro-dharma of Love.” A number of these daylongs are co-sponsored by Institute for Spirituality and Psychology that works with Spirit Rock in exploring the interface between spirituality and psychology.

²²⁶ “Spirit Rock’s Vision Mandala,” accessed June 18, 2009, <http://www.spiritrock.com/display.asp?pageid=6&catid=1>.

Weekly classes tend to fall on the more traditional side of the spectrum. There are weekly vipassana sitting groups and classes that combine vipassana with other practices such as yoga. There are also class series that run over ten weeks such as “Essential Dharma: Core Buddhist Teachings,” which aim to provide a grounding in foundational Buddhist teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Spirit Rock also runs a number of long-term programs which explicitly aim to integrate formal retreat practice with daily life and work. The two-year Dedicated Practitioners Program, for example, provides comprehensive lay training in textual study and meditation practice and aims to bridge the gap between residential retreats and daily life. Another long term program, The Path of Engagement, aims to connect participants’ vipassana practice with their work service and action in the world.²²⁷

Another striking feature of Spirit Rock is the number of programs offered to specific groups of people such as families, teens, women, queer, lesbian, gay, and transgender people and people-of-color. A commitment to diversity is reflected in the recent initiation of a new diversity program that is “dedicated to the inclusion of all races, classes, sexual orientations, gender identities, ages, disabilities, cultures, ethnicities, and other social identities” and aims to diversify Spirit Rock on all levels.

It is this particular mix of preservation and innovation or conservatism and radicalism that constitutes “west coast Vipassana.” Before I turn to close reading of the specific themes emerging from west coast Vipassana, a brief word on terminology is necessary. I specify west coast Vipassana because, as discussed, the east-coast community as represented by IMS has been more hesitant about west coast

²²⁷ For details of these and other similar long-term programs see “Spirit Rock Programs,” <http://www.spiritrock.com/display.asp?catid=2&pageid=106>.

developments. However, while most significantly represented by Spirit Rock, west coast Vipassana is not confined to this area. Other Insight teachers such as Tara Brach, who teaches in Washington D.C, promote a similar ethos. Similarly, although a minority, there are also more traditional and conservative teachers at Spirit Rock. Kornfield notes that there has been conflict at Spirit Rock between those teachers wishing to preserve the traditional style of the Burmese Mahasi retreat model and those wishing to adapt to American culture with more innovative forms. He shares the story of an early teacher meeting adjudicated by a professional conflict advisor in which there was conflict between two teachers each of whom represented the extreme ends of the conservative-radical spectrum. The result of this meeting, Kornfield concludes, was the realization that the conservative and radical voices complemented each other and that each contributed a piece to the living mandala of Spirit Rock.²²⁸

The Incorporation of the Personal and the Sacralization of the Everyday: The Main Innovative Themes of West Coast Vipassana

In the following section, I offer a close reading of the main innovative themes that have appeared interwoven with and alongside more traditional Theravadin teachings in west coast Vipassana. While there is much cross-over between these themes, for purposes of clarity and organization, I have delineated the following threads: (i) The call to include the personal self within spiritual practice and a corresponding integration of western psychology and Buddhism; (ii) An emphasis on self-acceptance that is located within a wider shift towards a more feminine approach to practice; (iii) The replacement

²²⁸ Kornfield, "A Vision for Spirit Rock."

of the ideal of perfect enlightenment with the goal of an “embodied enlightenment,” or mature spirituality; (iv) A stress on the importance of integrating meditation with everyday life and a celebration of householder life as a site for spiritual liberation; and (v) An embrace of both immanent and transcendent dimensions of awakening.

In the introduction to his bestselling 1993 text, *A Path With Heart: a Guide through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*, Jack Kornfield states that the greatest spiritual lesson he has learnt is the importance of wedding the personal to the universal. Kornfield frames this as a marriage of the universal and impersonal qualities of Buddha nature with one’s unique individual incarnation. As he states:

This personal approach to practice honors both the uniqueness and the commonality of our life, respecting the dance between birth and death, yet also honoring our particular body, our particular family and community, the personal history that has been given to us. In this way, our awakening is a very personal matter that also affects all other creatures on earth.²²⁹

Both the psychological and spiritual must be included in what Kornfield calls “the dharma of liberation,” because anyone who begins Buddhist practice will eventually discover that personal healing is a necessary component of the spiritual path. Drawing from his own personal experience and over thirty years of teaching, he states that while many people come to spiritual practice hoping to transcend the difficult and painful areas of their lives, the need to deal with personal emotional problems is the rule rather than the exception. Also, because the issues of personal life are often the source of one’s greatest

²²⁹ Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, 40.

suffering, one must guard against “spiritual bypassing” the unconscious use of spiritual practice to circumvent personal developmental issues.²³⁰

Including the personal in practice is essential because, according to Kornfield, whatever meditative heights are reached, one can never fully transcend the personal self. The same point was repeatedly made in interviews by different Spirit Rock teachers. They shared that they had experienced profound moments of awakening and disidentification from the personal self but that such experiences were inevitably followed by a return to the self. Similarly, teachers referred to students and colleagues who had deep spiritual insights into the nature of suffering, impermanence and no-self but who, at the same time, were unhealthy and neurotic in their personal lives.

The inability to fully transcend the personal self legitimates the incorporation of the tools and insights of western psychology into Buddhism. Kornfield, who has a doctorate in clinical psychology and is a practicing psychotherapist, has been at the forefront of the movement to integrate the two disciplines. He believes that, at their best, both psychodynamic work and Buddhist meditation aim to liberate one from the power of past conditioning and the false identities constituted around such conditioning.²³¹ Hence, rather than polarizing Buddhist practice and psychotherapy, he suggests that, “The point is to pay attention to where there is suffering, see the clinging, identification and release it to find a freedom of heart.”²³² From this perspective, attention to the personal does not result in more identification with or reification of the self as critics suggest, but rather expands possibilities for liberation. As Kornfield puts it, “The psychological and

²³⁰ Ibid., 247.

²³¹ Ibid., 244.

²³² Jack Kornfield, "Meditation and Psychotherapy: A Plea for Integration." *Inquiring Mind* 5, no. 1 (summer 1988).

spiritual, the personal and the universal have become widely understood as complementary dimensions of the dharma of liberation.²³³

Central to psychological healing is self-acceptance. Kornfield goes as far to suggest that not only is much of spiritual life about self-acceptance but “maybe all of it is.”²³⁴ He sees self-acceptance as particularly essential for westerner practitioners because of the pervasiveness of self-hatred and self-judgment in modern western culture.

Moreover, Kornfield laments that western practitioners often misuse Buddhist ideals to feed their harsh “inner-critic” or super-ego. In a related vein, Eugene Cash, teacher of Insight San Francisco, repeatedly addresses the problem of the inner-critic in his dharma talks. He claims that it is the only area of experience where simple observation or mindfulness is not sufficient and recommends the use of either humor or intentional aggression to disidentify from it. Similarly, Howie Cohn, one of the founding members of Spirit Rock, devoted an entire dharma talk to discussing strategies for disarming the super-ego. Drawing as much from psychoanalysis as Buddhism, Cohn called for self-compassion and suggested the skilful use of vipassana and metta to combat relentless critical self-judgments.²³⁵

Of special note here is Washington-based Insight teacher Tara Brach’s book *Radical Acceptance*.²³⁶ This text is devoted to the pervasive modern western problem of what Brach calls “the trance of unworthiness” which is brought about by the conviction that “there is something fundamentally wrong with us.”²³⁷ She explains this fundamental

²³³ Jack Kornfield, “American Buddhism” in *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America* ed. Don Morreale (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1998), xxi-xxx.

²³⁴ Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, 47.

²³⁵ Details gathered from participant-observation conducted during summer 2008.

²³⁶ Tara Brach, *Radical Acceptance* (London: Random House, 2003).

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-9.

sense of unworthiness as a symptom of a modern western culture that breeds shame and separation and offers the Buddhist concepts of interdependence, Buddha-nature and her own Buddhist-derived practice of radical acceptance as its antidote. Radical acceptance does not, Brach cautions, mean self-indulgence, resignation or self-affirmation. It is rather the compassionate and mindful acceptance of whatever is arising in ones' present experience. On several occasions Brach's text was referred to and recommended by Insight teachers during their vipassana weekly groups or daylong events.

The emphasis on self-acceptance can be seen as located within a larger shift towards a more feminine approach to Buddhist practice. According to Kornfield, Asian Buddhism has been largely a masculine and patriarchal affair. Men have had sole authority over the preservation and transmission of the tradition and have shaped Buddhism as a practice of the mind or logos in which enlightenment is attained through a hyper-masculinized ascetic renunciation and self-mastery. However, not only has western Buddhism institutionally challenged patriarchal and sexist structures, it has also feminized and reconfigured the dharma as a practice of relationship to the body, the community and the earth. Within American Buddhism there has been a shift away from a masculinized practice that promotes renunciation, striving and conquering towards a more feminine-associated appreciation of self-acceptance, interdependence and healing.²³⁸ As Brach puts it, "We are not walking this path alone building spiritual muscles, climbing the ladder to become more perfect. Rather we are discovering the truth of our relatedness, the belonging to our bodies and emotions, to each other and to the world."²³⁹

²³⁸ Kornfield, *American Buddhism*, xxiii.

²³⁹ Brach, *Radical Acceptance*, 42.

Such a perspective is described by Kornfield as an “embodied enlightenment” or a mature spirituality. This mature spirituality abandons unrealistic fantasies such as the perfect guru, the complete spiritual teaching or full enlightenment. While these ideals appear in Buddhist texts, Kornfield explains them as archetypal ideals and inspirational guides rather than concrete realities. Buddhist maps of enlightenment should be read as poetry or metaphors rather than approached as actual states to attain. Discussing different models of liberation, he rejects a linear ascension path, which results in the perfect human in favor of a spiral unfolding, which acknowledges increasing awareness and freedom but also embraces human vulnerability. Although a radical shift in identity is possible, according to Kornfield, there is no “enlightenment retirement.” It is not possible to fully transcend “the pain of human life” and so we must resist the “myth of perfection.”²⁴⁰ Cycles of awakening and openness are followed by periods of fear and contraction. The disappearance of Mara, the Buddhist personification of desire, aversion, and ignorance, is only temporary. Mara always returns to visit the Buddha.²⁴¹

Yet, rather than lament the return of Mara, or what Kornfield describes as the descent into our human vulnerability, we can embrace it because the real problem is not our humanity but the denial of it. A mature spirituality aims, therefore, not to transcend the human but to claim and embody human wholeness in every aspect of life.²⁴² Brach also stresses the need to surrender “fantasies of perfection” and accept the reality of human wholeness. She advocates Carl Jung’s description of the spiritual path as a spiral unfolding into wholeness over the linear “orthodox path of climbing up a spiritual ladder

²⁴⁰ Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, 123.

²⁴¹ The same theme of the return of Mara is also discussed in Stephen Batchelor *Living with the Devil: A Meditation on Good and Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

²⁴² Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, 162.

seeking perfection.”²⁴³ Rather than try to eradicate or transcend the psyche, we must “embrace life in all its realness—broken, messy, mysterious and vibrantly alive.”²⁴⁴

In his call for an embodied enlightenment, Kornfield stresses the importance of integrating meditation with every aspect of daily life. He claims that rather than renouncing the world, western practitioners wish to integrate the deepest dimensions of the dharma into their daily lives. In reflections such as “Daily Life as Meditation,” “Moving into the World” and “Honoring Family Karma,” Kornfield cautions against limiting Buddhist practice to meditation retreats and describes parenting as a “sacred act” and family life and children as “a wonderful temple.”²⁴⁵ He critiques the western tendency to focus on individual meditation practices and discard the interpersonal context within which they have traditionally been held, and shares that his own deepest spiritual awakenings have occurred in relationships.²⁴⁶ The centrality of integrating practice with the everyday is reflected in several of Spirit Rock teachers’ biographies. Cash, for example, declares that he “is passionate about teaching mindfulness, inquiry and waking up in daily life.” Sylvia Boorstein “is particularly interested in seeing daily life as practice” and Philip Moffit has founded “a non-profit organization devoted to the study and practice of spiritual values in daily life.”²⁴⁷

The embrace of the everyday, of family, relationships, work and the world occurs within an affirmation of a wider metaphysics that celebrates both immanent and transcendent dimensions of awakening. Kornfield distinguishes between two different types of spiritual paths: paths of transcendence and paths of immanence. Both, he claims,

²⁴³ Brach, *Radical Acceptance*, 42.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, 286-291.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 287.

²⁴⁷ See “Spirit Rock Teachers,” <http://www.spiritrock.com/display.asp?pageid=18&catid=4&scatid=8>.

are expressions of the “Great Way” with their own values and dangers. The profound spiritual experiences generated by transcendent paths can be a source of great motivation and inspiration. Yet the same experiences can fuel the “myth of perfection” and foster “hubris and self-deception.” Paths of immanence offer a powerful integrated approach that infuses the whole of life with a sacred scent. Spiritual compliancy and indulgence, however, can be legitimated in guise of an immanent embrace of the ordinary.²⁴⁸ While both immanent and transcendent paths are acknowledged by Kornfield as integral to liberation, west coast Vipassana is strongly flavored by an immanent approach to awakening.

The Humanistic Domestication and Dilution of the Dharma: Critiques of West coast Vipassana

West coast innovations have been subject to a number of criticisms on the grounds that they represent a humanistic domestication and dilution of traditional Buddhism. Initially there were tensions within the American Insight community itself with a polarization occurring between its two main centers, IMS and Spirit Rock. By the mid-1980s, growing tensions between Kornfield and Goldstein were expressed in a fairly publicized disagreement revolving around the appropriate place of personal or psychological issues within Buddhism and the respective merits of the householder and renouncer paths.²⁴⁹ Goldstein and Salzberg had become increasingly influenced by the teaching approach of one of Mahasi Sayadaw’s successors, U Pandita Sayadaw. U

²⁴⁸ Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, 120-121.

²⁴⁹ Tony Schwartz, *What Really Matters: Searching for Wisdom in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), 307-308.

Pandita was renowned for his strict and rigorous style, encouraging a commitment to meditation practice without “thought for body or life.”²⁵⁰ Kornfield, however, reports becoming increasingly frustrated with U Pandita’s “warrior approach” to practice, feeling it was not skilful for western practitioners wrestling with self-hatred. He wanted to develop a more embodied heart-centered approach that integrated meditation experiences with everyday life. Questioning whether vipassana alone was sufficient to resolve all areas of psychological conflict, Kornfield believed that, in certain cases, directly engaging areas of the personality was also necessary. He was convinced, for example, that the intensive individual meditation practice characteristic of the Burmese approach did not sufficiently address interpersonal issues.

In contrast, Goldstein remained committed to the traditional Theravadin perspective of his teacher. Goldstein lamented that the highest Buddhist aim of liberation from suffering was being replaced by more humanistic concerns. In his words, “I see a tendency to let go of that goal and become satisfied with something less: doing good in the world, having more harmonious relationships, seeking a happier life. That’s all beautiful but in my view it misses the essential point.”²⁵¹ Moreover, the way to liberation was through disidentification and nonattachment. Psychological work risked reinforcing a sense of self: a focus on *my* personal history, *my* individual problems. As regards adapting Buddhism for westerners, Goldstein noted that U Pandita was concerned with liberation not with making the teachings palatable for Americans. Similarly, comparing renouncer and householder paths, he quoted the Buddha’s evaluation of the householder life, found within the Pali Canon, as being “full of dust.” Summing up the disagreement,

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Schwartz, *What Really Matters*, 329.

Goldstein stated: “the difference between me and Jack might be in his emphasis on humanistic values versus mine on the values of liberation.”²⁵²

Before elaborating on this tension between humanistic and Buddhist ideals and values, a few words on present relations within the Insight community are necessary. To suggest a split between IMS and Spirit Rock would be misleading. Most of the teachers move between both of the centers; some of the senior Spirit Rock teachers are or have been students of Goldstein; all teachers report strong bonds and friendships between east and west coast communities. In my recent interviews with Spirit Rock teachers, interviewees reported that while IMS maintained a more traditional approach, differences between the two centers had notably lessened. This, interestingly, was attributed to a shift in east coast perspectives with two particular points being noted: first, that Goldstein has since personally benefited from and was thus more open to psychotherapy; and second that east coast teachers had widening their perspective as a result of practicing in other Buddhist traditions, such as the Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen lineage.²⁵³ Later interviews with Goldstein also show a shift in his perspective regarding the possibilities of householder life as a site for liberation. In a 2000 interview, Goldstein acknowledged that although householders face greater challenges, many, including one of his own teachers Dipa Ma, had reached great stages of awakening. Although Goldstein did not promote the issue with as much enthusiasm as Kornfield, he displayed a greater degree of

²⁵² Ibid., 331.

²⁵³ See Joseph Goldstein’s book *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism* (New York: HarperOne, 2001) in which he explores the different views of Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism on the nature of enlightenment.

openness declaring the householder issue “the great experiment in dharma in the West.”²⁵⁴

My general impression from formal interviews and casual conversations is that teachers are keen to portray the Insight community as diverse yet harmonious. While the gap between IMS and Spirit Rock has lessened, however, disagreements still remain. One teacher at Spirit Rock confided that east coasters remained suspicious of the heavily psychologized accent of their west coast counterparts. Another teacher at IMS told me that many within the east-coast community felt that Kornfield had unintentionally done American Buddhists a disservice in promoting what they feel is a diluted version of Buddhism in his bestselling texts.

Returning to tensions between humanism and Buddhism, an exemplifying critique has come from an American-born Theravadin monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Thanissaro Bhikkhu is a prolific contemporary monk, translator and commentator on Pali texts. After graduating from Oberlin College, he traveled to Thailand where he ordained and trained in the Thai Forest tradition under Ajahn Fuang. After over a decade, he returned to the US in 1991 to help found the Metta Forest Monastery, near San Diego where he has been co-abbot since 1993. Thanissaro is outspoken in his critique of many aspects of American Buddhism, declaring that it too often resembles a game of telephone in which “Things get passed on from person to person, from one generation of teachers to the next, until the message gets garbled beyond recognition.”²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ “No Escape From the World: An Interview with Joseph Goldstein,” *What is Enlightenment?* (Fall-Winter 2000), <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j18/goldstein.asp>.

²⁵⁵ “A Question of Skill: An Interview with Thanissaro Bhikkhu,” *Insight Magazine Online*, <http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas/ebud/ebdha213.htm>.

Although Thanissaro critiques American Buddhism in general, many of his points directly address west coast themes. In his 2002 article, “Romancing the Buddha,” Thanissaro convincingly argues that many American Buddhist themes—such as wholeness, integration, interconnectedness, opening the heart and ego-transcendence—are reflective not of Buddhism but of Romanticism and its contemporary heir, depth psychology. He correctly notes that Romanticism was one of the major western filters for Buddhism and that the Romantic view of religious life has shaped the western view of dharma practice. Three Romantic concepts have been particularly influential in the American assimilation of Buddhism. First, is Friedrich Schiller’s concept of integration as an unending process, which is personal and unique for each individual. Second, is the translation of Schiller’s model of integration through the figures of William James, Carl Jung and Abraham Maslow into the psychological perspective that a final end to suffering is both unattainable and undesirable. Third, is the Romantic imperative to creatively recast traditional religious doctrine to keep religious experience alive for each generation that has also influenced liberal Christianity and Reform Judaism.

Thanissaro calls on American Buddhists to interrogate Romantic assumptions and become aware of the real differences between the two traditions. In particular, he draws attention to fundamental differences between Buddhist and Romantic notions of the nature of religious experience, the basic spiritual illness or problem and the possibility and nature of spiritual cure. Like Goldstein, Thanissaro unfavorably compares the full awakening offered by Theravada Buddhism to the partial view of freedom offered by “Buddhist Romanticism.” While many derive therapeutic benefit from the latter, such as a personal sense of connection and wholeness, Buddhist Romanticism is severely limited.

In emphasizing interconnectedness rather than the unconditional freedom of nirvana, it excludes those aspects of the dharma that address levels of suffering remaining even after the attainment of personal wholeness. It also alienates those people who find the concerns and the cure it offers too facile. Furthermore, in its concern to accommodate American middle-class comfort standards, Buddhist Romanticism has abandoned the fundamental Theravadin ideal of renunciation.²⁵⁶ The lack of interest in monastic life and the contemporary American reconfiguration of renunciation as a state of mind rather than an actual practice is, declares Thanissaro, a “huge blind spot in American Buddhism.”²⁵⁷

Helen Tworkov, editor of the popular Buddhist magazine, *Tricycle*, and Zen practitioner, has also unreservedly critiqued the accommodation of Buddhism to American materialistic culture. In particular, Tworkov bemoans how American secular materialism has co-opted the Buddhism goal of enlightenment. In her view, “the quest for enlightenment has been derided of late as [a] romantic and mythic aspiration of antiquated patriarchal monasticism.”²⁵⁸ The American “denigration of enlightenment” has seen it being reconfigured as an obstacle rather than the goal of practice and the replacement of the traditional quest for enlightenment with a contemporary concern with ethical behavior. For Tworkov, this is a particularly grievous misinterpretation of some of the great Zen teachings about the goal of Buddhism. She points out that when D.T Suzuki developed and created a climate for Zen practice in America, the enlightenment experiences of *satori* and *kensho* were fundamental to his vision. When Zen became popular in the 1960s, Tworkov explains, American practitioners were optimistic about

²⁵⁶ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “Romancing the Buddha,” *Tricycle* (Winter 2002), <http://www.tricycle.com/feature/romancing-buddha>.

²⁵⁷ Thanissaro Bikkhu, “A Question of Skill”, 6-7.

²⁵⁸ Tworkov, *Zen In America*, 258.

attaining enlightenment. However, when they had not reached enlightenment twenty years later, Americans became angry and disappointed and blamed their teachers and the tradition. Far from expressing a more mature spirituality as Kornfield suggests, then, for Tworokov, contemporary revisions of enlightenment are the result of practitioners' cynicism and resignation.²⁵⁹

Another major contributing factor to what Tworokov problematizes as the "secularization of Zen" is that as the first-generation of American practitioners became middle-aged and many started to have families they become more concerned with household life than with the quest for enlightenment. For Tworokov, like Thanissaro, a major problem in American Buddhism is the lack of interest and support in renunciation and monasticism. It is the monastic tradition, she claims, that represents and keeps the enlightenment goal alive and without this it is very difficult to prevent a dilution of the dharma. Although Tworokov comments are directly primarily to the American Zen community, she also sees them applying to Theravadin and Tibetan schools of American Buddhism.²⁶⁰

Other voices outside of the Buddhist community have also targeted west coast Vipassana. American Religion scholar, Stephen Prothero has launched a caustic attack on what he dismisses as "the easy answers of boomer Buddhism." Dismissing scholarly support from sociologist James William Coleman's *The New Buddhism: Modern Transformations of an Ancient Tradition* and popular bestselling texts by Spirit Rock teachers such as Sylvia Boorstein's *It's Easier Than You Think: The Buddhist Way to Happiness*, Prothero blasts boomer Buddhism for being shallow and "smoothing out the

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 258-267.

²⁶⁰ Amy Edelstein, "Is Buddhism Surviving America? An Interview with Helen Tworokov," *WIE?* <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j14/tworokov.asp?page=1>.

palpable friction between Buddhist practice and the banalities of contemporary American life.”²⁶¹ While supporters claim that innovations improve traditional Buddhism by making it “nonsectarian” and “psychologically astute,” he declares that they have merely transformed a religion deeply suspicious of the self into a vehicle of self-absorption. Prothero concludes by unfavorably comparing commercial and inauthentic boomer Buddhism with the strict renunciation or the “real thing” as practiced by monastics such as Thanissaro Bhikkhu.²⁶²

Beyond Meditation: In Defense of West Coast Vipassana Developments

West coast developments are accused, therefore, of reflecting a dilution and corruption of Buddhism by western Romantic, humanistic, individualistic and psychological values. The influence of these western strands of thoughts on American Buddhism is undisputable. As David McMahan notes, it has often said as a matter of course that modernist forms of Buddhism have been westernized, demythologized, rationalized, Romanticized, Protestantized or psychologized.²⁶³ What I wish to problematize, however, is the equally common move that equates acknowledging these influences with immediately dismissing them. For, as McMahan correctly states, while Buddhist modernism is neither unambiguously “there” in classical Buddhist texts and lived traditions, nor is it merely a fantasy of an educated white western elite population. It is rather a new historically unique form of Buddhism that has emerged as a result of a

²⁶¹ Stephen Prothero, “Boomer Buddhism,” *Salon.Com*, February 2001.
<http://archive.salon.com/books/feature/2001/02/26/buddhism/index.html>.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 8.

process of modernization, westernization, reinterpretation, revitalization and reform that has been taking place not only in the West but also in Asian countries for over a century. This new form of Buddhism has been fashioned by modernizing Asian Buddhists and westerners deeply engaged in creating a Buddhist response to the dominant problems and questions of modernity.²⁶⁴

It is this novel and historically unique form of Buddhism, what one practitioner enthused as “the Buddhism of the future,” that has taken root at Spirit Rock. Such novelty is not, McMahan rightly stresses, grounds for an automatic dismissal. Yet, as he also recognizes, the hybrid nature of Buddhist modernism inevitably raises questions of authenticity, legitimacy and definition. At what point, McMahan asks, does Buddhism become so thoroughly modernized, westernized, detraditionalized and adapted that it simply can no longer be considered Buddhism? Rejecting the myth of a pure original Buddhism to which every adaptation must conform, he points out that very extant form of Buddhism has been shaped and reconfigured by the great diversity of cultural and historical circumstances it has inhabited in its long and varied existence. Nevertheless, McMahan acknowledges that questions of definition, legitimacy and authenticity have become important to practitioners in the contemporary period because of the unprecedented rapidity of change and proliferation of new forms of Buddhism.

In the absence of a pure Buddhism with which to compare and measure contemporary developments against, how are we to respond to these questions of authenticity and legitimation? McMahan suggests that to ask if any of the various forms of Buddhist modernism are legitimate is to ask whether there are communities of practice

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

that have been convinced of their legitimacy.²⁶⁵ Following McMahan, I wish to make a case for the legitimacy of certain west coast developments, specifically the inclusion of the personal self and the attempt to integrate meditation with everyday life, on the same and related pragmatic and ethical grounds that are forwarded by the communities within which they are occurring.

Buddhism and Psychotherapy: The Benefits of a Dialogical Approach

Numerous studies have noted that depth psychology has been one of the most prevalent frameworks for the interpretation and assimilation of Buddhism in the West. McMahan offers a brief history of the western psychological reconfiguration of Buddhism showing how ontological deities and cosmological realms have been translated into psychological forces and how Buddhist practices such as meditation have been rendered as psychotherapeutic techniques.²⁶⁶ Many commentators have bemoaned this reduction of Buddhist thought and practice into western psychological discourse. Richard Payne, for example, decries the common assimilation of Buddhism to the Jungian narrative of individuation.²⁶⁷

I argue, however, that critiques fail to acknowledge and adequately distinguish between reductive and dialogical approaches within the broad interface between Buddhism and psychology. Whereas a reductive approach interprets and reduces religious phenomena to psychological states, a dialogical enterprise employs psychology

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 253-254.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 51-59.

²⁶⁷ Richard Payne, "Individuation and Awakening: Romantic Narrative and the Psychological Interpretation of Buddhism," in *Buddhism and Psychotherapy Across Cultures*, ed. Mark Unno (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 31-51.

as a tool to extend, through dialogue, the aims of religion.²⁶⁸ While there are numerous incidents of the problematic reductive approach within the Buddhist and psychological interface, I claim that, in the main, west coast Vipassana attempts to integrate the personal self into Buddhist practice should be discriminated, in the main, as dialogical enterprises.

To begin with, as William Parsons traces, the wider dialogical context between Western psychology and Asian religions has markedly improved. Early encounters were hindered by limited access to the traditions, poor and incomplete translations of Asian religious texts, naïve perennialism, liberal protestant agendas and orientalism. However, from 1970 to the present, there have been a number of impactful socio-cultural shifts and intellectual developments. These include the continuing waves of Asian immigration, unprecedented access to a plurality of Asian religious communities and an increased awareness of cultural differences and their impact on healing enterprises.²⁶⁹

For example, a number of ethno-sociological studies and cultural psychological studies have concluded that Asian models of subjectivity differ from western ones in being more collectively orientated and less concerned with individuality.²⁷⁰ Noting this, Buddhist scholar-practitioners such as Anne Klein have acknowledged that American Buddhists encounter unprecedented concerns because the modern western construction of

²⁶⁸ For clarification of dialogical approaches see William B. Parsons and Diane Jonte-Pace, "Introduction: Mapping Religion and Psychology," in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, eds. William B. Parsons and Diane Jonte-Pace (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 1-29.

²⁶⁹ William B Parsons, "The Psychology-Comparativist Dialogue," in *ibid*, 229-253.

²⁷⁰ See, for example, Mattison Mines, "Conceptualizing the Person: Hierarchical Society and Individual Autonomy in India," in *Self As Person In Asian Theory and Practice* eds., Roger T. Ames, Wimal Dissanayake & Thomas P. Kasulis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 279-295. Alan Roland, *In Search of Self in India and Japan: Towards a Cross-Cultural Psychology* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988).

the self as a unique individual is foreign to traditional Asian cultures.²⁷¹ Although Janet Gyatso's presentation of the Tibetan visionary Jigme Lingpa's autobiography tempers claims that a sense of personal individuality is a unique marker of modern western identity, I remain convinced that the modern psychological subject, whose appearance was influentially documented by Philip Rieff, is not sufficiently addressed by traditional Buddhism.²⁷²

One indication of this are reports that vipassana practice alone is not able to resolve the personal material uncovered for practitioners on intensive retreats. Kornfield, for example, reports that at least half of the western students on the annual three month retreats at IMS are unable to continue with vipassana practice because they encounter so many unresolved emotional and psychological issues.²⁷³ This confirmed the earlier findings of Insight teacher and psychologist Jack Engler.²⁷⁴ Engler and Dan Brown did a Rorschach study of vipassana meditators before and after a three-month retreat. They found that about half of the practitioners were unable to sustain vipassana practice because they became overwhelmed by unfinished developmental material. As Engler explains, "Trying to get them to redirect their attention to note simple arising and passing of phenomena is usually unsuccessful. The press of personal issues is just too great."²⁷⁵

Asian teachers, such as Mahasi Sayadaw and the current Dalai Lama, have also reported being bewildered at the psychological problems they encounter in their western students. On his first visit to America, Sayadaw confessed that many students seemed to

²⁷¹ Anne Carolyn Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Feminists, Buddhists and the Art of the Self*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

²⁷² Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998); Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1966.

²⁷³ Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, 246.

²⁷⁴ Jack Engler "Promises and Perils of The Spiritual Path," in *Buddhism and Psychotherapy: Across Cultures*, ed. Mark Unno (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006),17-30.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

be suffering from problems that were unfamiliar to him. Before leaving the US, Sayadaw shared that he had discovered a new form of dukkha, called “psychological suffering.”²⁷⁶ Similarly, the Dalai Lama was astonished to hear that many westerners suffer from self-hatred and reported that there was no equivalent Tibetan word or concept for this psychological issue.²⁷⁷

Moreover, as Engler recognizes, freedom from these personal issues cannot be achieved simply by prescribing more meditation or other forms of Buddhist practice. This, he believes, is particularly true for issues concerning trust and intimacy in relationships: “These issues cannot be resolved simply by watching the moment-to-moment flow of thoughts, feelings and sensations in the mind. These problems arise in relationships; they have to be healed in relationships.”²⁷⁸

Engler’s observation leads to my next argument that charges of psychologization and individualism fail to fully appreciate the interpersonal and relational dimensions of many of the innovations of west coast Vipassana. They have been motivated by the realization that Buddhist practice often proves insufficient in addressing interpersonal dynamics for western practitioners. This emerges through the experiences of individual lay practitioners in their romantic, family and working relationships and when crises in spiritual communities reveal the replication of dysfunctional family relational patterns. Kornfield personal reminiscence captures what has emerged as a common narrative amongst many western practitioners:

²⁷⁶ Engler, “Promises and Perils of the Spiritual Path,” 24.

²⁷⁷ Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, 245. See also Engler, “Being Somebody and Being Nobody: A Reexamination of the Understanding of Self in Psychoanalysis and Buddhism,” 45.

²⁷⁸ Engler, “Promises and Perils of the Spiritual Path,” 23.

Although I had arrived back from the monastery clear, spacious, and high, in short order I discovered, through my relationship, in the communal household where I lived, and in my graduate work, that my meditation had helped me very little with my human relationships. I was still emotionally immature, acting out the same painful patterns of blame and fear, acceptance and rejection that I had before my Buddhist training; only the horror was that I was beginning to see these patterns more clearly now...The roots of my unhappiness in relationships had not been examined. I had very few skills for dealing with my feelings or engaging on an emotional level or for living wisely with my friends or loved ones.²⁷⁹

Similarly, in the wake of the series of sexual, drug and financial scandals which rocked a number of North American Buddhist communities in the 1980s, many communities came to recognize that unconscious psychological dynamics, such as transference issues and unresolved narcissistic needs, had contributed to the ethical crises that erupted around the guru-disciple relationship.²⁸⁰

In order to address the neglect of the interpersonal, a number of specifically relational practices derived from Buddhist practices and principles but incorporating the insights of western psychotherapy have been developed. Gregory Kramer's practice of insight dialogue serves as a perfect example. Kramer, who trained with Theravada monastics in Asia and is a visiting teacher at Spirit Rock and IMS, developed insight dialogues after discovering that individual meditation practice was not sufficiently attending to the suffering generated through interpersonal dynamics. He claims that even

²⁷⁹ Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, 6-7

²⁸⁰ Kathy Butler, 'Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America,' in *Meeting the Shadow*, eds. Connie Zweig, and Jeremiah Abrams (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher /Putnam), 137-147.

in those Buddhist traditions in which community life is a central transformative practice, meditation itself is entirely internal and largely ignores interpersonal dimensions. To rectify this, he developed the practice of insight dialogues or interpersonal meditation which directly applies vipassana to the relational realm. Kramer sees insight dialogue as completing that aspect of the Buddhist path, the interpersonal, that has been historically neglected. While it is grounded in Theravada Buddhism, it utilizes psychotherapeutic insights and is particularly relevant to the needs of contemporary western practitioners.²⁸¹

Considering attempts, such as Kramer's, to integrate the (inter)personal self into Buddhism as reflecting a genuine ethical and pragmatic response to the above issues, leads me to be skeptical of critiques, such as Payne's, that dismiss such moves as the mere infiltration of Buddhism by western psychological values. Granted, there are many streams, such as classical Jungian positions, within the encounter between western depth psychology and Asian religions that problematically reduce the latter to psychological narratives. The alternative, more dialogical maneuvers that I am highlighting here, however, attempt rather to integrate psychological and spiritual perspectives within an overarching spiritual framework. In evaluating west coast Vipassana attempts to integrate the personal self into Buddhism, the question, therefore, becomes whether personal material is negotiated in a way that reduces Buddhism to psychology or extends, through dialogue, the Buddhist aim of freedom from suffering.

²⁸¹ The emphasis on relationality can be seen both as a continuation and critique of Buddhism modernism. Gregory Kramer, *Insight Dialogue: The Interpersonal Path to Freedom* (Boston: Shambhala, 2007).

Meditation and Daily Life: A Case for Integration

In addition to recognizing the inability of meditation practice to sufficiently attend to all dimensions of psychological suffering, west coast Vipassana advocates have also acknowledged other limitations involved in an exclusive focus on meditation. Donald Rothberg, a senior member of Spirit Rock's teaching council, has been a vocal critic of the privileging of individual meditation practice and development within the American Insight community. To rectify this, he has pioneered engaged forms of Buddhism such as relationship as spiritual practice and nonviolent conscious communication that also address relational and collective dimensions.²⁸² Moreover, as Rothberg points out, traditionally most contemplative traditions, including Buddhism, have regarded individual experiences and practices such as meditation as important but partial elements of a larger system that also comprises communal life, strong ethical commitment, relationship with the teachers and the study of sacred scriptures.

Rothberg's redirection of attention to the traditional wider context and aspects of contemplative practice leads to my next main argument in defense of west coast developments. Rather than dismissing the concern with integrating meditative experience into daily life as a distraction from the highest Buddhist goal, it can be more generously appreciated as an attempt to counter one of the more problematic aspects of Buddhist modernism. By the latter, I refer to an over-emphasis on meditation and meditative experience as constituting the essence of Buddhism.

²⁸² See Donald Rothberg, *The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

The privileging of meditation within American Buddhism, including the Insight community, has been subject to a number of critiques. In an influential analysis of the status of experience in modern religious practice and the modern academic study of religion, Robert Sharf has targeted the contemporary western privileging of meditative experience.²⁸³ Sharf traces the modern understanding of the essence of spirituality as individual inner experience to Schleiermacher's attempt to protect religion from Enlightenment critiques. He further shows how the privileging of experience in Asian thought can be traced to a handful of twentieth century Asian religious leaders and apologists in sustained dialogue with their intellectual counterparts in the West. One of these figures was D.T. Suzuki, who was particularly influenced by William James's belief that the essence of religion was mystical experience and the Kyoto School's presentation of Buddhism as unmediated mystical experience. These shaped Suzuki's seminal American presentation of Zen as the experiential essence of all religion and as chiefly concerned with enlightenment experiences of kensho and satori.

Sharf, however, questions the assumption that meditation experience is central to traditional Asian religious practice. He points out that while meditation might have been esteemed in theory, it did not historically occupy the dominant role in monastic and ascetic life that is sometimes supposed. Taking the Vipassana movement as an example, he notes that the meditation techniques promoted within it cannot be traced back prior to the late nineteenth century and thus are an unreliable source for the reconstruction of premodern Theravada. Moreover, these techniques, which were reconstructed in the modern period on the basis of scriptural accounts (primarily the two Satipatthana suttas and the Path of Purification), are often ambiguous or inconsistent, and contemporary

²⁸³ Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," 223-284.

vipassana teachers are often at odds with each other over their interpretation. He points out, as Kornfield also noted, that the designation of particular techniques and the identification of meditative experiences that result from them are subjects of continuous and often acrimonious debate in the Theravada community. For Sharf, the modern privileging of meditation seen in the Vipassana movement is problematic because it ignores the equally important traditional Theravada practices of ritualistic, ethical and merit-making activities.²⁸⁴

A similar point is made by Ajahn Amaro, who understands the privileging of meditation and intensive retreat practice within the American Insight community as an unfortunate inheritance of the adoption of the Burmese retreat model. Rather than view west coast attempts to integrate meditation with daily life and broaden dharma practice as a new modern development, Amaro sees it, on the contrary, as a more faithful adherence to the Pali Canon and a correction of an earlier modern misperception. He points out that the Buddha gave many different practices and teachings and that there is much more to the Pali Canon than vipassana meditation.²⁸⁵ Following Amaro, one legitimating strategy employed by west coast Vipassana to justify their attempts to integrate meditation with daily life is the claim that they are drawing more on the Thai forest lineage of Ajahn Chah and his approach to seeing all daily activity as practice.

In a similar vein to returning to the Pali Canon, the move away from a privileging of meditation practice and experience can also be seen as a recovery of aspects associated more with traditional Theravada but now recast in a modern register. For example, offering a range of teachings and activities that are more accessible to larger numbers of

²⁸⁴ Robert Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms For Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94-116.

²⁸⁵ Personal interview with Ajahn Amaro. July 4, 2009.

the laity, although not exactly a return to traditional Theravada, does have some parallels with the world-accommodation that characterizes traditional Buddhism.

McMahan makes an important point here. In response to Prothero's critique of American "boomer Buddhist" domesticated flattening of the radical ideas of Buddhism, McMahan notes that the vast majority of Buddhists in Asia are laity whose practice of Buddhism is similarly soothing, offering comfort and accommodation rather than radical transformation.²⁸⁶

My argument is that many of the developments, or so-called dilutions, in west coast Vipassana can be thought of as contemporary parallels or analogies to the traditional Theravada mundane practice of rituals, devotion and merit-making. They are providing alternative forms of practices for those who do not want to or are unable to devote themselves exclusively to formal meditation. What is different, of course, is that these practices are often given a transformative or supermundane status or potential that traditional mundane lay activities did not have. Still my point in response to critiques is that the American Insight community cannot win: earlier critiques targeted its privileging of meditation as promoting a decontextualized technological individualistic approach to Buddhist practice whereas more recent critiques are targeting its attempt to rectify this through creating a wider and more communal context for meditation practice as dilution of the virtuous renouncer ideal.

West Coast Vipassana as Skilful Means

²⁸⁶ McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 263.

In light of the above reflections, I am more inclined to a sympathetic reading of west coast developments as attempting to develop a more “skilful means” approach to Buddhist practice in the West. Skilful means is a Buddhist doctrine, particularly prominent in Mahayana Buddhism that argues that because individual temperaments differ, an enlightened Buddha must use innovation and flexibility in teaching individual students.²⁸⁷ Certainly, this is the perspective of teachers at Spirit Rock. As Kornfield puts it:

I simply feel that in order to be skillful at this time, the dharma has to include attention to personal life and the kind of emotional deficiencies that are common in our society. It has to bring skillful means of awareness and compassion to those areas, which aren't-and weren't-major focuses in the monasteries in Asia.²⁸⁸

Similarly, Rothberg explains that the core intention behind his innovations is to develop Buddhist forms that are more appropriate and effective for the contemporary western historic and cultural moment.²⁸⁹

In response to accusations of dilutions, Spirit Rock teachers agreed that there are some troubling commercialized forms of “dharma-lite,” such as New Age books and meditation practices claiming to be Buddhist or Buddhist-based yet without having any real relationship to the tradition. However, they denied that this complaint was applicable to innovations within Spirit Rock. Rather than diluting Buddhism, teachers see their innovations as extending the dharma and making it more widely available and

²⁸⁷ For a description of skilful means see Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, 197-204.

²⁸⁸ Helen Tworok, “The Sure Heart’s Release”, 37-45.

²⁸⁹ Personal interview with Donald Rothberg.

accessible. Aiming to “cast as wide as net as possible,” Spirit Rock offers a diverse range of programs from the more innovative daylongs aimed at giving people their first taste of the dharma to the annual two month silent retreats for more experienced practitioners.²⁹⁰

This raises the somewhat contentious question of whether Spirit Rock teachers consider Theravada Buddhism as a complete path of liberation. Rothberg was unapologetic in his view that traditional Asian Theravada Buddhism did not have all the practices and teachings that contemporary westerners needed, in his words, “to uproot desire, aversion and ignorance in all aspects of their lives.”²⁹¹ Other teachers were more measured in their response. For some westerner practitioners, they suggested, traditional Theravada was sufficient; for a large body, however, it did not provide all the tools necessary for full psychological and spiritual liberation.²⁹²

Teachers see their innovations as building upon the foundations of traditional Theravada in order to extend it to all areas of contemporary life. Hence, west coast teachers reject the framing of the debate in either/or terms: either liberation or humanism, the universal or personal, the monastic or the householder path. For them, it is a case of both/and. The major theme is inclusion: traditional forms of Buddhism are seen as being extended and expanded upon rather than rejected. Interviewees frequently stressed that an integrated approach does not sacrifice meditative discipline or the depths of formal practice. They emphasized that intensive periods of retreat are necessary to support the integration of practice with everyday life in the world and discussed, as an example, the substantial amounts of time they devoted to formal practice. Several interviewees also referred to a new dedicated practitioners program designed to offer a more substantial

²⁹⁰ Interviews with Spirit Rock teachers conducted during June-August 2008.

²⁹¹ Personal interview with Donald Rothberg.

²⁹² Ibid.

and detailed exposure to Buddhist teachings. Similarly, both householder and monastic paths were affirmed as valid paths to awakening and links between monastic and lay communities were celebrated.

Another common way that Spirit Rock teachers and texts undermine the either/or framing of the debate was by claiming that far from being in conflict with traditional Buddhism, their innovations are rooted in tradition. I delineated three main legitimating strategies in relationship to this. First, many teachers referenced and compared their approach with the teaching style of the Buddha as portrayed in the Pali Canon. Above all, they argue, the Buddha was pragmatic and taught a wide range of practices from mindfulness to ethics to diverse groups of people such as monks and kings. Second, they situate developments as extensions of the Noble Eightfold Path. For example, Rothberg discusses the development of nonviolent communication techniques as a contemporary manifestation of right speech. Third, teachers situated Spirit Rock's integrative ethos in the lineage of Ajahn Chah's relational and communal teaching approach. Rothberg points out that Ajahn Chah was also criticized for his interactive style and Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Amaro a lot of attention to relationships in the community.

In discussing their innovations, therefore, Spirit Rock teachers are keen to situate them in relationship to more traditional aspects of Theravada Buddhism and to stress their dual commitment to preservation and innovation. Keeping this both/and tension and dialogue alive is, I suggest, crucial to the legitimacy and success of the integrative ethos. For example, while integration of meditation experiences into daily life is essential, one must first have a meditative discipline and depth of practice with which to integrate. A danger with a focus on integration and the everyday is that practitioners might sacrifice or

skip over formal practice commitments that act as the necessary foundation of innovations. The same concern is raised by Kornfield, who warns that a danger of an immanent approach to spirituality is that practitioners might become lazy and legitimate comfortable worldly habits under the guise of an integrative approach to practice.²⁹³ My point is that any approach, whether of extreme self-discipline or radical self-acceptance, can be reified and employed in an unskillful way. Not reifying or, in Chogyam Trungpa's terms, allowing the ego to convert or appropriate practice for its own ends, relies to a large degree to the motivation of the individual practitioner.²⁹⁴ Still, in promoting a both/and perspective that keeps tradition and innovation in critical dialogue, west coast Vipassana can reduce the possibility that integration comes at the cost of dilution.

An important point to recognize here is that the majority of the innovations can be accounted for as pragmatic attempts to adapt a premodern Asian renunciate tradition to the conditions of living in the modern western world. As noted, they occurred after westerner Buddhists, living householder lives, found limitations to Theravada Buddhism and thus endeavored to extend traditional teachings or pioneer new practices to address these gaps. However, before their attempts at integrating modern concerns, practitioners such as Kornfield and Kramer had first received substantial training in traditional Theravada. Similarly, key figures in Asian Buddhist modernism movements such as Mahasi Sayadaw and Ajahn Buddhadasa, were renowned for their mastery of Buddhist scholarship and meditation before they initiated reforms. One of the dangers for second- or third-generation west coast practitioners, however, is that they will not have any

²⁹³ Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, 121.

²⁹⁴ Chogyam Trungpa *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2002), 13-23.

foundation in or exposure to traditional Buddhism and so will only be conversant in one side of the conversation.

In order to qualify as skilful means, therefore, west coast Vipassana must strive to maintain a both/and perspective and honor their dual commitment to preservation and innovation. Ways that it can maintain a relationship to, or grounding in Buddhist tradition include the study of the Pali Cannon and through nurturing links with monastic communities. The latter, I believe, is particularly important given that the Insight community has shown no or virtually no interest in monastic or renunciate life. Interesting to note here is that while fully supportive of thematic developments, such as the incorporation of psychotherapy and the integration of meditation with daily activities, Ajahn Amaro is troubled by the lack of interest in renunciation and how that plays out and is reinforced structurally at Spirit Rock. He voiced concern that if teachers depended upon the dharma for a living, this would inevitably affect the types of programs and teachings offered. He also shared that as a renuciate he often felt marginalized at Spirit Rock, and that he was dismayed that virtually none of the teachers associated with Spirit Rock have expressed any interest in monastic life. The Buddha, after all, he pointed out, was a renunciate monk.

I also agree with Gil Fronsdal, a member of the teachers' council at Spirit Rock, that it is important to make innovations transparent. Fronsdal has defended the Vipassana movement against complaints of "Buddhism lite," arguing that its innovations are aimed at making Buddhist practice available to the widest range of people possible and alleviating suffering by meeting people where they are. However, he has also called on Vipassana teachers to study traditional Buddhism, not in order to adopt it wholesale but

to be more conscious about what is and is not adopted and to take more responsibility for assumptions and intentions underlying innovation.²⁹⁵ Fronsdal himself is a good example of how west coast Vipassana can be done well. In addition to receiving dharma transmission as a Soto Zen priest, he has trained as a Theravada monk in Burma and completed teacher training under Kornfield. He has a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies, has translated many Pali texts and is the founder of the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies which brings together study and practice to help participants “appreciate the richness of the tradition and lineage.” All of Fronsdal’s teachings are offered on a dana or voluntary donation and he has nurtured close links with the monastic community at Abhayagiri.²⁹⁶

Recent developments at Spirit Rock are promising in these respects. They suggest that having successfully implemented more innovative aspects, teachers are renewing their attention to the more traditional elements of Theravada Buddhism. For example, a dedicated practitioner program that includes intensive study of the Pali suttas has recently been initiated and Kornfield’s latest book is notably more centered in the Theravada Buddhist psychology found in the Abhidhamma.²⁹⁷ Also worth mentioning is that retreats lead by monastics are amongst the most popular at Spirit Rock which suggest that students at Spirit Rock also value more traditional forms. Such trends are consistent with McMahan’s observation that contemporary practitioners are taking a variety of positions along the traditionalist-modernist spectrum and that there are moves towards a

²⁹⁵ Gil Fronsdal, “Living Two Traditions,” *Tricycle* (winter 2002), <http://www.tricycle.com/interview/living-two-traditions?page=0,1>.

²⁹⁶ See Insight Meditation Center, <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/>.

²⁹⁷ Jack Kornfield, *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008).

reclaiming of tradition and the existence of various combinations of tradition and innovation alongside the existence of an extremely detraditionalized Buddhism.²⁹⁸

I share McMahan's view that the most viable iterations of Buddhist modernism are those that combine aspects of both tradition and innovation as well as both selective accommodation and critique of mainstream culture.²⁹⁹ As McMahan notes, a commitment to modernism tackles the problems of traditionalism—such as sexism, hierarchy and dogmatism—and grounding in tradition can respond to some of the afflictions of modern culture, such as its narcissism, consumerism and alienation. In terms of its dual commitment to preservation and innovation, Spirit Rock must keep both the European Enlightenment and the spiritual enlightenment promised by Buddhism in conversation.

Spirit Rock: An American Tantric Tradition in the Making

While the above points call for a more nuanced evaluation of west coast developments, the question remains, however, as to exactly what type of Buddhism is being produced here? Goldstein and Thanissaro Bhikku are correct in questioning such innovations from a strictly Theravadin perspective. Although Spirit Rock is grounded in Theravada Buddhism, the thematic and structural developments affected within west coast Vipassana have indisputably moved it beyond Theravada Buddhism of the Pali Cannon and any lived Asian Theravada lineage. Developments at Spirit Rock are rather more faithfully reflected under the category of Buddhist modernism as recently

²⁹⁸ As McMahan points out, returns to tradition are themselves products of modernity; they reconstruct tradition in response to some of modernity's dominant themes. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 246.

²⁹⁹ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 263-264.

explicated and refined by McMahan. As McMahan traces Buddhist modernism has emerged as a result of a process of modernization, westernization, reinterpretation and reform that has been taking place in the Asia and the West for over a century.³⁰⁰ Yet, while Buddhist modernism captures much of what is at play at Spirit Rock, a limitation of this category is that it is more of a cultural hermeneutic than a metaphysical one. In my final section therefore, I want to focus specifically on the type of metaphysical or ontological vision emerging from west coast Vipassana, by arguing that this particular configuration of Buddhist modernism displays a distinctively Tantric orientation.

Although Spirit Rock officially aligns itself with Theravada Buddhism, declaring, that it is “based upon the dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, as expressed in the suttas of the Pali Canon,” teachers commonly qualify this with the statement “we do Theravada with a Mahayana attitude.”³⁰¹ The influence of Mahayana is seen less in the actual practices taught at Spirit Rock, which are the classical Theravada practices of vipassana and concentration, and more in the general orientation and overarching framework of Spirit Rock. As Kornfield puts it, “I discover myself teaching what Suzuki Roshi called Hinayana practice with a Mahayana mind.”³⁰² The Mahayana influence is further seen in the fact that a number of Spirit Rock teachers have had substantial exposure to Mahayana traditions such as Zen and many of the prevailing thematics at Spirit Rock such as the Bodhisattva ideal and nondual metaphysics are more associated with Mahayana than Theravada Buddhism.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 5.

³⁰¹ This was repeated in interviews with teachers and is also discussed by Kornfield in “American Buddhism,” xxix.

³⁰² Ibid.

Expanding upon this emic Mahayana hermeneutic, I want to further discriminate that west coast Vipassana does Theravada with a Tantric attitude with a distinctively American flavor. Certainly, one can point to some direct links between Spirit Rock and Tibetan tantric Buddhism. One interviewee, for example, revealed that the main practice of the majority of Spirit Rock teachers is not vipassana but the Tantric Buddhist practice of Dzogchen and that at a recent gathering of over twenty teachers all but one were students of the Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Tsoknyi Rinpoche. However, by Tantric I refer not to the historical practices and forms of Tantric Buddhism, but to a broad spiritual perspective that insists on the essential unity of the transcendent and immanent and seeks not to renounce the world but to recover it within the perspective of liberation.

In arguing for Spirit Rock as a modern American Tantric tradition, I borrow from Jeffrey Kripal's recent reading of Esalen, the California epicenter of the human potential movement. According to Kripal, the history of Esalen can be read as an American movement within a much broader Tantric transmission from Asia to the West. By Tantra, Kripal refers to a broad pan-Asian deep worldview that weaves together such local traditions as Hindu Shakta Tantra, Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, esoteric Japanese Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. He adopts two classic definitions of Tantra by David Gordon White and Andre Padoux. From White:

Tantra is the Asian body of beliefs and practices that works from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to

ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.³⁰³

And, from Padoux, Tantra is “an attempt to place kama, desire, in every sense of the word, in the service of liberation...not to sacrifice the world for liberation’s sake but to reinstate it, in varying ways within the perspective of salvation.”³⁰⁴ As Kripal notes, whereas ascetic Asian traditions such as Advaita Vedanta or Theravada Buddhism tend to privilege the transcendent order that designates or renounces the everyday world as illusory or impermanent, the Tantric traditions insist of the essential unity of the transcendent and immanent and, in fact, often privilege the immanent orders.

These descriptions of Tantra, Kripal convincingly argues, could easily apply to Esalen with its emphasis on the mystical potentials of the body, its embrace of the physical world as a spiritual force and its understanding of the universe as the manifestation of divine energy. He sees Esalen as fundamentally Tantric in its affirmation of a bipolar model of reality expressed as the play of consciousness and energy and its insistence that liberation is a matter of full embodiment and not just spiritual transcendence.

Yet, Kripal points out, just as Esalen is fundamentally Tantric, so it is also fundamentally American. This is seen in Esalen’s commitment to democratic principles, pluralist approach to religion, and socially liberal agendas, all of which it sees as liberalizing the limitations of Asian spiritualities and which, in turn, sets it apart from any traditional Asian religious system. Ultimately, therefore, Kripal reads Esalen as a

³⁰³ David Gordon White, *Introduction to The Practice of Tantra: A Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, 8 quoted in Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, 19.

³⁰⁴ Quoted in White, 19.

modern American Tantric tradition, a utopian experiment creatively encompassing something of both the European Enlightenment with its democratic, scientific and pluralistic revolutions and the corporate enlightenment of Asia, with its many psychophysical techniques for cultivating contemplative states of consciousness and energy.³⁰⁵

Something similar, I suggest, can be detected at Spirit Rock. Certainly, there are direct connections between these Californian neighbors; for example, Robert Hall a member of the Spirit Rock teachers council was an important figure at Esalen and many of the teachers at Spirit Rock have taught at Esalen. My focus here, however, is on a thematic affinity rather than historical connections. As earlier noted, the commitment to modern American values—such as democracy, individualism, pluralism, pragmatism—is clear in the structure and ethos of Spirit Rock. From the onset the Insight community has been committed to democratic power sharing and transparency, which can be seen in such things as the principle of team teaching form and the presentation of teachers as spiritual friends rather than gurus. This lack of hierarchy combined with the absence of ritual, devotion and esotericism considerably distinguishes Spirit Rock from any historic form of Tantric Buddhism.

Nonetheless, a very definite Tantric orientation flavors many west coast Vipassana texts and teachings. Eugene Cash picks up one of these Tantric threads in his framing of spiritual awakening as both transcendence and transformation. Both are important, Cash acknowledges, but the danger of transcendence is that it can exclude or diminish the human, embodiment and the world. On the contrary, the transformative approach, an approach that Cash explicitly identifies as Tantric, weaves every strand of

³⁰⁵ Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, 16-24.

life as part of practice. As Cash succinctly puts it, “if it’s in the way, it is the way,” rather than transcend the passions and difficulties of life, we transform them through awareness in daily life.³⁰⁶

The body as site of the transcendent is central to this process. A repeated theme within Cash’s dharma talks is the body as door to liberation. He claims that there is a split in how the body is seen in Buddhism. On one extreme, Buddhism portrays the body as an obstacle to awakening that needs to be overcome or transcended. On the other, it celebrates the body as the medium or vehicle of enlightenment. While both of these attitudes can be found within Theravada Buddhism, the latter perspective of body as vehicle is most often associated with a Tantric perspective. This is seen further in Cash’s discussion that there are within Buddhism there are three stages of awakening in relationship to the body. The first stage is an appreciation of the preciousness of the human rebirth. The second stage is the practice of disidentifying from the body in order to realize its limitations as impermanent and subject to decay. The third stage, what Cash calls the ripening of the dharma, reveals the body as the “platform through which the dharma expresses itself in the world.” This is depicted in the imagery of the Zen tradition which presents the fulfillment of liberation as the return to the world and the marketplace with “bliss-filled hands,” a physical incarnation of enlightenment that embraces the world.³⁰⁷

Similarly, as suggested by chapter headings such as “This Very Body, The Buddha,” “Awakened Emotions and Ordinary Perfection” and “The Mandala of

³⁰⁶ Eugene Cash, “If it’s in the Way, it is the Way,” *San Francisco Insight*, July 29 2007 <http://www.sfinsight.org/>.

³⁰⁷ Eugene Cash, “The Body of Awakening: Three Stages of Awakening,” *San Francisco Insight*, July 2 2006, <http://www.sfinsight.org/>.

Awakening” Kornfield’s popular texts contain many Tantric themes.³⁰⁸ Kornfield explains that the problems, passions and energies of life are medicine for awakening, the feminine, body and emotions are to be embraced as vehicles for liberation and celebrates the manifestation of absolute reality in the immanent as well as the transcendent. A Tantric affirmation of immanent and transcendent dimensions of reality is also advocated by Tara Brach, who frames her practice of radical acceptance as being situated in the larger recognition that “Our being resides in both the unmanifest and the manifest, the absolute and the relative.” She points to the classic expression of this Tantric perspective in the Heart Sutras famous teaching “Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form. Emptiness is no other than form, form is no other than emptiness,” which is translated colloquially by Brach into “loving life and realizing our essence as formless awareness cannot be separated from each other.”³⁰⁹

Another text that explicitly reveals the ascendancy of the Tantric approach is Mark Epstein’s *Open to Desire: Embracing A Lust for Life*. Epstein has trained in vipassana practice under Goldstein and Kornfield and is well-known for his books on the interface of psychoanalysis and Buddhism. In this text, he promotes a Tantric approach to spirituality that harnesses desire and relationships as a valuable resource for awakening. The Buddha’s teaching on desire, Epstein claims in a similar vein to Cash, can be roughly divided into two categories: the right-handed path of renunciation and monasticism and the left-handed path of passion and relationship in which sensory desires are not avoided but made into objects of meditation. While the Buddha’s early exhortations encouraged his disciples to renounce the householder life, as Buddhism

³⁰⁸ See Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* and Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*.

³⁰⁹ Brach, *Radical Acceptance*, 318.

developed the relevance of its teachings for the everyday life of passion and relationship began to be revealed. Epstein explains why the Tantric perspective has become so attractive to contemporary practitioners:

The separation of the spiritual from the sensual, of the sacred from the relational and of the enlightened from the erotic no longer seems desirable. Certainly, seeing how impossible the division has proven for the countless spiritual teachers of every tradition who have stumbled over their own longings has been instructive. In addition, having a family and a relationship has made it abundantly clear to me that they require the same dedication, passion and vision that a spiritual life demands. Now that spiritual life is in the hands of householders rather than monastics, the demands of desire are front and center, not hidden from view.³¹⁰

Further support for the Tantric thesis comes from the fact that similarities have also been drawn between the most influential Theravadin lineages at Spirit Rock, Ajahn Chah's Thai forest tradition, and Tantric Buddhism. During a Spirit Rock retreat co-taught by Ajahn Amaro and Tsoknyi Rinpoche, Ajahn Amaro shared his surprise at realizing that the practice of mindfulness as taught by his teacher Ajahn Chah was the same as rigpa, the Tantric nondual awareness practice given by Tsoknyi Rinpoche. Amaro acknowledged a number of similarities between the Thai forest lineage of Ajahn Chah and the Dzogchen teachings of the Tibetan Nyingmapa tradition. These include the understanding of the true nature of the mind as nondual awareness and the essence of

³¹⁰ Mark Epstein: *Open to Desire: Embracing A Lust for Life* (New York: Gotham Books, 2005), 12.

practice consisting of the ability to rest in this nondual awareness in all activities. Ajahn Amaro claims that this nondual view is to be found in the Pali Canon.³¹¹ When I discussed these similarities further with him, he agreed that in some ways the Thai Forest tradition has more in common with the Dzogchen lineage than the Burmese Theravada tradition and he noted that Ajahn Chah had offered profound commentaries on a number of Mahayana Sutras through his own mastery of the Pali Cannon.³¹²

Also worth noting here is the influence of Ajahn Buddhadasa, who is included in the dedications of both of Kornfield's key west coast texts and was the primary Asian teacher for several Spirit Rock teachers. One of Buddhadasa's main concerns was to abolish the traditional Theravadin segregation between the lay or mundane and the clerical and supermundane realms and to shift its focus from the transcendent to the world. As Peter Jackson notes, the theoretical pivot on which Buddhadasa attempts his reconstructive effort of integrating world involvement with spiritual practices is a special interpretation of Nibbana as *chit-wang* or "freed mind." However unlike traditional Theravada interpretations of Nibbana that define it as a transcendent condition attained by world-renunciation, Buddhadasa maintains that *chit-wang* is based in an everyday experience of mental peace that is available to all. Yet, as Jackson states, such an interpretation moves Buddhadasa beyond the boundaries of Theravada Buddhism and his interpretation of *chit-wang* was significantly influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, particularly Zen.³¹³

³¹¹ Ajahn Amaro, "Ajahn Chah's View of the Mind," *Forest Sangha*, [http://www.forestsangha.org/amaro4.htm#\[1\]](http://www.forestsangha.org/amaro4.htm#[1]).

³¹² Personal Discussion with Ajahn Amaro at Abhayagiri monastery 4 July 2009.

³¹³ Jackson, *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand*, 69-72.

The Tantric thesis is also explicitly acknowledged in an article by Kornfield in which he discusses how in becoming more integrated and inclusive, American Buddhism has mimicked the historic evolution that marked the development of Buddhism in Asia. Earlier forms of Buddhism, Kornfield argues, were primarily renunciatory and rejected the body, sexuality and the world as obstacles to liberation. As later schools of Buddhism developed, however, the earlier renunciatory dualistic approach was replaced by a nondualistic perspective that celebrated the interdependence of all life and the importance of discovering nirvana in the midst of samsara, or “a liberation in this very life and on this very earth.” It is this nondual perspective, Kornfield claims, that is spreading throughout Buddhist America.³¹⁴

The above evidence offers much support for the Tantric thesis. Much of value and substance has been written about the assimilation of Buddhism in America. And much of this, such as McMahan’s category of Buddhism Modernism, applies to and illuminates Spirit Rock. As Kripal states with Esalen, however, the Tantric thesis provides us with a unique lens that can reveal some meaningful structures and patterns that other interpretations cannot reveal.³¹⁵ What I’m after with the modern American Tantric thesis, therefore, is a more creative and optimistic hermeneutics. One that offers both a cultural and metaphysical reading of west coast Vipassana and thereby goes beyond a reductive lens or an either/or logic to a third possibility, an integrative space that is created by those who speak in both Asian and American tongues, who move between monastic and lay communities and who value elements of both the European

³¹⁴ Kornfield, “American Buddhism,” xxvii-xxviii.

³¹⁵ Kripal, *Esalen*, 16.

enlightenment and the enlightenment traditions of Asia. Spirit Rock, acknowledged by its community as an “adolescent,” and a “fantastic experiment,” grows from such a space.

If it is to fully mature into a (post)modern American Tantric tradition, however, it must remain faithful to the mandala the symbol it has chosen to represent itself. It is often stressed that Tantra does not exclude but is built upon the earlier forms of Buddhism. Mastery of both the Pali Canon and Mahayana sutras and a deep grounding in ethics are the foundations of the higher teachings of Buddhist Tantric practice. Internal renunciation must precede an embrace of the world. The integrative and inclusive ethos of west coast Vipassana is *pointing in the right direction* but for a householder tradition located in a society driven by materialism, a truly authentic revisioning of renunciation might be the biggest challenge on its path to fruition.

Chapter Three

A.H. Almaas's Diamond Approach: Divine Individualism or Mystical Humanism?

In his recent unabashed homage to Esalen, the Californian epicenter of East-West spirituality, Jeffrey Kripal enthuses that we are witnessing the emergence of a new American mysticism. Such mysticism operates with democratic principles, individualist values and socially liberal agendas, all of which in turn attempt to liberalize the limitations of Asian spiritualities. Kripal proposes that these modern American mystical traditions, suspended between the revelations of Asian religions and the democratic, pluralistic and scientific revolutions of modernity, drew on, but are fundamentally distinct from, their premodern Asian precursors. Recognizing, with and after Freud, that religious experience is always related to unconscious forces that speak with and through the body, these traditions psychologize spirituality and aim for more integral forms of spirituality that embrace spirit and psyche, transcendence and immanence. Kripal celebrates these new western psychospiritual traditions as providing what our cultural moment demands—a more integral spirituality, a “mystical humanism,” that respects both the ontological truth of nondualism and affirms the value of the individual.³¹⁶

Other readings of these traditions, however, are decidedly less optimistic. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, for example, have declared that the new psychospiritual traditions are to be rejected as the corruption of Asian religious ideals by western individualistic and psychological values. They claim that psychologized spirituality

³¹⁶ Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*.

privatizes and commodifies Asian wisdom traditions, reducing them to techniques aimed solely at the production of individual enlightenment. Asian religious perspectives are repackaged to suit and enhance the modern psychological subject. Rather than pursuing the transcendence of the ego, they reify it in a form of divine individualism.³¹⁷

What then are we witnessing here, mystical humanism or divine individualism? Are contemporary western psychospiritual traditions to be appreciated as mature psychologically sophisticated forms of modern religiosity or rejected as psychological dilutions of traditional mysticism? The debate over the integration of depth psychology and nondual, particularly Asian, spiritualities has engaged academic, therapeutic and spiritual communities and reveals tensions between psychological and religious and Western and Asian constructions of subjectivity. This chapter aims to further this discussion by providing a detailed treatment of the issues at stake through a close reading of one such tradition, A.H. Almaas's Diamond Approach. The Diamond Approach provides a useful study of contemporary American psychospirituality on two counts. First, it reconciles American concerns with individual development with Asian mystical goals of self-transcendence through an incorporation of Asian and Western religious and secular models of subjectivity. Second, it utilizes psychoanalytic theory—ranging from Freudian to intersubjectivist perspectives—to elaborate on premodern, particularly nondual Asian, mysticism. I will explore these two issues through an examination of Almaas's recent incorporation of the personal self into a nondual impersonal ontology.

³¹⁷ For critiques of the new psychospiritual traditions on the grounds of individualism, commodification and appropriation see Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005) and Helen Lee and Harriett Marshall, "Divine Individualism: Transcending Psychology," in *International Journal of Critical Psychology* Issue 8 ed. Lisa Blackwell, 2003. For Kripal's counter-defense see Kripal, *Esalen: American and the Religion of No Religion*, 399-403.

Map and Methodology

The first section of this chapter focus specifically on the Diamond Approach: I provide some biographical details of its founder, Hameed Ali and a brief description of the organizational context of the Ridhwan School that he established to promote the Diamond Approach. Next, I sketch the Diamond Approach's metaphysics and anthropology. I then analyze in more detail how the Diamond Approach theoretically and experientially integrates psychological and spiritual discourses and retains a space for the personal individual within an impersonal nondual metaphysics.

The next section offers some historic and socio-cultural context for the emergence of the new Western psychospiritual traditions such as the Diamond Approach. In particular, I utilize the work of William Parsons and Wouter Hanegraaff to historically trace some key junctures in the increasing collapse between psychology and spirituality.³¹⁸ I supplement this historic account by employing the sociological category of inner-worldly mysticism to provide a socio-cultural analysis of the development of a this-worldly heavily psychologized Western mysticism.³¹⁹

In the final section, I consider the wider debate over the integration of depth psychology and Asian impersonal spiritualities. I respond to the major critiques of individualism, psychologization and appropriation that have been leveled against the new

³¹⁸ See Parsons, "Psychologia Perennis and the Academic Study of Mysticism," and Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

³¹⁹ Here I follow the lead of Parsons, "Psychologia Perennis and the Academic Study of Mysticism" and Harry T. Hunt, *Lives In Spirit: Precursors and Dilemmas Of A Secular Western Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). See also, Roland Robertson, *Meaning and Change: Explorations in the Cultural Sociology of Modern Societies* (New York: New York University Press, 1978).

psychospiritual traditions and adjudicate between the conflicting hermeneutics of these traditions as represented by Kripal and Carrette and King respectively. I conclude by offering a couple of suggestions for future directions for contemporary psychospirituality.

Methodologically, I combine textual analysis and ethnography. I have been conducting fieldwork as a participant-observer for four years with the Gulf Coast Diamond Approach group. I also undertook fieldwork in the San Francisco Bay Area, which is home to Hameed Ali and one of the two main centers of the Ridhwan School. This fieldwork helped significantly unpack Ali's often difficult and technical texts and it provided material unavailable from texts. Given the decentralized and deinstitutionalized nature of the new psychospiritual groups, collecting demographic data and information on their participants is a challenge. While I was unable to collect any large-scale demographic information, my participation in the Gulf Coast group gave me insight into the background, motivations and concerns of Diamond Approach students. Similarly, my credentials as a participant or "insider" enabled formal and informal contact with members of other Diamond Approach groups. This proved useful in securing interviews with American Buddhist teachers who are also Diamond Approach students in order for me to test my thesis that one of the main attractions of the Diamond Approach is that, unlike traditional Asian traditions, it offers practitioners a way to integrate their personal psychodynamic history with their spiritual practice.

A.H. Almaas, the Diamond Approach and the Ridhwan School

A.H. Almaas is the pseudonym of A. Hameed Ali who, born in 1944 into a Muslim family in Kuwait, came to Berkeley in 1964 to study for a Ph.D. in Physics at the University of California. Exposed to the proliferating growth therapies of the human potential movement and the explosion of alternative and Asian spiritualities, Ali attended workshops in various disciplines at Esalen in the late sixties. In 1971 he joined a psychospiritual group named, after Gurdjieff's earlier European esoteric group, SAT (Seekers After Truth), situated in Berkeley and led by an established teacher at Esalen, Chilean psychoanalyst turned gestalt psychologist Claudio Naranjo. Naranjo aimed to create a new synthesis between western psychologies, Asian contemplative traditions, particular Tantric strands, and Fourth Way schools. His teaching involved a syncretic blend of gestalt therapy, psychodynamic work, bodywork, meditative practices and the psychospiritual tool, the enneagram. In addition to working with Naranjo, whose pioneering forays into the relationship between psychoanalysis and spirituality he considerably developed, Ali also trained in a wide variety of spiritual and psychological growth traditions.

The Diamond Approach draws considerably on Asian and Western mystical traditions, particularly Sufism, the Gurdjieff work and Tibetan Buddhism, and extensively utilizes classic and contemporary psychoanalytic theory. Ali stresses, however, that it is not an integration of pre-existing systems but rather a revealed teaching primarily experientially based. Supported in his spiritual development by two close friends, Karen Johnson and Faisal Muqaddam, Ali began to have experiences that could not be accounted for by any prevailing religious tradition or hermeneutics.³²⁰

³²⁰ Karen Johnston remains one of the senior teachers of the Diamond Approach and is acknowledged as a co-participant in the development of the Diamond Approach. After participating in the setting up of the

Beginning in 1975 and continuing to the present, he realized that a new unique teaching or “logos,” named the Diamond Approach, was manifesting itself through him.³²¹

In order to disseminate the Diamond Approach, Ali established the Ridhwan School in 1977, in Boulder, Colorado, and one in Berkeley, California in 1978. These two locations remain the primary centers for the Diamond Approach and are home to the majority of Diamond Approach teachers many of whom travel nationally and internationally to lead groups. The Ridhwan School is a loosely knit affiliation of groups that is legally structured as two non-profit organizations: a church with over one hundred teachers recognized as ordained ministers and an educational corporation, the Diamond Heart and Training Institute (DHAT), directs an on going seven-year seminary teacher training program. DHAT also conducts promotional events, such as book-signings and one-day workshops for the general public.

Official students in the Ridhwan School participate in what is commonly referred to as “the Work” in three main ways: large group retreats, small group sessions and private sessions. The large group retreats, which can occur up to nine times a year, last between two and ten days and typically involve a detailed exploration of one particular aspect of the Diamond Approach. The small group sessions, conducted during long retreats, or for some groups on a monthly basis, enable students to work individually with a teacher silently supported by a group of between twelve to eighteen students. Finally,

Ridhwan School, Faisal Muqadamm, a friend of Hameed’s from Kuwait, separated from him to found his own school, named the Diamond Logos Teachings. For details of the Diamond Logos and more biographical details see <http://www.diamondlogos.com/>. For Ali’s account of his early collaboration with the two see A.H. Almaas, *Luminous Night’s Journey, An Autobiographical Fragment* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2000), xiv-xvii.

³²¹ Biographical details are drawn from the Ridhwan website under the A.H. Almaas’s biographical section (For more details see <http://www.ahalmaas.com/>). See also Almaas, *Luminous Night’s Journey*, xiv-xvii for an autobiographical account of the unfolding of the Diamond Approach.

private teaching sessions consist of a one-to-one encounter between a teacher and student and can be conducted in person or over the telephone. At present there are well-established and recently formed Diamond Approach groups in North America, Europe and Australia. Further, in an attempt to reach a wider audience, Ali has written fourteen books, which are now being published by Shambhala.

A more detailed look at a Diamond Approach group, the Gulf Coast Group, in which I have been conducting participant-observation, is useful. Established in 1996, the Gulf Coast group is led by Deborah Ussery and Morton Letofsky, two of Ali's oldest students and senior teachers of the Diamond Approach, and their three assistant teachers, all of whom reside in Colorado. It has a membership of around seventy students drawn primarily from Texas but also from Florida, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Costa Rica. The larger group is divided into four subgroups of which membership is determined by the length of time in the group. These subgroups function independently for the small group sessions and are closed to new members after a certain number of participants have been reached. In the main, students are Caucasian, middle-class, over fifty and there are slightly more females than males. They are college and graduate educated with student professions including business, law, medicine and psychotherapy. Most students have practiced and some continue to practice in other spiritual traditions including Buddhism, forms of American Hinduism and other Western alternative spiritualities.

The Gulf Coast group meets between four and seven times a year for retreats lasting between three and ten days that are conducted in different hired retreat centers in Texas. Each day is structured into a morning, afternoon and evening session with each session lasting three hours. Sessions follow a typical format of an opening meditation, a

lecture on a particular aspect of the Diamond Approach, the breaking-up of students in groups of two or three to do exercises and the reconvening of the larger group to discuss students' experiences. The large group meets twice daily with the third session scheduled for small group, additional practices or free time. Also, two or three times between group retreats, students meet in Austin, Houston, or Dallas for "follow-up" sessions, recorded teachings including practices, that last a few hours and are held in students homes.

In terms of the wider organization, the Gulf Coast group is run autonomously from the DHAT institute. The head teachers determine the teaching material and oversee major decisions involving the group. As regards practical organization, however, students are largely responsible. Amongst other things, volunteers arrange retreat locations, timetable individual sessions and run a new person committee and scholarship fund.

The Diamond Approach's Metaphysics and Anthropology

Metaphysically, the Diamond Approach postulates an evolutionary and dynamic version of the "great chain of being." This is a classical western conception of the universe structured as a series of hierarchical links from the highest and most perfect elements to the lowest and most basic. Governed by the theory of correspondences in which each segment of the chain is seen as reflecting the other segments, the human being is viewed as a microcosm that reflects the structure of being as a whole, the macrocosm. The great chain of being has functioned as a highly influential ontology within Western esotericism from its early manifestations in neo-Platonism, to its

flourishing in the European Renaissance and its contemporary reemergence in a heavily psychologized guise in the work of integral theorist Ken Wilber.³²²

Situated within this lineage, the Diamond Approach describes ultimate reality—called “Being” or “true nature” –as having both an unmanifest and manifest aspect. From the unmanifest, an undifferentiated impersonal absolute, unfold a number of differentiated dimensions. The most fundamental of these are the five boundless dimensions that function as the ontological ground of all phenomena: absolute emptiness, pure nonconceptual awareness, pure presence, pure universal love and the dynamic logos.³²³ In addition to the “vertical” or transcendent unfolding of the boundless dimensions, there is a ‘horizontal’ or immanent manifestation of what are known as the “essential aspects.”³²⁴ Understood as a distinct subset of Platonic forms, these are differentiated perfections or qualities of true nature and include such aspects as truth, clarity, intelligence, will, strength, love, compassion and value.³²⁵ Accessed through the awakening of the inner senses, which are capacities of the soul that correspond to the physical senses, the essential aspects can be directly experienced in a number of ways—as a color, texture, smell, taste, sound or affect—or through their effect on the soul. For example, the pink essence can be literally experienced as the scent of rose or jasmine and gives the individual a capacity for personal love and appreciation. The essential aspects

³²² Ali points out that a fundamental difference between Wilber and the Diamond Approach is that for Wilber spirit is always transcendent and undifferentiated, whereas for the Diamond Approach spirit is also structured and differentiated, an understanding which is fundamental to the school. See A. H. Almaas, “The Diamond Approach,” http://www.ahalmaas.com/Articles/diamond_approach.htm.

³²³ For a description of the boundless dimensions see A.H. Almaas, *The Inner Journey Home* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2001), 271-409.

³²⁴ The terms vertical and horizontal have entered psychologized spirituality nomenclature as common ways to differentiate between transcendent and immanent planes of awakening.

³²⁵ The Diamond Approach uses the term essence or essential aspects to denote the differentiated aspect of Being or True Nature as it arises in the human soul. See A. H. Almaas, *Spacecruiser Inquiry: True Guidance for the Inner Journey Home* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2002), 8.

are understood as the manifestation of true nature in the precise quality necessary for the soul at that particular moment both in terms of its spiritual maturation and its everyday functioning. For example, if a personal life situation such as a romantic relationship or a work issue requires strength or discrimination, the red essential aspect that manifests itself in these qualities could arise and enable the student to act accordingly. Recognition of the essential aspects is seen as unique to the Diamond Approach and offered as one of its major contributions to spiritual awakening.³²⁶

True nature also manifests itself in the form of energy and matter. These are distinct from the boundless dimensions and the essential aspects, however, in that they can be experienced without recognition of their spiritual essence. In terms of the human being this means that while the body and the instinctual drives are fundamentally manifestations of Being, they are conventionally experienced on a purely material level.³²⁷ The individual human consciousness, the personal sense of “I” is also a differentiation of true nature specifically the dimension of the logos. Ali refers to the individual “I” as the soul. The human being, therefore, is an embodied soul, an individual organism of consciousness, which is the agent, site and content of all experience.³²⁸ The soul can experience itself on an “egoic” level as an individual historic personality and on ‘essential’ level as an ontological presence. Signified, somewhat problematically, with the traditional feminine pronoun, the soul is functionally distinct from Being although the latter is her true nature and ontological ground.³²⁹ Whereas

³²⁶ Almaas, *The Inner Journey Home*, 133-140.

³²⁷ A.H. Almaas, “The Diamond Approach,” http://www.ahalmaas.com/Articles/diamond_approach.htm.

³²⁸ For a detailed description of the soul see Almaas, *The Inner Journey Home*, 45-128.

³²⁹ I will follow the Diamond Approach in using the feminine pronoun in describing a soul. Ali states that he is following mystical tradition by using the female pronoun because the soul is a manifestation of the creative and generative dimensions of true nature and because the soul’s relationship to essence is one of receptivity. See A.H. Almaas, *Spacecrusier Inquiry: True Guidance for the Inner Journey Home* (Boston

Being is perfect and complete, however, the soul must mature in order to consciously realize true nature in all its differentiated aspects and boundless dimensions.

The recognition of both undifferentiated and differentiated dimensions of true nature is crucial to the Diamond Approach. It allows the school to distinguish itself from Asian nondual mystical traditions, such as Advaita Vedanta, which frame spiritual liberation as the recognition of pure undifferentiated consciousness as the ultimate nature of self and reality. In order to balance what it sees as an excessively transcendent focus within much of traditional mysticism with a more immanent perspective, the Diamond Approach promotes a dual telos. One is *self-realization*, the recognition of the unmanifest as the ultimate nature of reality and self. The other is *self-development*, the personal individual embodiment of true nature in its differentiated aspects and boundless dimensions. The fully realized self or “true human being” is one who achieves both these goals through the soul’s individuation and maturation process, an essential stage of which is ego development as outlined by psychoanalytic theory.

Different cultural religious and secular forms of subjectivity are implicitly accommodated, therefore, within a model of identity that stretches primarily over three categories: the personal ego-self of depth psychology, an individual soul aligned with the Socratic and Western gnostic traditions and an impersonal nondual absolute identified with Asian liberation traditions. The individual soul is the connecting link between impersonal Being and the personal ego. The integration of the three—ego, soul, and Being—is achieved in the realization of a unique differentiated aspect, the personal

& London: Shambhala, 2004), 8. Although Ali states he uses the female pronoun as a metaphor for the soul’s receptivity and does not see anything essentially female about the soul, the unreflexive use of gender imagery and the heterosexist underpinnings of segments of the Diamond Approach is problematic. As a corrective to this a number of gay, lesbian and queer identified Diamond Approach students have formed a group to explore gender and sexuality issues within the Diamond Approach.

essence or “pearl beyond price.” Ali describes this process as “how Being, impersonal and eternal, becomes a person, a human being on earth.” He privileges it over the Asian-aligned spiritual aim of identifying exclusively as an impersonal consciousness.³³⁰

Theoretical Integrations: The Role of Ego-Development in the Individuation Process

The Diamond Approach understands the personal essence as settling a contentious debate between western psychology and Asian contemplative traditions over the possibility of ego-transcendence. This debate has recently engaged groups such as the American Buddhist community, Hindu or Hindu-influenced (guru) communities, transpersonal and Jungian psychologists, and the psychoanalytic field. It revolves around a tension between Asian religions that propose that spiritual liberation necessitates a transcendence of, or disidentification from, the ego and western psychological narratives that are concerned with developing and strengthening the ego. The conflict between consolidating and transcending what is loosely and inconsistently labeled as the “ego,” “personal self,” “individual self” or “mind-body” becomes framed, therefore, as an antagonism between Asian spiritual traditions and western depth psychology.³³¹ While Jack Engler, amongst others, has convincingly differentiated between the ego targeted in Buddhism and the Freudian ego, the ideal of enlightenment as a subjectivity free from all

³³⁰ A.H. Almaas, *The Pearl Beyond Price: Integration of Personality into Being: An Object Relations Approach* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1988), 161.

³³¹ For a balanced and insightful summary of the debate over ego-transcendence between Buddhism and psychoanalysis see Jack Engler, “Being Somebody and Being Nobody: A Reexamination of the Understanding of Self in Psychoanalysis and Buddhism,” in *Psychoanalysis and Buddhism* ed., Jeffrey D. Safran. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 35-79. See also Harvey B. Aronson, *Buddhist Practice On Western Ground*. (Boston & London: Shambhala 2004), 64-90.

traces of egocentricity and the vicissitudes of psychophysical conflict remains suspect from a psychoanalytic perspective.

In light of the “fall of the western guru,” the series of sexual and financial scandals that rocked a number of North American Asian spiritual communities in the 1980’s, such suspicions appeared justified.³³² One after another prominent enlightened guru was exposed for destructive, delusionary and what appeared to be extremely egotistic behavior. Swami Muktananda was alleged to have had sex with a number of women, some of them teenage girls. The married Amrit Desai was forced to leave his own ashram after he admitted to sleeping with female students. Chogyam Trungpa died of alcohol related liver damage and the American he appointed as his successor, Osel Tendzin, had unprotected sex with his students, infecting one with the HIV virus that would cost them both their lives. These scandals disrupted ego-transcendent narratives, seriously dented claims of psychophysical immunity, and revealed what looked to be all too little examined relationships to sexuality, aggression and power. Whatever else was at work, it appeared that the complex relationship between mystical transcendence and psychophysical embodiment was not being sufficiently addressed in these traditions, at least not in a manner acceptable to modern western cultural expectations or standards.

The personal essence responds to ego-transcendence and the guru scandals in two ways. First, it provides a detailed map of the process of ego transcendence, or what might be better understood as ego integration, which reconciles Asian mystical and western psychological perspectives. Second, it elucidates the specific relationship

³³² For a thoughtful account of the “fall of the western guru” see Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Debating the Mystical as the Ethical: An Indological Map,” in *Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, eds., Jeffrey J. Kripal and William G. Barnard (New York: Seven Bridges Press/Chatham House, 2002), 15-69.

between psychodynamic issues and spiritual awakening which, in turn, illuminate dynamics at play in the guru scandals.³³³

According to the Diamond Approach, the soul begins life as a formless organism of consciousness that is infused with true nature but also dominated by the instinctual drives. In order for her to be able to individually personify Being, the soul has to develop stable psychological structures that, although required for her maturation, move her away from her ontological ground. It is here that the insights of psychoanalytic developmental theory are essential. The soul's initial period of growth is what is referred to psychoanalytically as ego development. The term ego necessitates some clarification. Ali uses it both technically (in a psychologically specific manner) and non-technically (in a more spiritual, colloquial sense) with different nuances. At this juncture, ego development refers to the specific process, delineated by object relations and self-psychology, through which a sense of self and other is formed and maintained.³³⁴

According to this body of psychoanalytic theory, the self is composed of the internalization of the infant's earliest relationships, particularly with his or her primary caretakers. These relationships, referred to as "object relations," consist of three components: an image or representation of the self, a representation of the other and the affect or emotional tone between the two. Over time, the various self-representations consolidate to form a cohesive self-image and the numerous object representations fuse to form an overall object-image.

³³³ This second issue is more directly addressed in A.H. Almaas, *The Point of Existence: Transformations of Narcissism in Self-Realization* (Boston & London: Shambhala 2001). This text deals with the relationship between self-realization and narcissistic disturbances.

³³⁴ The ego develops, primarily through the integration of early experiences, into organized mental structures. These mental structures, termed ego structures, are systems of memories that have become organized through the processes of assimilation or introjection, identification, integration, synthesis, and so on, into an overall schema patterning the self." See Almaas, *The Point of Existence: Transformations of Narcissism in Self-Realization*, 59.

Following this theory, Ali argues that the impressions of early object relations structure the soul by forming a self-image that constitutes the sense of being an individual person with a distinct character.³³⁵ As the infant develops, the sense of “I” shifts from Being to the self-image, which, then, becomes the primary lens through which self and reality is viewed. The identification of the soul with the self-image forms the basis of dualistic perception—between self and other, the experiencer and that which is experienced—that Ali states is the major barrier to spiritual realization. However, Ali claims that the sense of being a separate self is merely a mental construct: “It is a feeling that results from identifying with a certain structure in the mind, the self-image.”³³⁶

This identification with a set of internalized self-images is distinct from the ego apparatus needed for daily functioning. While there is some overlap, the self-image is not equivalent to the functional Freudian ego. Moreover, whereas developmental theory assumes that adaptive functions are inextricably linked with a unified self-image, Ali differentiates between the two. This is essential to his account of the transcendence of ego—as self-image—without the loss of autonomous functional capacities.

Surveying a number of spiritual traditions, Ali identifies different understandings of the ego but concludes that it is always viewed as the primary obstacle to spiritual realization. He asks, however, “If the ultimate goal of the human being is the universal impersonal truths of Spirit, why is it that all humans end up with an ego, with a self and a personality?”³³⁷ Departing from traditional spiritual perspectives, Ali argues that ego development is an essential stage of the soul’s individuation process. It enables both the

³³⁵ Almaas summarizes Mahler as showing that the sense of being a separate individual is a developmental attainment achieved by the establishment of a cohesive self-image and the internalization of a positively regarded image of the mother. See Almaas, *The Pearl Beyond Price*, 25.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

development of apparatus necessary for daily functioning and the development of cognitive facilities of the soul required for full spiritual realization. The problem, therefore, is not ego development per se but rather that development gets arrested here. There is a rupture in essential identity as the soul progressively dissociates from Being and becomes increasingly identified with ego structures.

To elucidate how and why this process occurs, Ali turns again to the insights of object relations theory and self psychology. He argues that the gaining of identity through self-representation—that, as we have seen, is derived from retained past object relations—necessitates a loss of Being, which is always direct and immediate. Also crucial to Ali's explanation is object relation theorist Donald Winnicott's concepts of the holding environment and the true and false self. According to Winnicott, the primary task of the mother is to provide a "holding environment" in which the infant can recognize and contain his or her experience as an integrated whole. The mother 'mirrors' or reflects the infant's experiences back to him or her that, in turn, enables the infant to feel real and alive. The mother's ability to hold the infant is crucial, therefore, to the formation of the infant's sense of self. If there is a failure in this holding process, the infant becomes estranged from his or her own spontaneous needs and compulsively attuned to the needs of others. What Winnicott calls the infant's "true self" is forced to retreat because the failure of the mother to respond adequately to it is equal to psychic annihilation. In place of the true self emerges a substitute, the "false self," which provides an illusion of personal existence whose content is fashioned from maternal expectations and demands. Extending Winnicott, Ali claims that Being has to be recognized and valued if it is to be able to arise in the infant's consciousness. Due to the

almost universal absence of caretakers who can hold and mirror back the essential aspects, however, the conditions for its manifestation are rarely provided. This results in the loss of essential identity and the creation of a substitute ego-self.³³⁸

Drawing on an extensive knowledge of psychological development theory, Ali painstakingly details the progressive loss of this ontological ground.³³⁹ His analysis establishes a precise correlation of different essential aspects with specific developmental stages such as essential will with the Oedipus complex and essential strength with the differentiation phase. He argues that during these developmental stages the insufficient holding of the corresponding aspects by primary caretakers results in their progressive alienation. This causes a psychological and energetic deficient emptiness that is literally felt in the body as a “hole.”³⁴⁰ The soul cannot tolerate feeling this sense of deficiency or lack so she attempts to fill in the hole with an egoic structure designed to act as a surrogate for the particular differentiated aspect that is absent.³⁴¹ The ego characteristic, therefore, both substitutes for and mimics the essential aspect it attempts to replace. Hence, the Diamond Approach aims to work through rather than transcend ego structures. Being patterned on essential aspects, they are transitional stages to essential embodiment that both conceal and reveal true nature.

³³⁸ Almaas’s description echoes Winnicott’s concept of the true and false self split. He claims that Winnicott included Being in his theory but did not distinguish it from ego structures. See Almaas, *The Pearl Beyond Price*, 45-56.

³³⁹ For example, see A.H. Almaas, *Essence: The Diamond Approach to Inner Realization* (Boston: Weiser Books, 1998), 83-101.

³⁴⁰ In his early books, Ali describes the Diamond Approach as “the theory of holes.” See A.H. Almaas, *The Void: Inner Spaciousness and Ego Structures*. (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1998), Almaas, *Essence*, 83-103 and Almaas, *The Pearl Beyond Price*, 96.

³⁴¹ As such, Ali states that when an essential quality is arising in the context of the Diamond work it will first manifests as a sense of its absence. In response, the student will resorts to habitual ways of coping with the lack. For example, in the case of essential autonomy they might attempt to assert a false independence through acting out and wanting to leave the group. Almaas, *The Pearl Beyond Price*, 46.

Experiential Integration in the Diamond Approach: The Practice of Inquiry

Framing the personality as an imitation of Being and connecting psychodynamic issues to essential aspects allows Ali to theoretically relate the personal ego to impersonal Being. It also allows him to treat one's immediate personal embodied experience as the practical departure point for accessing essential states. Students explore their personal ego structures and psychodynamic history in order to uncover the deficient emptiness they conceal. This is because it is only through fully experiencing the underlying hole that the essential aspect can (re)-emerge. The investigation into and disidentification from multiple layers of ego structures in order to recover essence is chiefly achieved through 'inquiry,' the central practice of the Diamond Approach. The school utilizes a number of eclectic practices ranging from meditation to chanting to aid in the recovery of essence. Inquiry, however, is its major tool. It is described by Ali as a unique contemplative technique and a natural capacity of consciousness, the expression of a penetrating and discriminating awareness, named as the diamond guidance.³⁴²

Inquiry is an open-ended phenomenological exploration into whatever is arising in one's immediate experience: thoughts, emotions, images, body sensations and such. Unlike traditional meditative practices, inquiry directly engages the personal content of experience, cultivating a discriminatory awareness in order to penetrate into deeper layers of one's experience. Because of the inseparability of the spiritual and psychophysical, following the thread of present experience rather than attempting to transcend it makes possible the recovery of essential aspects. As Ali puts it:

³⁴² For a detailed description of the practice of inquiry see Almaas, *Spacecruiser Inquiry*.

Inquiry is not a mental exercise, disconnected from ordinary reality. We have to be rooted in our everyday personal experience and in touch with our own thoughts, feelings, body and behavior. Inquiry does not require us to leave our body or try to reach unusual transcended heights of perception....Instead we need to become more concrete, more down to earth, by delving into our own everyday experience. It is the embodied soul that is the entry to all the treasures of Being.³⁴³

Inquiry can be undertaken alone as a silent contemplation or journaling process. It is most commonly pursued, however, with other students or a teacher as a spoken monologue or repeating question. If a teacher guides inquiry, he or she will help facilitate the process by directing the student's attention to any emerging resistance, defense or transference that is triggered by the material. The first stage of recovering essential aspects is to become aware of the repressed emotions and thoughts that are covering up the hole of an essential aspect. These unconscious emotions manifest mainly through blocks and tension patters in the body. Here the Diamond Approach draws heavily on Wilhelm Reich and his theory of character armor in which the defensive functions of the ego are identical with muscular rigidities in the body.³⁴⁴ Through developing awareness of and within the body, one can dissolve the muscular armor and the repressed emotions that it expresses.³⁴⁵ Hence teachers often employ Reichian

³⁴³ Ibid., 294.

³⁴⁴ Wilhelm Reich, *Character Analysis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 338-339.

³⁴⁵ A.H. Almaas, *Essence with the Elixir of Enlightenment* (Boston: Weiser Books, 1998), 129-130.

breathing and body-centered techniques to aid the student in working physically through the block.³⁴⁶

As a monologue, inquiry is generally undertaken in triads with each student respectively inquiring either into his or her present experience or a given topic while the others sit silently present in order to generate a holding environment. Monologues typically last fifteen minutes and are followed by five minutes of feedback in which the other two students ask questions or make comments with the aim of deepening or clarifying their partner's inquiry. Repeating question exercises are conducted face-to-face in dyads, with each partner taking a turn repeatedly to ask the other a specific question, which is designed to expose unconscious material around certain areas.

A detailed example is useful: I attended a retreat on the white latifa or the aspect of essential will that manifests itself in the qualities of clarity, solidity and groundedness. My teacher connected it to the Oedipal complex and stated that the essential will is abandoned if one's primary caretakers fail to hold appropriately the sexual and aggressive instincts arising during the Oedipal stage.³⁴⁷ In order to explore their personal experience of the Oedipal situation, students were asked to inquire into the following topic: "Explore your specific experience of the Oedipal situation. How did it shape your personal confidence and will? Do you feel real or false confidence?" At the same retreat, when

³⁴⁶ Wilhelm Reich was a psychoanalysis who claimed that unreleased psychosexual energy caused somatic blockages or "body armor" within the muscles or the organs. Ali has a PhD. in Reichian psychology and Diamond Approach teachers are trained in Reichian techniques.

³⁴⁷ Although the teaching utilizes the classical Freudian account of the Oedipal complex, the concept was adjusted so that the desire may be directed at either parent, not necessarily the parent of the opposite sex. Such adjustments have come out of the direct experience of heterosexual and homosexual students in the Diamond Approach who have re-experienced desire towards the parent of the same sex during this stage.

exploring specially the qualities of solidity and groundedness associated with the essential will, a repeating question was “What’s right about fantasizing?”³⁴⁸

These exercises are designed to expose the false form of the essential aspect and to illuminate the personality issues that are the barriers to its reemergence. In the case of the essential will, through inquiry students become aware of the absence of authentic will in their life. Ideally, with further investigation into this lack, students will begin to physically experience an emptiness, or a hole, in the solar plexus. If they attain precise insight into their personal psychodynamic issues that lead to this emptiness and can fully tolerate feeling it, the hole spontaneously transforms into a deep spaciousness and the specific lost essence reemerges. The recovery of essential will is experienced as a full silver moon that fills the solar plexus and imparts the qualities of confidence, solidity, and groundedness. The following, taken from a student working directly with Ali, captures the process:

I worked with you on Tuesday night on understanding my concept of working to earn a living. I am either afraid to do anything because of my feelings of inadequacy, or I work on grandiose plans to get rich...I felt a lot of fear while working on this issue, and it was around my inadequacy. When you worked on getting me to feel this I kept going back to my grandiose ideas. This happened a few times, and finally I stayed with the feeling of inadequacy. I felt an emptiness and fear that I did not exist. As I explored the feeling of emptiness it felt like a hole and then a big cave. There was substance there and as I felt the substance I

³⁴⁸ All of this material comes from participant-observation fieldwork with the Gulf Coast Diamond Heart Group White Latifa retreat in Houston during May 17-19, 2008.

began to feel strength in it. It felt like the strength I try to get by being grandiose, except that it felt real and it felt like my strength. It is hard for me to feel this real strength because I am so identified with the feelings of inadequacy and grandiosity. They are both in my head and neither are able to give me the strength I need to function, as Essence does.³⁴⁹

This systematic use of psychoanalytic theory to work through issues of personality fundamentally differentiates the Diamond Approach from traditional contemplative traditions. Ali organizes the various barriers to the soul's liberation into the following categories: psychodynamic issues, structural issues, existential issues and epistemological/phenomenological issues.³⁵⁰ He points out that awareness of the first two categories was only made possible by psychological development knowledge. Hence, the psychologies and methods of the "ancient wisdom traditions" cannot penetrate these particular egoic structures.³⁵¹ Indeed, according to Ali, the methods and results of traditional contemplative traditions would be much more effective if they employed the findings of modern psychoanalytic theory. However, while utilizing psychological knowledge, inquiry should not be confused with therapy that, in the main, is viewed as limited being based on a material view of reality. Although psychological healing may occur as a by-product of the practice, personal issues are never explored to repair the self but rather to recover Being.

³⁴⁹ Almaas, *The Pearl Beyond Price*, 371.

³⁵⁰ Almaas, *The Inner Journey Home*, 226-234.

³⁵¹ According to Ali the methods and results of traditional contemplative traditions would be much more effective if they utilized the findings of modern psychoanalytic theory. See Almaas, *The Point of Existence: Transformation of Narcissism in Self-Realization*, 10.

Students in the Ridhwan School sign legally-binding contracts which differentiate the Diamond Approach from psychotherapy and exonerate the Ridhwan School from any psychological distress that might occur for practitioners. When I discussed this with a teacher, he said that the School has never had any problems of this nature and this was a fairly new procedure that was implemented as a precautionary measure as the School rapidly expands.

The Personal Essence: The Personal Self as Ontological Presence

Moreover, just as the different ego structures mimic and substitute for the essential aspects, so the conventional individual and autonomous sense of self is patterned on a unique essential aspect, called the personal essence. The personal essence is unique because it is the only personal aspect amongst the impersonal essential aspects. In order for the soul to complete fully the individuation process she must realize the personal essence by integrating the ego's achievements into Being through what Ali refers to as the "metabolism" of ego structures. This is a complicated procedure that basically aims at the disidentification of self-images while retaining functioning capacities. According to Ali, each time a constellation of identifications is understood objectively it dissolves and an essential aspect arises which performs the function of the ego structure it replaces. This process ideally climaxes in the transmutation of the ego individuality into the personal essence or "pearl beyond price": "The sense of being an

individual with unique qualities and skills does not disappear, but appears in the soul now as an essential presence that has a personal quality.”³⁵²

The personal essence, therefore, ontologizes a personal sense of individuality enabling a simultaneous experience of self as an ontological spiritual presence and as a unique human person. Ali describes it as having four primary characteristics: autonomy, beingness, personhood and contact. It is autonomous because all self and object images are absent. It thus does not depend on past experience for its identity. Rather, it is constituted by a constant sense of beingness that is completely independent of ego structures. Personhood refers to a sense of intimacy experienced both with oneself and as a concern for others that bridges separate egos. It enables an ability to make true contact, namely a capacity for authentic relationship that is unavailable from both impersonal Being and the inherently narcissistic ego.³⁵³

Enabling individuality without individualism, the pearl allows one to be a unique individual, the normative Anglo-American self with its dual Protestant and Romantic heritage but without the defensive, separating boundaries of the ego. Its realization is one of the ultimate concerns of the Diamond Approach. It bridges the disjuncture between traditional Asian spiritual traditions that declare absolute reality as impersonal and the subjective reality of the personal embodied self. As such, the pearl is viewed as resolving a series of conflicts including those between spirit and psyche, soul and body, immanence and transcendence and the “man of spirit” and the “man of the world.” Furthermore, the sacralization of the personal legitimates worldly life as site of spiritual growth and democratizes spiritual knowledge: “It allows a modern *gnosis* or understanding which

³⁵² Almaas, *The Pearl Beyond Price*, 181.

³⁵³ For a more detailed description of the personal essence see Almaas, *The Pearl Beyond Price*, 33-89.

makes heretofore esoteric insight and realization more available to people who are living a normal life in the world.”³⁵⁴

Although hinted at in Sufism, in Ali’s judgment the pearl’s detailed explication is only possible now because of the availability of psychological developmental knowledge, pioneered by Freud and developed in later psychoanalytic theory. Ali believes that the Diamond Approach could only have manifested itself in the freedom of a democratic and pluralistic society such as the US. He locates it, further, in a historic current that he predicts will culminate in an integrative psychospiritual Western tradition navigated by individuals who are able to translate traditional spiritualities into new forms that take into account the West’s scientific heritage and technological advances.

The Emergence of a Secular Western Psychospirituality

Ali’s understanding of the Diamond Approach, which he characterizes as encompassing a metapsychology that sets psychological experience within a phenomenology of Being, locates him in the lineage of a distinctly Western secular heavily psychologized mysticism. In this section, I draw on historic and socio-cultural accounts to trace how mysticism and spirituality have followed a similar historical trajectory producing a modern form of religiosity, what is commonly becoming dubbed as psychospirituality, in which boundaries between psychological and spiritual growth become blurred.³⁵⁵ This merging occurs at a variety of intersections as a multitude of

³⁵⁴ Ibid., preface.

³⁵⁵ For another perspective on this emerging western psychospiritual field see William G. Barnard, “Diving into the Depths: Reflections on Psychology As Religion,” in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 297-318.

cultural strands converge, intertwine and trail off. Such interlacing complicates a tracing of the history of psychospirituality, but one can certainly identify significant junctures and key figures. William Parsons has teased out one influential strand, which he identifies as the “*psychologia perennis*.” This perennial psychology is an unchurched, psychological form of spirituality whose origins can be seen as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the appearance of mysticism as a subjective “experience” divorced from church and tradition. Prior to this, mysticism was understood and defined by the Church Fathers in a strict religious matrix with respect to three interrelated contexts: biblical, liturgical and spiritual. Mystical experience implied the presence of an objective and transcendent reality and could only be accessed through the mediation of church and tradition.³⁵⁶

As Michel de Certeau has catalogued, however, a shift occurred during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During this period, he finds the emergence of mysticism as a substantive (*la mystique*), the understanding of mysticism in terms of a subjective experience divorced from church and tradition and the investigation and interpretation of such experiences from a scientific/psychological perspective. Concurrent with this was the formulation of a new category of universal religious types—the mystics—and a new understanding of the sacred or “absolute” as a universal dimension of human nature, a subjective reality obscured beneath a diversity of religions, institutions and doctrines. Such developments allowed for the psychologization of mystical experiences and made “a nonreligious exegesis of religion possible.”³⁵⁷

Extending de Certeau’s work, Leigh Eric Schmidt delineates the influence of

³⁵⁶ Parsons, “Psychologia Perennis and the Academic Study of Mysticism,” 97-123.

³⁵⁷ Michael de Certeau, “Mysticism,” *Diacritics* 22, no. 2 (1992), 14. Quoted *ibid.*, 98.

numerous factors, notably liberal Protestantism, in securing the widespread use of the substantive “mysticism” and in inventing its modern form, understood as “ahistorical, poetic, essential, intuitive, and universal.”³⁵⁸ Schmidt also argues that modern constructions of spirituality have paved the way for the popular, contemporary conflation of the terms “mysticism” and “spirituality,” the latter following a psychologized trajectory similar to the former. Classic Christian spirituality endures, adhering to its biblical roots in referring to growth in the spirit of God and the development of virtues, ideals and characteristics in striving towards Christian perfection. Alongside it, however, one now finds a plethora of non-institutional, nontraditional contemporary forms of spirituality. These modern forms of spirituality are concerned with personal religious experience, champion self-development, draw liberally from a variety of religious traditions and often position themselves in opposition to traditional religion, which is seen as dogmatic, authoritarian and oppressive. Traditional Christian spirituality is premised on the belief in a transcendent God who can only be mediated via religious authority and institution. Modern forms of spirituality are highly individualized, decidedly psychological, and promote a universal model of an innate inner divinity.³⁵⁹

According to Parsons, the emergence of a universal, sacred inner dimension of the human and a generic understanding of the absolute allowed for the psychologization of mysticism and spirituality. It links the figures of Romain Rolland, William James, Carl Jung and such humanistic and transpersonal psychologists as Abraham Maslow, Roberto Assagioli and Ken Wilber in a common lineage Parsons designates as “the perennial

³⁵⁸ Leigh Eric Schmidt, “The Making of Modern Mysticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (June 2003), 288. Quoted *ibid.*, 98.

³⁵⁹ See, for example, Robert Fuller, *Spiritual But Not Religious* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

psychology.” While acknowledging real differences in metapsychology and technique among these thinkers, Parsons sees them united by several themes: First, is their championing of the individual as an unchurched site of religiosity. Second, they support the valorization of personal unchurched mystical experiences. Third, they advocate various permutations of perennialism. Fourth, they identify the innate, intuitive, mystical capacities. Fifth, they develop various psycho-mystical therapeutic regimens. Finally, they share a social vision consisting of the emergence of *homo mysticus*.³⁶⁰ To this list, I would add a strong interest in and creative borrowing from Asian mystical traditions.³⁶¹

As Parson acknowledges, such characteristics are similar to those identified as definitive of the New Age. Indeed, Wouter Hanegraaff has described one of the major trends of the New Age as “healing and personal growth,” in which psychological development and religious salvation merge to such an unprecedented extent that it is difficult to distinguish between the two.³⁶² Setting it within the wider context of the secularization of traditional esotericism as it adapted to the emerging scientific worldview, he argues that one of the defining marks of the New Age is “the psychologization of religion and the sacralization of psychology.” He delineates two major lineages for this occurrence: American metaphysical movements and Carl Gustav Jung. Regarding the first, drawing heavily on a series of works by Robert Fuller that traces the emergence of a distinctively American religious psychology, Hanegraaff divides the American lineage into two separate but related streams.³⁶³ The first, the

³⁶⁰ Parsons, “Psychologia Perennis and the Academic Study of Mysticism,” 98.

³⁶¹ For details of American metaphysical traditions appropriation of Asian religions see Catherine Albanese’s work on “metaphysical Asia.” Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, 330-393.

³⁶² Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 482-513.

³⁶³ See Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), Robert C Fuller, *Americans and the Unconscious* (New York: Oxford

metaphysical movements, include Mesmerism, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby's Mind-Cure, the New Thought movement and positive thinking/self-help popular psychology. The second, functionalist psychology, has its roots in the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, embraces William James, Carl Rogers, and humanistic psychology and is best represented by James's classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.³⁶⁴ Common to the American lineage are the following themes: an understanding of the unconscious as a site of harmony, reparation and revitalization; the casting of the unconscious as the locus of or a doorway to the sacred; a concept of a spectrum of consciousness in which different layers of consciousness correspond to different psychic capacities, mystical experiences and metaphysical realms; and the development of a pragmatic attitude and scientific techniques to access the resources of the sacralized unconscious.

The second major source for the psychologization of religion is Jung, whom Hanegraaff sees as the link between traditional European esotericism, Naturphilosophie, Romanticism and the New Age. According to Hanegraaff, Jung united science and religion by presenting an esoteric worldview in psychological terms and providing a scientific alternative to occultism. Not only did Jung psychologize esotericism, he also sacralized psychology by filling it with the contents (e.g. archetypes, the transcendent function, and individuation) of esoteric speculation rather than empirical realities. The result was a theory that allowed people to talk simultaneously about God (the Self) and the psyche. This move collapsed boundaries between religion and psychology, thus anticipating the rise of contemporary psychologized spirituality.

Turning to a more socio-cultural perspective, the rise of a western unchurched

University Press, 1986), and Robert C. Fuller, *Alternative Medicine and American Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³⁶⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002).

psychological mysticism can be further illuminated in reference to the emergence of what Max Weber called inner-worldly mysticism. Weber postulated two “ideal types” of radical salvation moments, “mystical contemplation” and “active ascetic conduct.” Each of these movements have a correlative religious experience, socio-economic class and societal impact. To this he added the further distinction of “inner-worldly” and “other-worldly” to produce four possible ideal types of salvation. It is the “inner-worldly mystic,” who cultivates mystical experiences and spiritual development in the midst of everyday society who is relevant here. Ernest Troeltsch has his concerns about the inner-worldly mystic. He is suspicious of such a mystic’s ability to engender community, associating it with the rise of a modern, non-institutional, and individualistic form of spirituality that he dubbed as “the secret religion of the educated classes.” For Troeltsch, this emerging ‘invisible church’ was highly experiential, radically individualistic, tending to the antinomian and notably syncretic and diverse.³⁶⁵

Troeltsch’s refinements of inner-worldly mysticism have formed the basis of a number of more recent sociological inquiries into new religious movements and current forms of alternative spirituality.³⁶⁶ Particularly relevant is Roland Robertson’s research. Elaborating on Troeltsch, Robertson argues for the contemporary pervasiveness of inner-worldly mysticism. He contextualizes it within a culture characterized by capitalism, individualism, pluralism, rationalization, a scientific-bureaucratic ethos and the de-contextualization and availability of various introspective techniques geared at the realization of “the self.” Parting from Weber and Troeltsch, however, Robertson argues

³⁶⁵ Hunt, *Lives in Spirit*, 57-69.

³⁶⁶ See, for example, Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Volume 2: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (New York: T & T Clarke International, 2005).

that these new forms of mystical self-cultivation are capable of social engagement in promoting an ethos that expresses the need to work “in the world” while striving for individualization and self-actualization.³⁶⁷ Certainly Robertson’s refinements of the category of inner-worldly mysticism capture many of the themes and concerns of the Diamond Approach.

Reading the Diamond Approach: Mystical Humanism or Divine Individualism?

Before considering the different readings of the new psychospiritual traditions, such as the Diamond Approach, a word on the legitimacy of the terms of the impersonal/personal debate is necessary. Claiming that Asian religions are impersonal clearly ignores theistic and devotional traditions. Kalidas Bhattacharyya, among others, has also opposed the view that the individual is absent in Indian religious traditions. He blames this misconception on the dominance of Advaita Vedanta and points out that its denial of the individual is contested by other Indian traditions.³⁶⁸ Ali, however, does acknowledge differences in Asian traditions and clarifies that he is addressing those traditions such as Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta and Taoism that deny the ultimate existence of the individual. While Ali’s employment of the general rubric of “impersonal” risks a problematic perennialism that such traditions undermine the individual is a sound claim. Furthermore, a number of ethno-sociological studies and

³⁶⁷ Roland Robertson, *Meaning and Change: Explorations in the Cultural Sociology of Modern Societies* (New York: New York University Press, 1978). I am indebted to Parsons, “Psychologia Perennis and the Academic Study of Mysticism,” for this section on the socio-cultural analysis of a western inner-worldly mysticism.

³⁶⁸ Kalidas, Bhattacharyya, “The Status of the Individual in Indian Metaphysics” in *The Indian Mind: Essentials of Indian Philosophy and Culture* eds. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1967), 299-319.

cultural psychological studies have concluded that Asian models of subjectivity differ from western ones in being more collectively orientated and less concerned with individuality.³⁶⁹ Noting this, Anne Klein recognizes that Western Buddhists encounter unprecedented concerns because the important modern understanding of the self as a unique individual is foreign to traditional Asian cultures.³⁷⁰ Janet Gyatso's presentation of the Tibetan visionary Jigme Lingpa's autobiography tempers claims that a sense of personal individuality is a unique marker of modern Western identity, I, however, remain convinced that the modern psychological subject, whose appearance was influentially documented by Philip Rieff, is not sufficiently addressed by Asian traditions.³⁷¹ The number of testimonies of Western practitioners and teachers of Asian traditions still struggling with personal issues despite extensive spiritual practice is one indication that they do not do so. The reports of Asian teachers, such as Mahasi Sayadaw and the current Dalai Lama, who confess to being bewildered at the psychological problems they encounter in their western students is another.³⁷² The same shortcoming is also more troublingly revealed, as discussed above, in the well-documented guru scandals.

I consider contemporary efforts to integrate the personal individual self into impersonal spiritualities as reflecting a legitimate ethical and pragmatic engagement with these issues. Hence, I am skeptical of critiques that reduce such attempts to the infiltration of western individualism and late-capitalist agendas.³⁷³ For example, Jeremy

³⁶⁹ See, for example, Mattison, "Conceptualizing the Person: Hierarchical Society and Individual Autonomy in India," 279-295 and Roland, *In Search of Self in India and Japan: Towards a Cross-Cultural Psychology*.

³⁷⁰ Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Feminists, Buddhists and the Art of the Self*.

³⁷¹ Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self* and Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*.

³⁷² Engler "Being Somebody and Being Nobody: A Reexamination of the Understanding of Self in Psychoanalysis and Buddhism," 45.

³⁷³ For example, see the critique of transpersonal psychology in Lee and Marshall, "Divine Individualism: Transcending Psychology."

Carrette and Richard King argue that the new psychospiritual traditions are to be rejected as the corruption of Asian religious ideals by western individualistic and psychological values. According to Carrette and King, the slow assimilation of the religious into the psychological has distilled the social and political aspects of religion to form a privatized religion amenable to the demands of neoliberal ideology. They claim that psychologized spirituality privatizes and commodifies Asian wisdom traditions, reducing them to techniques aimed solely at the production of individual enlightenment. Asian religious perspectives are repackaged to suit and enhance the modern psychological subject. Rather than pursuing the transcendence of the ego, they reify it in a form of divine individualism. Carrette and King locate this psychological dilution within the long and shameful history of the European colonialist appropriation of Asian culture.³⁷⁴

In bemoaning the invasion of Western psychology within Asian religions, Carrette and King join a long chorus of dissent at what is claimed as the corruption of authentic Asian religious practice by Western Romantic, humanistic and individualistic values.³⁷⁵ Similarly, the new Western psychospiritual traditions that draw liberally on Asian mystical traditions have been consistently accused of narcissism, individualism and superficial appropriation.³⁷⁶ It is undisputable that modern Western concerns with the individual self have been a constant feature of the Western encounter with and appropriation of Asian mysticism. However, while having clear historic precedents, contemporary attempts to incorporate the personal individual self differ from their

³⁷⁴ See Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 54-122.

³⁷⁵ See for example, Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* and Versluis, *American Transcendentalism & Asian Religions*.

³⁷⁶ See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979) and Paul Vitz, *Psychology As Religion: The Cult Of Self-Worship*. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977) and Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitments in American Life*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

predecessors. To begin with, the wider dialogical context between Western psychology and Asian religions has markedly improved. Early encounters were hindered by limited access to the traditions, poor and incomplete translations of Asian religious texts, naïve perennialism, liberal protestant agendas and orientalism. As William Parsons notes, however, from 1970 to the present, there have been a number of impactful socio-cultural shifts and intellectual developments. These include the continuing waves of Asian immigration, unprecedented access to a plurality of Asian religious communities and an increased awareness of cultural differences and their impact on healing enterprises. Alongside this is the growth of departments of religious and comparative studies, significant improvements in translations and increased scholarly specialization.³⁷⁷

Most significant, perhaps, is that over the last forty years many Westerners have been participating not just as serious students but as teachers across the Asian traditions.³⁷⁸ Labeled by Parsons as ‘cultural insiders,’ these individuals constitute a new cadre of participants, a significant number of whom are familiar personally and professionally with depth psychology and have first-hand experiential knowledge of the different maps of subjectivity the Asian traditions have produced. I view one of the results of this Western immersion in the Asian traditions as a maturing of early idealistic and romantic approaches to Asian mysticism. The increasing plethora of contemporary narratives to which such social actors give voice share several related themes.³⁷⁹ First,

³⁷⁷ See Parsons “The Psychology-Comparativist Dialogue,” 229-253.

³⁷⁸ For a fascinating and comprehensive account of this phenomena see Andrew Rawlinson, *The Book Of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Tradition* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1997).

³⁷⁹ See Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path*; John Tarrant, *The Light Inside The Dark: Zen, Soul and the Spiritual Life* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998); John Welwood, *Toward A Psychology Of Awakening: Buddhism, Psychotherapy, And the Personal and Spiritual Transformation* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2002); and Rob Preece, *The Wisdom of Imperfection: The Challenge of Individuation in Buddhist Life*. (Ithaca: New York; Snow Lion Publications, 2006).

they articulate a more pragmatic evaluation of the scope of Asian contemplative practice. Central to this evaluation is their acknowledgement that psychodynamic issues are not necessarily addressed and, in fact, might even be accentuated, by Asian practices. That acknowledgement comes with the coining of a new term “spiritual bypassing” to denote how spiritual experiences or philosophy are misused to circumvent personal developmental issues. Second, such narratives evince more nuanced understanding of how cultural differences, particularly in subjectivity, affect practice. Third, they recognize a common need for western practitioners to supplement spiritual work with psychotherapy. Finally, they call for a mature and embodied approach to spirituality which balances transcendence and individuation, or what is increasingly referred to as vertical and horizontal levels of liberation.

Granted, there are traditions, such as classical Jungian positions, within the encounter between western depth psychology and Asian religions that problematically reduce the latter to psychological narratives.³⁸⁰ The alternative, more dialogical traditions that I am highlighting here, however, attempt rather to integrate psychological and spiritual perspectives within an overarching spiritual framework. Moreover, charges of individualism, falling into the error of equating individuation with individualism, fail to recognize that these integrative attempts are fundamentally relationally motivated. Common to these narratives is the realization that Asian contemplative practices often prove of little service in addressing interpersonal dynamics in modern western settings. This emerges through the experiences of individual practitioners in their romantic, family

³⁸⁰ For an example of a problematic reductive approach see Jung’s reading of Asian traditions. J.J. Clarke, *G.C. Jung on the East* (London: Routledge, 1995).

and working relationships and when crises in spiritual communities reveal the replication of dysfunctional family relational patterns.³⁸¹

In general, therefore, critiques do not appreciate the pragmatic nature of these psychospiritual endeavors that, to a large degree, can be accounted for as attempts to adapt traditional Asian renunciative spiritualities to the conditions of living in the modern western world. Given the particular socio-cultural construction of contemporary Western subjectivities, the turn to the personal is for many practitioners a necessary move. Such sentiments found frequent expression during interviews with students of the Diamond Approach who are also long-term practitioners and teachers in Asian impersonal spiritual traditions. Interviewees frequently stressed that the teaching on the personal essence and psychodynamic issues provided them with the “missing piece” that was absent in traditional Asian contemplative traditions. These teachings and practices enabled them to work through their personal psychodynamic history in the service of their spiritual development and provided them with a way to integrate spiritual experiences with everyday life in the world.³⁸²

I suggest, therefore, that Kripal offers a more convincing hermeneutic of the new psychospiritual traditions, and one which certainly resonates with Ali’s understanding. Kripal argues that Western humanism and Asian mysticisms have much to learn from one another and calls for a “mystical humanism,” an integration of Western critical thought with Asian nondual ontologies and contemplative techniques. In his recent cultural-history of Esalen, a pioneering force in East-West integralism, Kripal celebrates it for successfully wedding the human values of the European Enlightenment with the

³⁸¹ Kathy Butler, “Encountering the Shadow In Buddhist America,” in *Meeting the Shadow*, eds Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher /Putnam, 1991), 137-147.

³⁸² Interviews were conducted in San Francisco Bay Area June-August 2008.

ontological insights of the Asian enlightenment traditions. Rather than this resulting in a dilution of Asian traditions, Kripal argues that the encounter between Western modernity and Asian mysticism has resulted in the emergence of genuinely new, psychologically sophisticated, embodied, and democratic forms of spirituality. He celebrates these new Western psychospiritual traditions as providing what our cultural moment demands—a more integral spirituality, which respects both the ontological truth of nondualism and affirms the value of the individual embodied self.³⁸³

Conclusion: From the Personal to the Social Body

In conclusion, I wish to offer a couple of suggestions to strengthen Kripal's hermeneutic and the inclusion of the personal self in the Diamond Approach. Although I generally share Kripal's sympathetic reading, I have certain reservations concerning his category of mystical humanism. Kripal's individual is very much the modern Western humanist subject that has come under attack from number of quarters.³⁸⁴ Although his mystical nondual ontological ground metaphysically undercuts individualism, Kripal does not sufficiently draw out the relational aspects of the human person. Similarly, although Kripal proposes a both/and perspective, which recognizes both our biological sameness and our real cultural differences, in his attempt to recover the shared dimensions of the human, I fear that he veers towards emphasizing the ahistorical and universal body that is abstracted from the social constitution and location of the

³⁸³ See Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, 8-24 and 449-468.

³⁸⁴ Kripal's mystical humanism can be viewed as a transpersonal model of the self. Interestingly, transpersonal theorists have recently deconstructed the monadic subject lurking within it. See Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*. I would like to see Kripal reflect more on the transpersonal relational turn.

individual. Likewise, in his valid concern to rescue the ontological dimensions of these integrative traditions from socio-economic critiques and materialist reductions, he tends towards underplaying the economic accessibility of these traditions and their lack of diversity. Kripal recognizes that the history of Esalen has been overwhelmingly male, heterosexual, white, and middle-class but, in my perspective, privileges the utopian ideal of Esalen's "enlightenment of every body" over the historic reality of whose bodies are actually represented in Esalen.³⁸⁵

As Hugh Urban argues, however, embodiment refers not only to the reality of the physical flesh but also to the embodiedness of humans in their lived social, political, and economic contexts.³⁸⁶ I would like to see, therefore, more problematization, interrogation, and bridging of the gap between ideal and actuality in whose bodies are included in these new integrative traditions. Hence, while supporting the contemporary incorporation of the personal self into nondual impersonal spiritualities, I call for more recognition of its relational and socio-cultural dimensions. How does the Diamond Approach fare here? The Diamond Approach addresses the interpersonal in two important respects. In principle, the pearl is a fully relational subjectivity. In practice, "dialectical inquiry," complements individual inquiry by exploring the intersubjective field between two students or the larger group.

Hence, the Diamond Approach can be appreciated for its engagements with the interpersonal. Its tackling of the social dimension of the personal, however, is considerably less developed. More attention to the internalization of socio-cultural

³⁸⁵ While raising some valid counter-critiques against socioeconomic critiques, Kripal generally tends to underplay issues of the economic accessibility and demographic diversity of these groups. See, Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, 399-403.

³⁸⁶ Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, 280-281.

categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class and the cultural biases and ideological underpinnings of psychoanalytic theory would extend its project of exposing and working through all of the unconscious barriers to the soul's liberation. One means of doing so could lie in the inclusion of critical psychoanalytic thought, such as feminist perspectives which recognizes the importance of the social in shaping subjectivity and psychoanalytic discourse itself.³⁸⁷ Also essential is making the group more economically accessible. The Diamond Approach does not offer a sliding scale for its events and this contributes towards an exclusion of certain of socio-economic bodies, which, in turn, reinforces a lack of diversity on a theoretical level. Similarly, Ali has acknowledged that the school is overwhelming white but has not implemented any investigation into factors that might reinforce this lack of racial diversity. Only an approach that includes the personal, interpersonal, and social body, however, can claim the status of a truly integrative and embodied spirituality: one that recognizes the personal as both political and spiritual and extends the project of liberation to all spheres of life.

³⁸⁷ Encouragingly such a direction can be seen in the recent forming of an international group of gay, lesbian and queer identified Diamond Approach students to explore gender and sexuality issues including the heterosexual underpinnings of psychoanalytic thought within the Diamond Approach.

Chapter Four

What is Enlightenment? From Neo-Advaita to Evolutionary Enlightenment in the Life and Work of Andrew Cohen

The privileged ontology within contemporary Asian-inspired American spirituality is without question that of nonduality, a situation which has led many participants to equate enlightenment with an experiential realization of the nondual nature of reality. The Sanskrit term for nonduality is *advaita*, which literally translate as “not-two” and, which is associated with the Indian philosophical tradition Advaita Vedanta. Both Asian and Western teachers have presented nonduality, however, as a universal mystical category that is at the heart of religion and which is found across all of the great wisdom traditions.³⁸⁸ In scholarly debates on religious pluralism and more popularized cartographies of consciousness, nonduality is consistently situated as the pinnacle of spiritual attainment.³⁸⁹ While it is indeed true that no concept is more important to Asian religious and philosophical thought than nonduality, in contrast to its Western perennial presentation, there are in fact a number of different and competing Asian schools or philosophical articulations of nonduality.³⁹⁰ One of the most fundamental contrasts is between a nonduality that affirms the identity of phenomena and the absolute and consequently embraces the world as an expression of the absolute, as expressed within the pan-Asian Tantric schools, and a nonduality that denies the reality of all phenomena

³⁸⁸ This privileging can be traced to early American representations of Hinduism and Advaita Vedanta by Hindu gurus such as Swami Vivekananda.

³⁸⁹ See Jorge Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Psychology*, 71-72.

³⁹⁰ See David Loy, *Nonduality* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1998).

except the absolute, and, which therefore devalues the material world, as represented by Advaita Vedanta.³⁹¹

In this chapter I want to consider what forms of nonduality have been embraced in America and why. I will explore the contemporary American assimilation of nonduality by tracing the American guru Andrew Cohen's transformation from a Neo-Advaita teacher to a leading proponent of "evolutionary enlightenment," a teaching that places traditional Eastern understandings of nonduality in an evolutionary context. Following Cohen's own evolution, I argue, affords some fascinating insights into the transformation of Hindu concepts in America. His early period shows the further deinstitutionalization of traditional Advaita Vedanta within the radically decontextualized Neo-Advaitin network, and his current teaching engages another less-known but increasingly influential Hindu lineage, namely that of Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga. Cohen has also been the subject of much debate over the efficacy of importing a traditional Asian hierarchical guru-disciple relationship into a modern Western democratic culture. He proves a useful case study into Asian-inspired spirituality because he has critiqued many of the common trends emerging from contemporary East-West encounters and, as such, forms a notable counter-point to the integrative, psychological, and everyday-oriented spirituality represented by West Coast Vipassana and the Diamond Approach.

Map and Methodology

I begin by distinguishing between three forms of Advaita: traditional Advaita Vedanta, the experiential Advaita of Ramana Maharshi, and the further radicalized

³⁹¹ Andrew Fort, *Jivanmukti in Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 6.

Western or Neo-Advaita. Next, I will divide Cohen's teaching career into three major stages: Neo-Advaita, impersonal enlightenment and evolutionary enlightenment. Stage one, "My Master is My Self," details Cohen's formative meeting with the Indian Advaitin guru H.W. L. Poonja, his early teaching period as a charismatic Neo-Advaita teacher and his eventual acrimonious split from Poonja and the Neo-Advaita world.

Stage two, "What is Enlightenment?" discusses Cohen's founding of the popular spiritual publication *What is Enlightenment?* and his critique of contemporary East-West integrations. Next, I will focus on the development of Cohen's teaching of impersonal enlightenment and his war against the ego. Locating them in a wider cultural dialogue about the guru-disciple relationship, I will examine a number of critiques targeted at Cohen from his former students over his controversial teaching methods and consider the response of Cohen and his supporters.

Stage three, "From Being to Becoming: Evolutionary Enlightenment and the Integral Alliance" traces Cohen's current manifestation as a pioneer of evolutionary enlightenment and his influential alliance with integral theorist Ken Wilber. I analyze the major components of evolutionary enlightenment and discuss its striking similarities with Sri Aurobindo's system of integral yoga.

In conclusion, I reflect on how we might locate Cohen's evolution in the context of the wider evolution of the American assimilation of Indian enlightenment traditions. I focus on three main themes: (i) the move away from experience to integration (ii) the championing of an embodied nonduality and (iii) the ethics of the guru-disciple and the possibility of a perfect liberation. I argue that metaphysically Cohen's evolutionary enlightenment fits well with Jeffrey Kripal's Tantric transmission thesis that argues that

in the last forty years, Americans have embraced world-affirming Tantric forms of Asian spirituality over world-negating renouncer traditions such as Advaita Vedanta.³⁹² I point out, however, that while Cohen shares a certain ontological trend with contemporary American assimilations, he also considerably differs in other ways, being critical of other common traits such as the incorporation of psychology, a more feminine self-accepting approach to practice, and the democratization of the guru-disciple relationship. Yet, while there are significant tensions between Cohen and other contemporary American revisions of enlightenment, I argue that he is still wrestling with many of the same fundamental issues, such as how to refashion world renouncing spiritualities into world-embracing ones and how to integrate enlightenment experiences with daily life.

In terms of methodology, I employ both textual analysis and fieldwork. In addition to a number of books and articles, textual analysis includes a significant amount of Internet material. As much of contemporary spirituality is deinstitutionalized and decentralized, the Internet functions as a central forum for information and participation. This is true for the three main communities I engage in this chapter: Neo-Advaita, Cohen's evolutionary enlightenment and integral networks. There are also a number of websites devoted to the topic of nonduality, which provide, amongst other things, discussions of current debates and controversies engaging the nondual community.³⁹³ I supplement this textual analysis with fieldwork consisting mainly of phone interviews with former and current students of Cohen and email correspondence with other

³⁹² Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, 16-21, 449-469.

³⁹³ Most prominent of these is "Jerry Katz's Non-Dual Salon," <http://www.nonduality.com/> established in 1997 as the first website to explore nonduality. Also well-respected is Dennis Waite's run "Advaita.org.uk," <http://www.advaita.org.uk/index.htm>. For a list of satsang schedules see, "Satsang Worldwide," <http://www.satsangteachers.com/links.aspx>, "Living Satsang," <http://home.wanadoo.nl/prembuddha/link.html>. See also "Sarlot's Guru Rating Service," <http://www.globalserve.net/~Sarlot/Ratings.htm>. There are also a number of localized satsang groups such as "Satsang in Spain," <http://satsang.es/>.

prominent figures in the nondual world. I have also engaged in participant-observation in Cohen's current teaching of evolutionary enlightenment through following webcasts and attending virtual retreats and conferences.

From Traditional Advaita to Neo-Advaita: Advaita Goes West

Cohen often refers to his Indian guru, H.W.L. Poonja as a teacher of Advaita Vedanta in the lineage of Ramana Maharshi. However, as I shall discuss, neither Poonja nor Ramana represent traditional Advaita Vedanta. In order to lay the groundwork, it is necessary to provide a sketch of the three distinct forms of Advaita that come into play at different places over Cohen's career: traditional Advaita Vedanta, the experiential Advaita of Ramana Maharshi, and the Western or Neo-Advaita birthed in large part by Poonja.

Traditional Advaita Vedanta

As Gavin Flood notes, the most notable feature of Hindu philosophy is that it is exegetical in nature, being expressed primarily through commentaries and sub-commentaries on the revealed Vedic texts. By the medieval period, Hindu philosophy had become codified into a standard list of six orthodox systems or *darsanas*. One of these is the school of Vedanta, the tradition that is based in an interpretation of the *Upanishads*, which are the last and the most mystical texts of the Vedas. Vedanta is the

most influential and paradigmatic of all schools of Hindu theology and was the central ideology of the Hindu Renaissance movement in the nineteenth-century.³⁹⁴

Within the Vedanta, there is a range of diverse views and a number of different sub-schools of which Advaita Vedanta is the most famous. The term *advaita* means “non-dual” and refers to the tradition’s absolute monism, which, put simply, maintains that reality consists of one substance. This one absolute essence is referred to as Brahman and described as pure subjectivity or eternal unchanging pure consciousness. The phenomenal world of changing multiplicity is explained as *maya* or an illusion that appears due to ignorance. The most famous Advaitin philosopher is Shankara who has been dated between 788-820 CE. In his commentaries, Shankara develops a metaphysics in which he tries to establish that spiritual ignorance is caused by the superimposition of what is not self onto the self. All knowledge is distorted by superimposition, which prevents us from seeing our true nature as the self’s pure subjectivity (atman), ontologically identical with the absolute (Brahman). In order to realize the truth of the identity of the self with the absolute, a person must develop discrimination, which allows for a person to distinguish the self from what is not self, subject from objects, and knowledge from ignorance. With discrimination one can remove superimposition and realize the self as the witnessing subject identical with Brahman. This knowledge of the identity of atman and Brahman is liberation or *moksha*.

This realization is to be achieved through the correct interpretation of the Upanishads. It is a process of hearing, reading, thinking and meditating on the texts and so gaining knowledge of the truth of revelation. As Flood points out, while the idea of mystical experience, which is stressed in the modern West, is important for Sankara as

³⁹⁴ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 224-231.

the goal to which revelation leads, he is primarily concerned with the correct interpretation of scripture and the refutation of what he regards as false views. There is no reference in his works to any personal religious experience or to the experience of the ancient sages.³⁹⁵

Advaita Vedanta is a conservative and elite scholastic tradition centered around four great monasteries or *mathas*. Shankara specified that before one began on the Advaitin path of knowledge, one must meet four qualifications, namely, the ability to discriminate, renunciation of sense pleasure, mental tranquility and concentrative abilities, and the intense longing for liberation from the cycle of rebirth.³⁹⁶ The disciple, in other words, must possess the correct qualifications and authority in order to begin the study of the sacred texts. Liberation within traditional Advaita was meant for male Brahman renouncers. The tradition is socially conservative and strictly upholds caste regulations. Only celibate male Brahmins are permitted to become gurus and a formal relationship between guru and disciple is essential to the tradition. Although it is likely that it was his disciples who founded them, Shankara is credited for establishing four monasteries in each of the cardinal directions in India and the head of each of these is known as a *Sankaracarya* signifying an unbroken lineage back to Shankara. *Sankaracaryas* are responsible for preserving the Advaitin teachings and play a variety of roles including teacher/scholar, administrator and spiritual leader.³⁹⁷

Between Tradition and Modernity: the Experiential Advaita of Ramana Maharshi

³⁹⁵ This summary of Advaita Vedanta comes from *ibid.*, 238-243.

³⁹⁶ Carl Olson, *The Many Colors of Hinduism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 115.

³⁹⁷ Fort, *Jivanmukti in Transformation*, 152-153.

Ramana Maharshi was born in South India near Madurai in 1879. At seventeen, he became seized by the fear of death and spontaneously had his first experience of the eternal Self or atman that was separate from the finite body/mind. After this realization, Ramana travelled to the Saiva centre of Tiruvannamalai at the foot of Arunacala hill in north central Tamil Nadu, where, on account of his strict austerities and deep meditative states, he soon became well known. He first lived as a silent ascetic renouncer but later moved to an ashram at the base of the hill and gradually took a more active role in its affairs. When he died of cancer in 1950, he had many Indian and Western devotees.³⁹⁸

According to biographers, Maharshi only began to read traditional Advaita texts in Tamil. He repeatedly privileged experience over scriptures and claimed that his experiences preceded his readings of the texts. When asked if his teaching was the same as that of Shankara's, Maharshi reportedly said that it "is an expression of my own experience and realization. Others find it tallies with Sri Shankara's."³⁹⁹ With this and other similar statements, Ramana established his authority on personal experience rather than scripture or lineage.

Still, as Andrew Fort notes, while he never produced any systematic philosophy, Ramana's views are nondual and in line, although not identical, with classical Advaita. Ramana insists that the only thing that exists is the Self. As such, realization consists only of removing the false idea that one is not liberated. Liberation is not anything new or to be acquired but rather the realization of that which one eternally is. Another way that Ramana was in line with traditional Advaita was in his emphasis on being detached

³⁹⁸ This summary of Ramana Maharshi is derived from Fort, *Jivanmukti in Transformation* and Thomas A. Forsthoefel "Weaving the Inward Thread to Awakening: the Perennial Appeal of Ramana Maharshi," in *Gurus in America*, 37-54.

³⁹⁹ Fort, *Jivanmukti in Transformation*, 139.

and knowing the Self rather than on social action. This is consistent with the traditional Advaitin view that devalues the external world and social reality. He also accorded with the tradition in seeing that the course of conduct is determined by one's karma and that the playing out of karma is responsible for the action of the sages.⁴⁰⁰

Ramana does differ, however, in several important respects from traditional Advaita. To begin with, while a celibate Brahman, Ramana was never aligned with any Advaitin institute nor did he receive any traditional scriptural training. Similarly, despite his own ascetic background, he rejected traditional renunciation claiming that one can be in the world and be detached. True renunciation is the renunciation of the "I" thought and the illusion of being the doer rather than shaving one's head and putting on robes. Ramana was indifferent to intellectual and scriptural training and taught that the way to Self-realization was through the practice of self-enquiry, which consists of meditating on the question, "Who am I?" While he always advocated self-enquiry as the highest practice, he also allowed for other paths, such as devotion or hatha yoga, depending upon the temperament of the individual. In offering multiple paths, Ramana differs from the exclusivity of traditional Advaita. Moreover, he offered his teaching to anyone regardless of his or her caste, culture or gender. He welcomed outcasts, women and non-Hindus and he redefined eligibility for spiritual training in terms of mental fitness rather than the traditional Advaitin categories such as gender, caste and stages of life.

In light of these continuities and discontinuities with traditional Advaita, Ramana is rightly seen as representing a distinct category within the history of Advaita. For, for example, locates Ramana Maharshi as a bridge between the categories of traditional

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 147-149.

Advaita and Neo-Vedanta, the confluence of traditional Advaita ideas with modern Western concepts like humanistic social concern as represented by Swami Vivekananda. He sees Ramana as traditional in his philosophical nondualism and his belief that knowledge of the Self is more important than social reform. However, in advocating the primacy of personal experience over scripture and tradition, and in his religious ecumenicalism and his socially liberal approach to caste, he creatively adapts Advaita to modernity.⁴⁰¹

In a similar view, Thomas Forsthoefel argues that Ramana's emphasis on a universal and transcultural mystical experience makes him particularly modern. He believes that it is "probably misguided" to identify Ramana within Advaita Vedanta at all, since the latter represents an entire cultural and institutional matrix that minimally consists of text, tradition and teacher. Forsthoefel calls Ramana "the sage of pure experience" and discusses how in moving Advaita out of a local context, which affirmed socially established doxastic practices, he enabled the universalism of Advaita.⁴⁰²

Similarly, Arvind Sharma distinguishes between the "doctrinal Advaita" of traditional Advaita and the "experiential Advaita" of which Ramana and Nisargadatta Maharaj, the twentieth-century householder Bombay guru, are two chief representatives.⁴⁰³

Advaita in the West: Neo-Advaita and Satsang Culture

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 149-150.

⁴⁰² Forsthoefel, "Weaving the Inward Thread to Awakening."

⁴⁰³ Arvind Sharma, *Experiential Dimensions of Advaita Vedanta* (Arvind Delhi: Motil Banarsidass Publishers, 1993).

The last twenty years have witnessed the appearance of increasing numbers of “awakened” Western teachers offering satsangs in which they give teachings on and, in some cases, transmission of “pure Advaita” or nonduality. Although some of these teachers declare that their awakening is independent of any tradition, a large majority situate themselves in the lineage of Ramana Maharshi or Nisargadatta Maharaj. While many of these teachers are openly critical of what they see as the dogmatism and secondary cultural accouterments of traditional religion, they declare their teaching of nonduality or pure Advaita to be the ground and ultimate truth of not only Advaita Vedanta but other nondual religious traditions such as Zen Buddhism, Dzogchen Buddhism, Taoism, and Sufism.⁴⁰⁴

These teachers have received scant scholarly attention but are the subject of numerous websites, books and debates within the milieu of contemporary alternative and Asian spirituality.⁴⁰⁵ In this section, I will provide a preliminary sketch of the history, organizational context, and main teaching themes of what has been alternatively identified as satsang culture, pure Advaita, Western Advaita, non-traditional Advaita, or, as has become most common, Neo-Advaita. The term Neo-Advaita is a term that has been applied to satsang culture by its, mostly critical, commentators and, which has correspondingly gained a negative association. I will adopt this term because it has achieved much prominence and currency in contemporary Advaita circles. At the same

⁴⁰⁴ Some Western teachers of nonduality, such as Adyashanti, have a strong background in Zen Buddhism. Peter Fenner who trained as a Tibetan Buddhist monk and has pioneered a nine month experiential teacher training in nonduality is another prominent figure in the nondual community. The focus of this section, however, will be on those teachers with connections with Hinduism.

⁴⁰⁵ I found only one published paper on this movement, a 2002 article named “The Satsang Network: A Growing Post-Osho Phenomenon” by Liselotte Frisk, published in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Volume 6, Issue 1 (October 2002): 64-85 and a yet unpublished paper by Phillip Lucas, “The Ramana Maharshi Effect: When a Movement is not a Movement,” presented at the American Academy of Religion, Chicago November 3, 2008 for the New Religious Movements group.

time, however, it is important to note that those teachers gathered under the rubric of Neo-Advaita do not consider themselves to be teaching, as the name literally suggests, a “new” form of Advaita and certainly not, as the title has come to imply, a “pseudo” form of Advaita. On the contrary, many consider themselves to be teaching “pure Advaita” the ultimate truth of the traditional nondual wisdom traditions. In order to differentiate it from both the experiential Advaita of Ramana Maharshi and traditional Advaita, I will consider the critiques leveled at it from both of these communities.

Having no central organization, official membership, set places of worship, or even an official title, Neo-Advaita is best approached as a loose network or shared culture rather than a spiritual movement. Many of the teachers within the Neo-Advaita circuit acknowledge one another, have the same gurus or situate themselves in the same teaching lineage, and are featured on the same websites and satsang schedules. Most significantly, however, teachers are connected through their shared teachings on nonduality and the holding of satsang as their main, often sole, teaching format.

The core teaching of Neo-Advaita is that ultimate reality is nondual pure consciousness, which is experienced as pure love, peace and stillness. One is already enlightened and to realize this all one needs to do is to give up seeking and the effort to attain enlightenment. Once seeking is abandoned, the identification with the false “I” or personal story will drop away and reveal what always is. No method can be employed because this merely solidifies the illusory sense of dualism: that is there is a separate “I” (subject) using a method to reach enlightenment (object).

Satsang culture is extremely deinstitutionalized and decentralized with the Internet functioning as its main organizational tool. Teachers have sophisticated websites that

include biographies, satsang schedules, audio and video clips, sales, and links to other related websites. The main teaching format within the Neo-Advaita circuit is satsang. Satsang is a Sanskrit word that translates as association or company with the truth. One prominent teacher, Neelam, describes satsang as a “direct experience of Self, not limited to person, circumstance, time, or space.”⁴⁰⁶ Another, Pamela Wilson, explains it as, “literally a truth-gathering - an informal get-together of people to sit with the truth of their being and, occasionally, talk about it.”⁴⁰⁷ Satsangs generally last around two hours and follow a common format of an opening period of silence, a short talk and a longer question and answer period. They often have themes such as “awareness,” “discovering what is already perfect” and “pointing at the truth.”⁴⁰⁸ The assumption is that through attending satsang with an awakened teacher one might also experience, or get a taste of, his or her nondual realization. Due to the decentralized nature of satsang, collecting demographical information on participants is difficult. However, from teachers’ websites and participant-observation, I found that, similar to much of contemporary alternative spiritualities, teachers and students are mainly white, over forty, middle-class, and there are slightly more women than men.⁴⁰⁹

One useful way to trace the many interrelated roots and branches of neo-Advaita is to think of it as a family tree of which the grandfathers are Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta Maharaj. Both of these Indian gurus are greatly revered in the

⁴⁰⁶ Neelam is a Polish devotee of Poonja. See her website, “Neelam,” accessed August 2, 2009, <http://www.neelam.org/about.php>.

⁴⁰⁷ Pamela Wilson is an American devotee of Poonja. See her website, “Pamela Satsang,” accessed August 2, 2009, <http://www.pamelasatsang.com/>.

⁴⁰⁸ For example see selections on Nirmala’s website, “Endless Satsang,” accessed July 28, 2009, <http://endless-satsang.com/satsangrecording.htm>, Gangaji’s website, “Gangaji,” accessed July 28, 2009, <http://www.gangaji.org/index.php?modules=invitation&op=watch> and Wayne Liquorman’s website, “Advaita,” accessed July 28, 2009, <http://www.advaita.org/>.

⁴⁰⁹ I have sporadically attended various satsangs over a period of eighteen years in England and the US.

contemporary Advaita scene; many teachers have quotes and photos of these two figures on their websites, some explicitly claim to be teaching in their lineages.⁴¹⁰ The issue of lineage, however, is hugely contentious as neither Ramana nor Nisargadatta appointed any successors.⁴¹¹ Moreover, as I will discuss, many commentaries on Western Advaita use the approach of Ramana Maharshi as the vantage point from which to contrast and critique it. Similarly, while Nisargadatta's teachings share thematic continuity with Neo-Advaita, as a member of a Hindu lineage, the Ichegeri branch of the Naynath Sampradaya, he is much more embedded in tradition than his western followers.⁴¹²

The indisputable father of Neo-Advaita is the Indian guru H.W.L. Poonja. I will discuss Poonja in more detail later but for now it suffices to note that he had a realization of the Self in the presence of Ramana Maharshi and saw himself as his devotee. A number of western disciples claiming direct authorization from Poonja and, through him, Ramana, are amongst the main figures of the Neo-Advaita scene. Another prominent Neo-Advaita lineage comes from the recently deceased Indian businessman Ramesh Balsekar who was a disciple of Nisargadatta Maharaj and has, in turn, a number of Western followers teaching on the Neo-Advaita circuit.⁴¹³

The most useful way to see how Neo-Advaita differs from traditional Advaita and the experiential Advaita of Ramana is to consider the number of critiques directed at it from both of those communities.⁴¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that such critiques

⁴¹⁰ Gangaji is an example of a teacher claiming to continue the Ramana lineage and Wayne Liquorman is an example of teacher claiming to continue the Nisargadatta lineage. See both of their websites *ibid*.

⁴¹¹ See "Introduction to Ramana Maharshi: David Godman talks to John David" under "Five Interviews with David Godman," accessed April 2009, <http://www.davidgodman.org/index.shtFive ml>.

⁴¹² Details of Nisargadatta Maharaj from Arvind Sharma, *Experiential Dimensions of Advaita Vedanta*.

⁴¹³ See "Ramesh Balsekar," accessed May 5, 2010, <http://www.rameshbalsekar.com/>.

⁴¹⁴ The most comprehensive critique of Neo-Advaita is found in Dennis Waite, *Enlightenment: The Path through the Jungle: A Criticism of Non-Traditional Teaching Methods in Advaita* (Washington and

rarely differentiate between the experiential Advaita of Ramana Maharshi and traditional Advaita Vedanta but rather conflate the two as classical Advaita and then unfavorably compare Neo-Advaita with this.⁴¹⁵ With that qualifier in mind, the major critiques are as follows: First, there is concern about the lack of a legitimate teaching lineage or teaching ‘qualifications’ within this network. As David Godman points out, Ramana Maharshi never authorized anybody to teach.⁴¹⁶ Others have questioned the teaching style of Poonja. James Schwarz, for example, accuses Poonja of being unskillful in exclusively focusing on experiences of the Self and not teaching the ethical foundation or scriptural basis of traditional Advaita. He suggests that Poonja’s experiential approach created unreal expectations of a magical enlightenment experience and has produced grandiose and immature western teachers.⁴¹⁷ Such teachers, Dennis Waite concurs, have had no rigorous training, have little familiarity with scriptures and lack depth and stabilization of realization.⁴¹⁸

Second, a number of criticisms have been directed at the organizational context and teaching format of Neo-Advaita. Alan Jacobs, the chairman of the Ramana Maharshi Foundation UK, problematizes the question-answer format of satsang because it does not include an overview of basic Advaita Vedanta teachings.⁴¹⁹ Waite also critiques the

London: O Books, 2008), which clarifies differences between traditional and Neo-Advaita and rejects the latter as a valid path to enlightenment.

⁴¹⁵ For example, Alan Jacobs, the chairman of the Ramana Maharshi Foundation UK, dismisses Neo-Advaita as “pseudo-Advaita” and berates it for diluting traditional Advaita to make it attractive to Westerners. See Alan Adam Jacobs, “Advaita and Western Neo-Advaita - A Study,” *The Mountain Path*, Autumn, 2004. <http://bhagavan-ramana.org/neoadvaita.html>.

⁴¹⁶ David Godman, “Introduction to Ramana Maharshi: David Godman talks to John David.”

⁴¹⁷ James Schwarz, “What is Neo-Advaita?,” accessed April 25, 2009, www.shiningworld.com.

⁴¹⁸ Waite, *Enlightenment: The Path through the Jungle*, 123-126.

⁴¹⁹ Jacobs “Advaita and Western Neo-Advaita - A Study.”

informalness of the teacher-student relationship and the lack of support offered to participants outside of satsang.⁴²⁰

Third, numerous critiques have been leveled at the “instant gratification” teachings of Neo-Advaita that dispenses with many aspects, such as ethical training, scriptural study and the use of reason and logic, which are considered essential in traditional Advaita. Waite dismisses Neo-Advaita as the “fast-food of nonduality” and claims that teachings such as “there is no doer,” “there is no other,” “no free will,” and “no path” gives license to immorality and lack of compassion for the suffering of others.⁴²¹ Fourth, is the related critique that Neo-Advaita does not sufficiently distinguish between absolute and relative levels of reality. Waite states that the main epistemological problem associated with Neo-Advaita is its confusion of ultimate absolute nondual reality and the relative conventional level of ordinary empirical experience. In considering things only from the nondual absolute perspective and ignoring the relative, Neo-Advaita has fallen into nihilism.⁴²²

Fifth, Neo-Advaita teachers are accused of insufficiently recognizing the power of the karmic traces or afflictions known as *vasanas* or *samskaras* to reassert themselves after enlightenment experiences. According to Jacobs, the main “Neo-Advaitin fallacy” is that it ignores the power and occlusions formed by the *vasanas* and *samskaras*.⁴²³ In a similar vein, the sixth critique is that teachers do not distinguish between permanent knowledge of the Self and temporary experiences of awakening. Godman claims that while many western teachers have had temporary experiences in which they have stopped

⁴²⁰ Waite, *Enlightenment: The Path through the Jungle*, 124-125.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴²³ Jacobs, “Advaita and Western Neo-Advaita - A Study.”

identifying with the individual ‘I,’ this is not equivalent to the rare attainment of permanent knowledge of the Self as was achieved by Ramana Maharshi.⁴²⁴ Neo-Advaita teachers, in short, greatly overestimated the significance of powerful but impermanent experiences of nonduality.

In conclusion then, while Neo-Advaita does share some features of the experiential Advaita of Ramana Maharshi, it is also correctly considered a new development in the history of Advaita. In the main, Ramana’s immediate community does not respect the western teachers and distances itself by critiquing Neo-Advaita and undermining lineage associations. Poonja occupies a more ambivalent position. For some, he is considered a Neo-Advaitin; for others, he is given a much higher and more privileged status than his western Neo-Advaitin followers. Godman, for example, reverses Poonja as a fully realized being but is much more dismissive of his western followers. Similarly, Timothy Conway, who maintains an extensive website on nonduality, claims that the deterioration of satsang culture began after the death of Poonja in 1997 when many of his western followers began to claim that Poonja had declared that they were enlightened and authorized them to teach.⁴²⁵ A problem with this perspective though is that, as his biographer Godman shows, a large number of these teachers do indeed have letters of legitimation from Poonja.⁴²⁶ Moreover, the teachings of Poonja’s disciples are thematically consistent with those of Poonja. Unlike Ramana, Poonja never taught any methods of awakening, which he believed were obstacles to liberation. Drawing a sharp line between Poonja and his students, therefore, seems somewhat arbitrary. Still, given

⁴²⁴ “An interview with David Godman by Rob Sacks,” under “Five Interviews with David Godman,” accessed April, 2009, <http://www.davidgodman.org/index.shtml#Five>.

⁴²⁵ See Timothy Conway’s website “Enlightened Spirituality,” accessed July, 2009, <http://www.enlightened-spirituality.org/>.

⁴²⁶ “An interview with David Godman by Rob Sacks.”

the overwhelming emic consensus is that Poonja was of a much higher caliber of enlightened guru than his numerous western devotees, I situate him as a bridge between the experiential Advaita of Ramana and the further decontextualized and radicalized Neo-Advaita movement in much the same way as Ramana can be seen as a bridge between tradition and modernity.

My Master Is My Self: Cohen, Poonja, and Neo-Advaita

Accounts for Cohen's first period as a Neo-Advaitin teacher come from four main sources. These include two books written by Cohen: *My Master is My Self*, which consists of his diary entries and a series of letters between him and his Indian guru, H.W.L. Poonja, and *Autobiography of an Awakening*, which details his formative spiritual experiences, dramatic meeting and acrimonious split with Poonja.⁴²⁷ The other two sources are critiques of Cohen, *Enlightenment Blues*, a memoir from former student Andrea van Der Braak, and another from Cohen's mother and former student, Luna Tarlo, the ironically titled *Mother of God*.⁴²⁸ While Cohen's account and the latter two interpret events very differently, the general details are consistent and so offer a reliable picture of this period. I supplement these textual accounts with interviews with former and current students of Cohen who were with him during this period.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁷ Andrew Cohen, *My Master Is My Self* (Corte Madera, CA: Moksha Foundation, 1989;1995). and Andrew Cohen, *Autobiography of an Awakening* (Corte Madera, CA: Moksha Foundation, 1992).

⁴²⁸ Andre van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues: My Years With an American Guru*, and Luna Tarlo, *The Mother of God* (New York: Plover Press, 1997).

⁴²⁹ Interviews were between one and three hours long and were conducted over the phone between April 2009-January 2010.

Born in New York City, on October 23rd 1955, the second son of upper-middle-class Jewish parents, Cohen's childhood was somewhat bohemian. He attended a progressive elementary school, began psychoanalysis at age three, read Freud, Laing and Jung as a teenager, and was expelled from a Swiss boarding school for smoking marijuana. At aged sixteen, a year after the death of his father, Cohen was talking with his mother when he suddenly had a spontaneous spiritual awakening:

I suddenly knew without any doubt that there was no such thing as death and that life itself had no beginning and no end. I saw that all of life was intimately connected and inseparable. It became clear that there was no such thing as individuality separate from that one Self that was all of life. The glory and majesty in the cosmic unity that was revealing itself to me was completely overwhelming.⁴³⁰

Six years later, after his attempt to become a professional jazz musician had failed, Cohen resolved to devote his life to the rediscovery of his earlier mystical experience, which he identified simply as "THAT."⁴³¹ His early years as a spiritual seeker were eclectic; he explored a number of different Eastern and Western religious traditions, visited many spiritual teachers, and travelled around the spiritual retreat circuit in Europe and India. During this period, three teachers particularly influenced him: an American martial arts master, an Indian Kundalini yogi, and a British vipassana teacher. Following an initial period of idealization, however, Cohen became deeply disillusioned

⁴³⁰ Cohen, *Autobiography of an Awakening*, 5-6.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

with each of these figures. He became dismayed by what he described as the discrepancy between the teaching and actual behavior of these teachers and their dismissive and hostile reactions when he attempted to bring this inconsistency to their attention. After this pattern occurred for the third time during a vipassana retreat in India with the former Theravadin monk, Christopher Titmuss, Cohen swore never to submit to spiritual authority again.⁴³² Yet, earlier on hearing about Hari Lal Poonja, a little-known disciple of Ramana Maharshi, Cohen had been instantly compelled to visit him, “The minute I heard this teacher’s name,” he declared, “I knew I had to go see him.”⁴³³ He decided to visit Poonja before leaving for Japan where he planned to undertake Zen Buddhist and martial arts training.

Accounts of Poonja’s life are inconsistent and unreliable. The major source of information comes from a three-volume biography, *Nothing Ever Happened* written by one of his devotees, David Godman.⁴³⁴ The primary source for Godman’s text was Poonja, whom Godman lived with for three years from 1992 to 1995. During this time he gave Poonja a number of long questionnaires, examined his personal diaries and notebooks, checked correspondences between Poonja and devotees, interviewed devotees, and transcribed the satsangs Poonja gave between 1992-1995. Despite Godman’s attempts to verify information and “achieve a standard of factual accuracy and scholarliness that takes the text beyond the realms of mere hagiography,” the biography is explicitly written as an act of homage.⁴³⁵ Moreover, while acknowledging certain

⁴³² Cohen, *Autobiography of an Awakening*, 23.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴³⁴ David Godman, *Nothing Ever Happened: Volumes One to Three* (Bolder, Colorado: Avadhuta Foundation, 1998). Godman has also written a number of books on Ramana Maharshi and worked as librarian at the Ramana Maharshi ashram.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

inconsistencies between Poonja's account and other facts, Godman nonetheless consistently favors the former, so the biography must be treated cautiously as an unreliable hagiographic portrait.

With these reservations noted, certain key events of Poonja's life can be sketched. Poonja, or Papaji as he was often called, was born into a Brahmin family in the Punjab in 1910 (according to him) or 1913 (according to official documents). His parents were devout followers of Krishna and he recalls having many childhood visions of Krishna and Radha. The key religious event of his childhood occurred while visiting relatives in Lahore in 1919. Poonja became absorbed in what he describes as an extremely still, peaceful, and blissful state and, although completely aware of what was happening around him, was effectively paralyzed for two days. In 1944 on meeting Ramana Maharshi, Poonja immediately recognized that this childhood state, which he described as an "uncaused happiness, which was completely beyond time," was the atman or Self.⁴³⁶ Shortly after, he claimed to have fully realized the Self in Maharshi's presence.⁴³⁷ Poonja spent the next forty years alternating between family obligations, giving satsang, and undertaking pilgrimages. He attracted a small group of Indian and foreign devotees, and visited students in Europe and South America.⁴³⁸ Poonja was relatively unknown, however, until Cohen's first book, *My Master is My Self* introduced him to a larger Western audience.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 121-122. I will follow common practice in capitalizing the atman Self in order to distinguish it from the false ego self.

⁴³⁷ Poonja gave different accounts of the exact details of this realization. In some he claimed to have immediately realized the Atman in Maharsi's presence; in others he claimed to have realized it later; in others he calls this a recognition rather than realization claiming that he had been enlightened since his childhood experience. When Godman questioned Poonja on these inconsistencies, he was dismissive claiming that metaphysically time did not exist anyway so such details were inconsequential. Godman, *Nothing Ever Happened*, 124-130.

⁴³⁸ Biographical details from Godman, *Nothing Ever Happened*.

A word here is necessary on the type of Advaita Vedanta that Poonja taught. As noted, many scholars have discussed the difference between traditional Advaita Vedanta and the decontextualized and experiential Advaita of Ramana Maharshi.⁴³⁹ Although Poonja and his students align themselves with Maharshi, he never appointed any successors, so claims to lineage are contentious. Poonja can be understood, rather, as one of the fathers of a further radicalized, decontextualized, and experiential Advaita, which has since been dubbed as Western or Neo-Advaita. His teaching was simple: no methods or effort are necessary to attain enlightenment because it is the realization of what one already is.⁴⁴⁰

This teaching was to profoundly impact Cohen. At their first meeting in Lucknow, North India on March 25 1986, Cohen asked Poonja a question about effort. Poonja's response, "You don't have to make any effort to be free" was catalytic. "In that instant," Cohen reports, "I realized that I had always been free."⁴⁴¹ As recorded in Cohen's diary, revelation after revelation followed in the next three weeks that the new found master and disciple spent together. "The universe is samsara," Cohen marveled, "It has no substance and is unreal. Creation itself is an illusion. What is beyond time cannot be born and cannot die. It is uncreated and timeless."⁴⁴² On their first parting, Poonja bestowed the highest accolade upon him: Cohen had the same look in his eyes as Maharshi, his understanding of Poonja's teaching was total, and now he had to take responsibility for the teaching.⁴⁴³

⁴³⁹ See Andrew Fort, *Jivanmukti in Transformation: Embodied Liberation in Advaita and Neo-Vedanta*.

⁴⁴⁰ For details of Poonja's teaching see H.W.L. Poonja, *Wake Up and Roar* (Bolder, CO: Sounds True, Inc, 2007) and H.W. L. *The Truth Is* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weister Books, 2000).

⁴⁴¹ Cohen, *Autobiography of an Awakening*, 30.

⁴⁴² Cohen, *My Master is My Self*, 12.

⁴⁴³ Cohen, *Autobiography of an Awakening*, 35-36.

Starting a Revolution Among the Young: Cohen takes Advaita West

Predicted by Poonja to “start a revolution among the young,” Cohen began his first teaching incarnation as a Neo-Advaita guru.⁴⁴⁴ Travelling around India, he discovered that he was able to transmit his state of realization to those around him and a small group of students, mainly people he had known before as fellow seekers, started to gather around him. Among these early students were his Indian girlfriend, Alka, who would soon become his wife, and his mother, the novelist Luna Tarlo, who had returned to India from the US at her son’s request. Tarlo reports being amazed by the complete transformation in Cohen’s personality, “in the space of the four months since I’d last seen Andrew, he had become a new man.”⁴⁴⁵ From an anxious and insecure young man, he had, she marveled, dramatically transitioned into an eloquent, confident, and charismatic teacher.⁴⁴⁶ Cohen, himself, was unequivocal about the transformation, insisting that his personal history had been completely destroyed through his awakening.

After being invited by a student to teach, Cohen moved to Cornwall, England in September 1986 and would spend the next two years giving satsang in various locations across Europe and in Israel before returning to the US with around 150 students. Reports commonly depict this as an idyllic and exhilarating period. By all accounts, Cohen was a charismatic teacher who was apparently very successful in transmitting the states of

⁴⁴⁴ Luna Tarlo confirms that Poonja told her Cohen was “his son” and that he had waited twenty-five years to meet him. Tarlo, *The Mother of God*, 84-85. Many of Cohen’s students referred to Poonja’s prediction during interviews, signifying that it functioned as a significant legitimating factor for Cohen’s teaching.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 57-59.

consciousness that he was experiencing. Van der Braak's description captures many of the experiences of satsang attendees:

When I'm with Andrew in satsang, I feel myself melt in a pool of absolute bliss, a place beyond good and evil, beyond conception itself. I feel he is in direct contact with the source of all being, the source prior to thought and feeling. It is the source in which I recognize myself, my own true face. Andrew takes me to the place where I no longer experience any separation or boundary between myself and others, between past, present or future, between pain and ecstasy.⁴⁴⁷

In my interviews with former or current students all interviewees reported having dramatic spiritual experiences on their first encounter with Cohen, whether this be through meeting him in person, being in the company of his students, or even reading one of his books.⁴⁴⁸ They described such experiences as a profound transformation of consciousness; others recall experiencing intense energetic states similar to those described in Hinduism as *shakti-pat*, a descent of divine power transmitted from the guru.⁴⁴⁹ One interviewee, for example, recalled that he did not sleep for a week after meeting Cohen; another shared how he was in an altered state of unitary consciousness for days after attending his first satsang. Many students felt they had experienced

⁴⁴⁷ van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 23.

⁴⁴⁸ Two former students report having profound transmission experiences of the states that Cohen described in his book when reading that book.

⁴⁴⁹ Most interviewees described their experiences in terms such as emptiness, the void and pure consciousness. Cohen referred mainly to experiences of pure consciousness but also, in a letter to his mother, declared that his body felt like an "electricity generator" and that he was "on fire." These experiences are more associated with *shakti-pat* than pure consciousness. Tarlo, *Mother of God*, 99.

enlightenment in Cohen's presence, with this, at least initially, confirmed by him.⁴⁵⁰ In the common parlance of his Neo-Advaitin period, they had "got it."

Cohen's early teaching context was remarkably informal with satsangs initially taking place in the living room of different students' houses. In Totnes, Cornwall, where Cohen first taught in Europe, Tarlo reports that in the beginning, around twenty people attended satsang during the week and up to eighty at the weekends.⁴⁵¹ The satsang format consisted mainly of sitting in silence and periods of questions and answers with Cohen often working on an intimate one-to-one basis with attendees. He would also occasionally read aloud questions or letters of devotion that his students had sent him.⁴⁵² During this early period, Cohen was very available and personally accessible to his students, often traveling, going to dinner with, and visiting them in their houses.⁴⁵³

No official records of attendees were kept so precise demographic information on his first students is difficult to obtain. Still, from the accounts of Tarlo and van der Braak's and my own interviews, a general portrait appears. Students tended to come from a similar background to Cohen; most were white, middle-class adults in their twenties and thirties when they first met Cohen, and many had already been eclectically practicing in, or exploring Eastern spiritual traditions. Without any explicit engineering on Cohen's behalf, an international community of devoted students began to form around him as students collectively rented accommodation near where he taught. Early reports of the community portray it as an informal close-knit spiritual family. Students spent evenings attending satsang and days together discussing Cohen and their satsang

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 60-68.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 101-104.

⁴⁵² van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 27-28.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 26.

experiences. Many had left their homes and jobs to follow Cohen around Europe and worked casual menial jobs in order to finance their participation in the community. In 1988, by the time the community relocated to Amherst Massachusetts, it had grown to around 150 students.⁴⁵⁴

Thematically, Cohen's initial teachings were consistent with Poonja's and typify the Neo-Advaita perspective: enlightenment requires no effort because one is and always has been liberated. Time, the world, and the individual self are an illusion. Only the unchanging, eternal, and pure consciousness Self is real. Enlightenment can be attained instantly; a gradual approach only reinforces the illusory concept of time. No methods are necessary because practice and effort assume a dualistic framework: a separate self (subject) attempting to achieve a future goal of enlightenment (object). To realize the Self all that is necessary is to surrender to the Self, which can be achieved in the presence of the teacher who is identical to the Self.⁴⁵⁵ Cohen's message was simple: nothing had to change, as everything is perfect as it is.⁴⁵⁶

This period is recorded in a series of ecstatic correspondence between Poonja and Cohen. In these letters, Cohen addresses Poonja as his beloved father and ardently declares undying gratitude and devotion. Poonja is no less effusive; Cohen is his own self and now that he had found his "true son" his work was done.⁴⁵⁷ What Cohen referred to as "the fairy tale" between the two, however, was soon to be over.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 22-32.

⁴⁵⁵ For examples of Cohen's early teachings see *My Master is My Self* and Andrew Cohen, *Enlightenment is a Secret* (Larkspur, CA: Moksha Press, 1991). The latter consists of transcribes of satsangs given between 1986 and 1990. It is a text that straddles Cohen's early Neo-Advaitin teachings and the development of his impersonal enlightenment teachings.

⁴⁵⁶ van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 37.

⁴⁵⁷ These letters are reproduced in Cohen, *My Master is My Self*.

⁴⁵⁸ Cohen, *Autobiography of an Awakening*, 82 and Andrew Cohen, *Living Enlightenment* (Lennox, MA: Moksha Press, 2002), 36-38.

From Experience to Ethics: The Split from Poonja and Neo-Advaita

After a few years, however, Cohen began to question Poonja's perspective on the nature of enlightenment as he observed that despite many powerful enlightenment experiences, his students had not been fundamentally transformed:

My Teacher always said someone was "Enlightened," after this initial glimpse into their true nature. I soon realized this wasn't true. If a person was "Enlightened," to me that meant they had to be able to manifest and express that Enlightenment consistently in their behavior. I had observed so many people who had experienced profound awakenings and yet still would be unable to manifest and express that realization in their outer lives. It seemed that in spite of "Enlightenment," much neurotic and conditioned behavior usually remained. And, not only that, I observed also that in spite of temporarily having seen through the nature of mind and thought, many still would be unable to see beyond the subtle concepts and thought formations that were their own minds.⁴⁵⁹

Cohen began, therefore, to realize the limitations of the ecstatic awakenings his students were having in his presence and became particularly frustrated by inconsistencies between his students' spiritual experiences and their behavior in the world.⁴⁶⁰ While he was convinced he had been fully liberated from his "karmic chains,"

⁴⁵⁹ Cohen, *Autobiography of an Awakening*, 56-57.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

he declared that his students were still immersed in karmic conditioning due to their inability to take responsibility for and overcome their self-centered egoic behavior.⁴⁶¹ Cohen framed this as a gap between the experience and expression of enlightenment and responded by modifying his teaching of effortless enlightenment to demand more renunciation and commitment from his students. His goal changed from transmitting an experience of enlightenment to facilitating what he deemed was the perfect expression of that experience in daily behavior.⁴⁶²

According to van der Braak, this shift first began in Amherst, Massachusetts. Cohen still claimed that enlightenment could occur instantly and effortlessly but he also began to talk about the “law of volition” or how the process of aligning with that experience of enlightenment involved tremendous effort. Concurrent with the shift in teaching content was a shift in teaching context. As the numbers of attendees grew, satsangs became more formalized moving from students’ houses to rented public spaces. In Amherst, Cohen offered daily public satsangs in a local Montessori school. He now gave satsang on a podium surrounded by flowers and students had to line-up for entry.⁴⁶³ The community also became more structured. Students were placed in collective houses that were hierarchically ranked according to how well each house was considered to reflected Cohen’s new teaching. House-meetings were also introduced in which roommates would determine to what extent one another were living up to the teaching. If students failed to embody the teachings, they were demoted to lower ranking houses or ordered to leave the community.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁶² See Cohen, *Enlightenment is a Secret*, for a clear presentation of his new teaching.

⁴⁶³ van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 47.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 39-48.

In 1989, after a short spell in Boston, the community relocated to Marin County, California where the process of formalization continued. The group of dedicated students was formalized as “the Sangha,” while visitors, or those who had not made a more formal commitment, were called lay students. Van der Braak states that a strict separation was introduced between “sangha business and public affairs.”⁴⁶⁵ Cohen also introduced separate groups for male and female sangha students, which effectively took over the function of house meetings. The men’s and women’s groups met twice a week to discuss Cohen’s teaching, determine what extent they had been followed, and increase the standard by which they were to be embodied. The main objective of such groups, Van der Braak recalls, was what Cohen called, “facing it,” namely, exposing the root of one’s egoic motivations, admitting guilt, expressing regret, and convincing the other students of one’s resolve to change.⁴⁶⁶

In addition to these groups, Cohen implemented many traditional ascetic practices such as intensive meditation, prostrations, celibacy and head shaving. One-fifth of the sangha would eventually become shaven headed celibates.⁴⁶⁷ Cohen also took an increasingly authoritative role in students’ lives, dictating personal decisions such as who they could have relationships with and where they should live. The early days of blissful satsang and effortless enlightenment were over. Sangha became, as one former student put it, a spiritual boot camp.⁴⁶⁸ The purpose of these new teaching methods was to enable the purification of karmic conditioning and the transcendence of the ego, which Cohen saw as the obstacle to the perfect expression of enlightenment.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 54-55.

⁴⁶⁶ For a description of a man’s meeting see Ibid., 59-61 and 77-79.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁶⁸ For an account of this shift in Cohen’s community see van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 56- 62.

According to van der Braak, by December 1989 only 80 of an initial 120 students were still in the sangha, although most remained as lay students and attempted to recover their status through various reparative measures.⁴⁶⁹ Cohen gives no details of this period but presumably refers to it in the following reflection:

My constant insistence that the Truth be lived was having a profound impact. It was creating a situation where individuals could no longer avoid inconsistencies and hypocrisy in their own being. In light of this many rose to my call for evolution, and in this, karmic chains were being broken and I was observing extraordinary transformation and true emancipation being realized and lived. My emphasis that all individuals take responsibility for their entire karmic predicament created a situation where the stakes were always high and the Truth was the only fact that never changed. Some found this blazing light unbearable because nothing could be avoided... Those who were unwilling and unable to step fully out of the darkness of their own mind and into that light left, because they found the demand for total integrity and absolute responsibility too much.⁴⁷⁰

Cohen's teaching of effortless enlightenment and his status as adored guru was already controversial for many of his western spiritual contemporaries. During his time in Totnes, many students, teachers, and over half the board members had left the nonsectarian Buddhist retreat center Gaia House to become his students.⁴⁷¹ This had

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁷⁰ Cohen, *Autobiography of an Awakening*, 60

⁴⁷¹ See Stephen Batchelor 's forward in William Yenner's *American Guru* (Rhinebeck, NY: Epigraph Books, 2009), ix-xii.

caused a long-standing rift between Cohen and the Vipassana community. Cohen's message of instant and effortless enlightenment was contentious for those who advocated a spiritual practice and gradual improvement over time.⁴⁷² Complaints against him only grew as he began to demand more renunciation from his students.⁴⁷³

Most troublingly, however, was dissent from inside the community. Rumors began to circulate that Poonja was also criticizing Cohen, claiming his teaching was "off," and advising Cohen's students to come directly to him.⁴⁷⁴ Although Poonja denied them when confronted by Cohen, reports that Poonja disapproved of his teaching and was speaking negatively about him continued to circulate. In addition, Cohen began to reflect on a number of incidents in which he felt that an unexplainable sense of separation had arisen between him and his guru.⁴⁷⁵ An interviewee, a former early student of Cohen's, confirms that Cohen was deeply confused and increasingly obsessed by the inexplicable shift in their relationship and by Poonja's denial of the rumors. Cohen started to feel a familiar sense of unease at discrepancies between the teaching and behavior of his guru.⁴⁷⁶

The strained relationship between the two irrevocable broke-down shortly after Poonja rebuked Cohen and a group of his students when they visited him in Lucknow in 1989. When Poonja never replied to a letter in which Cohen asked him to explain his behavior, Cohen accepted that their relationship was over, and much acrimony was to ensue between the two communities.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷² van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 26-27.

⁴⁷³ According to van der Braak many people found Cohen's adoring students weird and called them "androids." *Ibid.*, 51-52.

⁴⁷⁴ For van der Braak's description of this period see *Enlightenment Blues*, 99-109.

⁴⁷⁵ Cohen, *Autobiography of an Awakening*, 50, 66.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 110-114.

The Ethics of Enlightenment and the Possibility of Perfection

The breakdown in Cohen's relationship with Poonja can be attributed to a number of factors related to the relationship between ethics and enlightenment and how this played out in the guru-disciple relationship. Poonja was critical of the content of Cohen's teaching, his teaching methods, and the organization of his community. In terms of the actual teaching, the two main related points of contention were: (1) the relationship between enlightenment and ethics, or, put differently, the relationship between absolute and relative reality and (2) the possibility of fully transcending the ego. According to Cohen, Poonja insisted that the realization of the Self had nothing to do with worldly behavior and he did not believe that it was possible to fully transcend the ego and come to an end of self-centeredness. Poonja's perspective rather was that although karmic tendencies remained after enlightenment, the enlightened person was no longer identified with them and, therefore, did not accrue any further karmic consequences.⁴⁷⁸ Moreover, ethical standards, being based in a dualistic understanding of reality and assuming an individual agent, could never be used to measure nondual enlightenment. For Poonja, the goal was the realization of the Self: the illusory realm of relative reality was ultimately irrelevant.

Cohen, however, was adamant that the experience of enlightenment must manifest in flawless behavior. He believed that it was possible to fully transcend the ego and be liberated from karmic conditioning in order to perfectly express nondual realization in the world. It became clear that Poonja's and Cohen's view of enlightenment were

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 106-108.

“diametrically opposed.”⁴⁷⁹ The differences between the two were not only philosophical, however. They extended to the way that Cohen related to his disciples. As Cohen saw it, he was not willing to compromise and demanded that his students maintain a perfect expression of enlightenment in their behavior. Those who failed to meet his standards were subject to intensive reparative measures, such as public humiliations, compulsory ascetic practices, being demoted in or thrown out of the community. Some of these students went directly to Poonja to complain about their mistreatment and found that he was sympathetic and much more affirming of their shortcomings. Moreover, Poonja expressed concern over what he viewed as Cohen’s damaging teaching methods and the formal and hierarchical structure of Cohen’s sangha, reportedly calling his students “sheep.”⁴⁸⁰

From Cohen’s perspective, however, neither Poonja nor his former students could uphold the standards he had set: “many people who were unable to meet my demand for simple integrity, found in my Master “unconditional love” and acceptance. It began to appear that my Guru was willing to compromise where I could not.”⁴⁸¹ He further accused Poonja of hypocrisy and deception, “Beyond philosophical differences I was deeply pained that my Guru was speaking against me while actively deceiving me.”⁴⁸² Cohen portrays himself, then, as the innocent party, the diligent son who has been betrayed by his spiritual father.

The major source of Cohen’s and Poonja’s split comes from Cohen’s *Autobiography of an Awakening*. There is no mention at all of Cohen, least of all their contentious split,

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁸⁰ van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 102.

⁴⁸¹ Cohen, *Autobiography of an Awakening*, 82

⁴⁸² Ibid., 108.

in Godman's biography of Poonja. There are numerous places within the text, however, where Poonja insists that there is no necessary relationship between ethics and enlightenment.⁴⁸³ Similarly, when asked to explain inconsistencies of dates, Poonja was dismissive of the relative realm of time.⁴⁸⁴ All of these reflect the philosophical differences that Cohen points to. For direct reference to his split with Cohen, we are dependent on reports from western students of Poonja, many of whom had been former students of Cohen. The most influential of these was an American woman named Antoinette Varner. Declaring her enlightened, Poonja gave her the new name of Gangaji and sent her back to America to "clean up after Andrew" and restore the proper understanding of Advaita Vedanta.⁴⁸⁵ A later public debate between Cohen and Gangaji soon descended into hostilities, resolved nothing, and portrays both teachers in an unflattering light.⁴⁸⁶ The common Neo-Advaita perspective remains that Cohen had fallen victim to narcissism in claiming egoic "ownership" of his enlightenment experience and had corrupted the pure Advaitin teaching.⁴⁸⁷

While disagreeing on the cause, it was clear for both communities that Cohen's period as a Neo-Advaitin teacher had come to a dramatic end. Declaring that he had obviously surpassed his own teacher, Cohen paints a final portrait of his once beloved master as an immoral, power-mad hypocrite and liar. Similarly, he pointed to a number of gurus such as Chogyam Trungpa, Bhagwan Rajneesh, Da Free John, and Swami Muktananda, all of whom, despite being "enlightened to an extraordinary degree," had

⁴⁸³ Godman, *Nothing Ever Happens*, 317.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁸⁵ van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 101-102. Gangaji is one of the most famous and well-respected satsang teachers. See her website at <http://www.gangaji.org/>.

⁴⁸⁶ This debate was recorded and I found a copy of it in the Gaia House library in 2004 but I have been unable to get hold of archive details.

⁴⁸⁷ See Paula Marvally, *The Teachers of One Living Advaita* (Delhi: New Age Books, 2004), 40-41.

been implicated in various sexual, drug, and power scandals. Cohen claimed this had produced a prevalent cultural cynicism about the “possibility of perfection, the realization of perfection and the expression of perfection.”⁴⁸⁸ Against this cynical backdrop, he stood alone in sharp relief, the extraordinary rare case, a true spiritual pioneer and moral exemplar, who had the courage to live the truth at whatever cost.⁴⁸⁹ Insisting that ego-transcendence and perfect alignment between enlightenment and behavior was possible, he set this as the aim of his new teaching, to which I will now turn.

What is Enlightenment? Impersonal Enlightenment and the War Against the Ego

Cohen’s second main teaching stage, the development of impersonal enlightenment with its war against the ego, marks a radical departure from his period as a Neo-Advaitin teacher. The split with Poonja led Cohen to rethink the entire nature of spiritual liberation and, in 1991, as an on-going investigation into enlightenment, he began an in-house journal, the aptly titled, *What is Enlightenment?*⁴⁹⁰ Cohen states his primary motivation was to discover how enlightenment could be integrated with life in the twentieth-century:

Enlightenment *is* simple. It is the mind-shattering revelation that all is One and One is all. That everything is ultimately none other than the mystical and mysterious ground of Being...But what is the moral, philosophical, and ethical *context* in which that creative potential and authentic freedom will arise? ...The revelation of nonduality—that all is One and One is all—in and of itself does not

⁴⁸⁸ Cohen, *Autobiography of an Awakening*, 126.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 126-129.

⁴⁹⁰ From now on I will refer to *What is Enlightenment?* as *WIE?*

answer the question of how to live, how to make sense out of the human experience in the midst of a rapidly changing world.⁴⁹¹

WIE? soon grew into an international magazine with a wide readership. Tackling topics such as the nature of the ego and the relationship between spirituality and sex, it featured many well-known Asian and Western spiritual teachers and established Cohen as a major contemporary spiritual figure. It also provided a platform from which Cohen would critique many of the trends in contemporary East-West spirituality. One of its first tasks, for example, was to launch an attack on the Neo-Advaita movement, on the grounds that its sole focus on the Self was both ineffective and unethical. Cohen coined the term “Advaita shuffle” to refer to what he saw as the misuse of the monistic ontology of Advaita to legitimate ethical failings or inconsistencies in teachings.⁴⁹²

The “Advaita shuffle” enables a person to use the Advaita teachings of nonduality to “Advaita away” conflicts, disagreements, or uncomfortable aspects of reality. The attention is drawn away from the actual content of the discussion and put back on the questioner himself...proponents of the Advaita view become so fixated on the Absolute position that they regard any form of discussion as a descent into the relative, and a manifestation of ignorance.⁴⁹³

Cohen and his editors have continued their critique of the Neo-Advaita movement through a series of scathing articles that target its decontextualized nature and apparent amorality:

⁴⁹¹ Andrew Cohen, “Why I Founded *What is Enlightenment?*,” accessed May 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/andrew/magazine.asp>.

⁴⁹² “The Advaita Shuffle” in *What is Enlightenment?* Volume 1, Number 1 (January 1992): 12-15.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

In casting off the common Hindu strictures of traditional Advaita Vedanta (as espoused by such luminaries as Shankara and Ramana Maharshi), it places no explicit value on moral growth, spiritual purification, or character development. Anyone and his Nazi brother can be a Neo-Advaitin, no prerequisites or special skills required....no matter how effective a mystical teaching Advaita might have been in India's ancient past, its newborn Western child, Neo-Advaita, seemed to be missing something significant. Isolated from its Eastern religious and historical context and taught as a quick-fix, no-frills contemporary path to spiritual enlightenment, they noticed its tendency to ignore traditional values like ethics and the cultivation of personal integrity. What's more, it didn't give much credence to the values of the Western Enlightenment, either. Rationality, critical analysis, and common sense all took a back seat in its mind-transcending philosophy.⁴⁹⁴

In addition to his attack on Neo-Advaita, Cohen's second main target is what he saw as the American humanistic dilution of enlightenment in which, he claimed, the quest for liberation was replaced by a therapeutic ethos and an emphasis on self-acceptance and relationally. He was particularly dismissive of what he scorned as the "anti-transcendent" perspectives of teachers such as Jack Kornfield that are concerned with applying mindfulness to everyday life.⁴⁹⁵ Berating attempts to integrate Asian spirituality with Western depth psychology, Cohen claimed that psychology was always

⁴⁹⁴ See Tom Huston's introduction of "Who's Transforming Anyway? Stacey Heartspring Encounters the Postmodern Craze of Neo-Advaita" by Jessica Roemischer," *What is Enlightenment?* September-December 2006, accessed May 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j34/stacey-intro.asp>.

⁴⁹⁵ See Susan Bridle, "A Call to Mediocrity" *What is Enlightenment?* Issue 18 Fall-Winter 2000, accessed May 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j18/bookreview1.asp>.

about soothing and consolidating the ego.⁴⁹⁶ Treating the personal, he insisted, always sacrificed the perspective of absolute. His goal was not the integration of the absolute into the relative, like many of the East-West integrations, but rather the absolutization of the relative. This was to be achieved through his new teaching of impersonal enlightenment, which aimed not, as the American Buddhists did, at the integration of the personal but rather at its complete eradication. In sharp contrast to the feminization that characterizes many American Buddhist approaches, this eradication was expressed in decidedly masculine terms: impersonal enlightenment was a “revolution,” Cohen was engaged in a “battle” against the ego, students were “warriors” and those who had left his community were “war casualties.”⁴⁹⁷

Impersonal Enlightenment, the Five Tenets and the War Against the Ego

As noted, Cohen developed impersonal enlightenment in response to what he viewed as a corruption of enlightenment by highly realized but ultimately self-centered Asian gurus. Pointing to the number of guru scandals, he declared that the search for personal enlightenment was all too often motivated and corrupted by the fundamental self-concern of the individual ego. His community, however, had begun to manifest something beyond individual enlightenment—what he called impersonal enlightenment—in which enlightenment was realized for its own sake and not for the sake of the individual. He

⁴⁹⁶ Cohen has been a vocal critical of psychology, which he sees as reinforcing the ego. See the “What is Ego? Friend or Foe” edition of *What is Enlightenment?* Issue 17 (Spring-Summer 2000).

⁴⁹⁷ See van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 63, 90. In 2008 Cohen compared his community to the spiritual equivalent of Navy SEALs claiming they exemplified the “perfect warrior” Andrew Cohen, “A Declaration of Integrity,” *AndrewCohen.org*, accessed May 9, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/blog/index.php?blog/post/declaration-of-integrity/>.

compared his distinction between personal and impersonal enlightenment to the difference between the goal of individual liberation in Theravada Buddhism and the Mahayana Buddhist aim to liberate all sentient beings.⁴⁹⁸

The seeds of Cohen's impersonal enlightenment first appear in his 1991 text, *Enlightenment is a Secret* and are further developed in *An Unconditional Relationship To Life and Freedom Has No History*.⁴⁹⁹ Here Cohen declares that the teaching of instant complete enlightenment is not suited to the actual needs of most individuals because temporary experiences of enlightenment are not enough to overcome deeply ingrained conditioned or karmic patterns. Being unwilling to compromise, he has developed the path of impersonal enlightenment, a teaching that is marked by a total commitment to the attainment of perfection.

The aim of impersonal enlightenment is the perfect expression of the impersonal Absolute Self on the relative level. Cohen now describes spiritual life as consisting of two aspects: meditation and contemplation.⁵⁰⁰ Meditation answers the question of who one is and contemplation responds to the question of how one should live. Through meditation one realizes one's true identity—the eternal, unchanging, nondual Self—and through contemplation one fully manifests that Self in enlightened action in the world. With the aspect of meditation, Cohen remained faithful to the Neo-Advaitin perspective, to just “*let everything be as it is.*”⁵⁰¹ For contemplation, however, he produced a new methodology called “The Five Fundamental Tenets of Enlightenment,” which he claimed

⁴⁹⁸ van der Braak states that during this period he became particularly interested in Tibetan Buddhist practices although rejected what he saw as its mythic and medieval aspects. van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 102.

⁴⁹⁹ Andrew Cohen, *Enlightenment is a Secret* (Larkspur, CA: Moksha Press, 1991), Andrew Cohen, *An Unconditional Relationship to Life* (Larkspur, CA: Moksha Press, 1995) and Andrew Cohen, *Freedom has No History* (Lennox, MA: Moksha Press, 1997).

⁵⁰⁰ Andrew Cohen, *Who Am I? & How Shall I Live?* (Lennox, MA: Moksha Press, 1998).

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

would “enable any seeker to find out simply and directly what the appropriate response to life was in any given moment if they want to be free more than anything else.”⁵⁰² In brief, the tenets are as follows:

- (1) Clarity of Intention: states that the desire for liberation must be more powerful and take precedence over any other desire including work or family.
- (2) The Law of Volitionality: states one must unconditionally reject any temptation to be a victim and take full responsibility for ones karma, choices and actions.
- (3) Face Everything and Avoid Nothing: states that one has to face oneself unconditionally and cease acting out of ignorance in ways that cause suffering.
- (4) The Truth of Impersonality: states that every aspect of ones personal life is ultimately impersonal. One must resist the urge to personalize and accept the universal and impersonal nature of all experience.
- (5) For the Sake of the Whole: states that one has to completely abandon a self-centered relationship to life and live only for the sake of the whole.⁵⁰³

The major target of these tenets was the ego, defined by Cohen as, “the compulsive need to remain separate at all times.”⁵⁰⁴ The ego is the historic personality or the false sense of self that is characterized by a self-centeredness and impenetrable narcissism. The self-centeredness of such egoic individuality, Cohen believed, was the major obstacle to the perfect expression of the absolute on the relative level. He insists that “the compulsion with the personal” must be completely severed and compared working

⁵⁰² Ibid., 14.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., 14-29.

⁵⁰⁴ Andrew Cohen, *Embracing Heaven and Earth* (Lennox, MA: Moksha Press, 2000).

through rather than completely abandoning it to trawling through the contents of a garbage can.⁵⁰⁵ Expressions of the personal, individuality or uniqueness were attempts by the ego to reassert itself and a heroic effort was demanded to overcome it.⁵⁰⁶

Framing spiritual life as a battle between good and evil, enlightenment and the ego, Cohen intensely pushed his students to dedicate themselves completely to breaking through the many individual and cultural layers of conditioning that made up the ego.⁵⁰⁷ As mentioned earlier, Cohen had implemented a number of strict traditional ascetic practices and designed new methods such as encounter groups to aid in this “heroic” task. After the community moved back to Massachusetts, to a country estate called Foxhollow, in 1996, measures became even more extreme. He developed a number of dramatic, some would later claim abusive, teaching methods designed to ruthlessly expose, confront and eradicate the ego.

Critical former students have published accounts of these extreme methods and while interpretations widely differ, in general the incidents have been collaborated by more supportive former students. They include the use of physical force, verbal abuse and intense psychological pressure against students. One student, for example, reports being ordered by Cohen to deliver “messages” to fellow students by slapping the student in the face as hard as she could. The men’s group was ordered to jump and “rough up” certain male students. One student had paint poured over her head; another had a bag of garbage poured over her bed. Cohen began to place an emphasis on “healthy shame,” and one common practice was to highlight students’ egoic traits by giving them names such as Mad Dog, Raging Bull, Dizzy, Casual and the Clown. Similarly, when Cohen

⁵⁰⁵ Cohen, *Enlightenment is a Secret*, 85-86.

⁵⁰⁶ Cohen, *Freedom Has No History*, 102.

⁵⁰⁷ van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 157.

received a student letter that offended him, it would be blown up, splattered with fake blood, and publically posted. Students' bedrooms and the spa at Foxhollow were smeared with red paint to signify that students were spilling Cohen's blood by not living up to his teachings properly.⁵⁰⁸

Another feature of this period was Cohen's focus on gender specific egoic traits. One of the characteristics of his goal of "liberation without a face" was freedom or disidentification from one's gender-based conditioning and characteristics.⁵⁰⁹ With the professed aim of overcoming this conditioning, Cohen would "take on" each of the men and women's groups. While reports portray both groups as coming under intense pressure, they agree that women were particularly targeted.⁵¹⁰ Van der Braak, for example, notes that Cohen began to single out women's conditioning in 1992:

"According to Andrew, due to a millennium of deeply rooted conditioning women have an engrained survival instinct that prevents them from truly letting go of the personal and embracing the impersonal perspective."⁵¹¹ He claims that Cohen's focus on "taking on" women's conditioning became an increasingly central issue in the community and culminated in the 1998 Rishikesh retreat in which women were ignored, humiliated and thrown out of the retreat.⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁸ See several accounts of these incidents at WHAT Enlightenment??! An Uncensored Look at Self-Styled American Guru Andrew Cohen, <http://whatenlightenment.blogspot.com/>.

⁵⁰⁹ Andrew Cohen, *Living Enlightenment* (Lennox, MA: Moksha Press, 2002), 89-94.

⁵¹⁰ For a description of men's groups see Hal Blacker, "Shame, Guilt and the Guru's Blood (Part III)" posted on March 24, 2005 at WHAT Enlightenment??! , accessed May 9, 2010, <http://whatenlightenment.blogspot.com/2005/03/shame-guilt-and-gurus-blood.html>. Yenner also devotes a chapter called "Women and Enlightenment" to what he sees as Cohen's misogynist treatment of women. Yenner et al, *American Guru*, 68-

⁵¹¹ van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 162-167.

⁵¹² Ibid., 162-167. In my interview with Bridle she shared that the Rishikesh retreat was her most traumatic experience with Cohen.

Other accounts report that Cohen ordered groups of twenty to thirty women to squeeze into a small basement space and watch the movie “To Die For” or listen to Bob Dylan’s “Just Like a Woman” non-stop for twenty-four hours. Wall-to-wall on this basement were blown up comments and cartoons caricaturing specific women as devils or demons tearing out Cohen’s intestines with their hands, or dancing around a fire burning his books. Another woman was depicted as a dominatrix, performing sexually predatory acts.⁵¹³

According to Susan Bridle, former senior student and editor of *WIE*, while Cohen did have some powerful insights into the specific challenges that women face on the spiritual path, the major problem was that he reified “woman’s ego” making it into a “larger-than-life” monster to fight with. Bridle states that Cohen constantly berated and shamed individual and groups of women for expressing “women’s conditioning,” “women’s ego” and “women’s treachery.” Presenting himself as the true liberator of women, because he helped women to face the truth about themselves, he subjected them to many extreme episodes. While Bridle notes that men were also subject to similar pressure, she believes that Cohen’s treatment of women was more extreme and claims that Cohen was “fanatical about the subject of women and sexuality.”⁵¹⁴

These accounts depict Cohen as extremely authoritarian and punitive and claim that any expression of personal autonomy or individuality, disagreement or doubt was seen as “egoic resistance” and immediately squashed. If students did not live up to Cohen’s standards, they were demoted, moved to different centers, or expelled from the

⁵¹³ Hal Blacker, “Shame, Guilt and the Guru’s Blood (Part III).”

⁵¹⁴ Susan Bridle, “Susan Bridle’s responses to Yonatan Levy’s questions re: Andrew Cohen & EnlightenNext” at *WHAT Enlightenment?!!!*, accessed May 9 2010, <http://whatenlightenment.blogspot.com/search?q=levy>.

community. To return, they were often required to make a large monetary donation as “karmic retribution.”⁵¹⁵ Some students who attempted to leave independently were subject to intense pressure to return and it was common practice for those who did not to be publically vilified by Cohen.⁵¹⁶

WHAT Enlightenment??! Spiritual Authoritarianism and Breaking the Code of Silence

These tactics were all part of what Cohen declared as the war against ego, although, ironically, the biggest causality of this war might have been Cohen himself. Just as Cohen’s neo-Advaitin period had ended with a critique of the guru, in that case Poonja, this period closed with a number of assaults on Cohen. The first strike came from his mother and former student, the novelist Luna Tarlo, who, in 1997, published the ironically titled *The Mother of God* in which she portrayed Cohen as a spiritual tyrant who was controlling his community through fear and domination.⁵¹⁷ According to Tarlo, Cohen had become increasingly narcissistic and cruel, and his teaching methods encouraged students to be abusive to each other. After a series of reprimands from Cohen and a decisive meeting with the anti-guru teacher, U.G. Krishnamurti, Tarlo decided to leave the community. She became a vocal proponent of the anti-cult movement, concluded that Cohen had become fascist and was lost in self-delusion, and compared his community to a dysfunctional family. Her relationship with Cohen was

⁵¹⁵ Hal Blacker “Karma Will (Literally) Cost You and Leaving Isn’t Easy” posted May 31 2005 *WHAT Enlightenment??!*, accessed May 9 2010, <http://whatenlightenment.blogspot.com/2005/05/karma-will-literally-cost-you-and.html>.

⁵¹⁶ Simeon Alev, “A Response to Andrew Cohen’s ‘Declaration of Integrity,’” posted October 20 2006 *WHAT Enlightenment??!*, accessed May 8, 2010, <http://whatenlightenment.blogspot.com/search?q=A+response+to+declaration+of+integrity>.

⁵¹⁷ Luna Tarlo, *The Mother of God*.

completely severed, and they have had no contact since 1995, when Cohen unsuccessfully attempted to convince her not to publish her account.

A similar, although more nuanced and self-reflexive account of life with Cohen appeared in Andre van der Braak's 2003 memoir, *Enlightenment Blues*. A senior student of Cohen's for eleven years, van der Braak offers a compelling story that begins with his initial adoration of Cohen and ends with his progressive disillusionment and acrimonious split with him. The most accomplished reflection on Cohen, *Enlightenment Blues*, steers clear of diatribe and oversimplification and offers a number of thoughtful reflections on complex issues such as the dynamics of power and surrender in the guru-disciple relationship, the difficulties of importing a hierarchical Eastern model into a Western democratic culture and the complicity of students in dysfunctional religious communities.

Reviews of *The Mother of God* and *Enlightenment Blues* spun a series of critical press articles against Cohen.⁵¹⁸ The heaviest blow, however, came from the website *WHAT Enlightenment??!*, which was started by one of Cohen's former senior students and *WIE?* editor, Hal Blacker.⁵¹⁹ In an interview with Blacker, he informed me that although he had left before things had gotten so extreme, after hearing increasingly disturbing reports of life in the community, he felt that something had gone seriously wrong with Cohen's teaching methods and that he had an ethical responsibility to go public with such details. Since 2004, the site has functioned as a public forum for discussion on Cohen and his controversial teaching methods and includes postings that both critique and support him as well as general reflections on the ethics of the guru-

⁵¹⁸ See reviews of Tarlo's book at the website *Mother of God* at <http://www.themotherofgod.com/>. These include articles from the LA Times and the Boston Globe.

⁵¹⁹ See *WHAT Enlightenment??!*, accessed between April 2009-May 2010, <http://whatenlightenment.blogspot.com/>.

disciple relationship. Several former senior students, including three previous editors of *WIE?* describe Cohen's controversial teaching methods and accuse him of such things as presiding autocratically over a shame-based community, narcissism, financial extortion and psychological abuse.

While critiques of Cohen depict many of the same incidents, however, one can distinguish between various conclusions formed from them. For some disgruntled former students, Cohen is nothing more than a narcissistic and power-hungry fraud who has no spiritual weight whatsoever and on whom the community projected their own collective experiences and longings.⁵²⁰ From this perspective, Cohen's community was engaged in massive projection and transference and little other than the comradeship between students is salvageable. The majority of critiques, however, are more measured; they recognize that Cohen is spiritually realized in some areas but that he is also psychologically immature and narcissistic in others. Former students commonly problematize the lack of peer support that Cohen had, pointing out that because he did not belong to any lineage there were no checks on him.

In a similar vein, and one of the most convincing points for me, is that Cohen was untrained as a teacher and that he "absolutized" his understanding and forced a "one-size fits all" model on his students. His teaching methods, they suggest, were heavy-handed and unskillful at best, delusional and abusive at worst. Many of these students declare that they still value much of their time with him and in some ways, even appreciate his intentions.⁵²¹ Some also take responsibility for their part in the "creation of the painful

⁵²⁰ One of the most caustic portraits of Cohen appears in William Jenner's and contributors recently published *American Guru*.

⁵²¹ In an interview with Susan Bridle, for example, she told me that she still recommends that people attend Cohen's powerful retreats but warns them not to get involved with him on a personal level.

mix of enlightenment and insanity, of hope and fear, of bondage and ecstasy that he and his community embody.”⁵²²

The following reflections capture the struggles of many of the former students who posted on the blog and are worth quoting at length:

Part of why it’s so challenging to see this all clearly is that undeniably so many of us had enormously powerful and ecstatic experiences of Self when we met Andrew that literally blew our minds...As things slowly began to change and become not only ecstatic but actually quite scary, many of us, including myself, felt that finally we were really entering the ‘true spiritual life.’ ...But slowly, because I continue to stare into all of this and reflect and re-reflect from as many angles as I can find, I have to say that I am starting to fall off my high horse and to see that there was indeed a great deal that was just plain old weird, cruel and abusive, and way over the top. It’s helped me to think about what “went wrong” in terms of looking at the fact that Andrew really didn’t have a real model of “how to teach”. He hadn’t really worked closely with a deeply realized teacher who was steeped in a time-tested tradition where many of the kinks had a chance to get ironed out through centuries of learning and lots of mistakes.⁵²³

⁵²² Anonymous “Letter to a Seeker,” posted Friday October 29, 2004; See also Stas M, “Letter From A Senior Student,” Posted February 7 2005; and Susan Bridle, “A Legacy of Scorched Earth,” February 02 2005 All posted on *WHAT Enlightenment??!*

⁵²³ Roberta Flak, “Through a Mirror Darkly—continuing to try to see clearly!” posted April 18 2005 *WHAT Enlightenment??!*, accessed May 2010, <http://whatenlightenment.blogspot.com/search?q=Through+A+Mirror+Darkly>.

Bottom line, I experienced so much that was truly profound and transformative – and that I will ever be grateful for—and also so much that was really abusive and twisted—and that still deeply saddens me. The lightest light and the darkest dark. Both. All tangled together like miles of black and white yarn entwined in a big ball at the pit of my stomach. I guess for me, I feel my work is to digest the whole thing, tease it apart and try to come to some real maturity and wisdom about it. And without saying that Andrew doesn't have responsibility for where, in my considered opinion, he went off the rails, take responsibility for all my choices and actions, for what brought me to him, what kept me there, and what enabled me to finally move on.⁵²⁴

In the main, then, the critiques, like van der Braak's memoir, attempt to reflect honestly and vulnerably on the complexities of life in Cohen's community. I am inclined to agree with Blacker's conclusion that the website is a sincere effort at "healing and truth-telling," rather than Cohen's view of it as the work of those who are "committed to destroying my reputation."⁵²⁵

Crazy Wisdom, Rude Boys and the Shadow Sangha

Andrew Cohen is a Rude Boy. He is not here to offer comfort;. He is here to tear you into approximately a thousand pieces ...so that Infinity can reassemble you...

⁵²⁴ Susan Bridle, "A Legacy of Scorched Earth" posted February 2 2005 *WHAT Enlightenment??!*, accessed April 2009, <http://whatenlightenment.blogspot.com/2005/02/legacy-of-scorched-earth.html>.

⁵²⁵ Andrew Cohen, "A Declaration Of Integrity" *AndrewCohen.org*, accessed May 9 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/blog/index.php?/blog/post/declaration-of-integrity/>.

Every deeply enlightened teacher I have known has been a Rude Boy...Rude boys are on your case in the worse way, they breathe fire, eat hot coals, will roast your ass in a screaming second and fry your ego before you know what hit it.⁵²⁶

The response to these allegations from Cohen and his supporters has been numerous. First, they have completely denied some of the allegations and claimed that other incidents have been exaggerated and taken out of context. Second, they have launched character assignments on and questioned the motives of the people who have made these allegations. Cohen declares that such students have “failed miserably” on the spiritual path and need to justify why they abandoned that which gave their life higher meaning.⁵²⁷ Third, Cohen has delivered an impassionate defense of the guru principal as a force of love and evolution whose primary purpose is to destroy the ego. Complaints against him, Cohen claims, are the voices of wounded egos and signal a profound lack of understanding of the traditional guru-disciple relationship. According to him, the guru scandals have made people cynical about the possibility of an authentic teacher, and this is further accentuated in a postmodern culture that is deeply suspicious of hierarchy. In a related vein, his supporters have utilized the crazy wisdom teacher hermeneutic to legitimate Cohen’s controversial teaching strategies.⁵²⁸ Populating traditional Asian religions such as Tibetan Buddhism, crazy wisdom teachers are enlightened gurus who use shocking methods, such as hitting their students across the face to awaken them. One

⁵²⁶ Ken Wilber’s foreword to Andrew Cohen, *Living Enlightenment* (Lennox, MA: Moksha Press, 2002) xvi.

⁵²⁷ Cohen, “A Declaration Of Integrity.”

⁵²⁸ For a thoughtful account of the crazy wisdom tradition see Michael Stoeber “Amoral Trickster or Mystic-Saint? Spiritual Teachers and the Transmoral Narrative” in *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, 381-405.

of Cohen's most vocal and influential supporters, Ken Wilber, has celebrated Cohen as a true modern day crazy wisdom teacher or "rude boy" and compared his tactics to the original Zen masters teachers.⁵²⁹

While some of Cohen's supporters attacked individual critiques on *WHAT Enlightenment, ???!*, the first detailed public response by Cohen's community to allegations came in June 2008. Amy Edelstein, who has been a student of Cohen's since 1986 and is currently his executive assistant, responded by mail to questions fielded to Cohen by an Israeli journalist, Yonatan Levy, who was researching for an article about the controversy surrounding Cohen. After receiving a second letter from *EnlightenNext*, threatening a lawsuit if his article was published, Levy abandoned the project but posted Edelstein's letter and four responses by the students who had made the original allegations on *WHAT Enlightenment, ???!*⁵³⁰ In her letter, Edelstein claims that the blog is a campaign by a "few disaffected students" to discredit Cohen and counters allegations by either completely denying them, comparing them to parallel trainings in major religious traditions, or legitimating them as pedagogical innovations that have benefitted many students. In response to the question of whether the blog has had any impact on Cohen's teaching methods, she states that while Cohen has received valuable feedback from students, accounts on *WHAT Enlightenment, ???!* are entirely negative and have not been helpful in any respect.

After ignoring repeated calls to join the conversation on *WHAT Enlightenment, ???!* on October 18, 2006, Cohen published an open letter "to his friends and foes" titled *A*

⁵²⁹ Ken Wilber's foreword to Andrew Cohen, *Living Enlightenment*, xiii-xviii.

⁵³⁰ See William Yenner, "The Truth Will Set You Free" and Yonatan Levy, "Searching for the Truth About Andrew Cohen: A Journalist's Odyssey" at *WHAT Enlightenment, ???!*, accessed May 9, 2010, <http://whatenlightenment.blogspot.com/search?q=levy>.

Declaration of Integrity.⁵³¹ Here Cohen defends himself as a spiritual pioneer and moral exemplar who is the innocent victim of “the shadow sangha,” a small but vocal number of malicious students who are on a campaign to destroy him. He attributes the attacks to both individual failings and to a prevailing cultural climate that unconditionally privileges the individual and is adverse to hierarchy:

But, of course, from the very beginning, the radical and revolutionary nature of my vision has been perceived as a threat to the status quo of our postmodern egalitarian, pluralistic culture where the passing whims and desires of the individual, enlightened or not, are always held more sacred than any higher context, call or purpose.⁵³²

In terms of individual students, Cohen interprets their complaints as the defense mechanisms of the wounded ego, “Ironically, it is the ultimate humiliation for the ego to come face to face with its own unwillingness to transcend itself. It is this simple but tragic predicament that has been at the core of some of my former students’ unabated resentment and narcissistic rage.”⁵³³ Reaffirming his commitment to overcoming the ego as the “perennial obstacle to enlightenment” he explains that, at a tremendous cost to himself, he has shown great love and perseverance in helping people to overcome the “ferocious resistance” of the ego:

⁵³¹ Andrew Cohen, “A Declaration Of Integrity.”

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ Ibid.

But in fact, if you were made aware of the enormous amount of time, care, attention, and support that had been given to the individual; understood the complex psychological/spiritual dynamics at work; saw it in the context of a collective endeavor to create a higher ideal for the noblest of reasons; and didn't conveniently forget that it was a freely chosen path; what may have appeared unreasonable starts to look very different.⁵³⁴

Public defenses by Cohen and his supporters, in other words, have been unequivocally affirmative of Cohen and have attempted to thoroughly discredit all of the critiques. In my interviews with former supportive or current students, they repeated many of the same themes. They insisted that critiques were generated by a very small number of disgruntled students and that the overwhelming majority of former students were much more positive and supportive of Cohen. Critical students, they believed, had betrayed not only the entire community but also themselves in denying the profound experiences they had had with Cohen. One thing that was notable was that supporters did not reference or reflect on those critiques that are more measured, and thus more complex, but focused solely on reports that are unremittingly negative. Similarly, although Cohen claims that reports have reduced him to a "two-dimensional caricature of a cultural stereotype: the charismatic and corrupt guru," many accounts actually depict a more multi-dimensional picture.⁵³⁵ As Bridle reflects, for example:

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

I find Andrew Cohen one of the great mysteries of the dharma. He had a profound enlightenment experience and has a passionate commitment to the dharma; these have enabled him to inspire many people to plunge wholeheartedly into the spiritual path. That is no small thing. At the same time, I believe he has a number of blind spots that make him in many ways an ineffective, immature spiritual teacher.⁵³⁶

Another thing that struck me from my interviews was that supporters, including former students, interpreted events through the lens of Cohen's teaching paradigm and spoke in the language of his impersonal discourse. This points to one of the fundamental clashes between supporters and critics of Cohen: supporter speaks from what can be viewed as an insider perspective in which dissent is always synonymous with ego resistance, whereas critics have stepped outside of the insider paradigm and distinguish between healthy autonomy and ego resistance, individuality and individualism. In this way, the conflicting interpretations can be attributed to a clash between two opposing meta-narratives what we might label as a personal or humanistic enlightenment ethic and an impersonal enlightenment ethic.

I will return to these competing narratives in my conclusion, but for now, rather than attempt to privilege one narrative over the other, or discredit the testimony of either the supporters or critics of Cohen, I want to take the enlightenment ethic as a legitimate category and evaluate it from within its own terms. In the enlightenment ethic what appear to be conventionally disturbing and unethical incidents are understandable and

⁵³⁶ Susan Bridle's response to Yonatan Levy's questions re: Andrew Cohen & EnlightenNext at Yonatan Levy, at *WHAT Enlightenment??!*, accessed May 9, 2010, <http://whatenlightenment.blogspot.com/search?q=levy>.

legitimate when placed along the wider arc of an enlightenment telos. In order for the ethical enlightenment narrative to hold, however, it must, to a significant event at least, produce the promised results. That is, controversial teaching methods are justified because of their ability to liberate and awaken the students. This, after all, is ultimately what distinguishes pathological cult leaders such as Jim Jones from a lineage of crazy wisdom teachers in a major religious tradition such as Tibetan Buddhism.⁵³⁷

For some current and former students who were with Cohen through this controversial period, the methods do indeed appear to have been effective and transformative. *Guru Talk*, a website recently established by a former student to support Cohen, contains a number of positive testimonies that declare that they benefitted from and are grateful for their time with Cohen including his controversial teaching methods.⁵³⁸ Although jumping ahead in the narrative, according to its founder Pete Bampton, the severe pressure Cohen inflicted on his students only makes sense in light of a defining event in the community, the emergence of what is called intersubjective enlightenment. In an interview with Bampton, he claimed that all the critiques were by students who had left before this occurrence.⁵³⁹ I will return to this point in more detail, but for now it suffices to note that supporters of Cohen legitimate his controversial methods through a consequential ethic in which, simply put, the end justify the means.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁷ Cohen himself notes that there have been many “dangerous megalomaniacs” that have wreaked havoc in the name of a “utopian idealism.” See Cohen, “A Declaration of Integrity.”

⁵³⁸ *Guru Talk: American Guru Andrew Cohen: Former Students Speak Out*, accessed May 9 2010, <http://www.guru-talk.com/>.

⁵³⁹ Phone Interview took place on December 7, 2010 and was three hours long.

⁵⁴⁰ This, of course, does not mean that supporters are correct; critics have fielded a number of plausible explanations as to why they claim Cohen’s methods are transformative. These include the fact that such students were highly complicit in the abuse—Pete Bampton, for example, was the cartoonist, while Amy Edelstein delivered Cohen’s “messages”—and that they have not been able to accept the painful truth that they have dedicated their lives to someone who is not as enlightened as they thought.

For many of Cohen's students, however, this was clearly not the case. The sheer number of complaints and the fact that many are from students who had worked very closely with Cohen for long periods of time raises serious questions about the overall ethics and efficacy of these methods. Interesting to note here, is that while public responses of Cohen have been unambiguously supportive, two supporters of Cohen that I interviewed conceded that while they were completely convinced of the purity of Cohen's intentions, he had made some poor teaching decisions and interpersonal mistakes. Still, when I asked one of these interviewees whether the failure of a teaching method was the fault of the teacher or the student, he replied that in the main it was the responsibility of the student.

Whatever side one ultimately falls upon, however, the issues resulting from a clash of enlightenment and humanistic ethics and the guru-disciple dynamics are real ones and do deserve a more considerate and nuanced response than have been afforded to them by Cohen and his supporters. In my opinion this is where Cohen and his supporters have clearly fallen short. In contrast to many of the former students, who have sincerely attempted to hold and make sense of many contradictory and conflicting elements of life in the community, Cohen has failed to acknowledge any ambiguity or take any responsibility for the situation. His harsh dismissal and vilification of students, some of whom dedicated over a decade of their life to his work, is questionable. It is also somewhat ironic that Cohen draws on the crazy wisdom narrative to legitimate his approach as undergirding this is the doctrine of skilful means, which, in brief, argues that because individual temperaments differ, an enlightened master must use skill and

flexibility in teaching individual students.⁵⁴¹ Such characteristics, however, have been notably absent in Cohen's approach as demonstrated in his continued public affirmation that the battle against the ego is black and white and so no concessions must be made to individual needs.⁵⁴²

Despite his completely unapologetic public stance, however, Cohen, has affected numerous changes that suggest that critiques have had an impact even, if only in terms of self-marketing. For example, Cohen is now presenting himself as spiritual mentor as well as guru and stresses his desire for spiritual partners rather than followers. Similarly, he has recently declared that although individual gurus are essential at this point in time, in the future the guru principle will function, not through an individual teacher, but through a collective body of realized individuals.⁵⁴³ This refashioning of the guru has occurred within a wider transformation and in some ways a quite remarkable reinvention of Cohen's community, with the development of his third and current teaching of "evolutionary enlightenment," to which I will now turn.

From Being to Becoming: Evolutionary Enlightenment and the Integral Alliance

Cohen states that the ongoing question his teaching has revolved around is "what is the relationship between the unchanging, unmanifest, primordial Self and the ever-changing manifest world of time and space?"⁵⁴⁴ Whereas impersonal enlightenment

⁵⁴¹ For a description of skilful means see Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, 197-204.

⁵⁴² "Why Are You So Controversial? Part six of a multimedia interview with Andrew Cohen," *AndrewCohen.org*, accessed May 9, 2010, <https://www.andrewcohen.org/interview/controversial.asp>.

⁵⁴³ "Do We Still Need Gurus? part five of a multimedia interview with Andrew Cohen," *AndrewCohen.org*, accessed May 9 2010. <https://www.andrewcohen.org/interview/guru.asp>.

⁵⁴⁴ Cohen *Living Enlightenment: Evolution Beyond the Ego*, 16.

explored this question through an emphasis on the ethical expression of enlightenment, in his third and current manifestation as a “pioneer of evolutionary enlightenment,” Cohen has shifted his focus to the relationship between enlightenment and evolution.

Evolutionary enlightenment places traditional Asian models of spiritual liberation in the context of western evolutionary theory and reinterprets enlightenment as an evolutionary imperative. In doing so, it reconfigures the goal of self-realization from the transcendence to the transformation of the world and sets as its goal as not just the enlightenment of the individual but also the creation of an enlightened culture.⁵⁴⁵

In this section, I will trace Cohen’s thinking about evolution and awakening and analyze the major components of evolutionary enlightenment, namely, the shift from Being to Becoming, the authentic self, intersubjective emergence, and enlightened culture. I also discuss the evolutionary refashioning of Cohen’s teaching methods, mediums and community. Next, I will examine the dual strategies by which Cohen legitimates evolutionary enlightenment. First, I will consider the experiential narrative in which Cohen locates his new teaching in a spontaneous and gradual unfolding in his own spiritual awakening and the awakening of his students. Second, I will detail the historical narrative in which Cohen situates his teaching within a distinct lineage of thinkers who have promoted an evolutionary spirituality. Here, I will pay particular attention to Sri Aurobindo who is acknowledged as the grand forefather of evolutionary enlightenment, and to Cohen’s extremely influential alliance with integral theorist Ken Wilber.

⁵⁴⁵ The major source of information on evolutionary enlightenment comes from Cohen’s website at <http://www.andrewcohen.org/> and from *EnlightenNext*, a relaunched version of *WIE*?⁵⁴⁵ See its website at <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/>. Early articulations are also found in his books, particularly, *Embracing Heaven and Earth* (2000) and *Living Enlightenment: A Call for Evolution Beyond the Ego* (2002), although in both of these he is still using the term impersonal enlightenment.

Early Articulations of Evolutionary Enlightenment

Cohen vaguely refers to evolution in a number of his early books. In *Enlightenment is a Secret*, he declares that the reason for all spiritual experience and the transcendence of the individual is an evolutionary leap for the human race as a whole.⁵⁴⁶ Similarly, in *An Unconditional Relationship To Life*, he talks of an evolutionary impulse that manifests in the individual as a yearning for transcendence for the sake of the human race.⁵⁴⁷ He reiterates that spiritual awakening is not a personal matter but an evolutionary one in *Freedom Has No History*.⁵⁴⁸ In these texts, however, evolution appears to be conflated with a spiritual realization of the inherent perfection of the universe and an ethical relationship to life.⁵⁴⁹

Cohen only begins to discriminate between evolution and realization in his last two books. In *Embracing Heaven and Earth*, he states that there are two facets to enlightenment: (1) transcendence, which he defines as the realization of the “inherent perfection of the absolute or nondual nature of all things” and (2) an evolutionary imperative, or the emergence of a powerful, ceaseless imperative to evolve.⁵⁵⁰ Both the inherent perfection of consciousness and the energy of evolution must be embraced, Cohen stresses, for the full potential of spiritual awakening to be achieved. He extends this dual model in *Living Enlightenment: Evolution Beyond the Ego*, by explaining how the two fundamental components of enlightenment—unmanifest consciousness and evolutionary energy—are related:

⁵⁴⁶ Cohen, *Enlightenment is a Secret*, 273.

⁵⁴⁷ Cohen, *An Unconditional Relationship To Life*, 25.

⁵⁴⁸ Cohen, *Freedom Has No History*, 8.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁵⁰ Cohen, *Embracing Heaven and Earth*, 97-98.

That ground is where there is no time, where the unmanifest, unborn Self abides in the consciousness of absolute zero, or no thing whatsoever. In the awakened state, that primordial ground emerges in consciousness as the direct experience of everything being perfect just as it is. With the submission of ego and the surrender of the personal will, the individual becomes aware of the presence of a powerful and unyielding energy. That energy is the movement of the life-force in a self-propelled state of conscious evolution or becoming. From absolutely Nothing, suddenly something emerged, and that Something has remained ever since in a constant state of becoming. The source and ground of everything that has become, and that is even now in a constant state of becoming, is that place where there is no time and where nothing ever happened. Nothing and Something cannot be separated because they are simply two sides of the same one coin. That's the meaning of nonduality and that is what enlightenment is.⁵⁵¹

Evolutionary Enlightenment: From Being to Becoming, Transcending to Transforming.

A more systematic and detailed presentation of what is now presented as evolutionary enlightenment is found on Cohen's official website.⁵⁵² Perpetuating the image of Cohen as a revolutionary and radical teacher, he is introduced here as a "pioneer" of evolutionary enlightenment and "a cultural visionary thinker who is widely

⁵⁵¹ Cohen, *Living Enlightenment: Evolution Beyond the Ego*, 117-118.

⁵⁵² Evolutionary enlightenment was initially referred to as impersonal evolutionary enlightenment. Cohen gives the date he first explicitly taught evolutionary enlightenment as 2001. See "Revolution Retreat," at <http://www.andrewcohen.org/blog/index.php?/blog/post/revolution-retreat/>.

recognized for his original contribution to the emerging field of evolutionary spirituality.”⁵⁵³ At the base of evolutionary enlightenment is a twofold critique of the limitations of both postmodern Western secular culture and of premodern Eastern spiritual traditions.⁵⁵⁴ While the West has attained material, scientific and technological sophistication, Cohen believes, the majority of its citizens are adrift without any moral compass or existential purpose. In order to find solutions to the many global crises that are presently confronting the human race, however, we must move beyond our self-centered individualism and postmodern narcissism.⁵⁵⁵

While many have turned to Eastern religions in search of a solution, Cohen, cautions against such a response. To begin with, he claims that contemporary westerners are too sophisticated to believe in the myths of premodern Eastern traditions. Moreover, in Eastern traditions there is an overemphasis on transcendence. In most traditional Eastern teachings of enlightenment the goal is individual liberation from the world. A sole focus on transcendence, however, Cohen laments, is too often used by Westerners to avoid the complexities of an embodied human life and renders impossible an engaged response to human crises. Another limitation of premodern Eastern enlightenment traditions is that they did not have access to contemporary Western scientific knowledge such as evolutionary and developmental theory.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵³ See “Biography of Andrew Cohen,” accessed April 23, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/andrew/biography.asp?ifr=hp>.

⁵⁵⁴ Cohen also heavily critiques what he sees as the naïve idealism of contemporary new age spirituality in favor of a transrational spirituality. See Andrew Cohen “Evolutionary Enlightenment: Daring to Bear Witness,” in *EnlightenNext* Issue 45, (2000).

⁵⁵⁵ See “What is your Vision?,” accessed April 23 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/interview/default.asp>.

⁵⁵⁶ See “What is Evolutionary Enlightenment? An interview with Andrew Cohen,” accessed April 23 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/interview/evolutionary-enlightenment.asp>.

The solution, Cohen declares, is to redefine enlightenment and develop a new “post-metaphysical” or “post-traditional” spirituality that unites the contemplative wisdom of the East with the scientific achievements of the West and is relevant to the twenty-first century. This is how he frames his current teaching of evolutionary enlightenment, which, as the name indicates, has two components: enlightenment refers to the traditional Asian teaching of nondual realization and evolution signifies the deep time developmental perspective revealed by evolutionary theory

Putting these two perspectives into dialogue, Cohen posits both a spiritual hermeneutic of evolution and examines the evolutionary significance of enlightenment. In terms of a spiritual reading of evolution, as I will discuss in some detail, he follows a lineage of thinkers who have interpreted evolution as the progressive unfolding of Spirit and identified human self-awareness as instrumental to the fulfillment of this process. Cohen’s specific take on this spiritual evolutionary narrative is that the evolving universe is created from the unmanifest or “empty ground of being,” which is realized in enlightenment. From unmanifest Being, emerged an evolutionary impulse or creative principle, which initiated the leap from being to becoming, formlessness to form, nothing to something, or the One to the many. Cohen explains the creation process through “a theological fantasy” in which God, abiding as perfectly blissful and peaceful unmanifest consciousness, chose to manifest in and through form.⁵⁵⁷ God’s ultimate purpose, what Cohen calls the “Universe Project,” is the awakening of all matter. For this “seemingly

⁵⁵⁷ As I will discuss later, one new notable characteristic of evolutionary enlightenment is the adoption of Western theological and philosophical language.

impossible task,” God is dependent upon the conscious evolution of the awakened human being.⁵⁵⁸

This takes us to the evolutionary significance of enlightenment. According to Cohen, traditional understandings of enlightenment must be updated in wake of the evolutionary knowledge that has been discovered in the last 150 years. Evolution theory, he argues, has proven—contra to the beliefs of Indian enlightenment traditions—that time is not cyclic but linear and developing. In light of this, Cohen reinterprets the purpose of enlightenment. Ego transcendence must now be pursued not to escape the cycle of becoming, as in traditional Eastern paths, but, rather, to enable one to fully participate in the evolutionary process.⁵⁵⁹

To explain how the transcendence of the individual ego furthers the evolutionary process, Cohen turns the work of cosmologist Brian Swimme. Swimme proposes that human choice has superseded the process of natural selection as the primary force directing the future of the species. Extending Swimme, Cohen argues that through the awakened human being, the evolutionary process becomes self-aware and consciously begins to take control of its continued developmental unfolding.⁵⁶⁰ The responsibility for such a task of spiritual evolution, Cohen states, is with those Westerners at the “leading edge” of cultural development who are highly individuated and have unprecedented access to education and material resources. The problem is that these individuals suffer

⁵⁵⁸ See “When Nothing Becomes Something and Being and Becoming: The Philosophy and Vision of Evolutionary Enlightenment,” *Andrew Cohen.org*.

⁵⁵⁹ See “What is Evolutionary Enlightenment? An interview with Andrew Cohen,” accessed April 23, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/interview/evolutionary-enlightenment.asp>.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

from the “postmodern disease” of narcissism, which Cohen declares is a “cultural epidemic” and a major “evolutionary obstacle.”⁵⁶¹

Through the transcendence of the narcissistic ego, however, such individuals will be able to intentionally place the “miraculous power of human choice” in service of evolution and “literally create the future.”⁵⁶² This makes spiritual realization a moral imperative: one must awaken not for oneself but for the sake of evolution.

Enlightenment must not only be expressed in perfect ethical behavior but becomes itself an ethical imperative to further the development of the Kosmos.⁵⁶³

Cohen frames this evolutionary revisioning of enlightenment as a “shift from Being to Becoming or from Transcending to Transforming.” Whereas in premodern Eastern traditions, the emphasis is on transcendence and the unmanifest ground of Being, in evolutionary enlightenment the goal is not only the realization of Being but to become an agent of the evolutionary impulse and, in doing so, to transform the world. Traditional enlightenment, in other words, is only the beginning of the spiritual path. According to Cohen, the whole purpose of enlightenment in the current cultural-historic moment is to enable one to fully participate in the evolution of the world from a position of enlightened consciousness or higher development.

⁵⁶¹ It should be noted here that Cohen’s iteration of postmodernism is entirely dependent on Ken Wilber and goes against the grain of the conventional understanding of postmodernism that characterizes it as bringing the decentering or death of the subject rather than an heightened individualism. Similarly, more common readings of the limitations of postmodernism cite relativism, nihilism and superficiality rather than narcissism.

⁵⁶² Ibid and see also “A Revolution in Consciousness and Culture,” accessed April 18, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/andrew/revolution-consciousness-culture.asp>. Also “The Luckiest People Who Have Ever Been Born” accessed April 23, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/blog/index.php?blog/post/the-luckiest-people-who-have-ever-been-born/>.

⁵⁶³ Following Ken Wilber, Cohen uses the Greek spelling of kosmos rather than cosmos in order to “restore the spiritual depth and transcendent mysticism” to the universe. See Tom Houston “A Kosmic Concept,” *EnlightenNext*, accessed April 23, 2010, <http://magazine.enlightennext.org/tag/kosmic-concepts/>.

The Authentic Self as Evolutionary Impulse

Cohen's new teaching revisions enlightenment as a unique form of consciousness that furthers the evolution process. He does this primarily by expanding his model of subjectivity to include what he calls the authentic self to the pre-existing dichotomy of the absolute self and the ego. The absolute self is aligned with the classical Advaita Vedanta concept of the Brahman and atman. It is the unborn, unmanifest Self, the ground of being, beyond time and form, which is characterized by ultimate peace, bliss and fullness.⁵⁶⁴ The limitation of the absolute self, however, is that it is utterly transcendent and separate from the world.⁵⁶⁵

Abiding between and linking the absolute self and the world, however, is the authentic self. Drawing from western theology, philosophy and science, Cohen uses a number of terms to describe the authentic self. The authentic self is the First Cause, or Eros, the creative principle. Characterized by an ecstatic urgency and a fearless passion, it is the evolutionary impulse, the energy and intelligence that created the universe and, which manifests on a number of different levels spanning from the procreative instinct at the lowest level to the evolution of consciousness at the highest level. In contrast to the absolute self, which is completely uninvolved with the manifest world, the authentic self is fully engaged with the world of form. While the absolute self, as pure Being, exists beyond time, the authentic self, as the principle of becoming, is solely future-directed.

⁵⁶⁴ The absolute self is often capitalized to differentiate it from the false ego-self. The characteristics Cohen uses to describe it rough map onto the classic Advaita Vedanta description of the nature of Brahman as st-chit-ananda or being-consciousness-bliss.

⁵⁶⁵ See "The Self Absolute," accessed April 23 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/teachings/model-viewer.asp>. This is the dimension of the self that is accessed in meditation. Also, "Meditation and the Ground of Being," accessed April 23, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/meditation/>.

Yet, while it is life embracing and “cares passionately” about evolution, the authentic self is an impersonal and universal function of consciousness that exists in a dimension beyond form and is not affected by its vicissitudes.⁵⁶⁶

The realization of the authentic self allows one, then, to actively engage the evolutionary process and to participate in the transformation of the world from a higher developmental perspective. While vague on the specific mechanics, Cohen generalizes that the authentic self is triggered when one realizes the absolute self. As he puts it, “realization of Being catalyzes the evolutionary process of becoming.” The authentic self, in effect then, enables Cohen to reconcile a traditional transcendent understanding of enlightenment with a world-embracing evolutionary ethos while remaining faithful to his impersonal perspective.

The major barrier to enlightenment and the realization of the authentic self is the ego, which characterized by a deep inertia and an attachment to the past, is now redefined as “the anti-evolutionary force.” Cohen has also begun to explicitly identify the ego with cultural conditioning and talks of both the individual and collective ego. He relates the traditional concept of the ego to the narcissism of postmodernity, arguing that the ego is reinforced in the Western postmodern climate that privileges the self as the center of experience and authority.⁵⁶⁷ Such a reading, it should be noted, goes against the decentering of subjectivity characteristic of postmodernism that is captured in the famous “death of the subject” concept.

The New Being: Collective Enlightenment or Intersubjective Emergence.

⁵⁶⁶ See “The Authentic Self & The Ego: Two Different Parts of the Self”, accessed April 23, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/teachings/authentic-self-ego.asp>.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

The way to transcend egoism, activate the authentic self, and become a “pure vessel” for the evolutionary process is by following the five tenets of impersonal enlightenment, which are, predictably, also given an evolutionary gloss. Cohen declares that the five tenets are both the natural expression of the authentic self and the necessary conditions for its manifestation.⁵⁶⁸ Moreover, he claims that when individuals who are embodying the five tenets come together, a higher intersubjective consciousness begins to spontaneously manifest. This higher consciousness, what he refers to alternatively as collective or intersubjective enlightenment, is the goal of evolutionary enlightenment. Cohen states that his own experience has convinced him that the enlightenment of the future is not going to be an individual event, as it has been in the Eastern traditions, but will be rather a collective or intersubjective emergence. This, he stresses, is the core of what he is trying to accomplish, namely, “the birth of a new level of consciousness in which the enlightened mind emerges through a collective.”⁵⁶⁹ Moreover, Cohen claims this intersubjective enlightenment has huge evolutionary significance for the entire human race, “it is literally the birth of a new form of subjectivity, one that transcends and includes individuality and, will enable the creation of a new world.”⁵⁷⁰

This emerging intersubjective consciousness is characterized by what are identified as “the six principles” and advanced as a “blueprint for a new culture beyond ego.” Cohen describes the six principles as “cosmic laws that are self-revealing at the

⁵⁶⁸ “The Path: The Five Tenets,” accessed April 21, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/teachings/path.asp>.

⁵⁶⁹ See “Why Have You formed a Spiritual Community,” accessed April 23, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/interview/spiritual-community.asp>.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

cutting edge of our evolutionary potential.”⁵⁷¹ They are organized into three pairs: purity of motive and integrity in action; autonomy and communion; and evolutionary tension and hierarchy.⁵⁷² The latter two pairs are unique to evolutionary enlightenment and so require attention. Autonomy is defined as a “radical independence and authenticity” while communion is a relational experience of nonduality or “intimacy beyond individualism.” Cohen claims that the capacity to simultaneously experience autonomy and communion is a recently emerging potential in consciousness and a new expression of nonduality.⁵⁷³

Evolutionary tension refers to an inherent drive that compels one to rise to their highest development potential in order to further the evolutionary unfoldment. It is surrender to the demand of the authentic self to move towards higher and more complex forms of harmony and integration. Natural hierarchy is an “egoless structure” of human relationships that reflects actual differences between individuals' levels of development, experience, knowledge and authority. It is the recognition that while the ultimate ground of relationships is nonduality, the “reality of difference, which is the very fabric of any developmental perspective, must be honored.”⁵⁷⁴

Cohen’s goal is to sustain the higher consciousness that emerges through intersubjective enlightenment so that it can act as a future blueprint for the development of the species. This stabilization can be achieved through the “nothing-less-than-heroic” efforts and trailblazing endeavors of highly developed individuals, such as himself and

⁵⁷¹ Both quotes are from “The Goal: The Six Principles,” accessed April 21, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/teachings/goal.asp>.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

⁵⁷³ “Autonomy and Communion,” accessed April 21, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/teachings/autonomy-communion.asp>.

⁵⁷⁴ “Evolutionary Tension & Natural Hierarchy,” accessed April 21, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/teachings/tension-hierarchy.asp>.

his students, and through the creation of an enlightened cultural context that supports evolutionary unfoldment. As I will now show, the latter project has become an increasing priority for Cohen.

Creating a Revolution in Consciousness and Culture: Transformations in Teaching Methods and Organizational Context

Concurrent with Cohen's development of a new teaching is a restructuring of Cohen's teaching context and community, both of which have had evolutionary makeovers. *WIE?* has been relaunched and revamped as *EnlightenNext*; his Impersonal Enlightenment Fellowship has been renamed as *EnlightenNext*; and his students are now known as evolutionaries.⁵⁷⁵ Such future-oriented remodeling strongly characterizes the evolutionary discourse, which is laden with terms such as innovation, radicalism, revolutionary, pioneering, leading and cutting edge.⁵⁷⁶

In a similar vein, Cohen has also fully engaged innovative multimedia methods of teaching.⁵⁷⁷ As his redesigned sophisticated interactive website announces, *EnlightenNext* is dedicated to "pioneering the most powerful ways to use today's technology in the service of spiritual development."⁵⁷⁸ This includes hosting regular podcasts and virtual discussions, weekly webcasts and telephone conference calls, and monthly virtual workshops and seminars. It has even launched its own TV channel, *EnlightenNext TV*,

⁵⁷⁵ For details of organizational remodeling see "About EnlightenNext," accessed April 17, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/about/>.

⁵⁷⁶ In reflection on the adoption of new terms, one editor writes, "Charting a new future demands a new vocabulary" Tom Houston "A Kosmic Concept" *EnlightenNext*, accessed April 23, 2010, <http://magazine.enlightennext.org/tag/kosmic-concepts/>.

⁵⁷⁷ In 1999, the community launched a sophisticated website see "Magazine and Media" <http://www.andrewcohen.org/magazine/>

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

on u-tube.⁵⁷⁹ In February 2010, Cohen offered his first virtual weekend retreat and organized a virtual conference with many integral figures in May 2010.⁵⁸⁰

In addition to adopting new teaching mediums, Cohen has diversified his teaching format. He now offers four types of events: lectures, seminars, day and intensive retreats.⁵⁸¹ Another notable development is the appearance of an educational and training program in which sixty qualified EnlightenNext instructors offer a variety of live and virtual events.⁵⁸² This collective model of teaching marks a notable shift from the traditional guru-student model that previously characterized Cohen's community.⁵⁸³

Through these new teaching methods, Cohen attempts to reach a much larger and diverse audience. Indeed, his aim is to "create a global movement" and a "worldwide learning community."⁵⁸⁴ This global outreach initiative is linked to Cohen's new focus on the relationship between consciousness and culture. Declaring that the two are inextricably linked, he wants to pioneer forms of culture that support the newly emerging level of human development anticipated in intersubjective enlightenment.⁵⁸⁵ His main objective is to create a new cultural context, what he calls an "enlightened culture," that

⁵⁷⁹ See EnlightenNext TV at <http://www.youtube.com/user/EnlightenNext?ecp=ny-1009>

⁵⁸⁰ I participated in both of these events. The virtual retreat was attended by 450 participants from twenty-five countries. One thing that struck me about fellow participants was that there were many people who appeared new to the teachings. The virtual conference was attended by 13,000 people, which shows that the integral connection is giving Cohen exposure to a much larger audience.

⁵⁸¹ <http://www.andrewcohen.org/events/>.

⁵⁸² See "Evolutionary Enlightenment courses," at *EnlightenNext*, accessed April 17, 2010, <http://www.eecourse.org/index.php?q=en/index>.

⁵⁸³ According to his personal assistant Amy Edelstein, there has been a big shift in the community since the collective awakening. With the maturity this awakening has brought, there is a move towards being a partner with Cohen in the evolutionary endeavor. Information comes from a phone interview with Amy Edelstein on April 25 2009. Edelstein met Cohen in India before his awakening with Poonja and later became one of his first students. Cohen also celebrates the emergence of his evolutionary partners rather than followers in a blog posted June 2006 at "Creating the Future, Together," <http://www.andrewcohen.org/blog/index.php?blog/post/creating-the-future/>.

⁵⁸⁴ See "About EnlightenNext," accessed April 17 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/about/>.

⁵⁸⁵ See "A Revolution in Consciousness and Culture," accessed April 18, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/andrew/revolution-consciousness-culture.asp>.

will stabilize these higher levels of consciousness. To this end, EnlightenNext has sponsored live and media forums such as the Voices from the Edge speaker series, which hosts debates between leading spiritual and culture figures, and developed programs such as authentic leadership program for the business world and enlightened cultural activism.⁵⁸⁶ Particularly significant, here, is Cohen's alliance with the Integral world of thinkers such as Ken Wilber, Duane Elgin and Don Beck, which has been at the forefront of many of EnlightenNext theoretical and organizational innovations.⁵⁸⁷

To this new global audience, Cohen presents himself as a spiritual mentor rather than guru. Nonetheless, he still remains in a more traditional guru role to a smaller group of committed formal students some of whom live with him at Foxhollow. Cohen claims that the collective emergence of a higher level of consciousness is unlikely to occur outside of a very focused environment and, as such, declares that he is committed to sustaining "enlightened living" communities and collective spiritual practices. Tracking the number of people involved with evolutionary enlightenment is difficult because participation occurs on many different levels. In terms of the core inner group of students, many of whom live with Cohen in Foxhollow, according to his executive assistant, the number has never risen above one hundred and fifty.⁵⁸⁸ However, when we consider that the readership of *EnlightenNext* is given at 75,000, it shows that the number

⁵⁸⁶ For details of enlightened business see "What is Authentic Leadership," accessed April 18, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/andrew/authentic-leadership.asp>.

⁵⁸⁷ I will discuss this integral alliance in some detail when I consider the legitimating strategies Cohen employs for evolutionary enlightenment.

⁵⁸⁸ When I asked Cohen's personal assistant about participation she gave the following general estimates: the inner body of senior students 61; lay international students around 100; formal practitioners of evolutionary enlightenment (including on-line events, research seminars, and retreats 350; wider group of people involved at 10, 000 and EnlightenNext subscribers at 60,000. Information comes from a phone interview with Amy Edelstein on April 25, 2009.

of people exposed to, interested in, and perhaps identifying with evolutionary enlightenment ideas is much larger.⁵⁸⁹

Legitimizing Narratives: Experiential and Historic Strategies

In this section, I want to consider the different ways that Cohen has attempted to legitimate evolutionary enlightenment. I have delineated two main strategies: (1) an experiential narrative that validates the teaching as experientially based; and (2) an historic narrative that locates it in a historical lineage of thinkers who have proposed a spiritual dimension to evolution. These dual narratives function to give historical credence and philosophical weight to evolutionary enlightenment while also maintaining its uniqueness and perpetuating Cohen's status as spiritual pioneer.

1. Experiential Strategy: Evolutionary Enlightenment Day

According to Cohen, the primary source for evolutionary enlightenment is experientially; he claims that the teaching spontaneously unfolded in his own awakening and, as a result of his concerted efforts, later began to emerge in his students. In retrospect, Cohen dates glimpses of evolutionary enlightenment as early as his first satsangs in Rishikesh. After a few years, the revelation began to appear more fully. While teaching in India, "an unbridled passion poured out of me spontaneously, calling for this miracle, this mystery beyond time, to become manifest in this very world as ourselves."⁵⁹⁰ This new teaching, Cohen explains, emphasized not only the realization of Being but also "the need to become a radically and profoundly transformed human being

⁵⁹⁰ "The Evolution of Enlightenment," *The Guru and the Pandit What is Enlightenment?* Spring-Summer 2002 accessed April 5, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j21/gurupandit.asp?page=1>.

who is going to be able to manifest our higher evolutionary potential in the world.”⁵⁹¹

Such a realization was a surprise to him and he had “never really come across anything like it before.”⁵⁹²

A turning point for Cohen’s community came on July 30th, 2001, a date they now celebrate as “the birth of Evolutionary Enlightenment.” A small group of ten male students who had been undertaking an intensive retreat experienced what they understand as a collective enlightenment. In my interview with one of these students, he said that the group had been practicing intensely and had “all been in hell” prior to the experience, which he described as “an explosion, a ring of fire whirled around the room and we saw that everyone was enlightened.” It was “an explosion of consciousness and a simultaneous experience of autonomy and communion. A higher intelligence revealed itself through all of us.” The participant describes it, in other words, in the language of evolutionary enlightenment and it is difficult to ascertain if this is a retrospective description or not. Similar, in a letter to Cohen, one student describes his experience:

Last night we literally reached a critical mass and exploded. As more and more voices expressed the same doubtless conviction, the transformative power leapt off the scale of anything we have experienced before. The change in just 24 hours was truly phenomenal as we plunged deeper and deeper into ecstatic intimacy. We were a tornado absolutely out of control, a raging forest fire burning and consuming all ignorance and separation in our way.⁵⁹³

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

⁵⁹³ See Jessica Roemischer, “The Birth of Impersonal Evolutionary Enlightenment—July 30 2001,” accessed April 25 2010,

Cohen was not with the students when this occurred but recognized it as the fulfillment of what he had been intuiting since early in his teaching career. According to Cohen, if a group of individuals are able to live at the highest levels of moral integrity, honesty, and authenticity, in other words, if they are able to perfectly follow his teaching, a new structure of consciousness is created collectively between them. This, he claims, has been occurring in his own community:

We come together in different-sized groups, for which we've borrowed the term "holon," as each group is a whole that is a part of the larger whole. What I've just been describing has been taking place in what we've been calling a "superholon," which would be a fairly large group of people—twenty, thirty, forty, or more. In this context, a higher mind emerges, and together, individuals are able to deconstruct their own experience so that the shared state can become an object in individual and collective awareness.⁵⁹⁴

The next significant emergence of collective enlightenment occurred in early November 2005. On November 20 2005, Cohen appeared before a formally invited audience of several hundred students to declare that the efforts of his two decades of

http://www.andrewcohen.org/notes/index.php?/blog/the_birth_of_evolutionary_enlightenment/.

⁵⁹⁴ "A Living Experiment in Conscious Evolution," Andrew Cohen & Ken Wilber in *Dialogue*, *EnlightenNext* January-March 2007, accessed April 5, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j35/guru-pandit.asp>.

teaching were starting to show their intended results.⁵⁹⁵ Beginning with a series of conference calls, a shared experience of enlightenment had occurred in student gatherings and on international conference calls across his entire student body.⁵⁹⁶ Unlike previous temporary bursts, this collective enlightenment was sustained for a period of over a month. For Cohen, this stabilization signified a “ground-shift” in his community and demonstrated that his students were finally realizing what he had been pointing to with his distinction between personal and impersonal enlightenment. It revealed a “new and thrilling momentum” in their shared attempts to lay a foundation for a higher stage of development for the entire human species.⁵⁹⁷

Cohen interprets this collective enlightenment, therefore, as a fundamental turning point in his work. It effectively functions both to interpret and validate his past actions and to provide a rationale for future trajectories. In terms of the future, he declares that he is now devoted to creating a cultural context in which this higher consciousness can be stabilized. Cohen also uses the emergence of collective enlightenment to retrospectively legitimate his controversial teaching methods. He claims that it was only able to emerge as a result of his “momentous efforts” and “his relentless pressure” to push his students beyond their egoic selves.⁵⁹⁸ A number of student testimonies reiterate and reinforce this perspective:

⁵⁹⁵ For a description of this event see Tom Houston, “Declaration Day: The Emergence of Evolutionary Enlightenment,” accessed April 5, 2010,

http://www.andrewcohen.org/notes/index.php?/weblog/blog/declaration_day/.

⁵⁹⁶ For student testimonies of these conference calls see Tom Houston’s “Conferencing in Consciousness,” posted November 10 2005, accessed April 25, 2010,

http://www.andrewcohen.org/notes/index.php?/blog/conferencing_in_consciousness/.

⁵⁹⁷ See Andrew Cohen, “Victory!” posted November 29, 2005, accessed April 5, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/notes/index.php?/weblog/blog/victory/>.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Andrew has often remarked that getting people to change can be like attempting to split the atom. Indeed, he sometimes goes to extraordinary lengths, and takes tremendous risks, in order to compel his own students to live in accordance with their own highest potential. And having witnessed in myself and others the tenacious resistance to change that seems to be part of human nature, I wouldn't hesitate to say that Andrew's analogy of atomic fission is no exaggeration.⁵⁹⁹

Similarly:

Beginning in late 2000, Andrew began to make a concerted effort to bring into being what he had witnessed years earlier. He felt that if this new, impersonal enlightenment could be sustained through conscious intention among a group of his students, it would confirm his earlier intimations that an evolutionary leap in human consciousness was truly possible. After months of Andrew's ongoing attempts to get his students to fully give themselves to this endeavor and to go beyond any self-serving motive, Impersonal Evolutionary Enlightenment was born on the summer evening of July 30, 2001. On that date, which we now call Evolutionary Enlightenment Day, a higher collective consciousness emerged among a group of his students, and was sustained for a number of weeks—the first living proof of Andrew's vision and the fuel for the subsequent development of his philosophy.⁶⁰⁰

In accounts such as these, evolutionary enlightenment is presented as the fulfillment of Cohen's earlier teaching of impersonal enlightenment, which has now been

⁵⁹⁹ See Roemischer, "The Birth of Impersonal Evolutionary Enlightenment—July 30 2001."

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

reworded as an intersubjective awakening that transcends the individual. For all of Cohen's attempts to link impersonal and evolutionary enlightenment, however, the latter is clearly distinguished by a number of new terms and concepts, many of which can be traced to his second legitimating strategy, the historical narrative, to which I will now turn.

The History Narrative: Idealists, Aurobindo and Wilber

Cohen acknowledges a number of historic precedents and contemporary influences on evolutionary enlightenment, most notably the twentieth-century Indian philosopher and mystic Sri Aurobindo, and contemporary integral theorist Ken Wilber. Such influences, he insists, however, are secondary. After the collective awakening in his community, Cohen claims he was astonished to discover similar insights in thinkers such as Aurobindo and Wilber who had discussed the spiritual dimensions of evolution.⁶⁰¹

The historic precedents of evolutionary enlightenment are outlined in an article titled, "A Brief History of Evolutionary Spirituality," which traces a lineage of western and Asian thinkers who have explored the relationship between evolution and spirituality.⁶⁰² It begins with German Idealists such as Schelling and Hegel who are celebrated as the first to articulate a notion of the progressive incarnation of Spirit through matter. Forerunners of evolutionary enlightenment, these philosophers bridged the gap between the transcendent and immanent by combining mystical intuitions with

⁶⁰¹ See "The Evolution of Enlightenment" Andrew Cohen & Ken Wilber in *Dialogue, WIE?* Spring-Summer 2002, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j21/gurupandit.asp?page=2>.

⁶⁰² Tom Houston, "A Brief History of Evolutionary Spirituality," accessed April 5, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/teachings/history-evolutionary-spirituality.asp>.

rationality and forging a “uniquely western conception of human purpose and meaning.” The “revolutionary concept of spiritual evolution” that they pioneered has been carried forth and expanded upon by thinkers as diverse as the philosopher Henri Bergson, the Catholic priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, theosophical leader Rudolph Steiner, and philosopher Jean Gebser.⁶⁰³

Particularly significant, however, and necessitating some special attention are Aurobindo and Wilber. Aurobindo is heralded for being the first thinker to synthesize the modern understanding of evolution with the “timeless revelation of enlightenment” and for bringing an entirely new dimension to evolutionary spirituality by translating the theoretical concept of spiritual evolution into a spiritual practice. In order to appreciate the many parallels between Aurobindo’s teaching and evolutionary enlightenment, it is necessary to offer a brief overview of Aurobindo’s thought.

Aurobindo: Integral Yoga, the Psychic Being and the Divine Life

Aurobindo Ghose was a revolutionary, politician, scholar, novelist, and spiritual leader who exerted a significant influence on the cultural and religious landscape of twentieth-century India.⁶⁰⁴ In his final role as a mystic and guru, during which he was

⁶⁰³ Kripal points out that this is an incomplete lineage. He notes that the pattern was already strongly in place with Alfred Russell Wallace, the co-founder of evolutionary biology with Darwin and an intense student of Spiritualism; it was carried by the Society of Psychical Research and people like Frederic Myers, from which it passed into Henri Bergson and the twentieth century. Jeffrey Kripal, email message to author, July 22, 2010.

⁶⁰⁴ The following summary and review of Aurobindo’s life and thought is drawn from Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry: the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2009), Peter Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), Jeffrey J. Kripal “Reading Aurobindo From Stanford to Pondicherry,” in *On the Edge of the Future: Esalen and the Evolution of American Culture*, eds., Jeffrey J. Kripal and Glenn W. Shuck (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005) 99-131, and

known simply as Sri Aurobindo, he anticipated many of the themes of contemporary East-West integrations.⁶⁰⁵ Aurobindo reinterpreted the Vedas and Vedantic philosophy through a Western evolutionary lens to produce a metaphysics of spiritual evolution.⁶⁰⁶ He rejected both traditional Indian renouncer paths and western scientific materialism in favor of an all-encompassing or “integral” metaphysics that recognized the truths of both “spirit and nature” and aimed, not for liberation from the world, but rather the divinization of life on earth. To catalyze the transformation or evolution of not only the individual but also social and cultural life, Aurobindo developed a system of “integral yoga.”

The foundation of Aurobindo’s integral yoga is a dialectical metaphysics that advances a bipolar model of ultimate reality. Using the classic Vedic term, Aurobindo refers to ultimate reality as Brahman and explains that it has both static and dynamic aspects.⁶⁰⁷ Brahman is both the unmoving and moving, the unmanifest and manifest, transcendent and immanent, spirit and nature.⁶⁰⁸ Whereas Indian renunciate traditions have exclusively focused on the unmanifest aspect of Brahman and rejected the manifest as an illusion or a mistake, Aurobindo attempts to reunite the two through the utilization of an involution-evolution or descent-ascent narrative.⁶⁰⁹ Involution refers to the descent of spirit into nature and the progressive emergence of “matter, life and mind,” and

Brant Cortright, *Integral Psychology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007). I also utilized the website of the Sri Aurobindo ashram, <http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/>.

⁶⁰⁵ See Ann Gleig’s booknote review of Heehs, *Lives of Sri Aurobindo* in *Religious Studies Review* 35:1: 71.

Kripal makes the same reading of Aurobindo as a creative fusion of East-West thought in his “Reading Aurobindo From Stanford to Pondicherry,” 109-113.

⁶⁰⁶ Unlike Cohen, Aurobindo does not acknowledge the incorporation of evolutionary theory into his system as a new and uniquely Western contribution but rather reads evolution back into the Vedas. See Kripal, “Reading Aurobindo From Stanford to Pondicherry,” 110-113.

⁶⁰⁷ Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 232-233.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁶⁰⁹ This differentiation of Aurobindo’s system from classic Indian yoga is repeated in several places on the Sri Aurobindo Ashram website, <http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/>.

evolution signifies the re-ascent of the latter to their spiritual origin, a process that results in a spiritualization of matter or “the divine life.”

The principle themes of Aurobindo’s evolutionary spirituality are set out in his thousand-page, two-volume, treatise, *The Life Divine*. The text begins by rejecting both the Western scientific materialist claim that reality is reducible to matter and the Indian ascetic position, represented by Advaita Vedanta, that only Brahman or pure consciousness exists. Both of these, Aurobindo insists, are only partial truths. In the “completer affirmation” that he proposes, matter and spirit, are embraced as two different forms of a unitary reality, which is structured as a hierarchical “scale of substance.” At the top of the scale or at the upper hemisphere of the cosmos is the monistic Brahman, the nature of which is *sat-chit-ananda* or being-consciousness-bliss. At the lower hemisphere are matter, life and mind, all of which are characterized by division and multiplicity. The material, in other words, is not an illusion, as Advaita Vedanta claims, but is rather an expression or manifestation of Brahman that has become alienated from its divine origin and essential nature. Situated between the oneness of the higher hemisphere and the divisiveness of the lower hemisphere is what Aurobindo calls the supermind, a level of consciousness that is simultaneously aware of the unity of Brahman and the multiplicity of the universe. Moreover, the supermind is the principle by which the two can be reconciled because, although it is part of the higher cosmos, the supermind, unlike the utterly transcendent realms of Brahman, can act upon and transform the world.⁶¹⁰

Departing from traditional Indian accounts of cyclic creation, Aurobindo insists that Brahman’s descent into matter, mind and life, was “not a blunder and a fall, but a

⁶¹⁰ Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 270-276.

purposeful descent, not a curse but a divine opportunity...to achieve a possibility of the divine existence which could not be achieved in other conditions.”⁶¹¹ This divine existence emerges through the ascent of the lower to the higher in a continuation of the evolutionary unfolding of life from matter and mind from life. Furthermore, with the appearance of reason and intellect, “evolution has now become conscious.” Unlike plant and animal life, man can consciously engage his will to further the evolutionary process.⁶¹² Through man’s “conscious self-transformation” the evolutionary ascension can proceed more rapidly.⁶¹³

Aurobindo’s anthropology, therefore, presents the human as a transitional being, a turning point, and a central instrument in the spiritual evolutionary process. The human “may well be a thinking and living laboratory” in which nature “wills to work out the superman, the god.”⁶¹⁴ In the early stages of evolution, the human being needs “to affirm, to make distinct and rich, to possess firmly, powerfully and completely his own individuality.”⁶¹⁵ This, however, is only a preliminary step. The true individuality is not the ego or the separate individual but what Aurobindo identifies as the soul or “psychic being.”⁶¹⁶ The psychic being is an essential and innovative component in Aurobindo’s evolutionary metaphysics and deserves some attention. Its essence is ananda, the bliss or delight of Brahman.⁶¹⁷ However, unlike the traditional Indian atman, which is unmanifest, unchanging and transcendent, the psychic being evolves and develops

⁶¹¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 95, 591-592 quoted in Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 274.

⁶¹² Aurobindo uses man as the generic term for the human being. Although problematic, I will follow him in his use.

⁶¹³ See Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 274.

⁶¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 1-5 quoted in Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 271.

⁶¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 691 quoted in Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 275.

⁶¹⁶ Aurobindo began calling the evolutionary soul the psychic being in 1926. It was a term given to him by the Mother, who had, in turn, borrowed it from her previously teacher, the Western occultist, Max Theon. See Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 357.

⁶¹⁷ For an extended discussion of the psychic being see Cortright, *Integral Psychology* 29-51.

various potentialities. It is the evolutionary principle of the self that retains and carries forward the developmental gains of one lifetime to another. The realization of the psychic being is crucial because it enables a conscious and active participation with the evolutionary process and the divinization of the world.⁶¹⁸

The goal of the psychic being is to continue and fulfill the evolutionary process by evolving beyond the human to its highest potential, which Aurobindo calls the supermind or supramental consciousness. As noted earlier, the supermind is the level of consciousness that reunites spirit and nature. This is achieved through a dual movement of ascent and descent: the soul ascends to the supermind and the supermind descends into the material. According to Aurobindo, the evolution into the supermind will result in a “divine life” on earth and the transmutation of men into a supramental or spiritualized species. He believes that it is only through the emergence of such perfected beings that there can be a solution to the religious, social, and political problems inflicting humanity.⁶¹⁹

How is the spiritualization of mankind to be attained? According to Aurobindo, it involved both a “revolutionary individual effort” and an “evolutionary general progression.” Rare individuals are the forerunners of and act as intermediates for a general evolutionary transformation.⁶²⁰ Aurobindo was one of these evolutionary pioneers. In November 1926, after a long period of intensive practice, he achieved what he called the “descent of the Overmind” a preliminary stage in the “ascent to the Supermind.” This date marked the beginning of Aurobindo’s public withdrawal to

⁶¹⁸ Cortright’s description of the psychic being applies equally to Cohen’s authentic self. Its realization is characterized by purpose, guidance, authenticity, fulfillment and creative expression, evolutionary principle. He also echoes Cohen in declaring that “we are both an eternal being and becoming.”

⁶¹⁹ Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 275-276.

⁶²⁰ Cortright, *Integral Psychology*, 71

concentrate fully on this practice, which, he believed, would prepare the way for the descent of the supermind into humanity's consciousness.⁶²¹

Aurobindo used the generic term yoga to signify the methods and process of spiritual evolution. Yoga as an evolutionary process consists of two progressive aspects: first, a movement into the depths of the self to realize the psychic being; and, second, an upward ascension to, and descent of, the supermind.⁶²² Aurobindo outlined his theory and system of integral yoga in *The Synthesis of Yoga*.⁶²³ Integral yoga synthesizes three traditional paths of Indian yoga: karma yoga or the "discipline of action," jnana yoga or the "discipline of knowledge" and bhakti yoga or the discipline of love." It recognizes that many components from these paths are "indispensable."⁶²⁴ However, while incorporating some of the foundational elements of traditional yoga, Aurobindo rejected asceticism and the traditional yogic goal of absorption in the unmanifest Absolute. As reflected in his motto "All life is yoga," he proposed a householder model that incorporated all of aspects of life into spiritual practice. It is not action or life that is to be renounced, he insists, but rather egoism and desire. As such, Aurobindo developed a fourth yoga, "the Yoga of Self-Perfection," which consists of four elements: purification, liberation, enjoyment and perfection. Like tantric yoga, from which it also considerably

⁶²¹ Hechs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 344-346.

⁶²² The ascent-descent is a long and difficult process that occurs progressively as there are several intervening ranges of consciousness between the ordinary human mind and the supramental consciousness. See the section on *Integral Yoga* at Sri Aurobindo Ashram website.

<http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/yoga/index.php>

⁶²³ For a description and analysis of *The Synthesis of Yoga* see Hechs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 278-288.

⁶²⁴ See the section on *Integral Yoga* at Sri Aurobindo website
<http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/yoga/index.php>

borrow, integral yoga aimed at the transmutation of the human faculties rather than their repression and the transformation of the world rather than its renunciation.⁶²⁵

Aurobindo was concerned, then, not only with the liberation of the individual but also with the transformation of the world and the application of his integral yoga to all aspects of man's social and cultural life.⁶²⁶ He believed that the unity of humanity was "part of Nature's eventual scheme and must come about."⁶²⁷ Such a change, however, was dependent upon and could only be stabilized if it was based upon spiritually evolved individuals. Hence, Aurobindo declared that his ashram was a "laboratory" for the transformation of the human race. In a similar vein, his female counterpart, the French guru, the Mother, who took over the running of the ashram after Aurobindo's retirement, established the spiritually based international community or "universal township" of Auroville in south India 1969, in order to advance the spiritual evolution of the species.⁶²⁸

Aurobindo's Influence on Evolutionary Enlightenment: Authentic Self as Psychic Being

From this brief overview of Aurobindo's work, it should be evident that there are numerous parallels between his and Cohen's evolutionary spirituality. Indeed, Cohen has acknowledged Aurobindo's influence in several places and it is also clear to those readers versed in Aurobindo.⁶²⁹ For example, both thinkers share a bipolar ontology of an

⁶²⁵ Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 238-239. Both Heehs and Kripal, "Reading Aurobindo" 113-121 point out the Tantric influences and elements in Aurobindo's integral yoga. I will return to and extend this Tantric hermeneutic in the conclusion of this chapter.

⁶²⁶ Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 262-263 and 290-292.

⁶²⁷ Aurobindo, *On Himself*, 243 quoted in Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 289.

⁶²⁸ See the website of Auroville accessed April 17, 2010, <http://www.auroville.org/>.

⁶²⁹ After I gave a paper on Cohen at a panel on American Gurus for the Hinduism in North America consultation at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion 2009, one of the questions I

unmanifest and manifest absolute; both reinterpret nonduality through an evolutionary lens; both understand their spiritual awakening as instrumental to, and describe their spiritual community as an “experiment” and “laboratory” for, the evolutionary process; both rework the goal of spiritual realization from transcendence to the divinization of the world; both posit the birth of a “supramental being” or a “new being; and both aim at the spiritualization of culture as well as the transmutation of the individual.

The most striking parallel, however, is between Aurobindo’s psychic being and Cohen’s authentic self. Cohen states that when he first discovered Aurobindo’s concept of the psychic being, it seemed to clearly define something that he had intuited and been trying to cultivate in his students for many years, what he latter called the authentic self.⁶³⁰ He alternatively aligns or identifies Aurobindo’s psychic being with the authentic self.⁶³¹ Both are described as an ever-developing higher level of consciousness, which acts as an intermediary between the unmanifest and manifest, and whose realization is pivotal to the spiritual evolutionary process.⁶³² Another way that Aurobindo has indirectly affected evolutionary enlightenment is through his system of integral yoga, which is a forerunner of Wilber’s integral theory. As I will now discuss, Cohen’s

received was about the influence of Aurobindo on Cohen from an audience member who had immediately noticed the striking parallels between Cohen’s evolutionary enlightenment and Aurobindo’s philosophy.

⁶³⁰ See “Following the Grain of the Kosmos,” *The Guru and the Pandit: Ken Wilber & Andrew Cohen in Dialogue*, *WIE?* May-July 2004, accessed April 25, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j25/guruPandit.asp>.

⁶³¹ In a conversation with Michael Murphy on the authentic self and the psychic being, one difference that seemed to appear was over the relationship of the psychic being to personal history or the ego: Cohen insisted that there was absolutely no relationship, whereas Murphy claimed that much of what we call the ego is the psychic being’s attempt to express itself. See the video clip, “The Awakening of the Authentic Self,” accessed April 5, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/media/video.asp?vm=murphy>.

⁶³² Craig Hamilton “Why Sri Aurobindo is so Cool” *WIE?* Spring-Summer 2002, accessed April 25, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j21/aurobindo.asp?page=1>. After this article, Cohen regularly refers to Aurobindo and particularly his concept of the psychic being.

alliance with Wilber has been determinative in both theoretically and structurally shaping evolutionary enlightenment.

The Guru and the Pandit: Cohen's Integral Alliance with Ken Wilber

Cohen's alliance with former transpersonalist, now integral theorist, Ken Wilber has been absolutely fundamental to the development of evolutionary enlightenment. In 2002 *WIE?* announced a new regular feature titled, "the Guru and Pandit," a dialogue between Cohen and Wilber in which they would debate "cutting-edge spiritual topics." This feature has been mainly devoted to articulating the "bold and orthodox" teaching of evolutionary enlightenment. Both Wilber and Cohen are masculinized as brave and radical pioneers. Wilber is "an intellectual samurai," while Cohen has "fought the tide of anti-authority sentiment in the postmodern world by embracing the traditional demands of the *guru* principle."⁶³³

The official presentation of the alliance positions Wilber as providing the analytic framework for the practice of evolutionary enlightenment.⁶³⁴ Cohen and his students' claim they were amazed to discover a precise articulation of what they had been independently experiencing in Wilber's work. Cohen enthuses that Wilber's evolutionary developmental model gave him the language to better express his own

⁶³³ "The Evolution of Enlightenment" The Guru and the Pandit, Ken Wilber and Andrew Cohen in Dialogue in *WIE?* Spring-Summer 2002, accessed April 27, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j21/gurupandit.asp>.

⁶³⁴ A Wikipedia entry claims, for example, that the two emerged independent of one another. It claims Cohen pioneered Evolutionary Enlightenment in the mid-1980s and encountered Integral Theory around 2000. See "Evolutionary Enlightenment," accessed April 27, 2010, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolutionary_Enlightenment.

intuitive and spontaneous realizations and enabled him to interpret and, therefore, more fully understand the significance of his own experience:

I found the distinctions he was making both thrilling and clarifying. He articulated and put into a simple framework the different dimensions of the Divine that I had encountered: I continue to find these distinctions very illuminating. It's all too common, I've observed, for people to have very deep spiritual experiences but not necessarily know *what* they're experiencing or what it means. If we want to develop spiritually, we need both an intellectual or philosophical framework *and* an experiential grasp of what many of these very profound spiritual concepts mean.⁶³⁵

While Cohen's community implies that they came upon Wilber's theory after independently experiencing collective emergence, former students I interviewed offered an alternative perspective. According to them, Cohen had been reading Wilber for many years and spent considerable time and energy courting a relationship with him. Van der Braak's mentions Cohen reading Wilber as early as 1987 and claims that since that time Cohen had been brainstorming with students how he could recruit Wilber.⁶³⁶ Critics of Cohen see his relationship with Wilber as a strategic alliance that has been highly beneficial for both parties.

Whatever the origin of their relationship, it has clearly been a productive and successful one for both parties. Wilber has been an influential vocal supporter of Cohen,

⁶³⁵ See "The Second Face of God" *EnlightenNext*, September-November 2009, accessed April 26, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j45/guru-pandit.asp>.

⁶³⁶ van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 66-67.

endorsing many of his books and legitimating his status as a crazy wisdom teacher. One might reasonably speculate that Cohen, for his part, has brought an experiential legitimacy to Wilber's largely theoretical achievements. He is also one of the founding members of the Integral Institute, a "global think-tank" established by Wilber in 1998.⁶³⁷ EnlightenNext magazine has become a leading forum for integral theory, the two organizations have co-sponsored numerous events, and many integral figures promote and are promoted by Cohen.

My main focus, in this section, is on the thematic influences and affinities between the two. As Cohen has adopted many of Wilber's terms, is it sometimes difficult to precisely differentiate between integral theory and evolutionary enlightenment. For heuristic purposes, I will highlight some of Wilber's central concepts and then comment on how Cohen has incorporated them.

From a Spectrum of Consciousness to the Integral Map: Wilber's Theory of Everything

In a corpus spanning over thirty years, Wilber has attempted to update "the Great Chain of Being" presented by the perennial philosophers with the insights of modern and postmodern epistemologies in order to construct an inclusive model of human development.⁶³⁸ His main theoretical signature, as both transpersonal and integral

⁶³⁷ See the Integral Institute at <http://www.integralinstitute.org/> Integral Life at <http://integrallife.com/> and Integral Naked at <http://in.integralinstitute.org/>. Both accessed April 27, 2010.

⁶³⁸ For example, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (Wheaton, Ill: Quest Books, 1977), *The Atman Project A Transpersonal View of Human Development* (Wheaton, Ill: Quest Books, 1980), *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (New York: Anchor Press/Double Day, 1981), *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, (Boston: Shambhala Publication, 1995), *The Essential Ken Wilber*, (Boston: Shambhala Publication, 1998), *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy* (Boston: Shambhala Publication, 2000) and *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and*

theorist, is the integration of western developmental structural models with the different cartographies of consciousness charted by premodern, particularly Asian, religious traditions.⁶³⁹ Wilber's early transpersonal model, "the spectrum of consciousness," refracted the Great Chain through western psychological developmental models and an evolutionary framework.⁶⁴⁰ He has continued his contemporary refashioning of the Great Chain by adding more recent developmental schemas and postmodern epistemological claims to develop the "four quadrants model," and "integral map." As Cohen draws extensively from Wilber's integral framework, it is necessary to outline it in some detail.

Wilber presents the integral map as being developed from a cross-cultural and transdisciplinary study of the best elements of premodern, modern and postmodern knowledge of human development.⁶⁴¹ It distills these insights into five key elements: quadrants, levels or stages, lines, states and types. Most significant for our purpose here is the distinction between stages and states of consciousness, which we need to set in the context of the four quadrants model to fully grasp.

Wilber states that the four quadrants model is a further differentiation and completion of the Great Chain of Being.⁶⁴² He claims that each of the four quadrants represent an irreducible dimension and perspective of reality, signified as the subjective, intersubjective, objective and interobjective, as represented by the four basic pronouns of "I," "We," "It," and "Its." The upper-left quadrant represents "I," the interior-individual or self and consciousness. The lower-left represents "We," the interior-collective or

Postmodern World (Integral Books Boston & London, 2006). The summary of Wilber's thought is derived from all of these books.

⁶³⁹ Wilber introduced the four quadrants model and began to use the word integral to describe his new approach in *Sex, Ecology and Evolution*. He has distanced himself from transpersonal psychology, which he now actively critiques.

⁶⁴⁰ See *The Essential Ken Wilber*, 115 for Wilber's description of the different stages of his work.

⁶⁴¹ Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 1-3.

⁶⁴² For an in-depth description of the four quadrant model see Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 1-57.

culture and worldview. The upper-right represents “It,” the exterior-individual or brain and organism and the lower right is “Its,” the exterior-collective or social system and environment.⁶⁴³ Wilber associates each quadrant with a specific historic and cultural stage: the interior upper-left is the province of the premodern, particularly Asian, contemplative traditions with their sophisticated phenomenological meditative cartographies; the exterior right-hand quadrants are illuminated by the scientific advances and differentiations of modernity; while postmodernity has brought specific knowledge of the interior intersubjective realm of the lower-left quadrant.⁶⁴⁴

Within each of the quadrants, there are levels of development and evolution that can be measured using stages, states or lines.⁶⁴⁵ The distinction between states and stages of consciousness correlates to the difference between the Great Chain, which presents a hierarchical spectrum of phenomenological states of consciousness, and western cognitive developmental models, which detail the sequential emergence of progressively higher structural stages of consciousness.

States of consciousness covers a wide range of individual interior experiences from the conventional waking state to the various altered states of consciousness mapped by mystical traditions. Wilber refers to the numerous ways that this spectrum of consciousness is divided by different religious traditions but tends to settle on four basic categories: waking-gross, dreaming-subtle, formless-causal and nondual. The premodern wisdom traditions have produced detailed cartographies of these higher states and developed an array of sophisticated techniques to access them. Wilber’s main point about

⁶⁴³ Wilber also simplifies the four-quadrant model into three aspects, namely I, We, It or the Beautiful, Good and True because the right-hand sides are objective and can be counted as one (It). *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁶⁴⁴ See also Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 60-65 for more details of each quadrant.

⁶⁴⁵ See *Ibid.*, 1-33 and Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 1-28 for details.

such states is that while they are ever-present possibilities and easily accessible, they are also fluid and transient.⁶⁴⁶

Stages of development, however, represent permanent acquisitions of development along an evolutionary path.⁶⁴⁷ They refer simultaneously to individual and cultural stages of consciousness and moral development that build upon their predecessors, unfold sequentially, and take considerable time to develop. Knowledge of these different stages of consciousness has come from western developmental structuralism and was unknown to premodern wisdom traditions. As with states, there are many different ways to divide stages of development, or what Wilber calls “stage conceptions.”⁶⁴⁸

Two particularly influential stage conceptions that Wilber uses are the egocentric to kosmocentric worldview and Spiral Dynamics. Drawing from distinctions between preconvention, conventional, postconventional and post-postconventional levels on a moral development scale, Wilber delineates between egocentric, ethnocentric, worldcentric and kosmocentric worldviews, each of which has its own distinct values and behaviors. In brief, at the egocentric level, the individual is identified with the individual self and is largely self-absorbed. One moves to an ethnocentric view in becoming centered on one’s particular group or tribe. At the next stage of moral development, the individual develops a concern for all people regardless of their race, sex or creed, which is why this state is called a worldcentric view. The highest stage, however, is the

⁶⁴⁶ *Integral Spirituality*, 1-3; 71-83 and *Integral Psychology*, 12-16.

⁶⁴⁷ Stages of development are also referred to as “levels of development” the idea being that each stage represents a level of organization or a level of complexity. For an overview of these stages of development see Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 38-56.

⁶⁴⁸ See *ibid.*, for details of Wilber’s preferred stage models.

kosmocentric view, which is a concern for the whole Kosmos including the manifest and unmanifest realms.⁶⁴⁹

Wilber also draws considerably on the Spiral Dynamic model that Don Beck and Christopher Cowan have developed from the work of Clare Graves.⁶⁵⁰ Spiral Dynamics sees human development as progressing through eight levels of what it calls “systems of values meme,” commonly referred to as vMeme. A vMeme is simultaneously a psychological structure, value system, cultural worldview and mode of adaptation. Beck and Cowan use a color spectrum to distinguish between eight vMeme levels ranging from the lowest beige level of the archaic-instinctual to the highest turquoise level of the global holistic.⁶⁵¹ Particularly significant here, as I will later discuss, is the green pluralistic meme, which represents the postmodern self that is opposed to hierarchy and values egalitarianism, collectivity, and pluralism.

According to Wilber, the relationship between states of consciousness and structures of consciousness “holds the single most important key to understanding the nature of spiritual experience.”⁶⁵² His major insight is that one can experience different states in any stage of consciousness and will then unconsciously interpret the state

⁶⁴⁹ Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 6-7.

⁶⁵⁰ According to Wilber, Graves was one of the first people to take a developmental model and apply it to a wide range of endeavors from business to government to education. He proposed a psychology of the mature human being as an unfolding, emergent, oscillating, spiraling process marked by progressive subordination of older, lower-order behavior systems to newer, higher-order systems. Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 40-41.

⁶⁵¹ These eight levels are (1) beige instinctive (uroboric), (2) purple animistic/tribalistic (typhonic-magic), (3) red power gods (mythic-magic), (4) blue absolutist-religious (mythic), (5) orange individualistic-achiever (rational-egoic), (6) green relativistic (early vision-logic), (7) yellow systematic-integrative (middle vision-logic), and (8) turquoise global-holistic (late vision-logic). An important distinction is between first-tier, which covers levels one to six, and second-tier consciousness, which covers seven to eight. Second tier consciousness signifies a “momentous jump” as it can integrate its preceding levels. According to Wilber, only 1% of the world’s population has developed second-tier thinking and it is often met with much opposition and resistance from first-tier thinking. Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 47-53

⁶⁵² Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 72

through the worldview of the stage in which it occurs.⁶⁵³ This allows him to critique both premodern Eastern religions and contemporary Western spirituality. He situates premodern spiritualities at the lower stages of amber-to-orange, claiming that they translate profound contemplative experiences through a mythic and ethnocentric lens.⁶⁵⁴ While postmodern westerners have reached the more advanced stage of green pluralism, they, on the other hand, are obstructed by “boomeritis,” a term Wilber coined to denote the distortion of green pluralism by red narcissism.⁶⁵⁵ Playing off the term boomer generation, he claims boomeritis is a common phenomenon in this age group which was the first generation to reach the green pluralistic developmental level. The problem, according to Wilber, is that such pluralistic openness re-activated narcissistic impulses and resulted in the egocentricity of what was aptly satirized as the “me generation.”

There are two main problems with boomeritis: unbridled relativism and an indiscriminate rejection of hierarchy. He claims that contemporary Western practitioners use the nonjudgmental relativism that he sees as characterizing postmodernity to protect the egoic self from challenges. Such a perspective has produced and is evident in a mediocre Western spiritual scene that promotes self-acceptance and a therapeutic ethos rather than ego transcendence and authentic spiritual transformation.⁶⁵⁶

Another problematic characteristic of boomeritis is that it rejects all notions of hierarchy. This is a significant issue for Wilber because all of his adopted and developed

⁶⁵³ In order to integrate the developmental structural models with the phenomenologies of contemplative traditions, Wilber and Alan Combs developed the W-C (Wilber-Allan Combs) Lattice framework. It was a project, he states, that took two decades to complete. Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 88-94.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid. 97-98.

⁶⁵⁵ See Ken Wilber, *Boomeritis: A Novel That Will Set You Free* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002).

⁶⁵⁶ An example of this is American “Boomeritis Buddhism,” which, Wilber claims, has transformed a religion of no self into to a religion of expressing and indulging the ego. Wilber believes that while many American Buddhists of the boomer generation have attained genuinely high meditative states they have interpreted them down to support a dysfunctional green-level or a pathological pluralistic worldview. Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 103-108.

models assume and depend upon what he calls a “natural hierarchy.” The Great Chain, for example, presents consciousness as a hierarchy of dimensional levels, from the lowest and most fragmented to the highest and most unitary. What Wilber dubs his “postmodern and antihierarchical critics,” however, have declared that since the Great Chain ranks levels of consciousness it is inherently oppressive.

The main way Wilber has countered this critique is through differentiating between two fundamentally different types of hierarchies. “Dominator hierarchies,” such as the Indian caste system, are indeed oppressive. However, he suggests that his critics confuse this type of “pathological hierarchy” with “natural hierarchy.” Natural hierarchy is based upon what Arthur Koestler called a holon to refer to that which, is simultaneously a whole in one context and a part in another. Natural hierarchy or natural holarchy is an order of holons each of which transcends and includes the previous level and so represents an increase in wholeness and interactive capacity. Wilber sees hierarchy as a fundamental structural principle that is inherent to the structure of consciousness, Spirit and the Kosmos. He claims that all developmental or evolutionary sequences proceed by hierarchization or orders of increasing wholeness.⁶⁵⁷ Just as there are more complex and higher forms of biological life so at the level of consciousness and culture there are more evolved individuals and cultures. As Wilber puts it “all things are Spirit, but some things are more Spirit than others.”

According to Wilber, the postmodern rejection of hierarchy has many implications for spirituality. One example can be seen with his model of “the three faces of God” that differentiates between three expressions of Spirit: first-person, second

⁶⁵⁷ For details of Wilber’s explanation and defense of natural hierarchy see *The Essential Ken Wilber*, 49-54 and 55-60.

person and third-person Spirit.⁶⁵⁸ Spirit in first-person is the Great I, the experience of Spirit as one's deepest truest Self or pure Subjectivity. This form of Spirit is prevalent in Asian traditions such as the concept of atman of Advaita Vedanta and the Buddha-nature within Mahayana Buddhism. Spirit in the second-person is the great Thou, the intersubjective expression of Spirit. This is experienced through a personal relationship with an omnipotent monotheistic God or the guru to whom one must surrender. Spirit in the third-person is the Great It, the impersonal web of life or Kosmic evolutionary process, as is found within pantheism. Wilber laments that within contemporary American spirituality there has been a "loss and repression" of Spirit in the second person.⁶⁵⁹ This, he suggests, is largely due to boomeritis. Postmodern Westerners have rejected hierarchical second person forms because it is the sole form of Spirit that truly challenges and demands submission of the ego.⁶⁶⁰

Wilber's natural hierarchal universe is also evolving. He has devoted a number of texts exploring the relationship between evolution and spirituality and describes his own work as being the refraction of the Great Chain through an evolutionary lens. He claims that the evolutionary process has unfolded three-fifths of the Great Chain in the order that it proposes. All that is required, Wilber claims, is to "undo the myth of the given" and realize that the Great Chain does not exist as a fully given, unchanging archetype, as the perennial model implies, but is rather a "structural potential" of evolution.⁶⁶¹ The Great Chain is a "great morphogenetic field" stretching from matter to spirit in which various

⁶⁵⁸ For a description of the three faces of God model see *Integral Spirituality*, 158-161. Each face or form corresponds to the three fundamental perspectives that integral theory is built upon, I, You and It.

⁶⁵⁹ Another reason for the loss of Spirit in the second-person is because, for most contemporary westerners, Spirit as the great Other has become exclusively identified with the mythic-amber God; God as the paternalistic and dogmatic Father. *Ibid.*, 160.

⁶⁶⁰ See "The Second Face of God" *EnlightenNext*, September-November 2009, accessed April 26 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j45/guru-pandit.asp>.

⁶⁶¹ Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 11-12 & 143-146.

potentials unfold into actualities. While its lower levels—matter, body and mind—have already manifested on a large scale, the higher structures—psychic, subtle and causal—remain only potentials for most people. These higher levels can manifest on a large scale, however, as more people are able to actualize and evolve into them. In integral terms, “Kosmic Habits” are patterns that are laid down enough times to be carried forth as “Kosmic grooves.”⁶⁶²

According to Wilber the potentials for higher states to evolve depends on developing the appropriate types of support across all four quadrants.⁶⁶³ The problem with the premodern wisdom traditions was that they focused on individual interiority and neglected the changes needed in the external spheres to support the mass unfolding of the higher potentials. However, as consciousness and culture are inextricably linked, the external supports cannot be ignored.

The restyling of the Great Chain as an evolutionary potential leads Wilber to read the “great and rare mystics,” such as the Buddha and Christ, as evolutionary pioneers who have actualized these potential higher states and bequeathed them to us as morphogenetic fields and “evolutionary groves.”⁶⁶⁴ As such they are figures of the future and not of the past. Similarly, Wilber prioritizes the future rather than the past as the location of spiritual authority. As he reasons, “if evolution has thus unfolded the first three-fifths of the GN, isn’t it likely that it will continue in the coming years and unfold

⁶⁶² “Integral glossary,” accessed April 27, 2010, <http://integrallife.com/files/articulate/aqal%20glossary/player.html>.

⁶⁶³ Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, 314.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 252-253.

the highest two-fifths? If that is so, God lies down the road, not up it; Spirit is found by going forward, not backward; the Garden of Eden lies in our future, not our past.⁶⁶⁵

Wilber admits that no one fully understands how higher states emerge in evolution but proposes the concept of an evolutionary current, which he names as “Eros” or “Spirit-in-Action.” Drawing from Greek philosophy and Christian theology, Wilber defines Eros as the love of the lower reaching up to the higher (with higher specifically referring to that which demonstrates greater union and integration). Eros is the drive or “omega force” in consciousness and nature that moves towards higher levels of self-organization and self-transcendence.⁶⁶⁶

With his understanding of evolution as Eros or Spirit-in-Action, Wilber situates himself in a distinctive, mainly western, historic lineage of thinkers who have articulated the spiritual dimensions of the evolutionary process.⁶⁶⁷ He acknowledges that his model of the Great Chain refracted through an evolutionary lens owes much to the Romantics and Idealists and celebrates Aurobindo’s thought as the most sophisticated evolutionary mysticism of the twentieth century.

The Future Enlightenment: Post-Metaphysical Spirituality and Incarnational Nonduality

Wilber claims that the highest evolutionary state, which is also the ground and essential nature of all of the lower states, is that of nondual Spirit.⁶⁶⁸ Nonduality is attained when one moves from absorption in pure unmanifest Spirit and experiences the

⁶⁶⁵ Wilber, *The Essential Ken Wilber*, 114.

⁶⁶⁶ Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, 338-339 & 485-493.

⁶⁶⁷ See Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 74-85 for a description of this lineage.

⁶⁶⁸ Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, 301-309 and *The Essential Wilber*, 12-15.

entire manifest world as a perfect expression of the unmanifest. It is the realization that the unmanifest and manifest, or absolute reality and the relative world, are “not two.” Wilber presents nonduality as a universal mystical attainment that is found in western mystics such as Plotinus and Meister Eckhart and Asian gurus such as Ramana Maharishi.⁶⁶⁹ He sees the Asian Tantric traditions, however, and particularly Vajrayana Buddhism, as offering the most sophisticated understandings of nondual enlightenment.⁶⁷⁰

As Wilber correctly points out, while earlier renouncer traditions, such as Theravada Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta, sharply distinguished between the absolute and relative, the tantric traditions introduced a new perspective in which they were understood as nondual.⁶⁷¹ Such an approach allowed, at least theoretically, for an embrace of the world as an expression of the absolute. According to Wilber, however, while the Asian Tantric traditions are unsurpassed in their understanding of emptiness, they are limited in their understanding of form. Having developed in premodern cultures, tantric traditions were unaware that the world of form was evolving. He argues that in light of modern evolutionary knowledge, the traditional understanding of nonduality has to be revised. Wilber states that if they are inextricably linked, the evolution of form must affect emptiness and result in what he calls “the evolution of enlightenment,” which

⁶⁶⁹ In his typical perennialist view, Wilber states that the great nondual wisdom traditions have different names for the same state. See Wilber, *The Essential Wilber*, 12-15.

⁶⁷⁰ Wilber cites its most sophisticated premodern expression is to be found in the Mahayana Buddhist scripture, the Heart Sutra as the union of form and emptiness.

⁶⁷¹ In Theravada Buddhism, the unconditioned (nirvana) is radically distinguished from the conditioned (nirvana). Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, however, claimed there was a deeper realization in which nirvana and samsara, emptiness and form were realized as “not-two” or nondual. Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 108.

he sees as the completion of traditional understandings of enlightenment.⁶⁷² He refers to this evolutionary updating of nonduality alternatively as an “incarnational nonduality,” or “nondual evolutionary panentheism,” and promotes it as a perspective that fully embraces the relative and absolute.⁶⁷³

For this new complete understanding of enlightenment, Wilber argues that a post-metaphysical spirituality, which retains the phenomenological depths available from the premodern religious traditions but discards their surplus metaphysical baggage, is necessary. This is how he promotes his recently developed integral approach, which integrates the contemplative wisdom of premodern religious traditions with the scientific advances of modernity and the epistemological insights of postmodernity. He claims it recovers a sophisticated cartography of individual states of consciousness and spiritual realization from the premodern traditions; incorporates modern developmental and evolutionary knowledge and the values of liberal democracy and human rights; and includes the postmodern truths of contextualism, intersubjectivity, and constructivism. Wilber presents it as taking the best from premodern, modern and postmodern systems of knowledge while undermining each of their claims to absoluteness.⁶⁷⁴ It is, he insists, the spirituality of the future.

⁶⁷² This paragraph is mainly derived from Wilber’s discussion with Cohen in “The Evolution of Enlightenment” The Guru and the Pandit, Ken Wilber and Andrew Cohen in Dialogue in *WIE?* Spring-Summer 2002, accessed April 27, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j21/gurupandit.asp>.

⁶⁷³ Another way that Wilber expresses the evolution of enlightenment is to distinguish between two forms of enlightenment: horizontal and vertical. Horizontal enlightenment aligns with traditional understandings and is defined as becoming one with all the stages of consciousness while horizontal enlightenment signifies the incorporation of developmental and evolutionary knowledge and is expressed as becoming one with all the stages of consciousness. The new description of complete enlightenment is therefore, “the realization of oneness with all states and all stages that have evolved so far and that are in existence in any given time.” Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 129-130.

⁶⁷⁴ Wilber gives a detailed description of the best and worst aspects of the premodern, modern and postmodern periods and what each can give to a post-metaphysical spirituality. See *Integral Spirituality*, 42-49 and *Integral Psychology*, 66-73.

Integral Evolution: The Influence of Wilber on Cohen

As I hope is now evident, Cohen has been heavily influenced by Wilber and has adopted many of his terms and incorporated many of his concepts into evolutionary enlightenment, particularly, the evolution of spirituality, the stage-state distinction, natural hierarchy, boomeritis, a post-traditional spirituality, intersubjectivity, a future-oriented telos, evolutionary nonduality, and the relationship between consciousness and culture. It is not necessary to examine each of these but it is instructive to glance at a few, to show how Cohen has drawn from Wilber to both reinforce preexisting perspectives and to develop new ones.

Cohen has utilized Wilber's stage-state distinction to support and expand upon his own distinction between spiritual experiences and the context of that experience. Throughout his teaching career, Cohen has stressed the importance of creating a context for spiritual experiences and lamented the absence of such a context in the decontextualized and experiential-oriented climate of contemporary western spirituality. Rather than return to a premodern traditional context laden with "metaphysical baggage," however, he wants to create a new ethical, philosophical, and cultural context for nondual realization that is relevant to the twenty-first century. Echoing Wilber, Cohen introduces evolutionary enlightenment as a "post-traditional" or "post-metaphysical" spirituality that responds to the needs of modernity and postmodernity. He describes its goal of the stabilization of intersubjective enlightenment as a move from the temporary experience of a state to the creation of a permanent stage or structure in human evolution.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷⁵ "A Living Experiment in Conscious Evolution" Andrew Cohen & Ken Wilber in *Dialogue EnlightenNext*, accessed April 5 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j35/guru-pandit.asp>.

Cohen has also found much resonance with and use for Wilber's concept of boomeritis. Reading *Boomeritis*, Cohen states, was "a revelation to me because it helped me to understand in a broader context why so many people have been deeply resistant in the face of my call for change."⁶⁷⁶ He draws on boomeritis to legitimate his war against the ego, defend the traditional hierarchal role of the guru, and to explain why his philosophy and teaching methods have been criticized by many of his Western peers, particularly those in California. Following Wilber, Cohen relates the traditional concept of the ego with the specific postmodern narcissistic self that is the target of boomeritis.⁶⁷⁷ As he has witnessed with his own former and current students, when this postmodern ego is challenged rather than mirrored, it responds with a narcissistic rage and an intense deidealization of the teacher.⁶⁷⁸ Echoing Wilber, he targets California as particularly awash with a narcissistic pluralism and laments that its non-judgmental, democratic ethos has obstructed authentic spiritual transformation.⁶⁷⁹ Similarly, the emphasis on self-acceptance, that is also so prominent in California, functions as the "ultimate safe haven" for the ego and has resulted in a "conspiracy of mediocrity" within contemporary spirituality.⁶⁸⁰ On a more personal note, it explains why he failed to attract more students in Marin and why he decided to relocate his community back to the east coast.

Wilber's championing of natural hierarchy has also provided support for Cohen's role as guru. A clear example of this can be found in his adoption of Wilber's "three

⁶⁷⁶ "Breaking the Rules," *WIE?* Fall-Winter 2002, accessed April 26, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j22/gurupandit.asp>.

⁶⁷⁷ Both thinkers refer to Christopher Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1979) to reinforce their critique.

⁶⁷⁸ "Breaking the Rules," *WIE?*

⁶⁷⁹ EnlightenNext have even made a video titled, "Boomeritis: A Postmodern Disease," in which Cohen returns to California to deliver a stinging critique of its boomeritis culture. Accessed 26 April 2010 <http://www.andrewcohen.org/notes/index.php?/weblog/blog/boomeritis/>.

⁶⁸⁰ See "Breaking the Rules" and "In Search of a New Moral Compass," *WIE?* February-April 2004, accessed April 26, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j24/guruPandit.asp>.

faces of God” model. Cohen believes that the second face of God is particularly important for those who have grown up in postmodern Western culture. Following Wilber, he insists that an experience of Spirit as the great Other before whom we must ultimately submit, is the only authentic way for one to transcend the ego and the culturally conditioned tendency toward extreme narcissism. He claims that one way for the postmodern self to embrace the second face of God, without returning to an outmoded mythic belief system, is through entering into committed relationships with more evolved individuals. These relationships can generate many of the qualities associated with the second face of God, such as humility and respect. This, he insists, is not about submission or authoritarianism but is rather a moral awakening and a “fundamental respect for that which is higher.”⁶⁸¹

These few examples, I hope, give a taste of how much Wilber’s thought has shaped Cohen’s development of evolutionary enlightenment. Moreover, the influence is only growing as Cohen continues to develop his analytic alliance with integral theory. For example, he describes the third significant phase of his teaching as the “integral manifestation of enlightenment” and sets as a future aim the development of measurable, objective criteria for demonstrating how intersubjective emergence manifests in each of the spheres of the four quadrants model.⁶⁸² Nor is the evolutionary and integral alliance only theoretical; Cohen is involved in numerous events with thinkers from the integral

⁶⁸¹ See “The Second Face of God” *EnlightenNext*, September-November 2009, accessed April 26, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j45/guru-pandit.asp>. Another noticeable feature of evolutionary enlightenment is the introduction of Western theological and philosophical language, which is entirely absent from impersonal enlightenment, and, which is also suggestive of Wilber’s influence.

⁶⁸² See Andrew Cohen “Making Enlightenment Meaningful,” posted February 15 2007, accessed April 5, 2010, <http://www.andrewcohen.org/blog/index.php?blog/post/making-enlightenment-meaningful/>.

network and EnlightenNext is an important platform for integral ideas.⁶⁸³ The mutual publicity and endorsement between the integral world and evolutionary enlightenment cannot be underestimated.

Conclusion: Reading Cohen With and Against Contemporary Assimilations

In conclusion, I would like to revisit some of the most dominant themes emerging over the course of Cohen's career and offer some reflections on how they relate to the wider context of the contemporary American assimilation of Asian enlightenment traditions. I will focus on three main related areas (1) a move away from experience (2) embodied nonduality and (3) the guru-disciple relationship and the possibility of perfect liberation.

1. Beyond Experience: Integration and Embodiment

At the crux of Cohen's split with Poonja and one of his central teaching themes has been a focus on the ethical expression rather than experience of enlightenment. Cohen has consistently stressed the limitations of enlightenment experiences and the need to create a wider philosophical, ethical and cultural context for them. I argue that this contextual emphasis shows a move away from the privileging of experience that scholars

⁶⁸³ For example, many of Cohen's conferences feature speakers from the integral network such as Ken Wilber, Genpo Roshi, and Don Beck. Similarly, *EnlightenNext* posts numerous links to aspects of integral theory such as Spiral Dynamics. See "Spiral Dynamics," accessed April 26, 2010, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/spiral/?ifr=hp-thm>.

such as Robert Sharf have shown to be characteristic of the modern Western practice of Asian mysticism.

Although I have already discussed Sharf in relationship to the Vipassana movement, it is useful to briefly revisit him here. In an influential analysis of the status of experience in modern religious practice and the modern academic study of religion, Sharf has targeted the contemporary western privileging of meditative experience. Sharf traces the modern understanding of the essence of spirituality as individual inner experience to Schleiermacher's attempt to protect religion from Enlightenment critiques. He further shows how the privileging of experience in Asian thought can be traced to a handful of twentieth century Asian religious leaders and apologists in sustained dialogue with their intellectual counterparts in the West. Sharf, however, questions the assumption that meditation experience is central to traditional Asian religious practice and redraws attention to the indispensable aspects of ethical training, ritual and scripture.⁶⁸⁴

In a similar vein and particularly relevant here is Thomas Forsthoefel's explanation of the perennial appeal of Ramana Maharshi. According to Forsthoefel, one of the great attractions of Ramana was his insistence that the liberation experience is open to anyone regardless of cultural or social conditions. Forsthoefel situates this emphasis on a universal and transcultural liberating experience against the backdrop of the wider cultural and philosophical agendas of modernity. In brief, his argument is that Ramana's appeal was due in large part to the fact that he perfectly fit with the modern perennial presentation of a common mystical experience at the heart of all religions.

The turn to experience, in other words, is a modern western construct, which has its roots in the Romantic response to Enlightenment critiques of religious dogmatism and

⁶⁸⁴ Robert Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms For Religious Studies*, 94-116.

metaphysical speculation. To salvage religion from Enlightenment attacks, Romantics focused on direct experience as the essence of religion. First articulated by Schleiermacher who argued that a direct feeling or experience of the Infinite is at the core of religion, this theme was continued with different nuances by major scholars such as William James, Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade. The experiential thread is picked up and disseminated to a wider cultural audience, particularly the counter-culture, through the work of Huston Smith and Aldous Huxley. Indian gurus such as Swami Vivekananda and apologetics such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishna also promoted the experiential narrative in service of their own neo-Hindu agendas. Moreover, as Forsthoefel notes, the nondual ontology of Advaita Vedanta particularly lends itself to an experiential reading.⁶⁸⁵

Cohen's struggle with Poonja and his subsequent attempts to create a context for enlightenment experiences is a perfect example of the modern experiential legacy. Many of these issues would simply never have arisen in traditional Advaita Vedanta in which ethics and training are essential aspects in a complete religious matrix. Similarly, although Cohen poses his question about the relationship between enlightenment and karma as if it is a revolutionary one, there is a long-running debate in traditional Advaita about the relationship between liberation and embodiment.⁶⁸⁶

Cohen's dissatisfaction with the experiential vision and attempt to create a context for mystical experiences is also characteristic of the wider contemporary American assimilation of Asian enlightenment traditions. Jorge Ferrer, for example, has exposed and critiqued the centrality of the experiential legacy in the field of transpersonal

⁶⁸⁵ Forsthoefel, "Weaving the Inward Thread to Awakening."

⁶⁸⁶ This debate is the subject of Fort's *Jivanmukti in Transformation*.

psychology, which has been a central landscape for East-West integrations.⁶⁸⁷ I also demonstrated earlier that one of the defining characteristics of West Coast Vipassana is that it attempts to integrate experience with everyday life. Similarly, the Neo-Advaita network has come under much criticism for its sole focus on experiences of the Self rather than ethics or training.

I have delineated two main contemporary responses to the limitations of the experiential legacy: return or recovery of tradition and creation of contemporary context. In the first instance, some communities have called for a return to tradition or have, at least, developed a renewed interest in elements of tradition religion that were discarded or neglected by the modern experiential emphasis such as scripture and ritual. This can be seen in the wider Advaita movement's disavowal of Neo-Advaita, and it is also evident in some American Buddhist communities, which as I have noted, are increasingly adopting more traditional aspects such as ritual.

A second response has been an emphasis on integration, embodiment and the creation of a new Western context that is more culturally relevant to the twenty-first century. Rather than turn to traditional Advaita Vedanta, for example, Cohen's solution to the limitations of the experiential emphasis of Neo-Advaita has been to attempt to develop a new context that is relevant to the present cultural moment. Many of the contemporary East-West integrations have responded along similar lines: even the most perfunctory glance reveals that integration and embodiment are two of the central tropes in Asian-inspired American spiritualities. As I will now show, this integrative current is legitimated through recourse to a Tantric hermeneutic and the call for an embodied nonduality.

⁶⁸⁷ Jorge Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, 15-40.

2. *Towards An Embodied Nonduality and the Tantric Turn*

As noted, Cohen and Wilber have explicitly identified evolutionary enlightenment with a Tantric metaphysics, declaring that it is the completion and fulfillment of tantric articulations of nonduality. Such a perspective, I argue, is also characteristic of contemporary American discussions and assimilations of nonduality. Many figures have called for an embodied nonduality that respects both the personal and impersonal, relative and absolute, and immanent and transcendent, and have supported this call through recourse to the Tantric traditions. In the main, these positions follow what might be termed an affirmative Orientalist logic in which the East is revered for its knowledge of the unconditioned and the West is valued for its knowledge of the conditioned and the union of the two is celebrated as producing an “embodied nonduality.”⁶⁸⁸

In a recent two-volume collection on nonduality and psychotherapy, for example, the major theme to emerge was the development of an embodied nonduality.⁶⁸⁹ John Welwood, a Tibetan Buddhist and transpersonal psychologist, has been one of the vocal figures in contemporary debates on nonduality.⁶⁹⁰ He frames East and West as having complimentary roles: the East is supreme in revealing impersonal nondual awareness and the West specializes in knowledge of the personal and interpersonal. Welwood critiques

⁶⁸⁸ Affirmative Orientalism is generally a negative term, however, I am using it here as a recognizable signifier for an historic line of thought that presents East and West as complimentary opposites without implying this is negative.

⁶⁸⁹ John Prendergast, Peter Fenner and Shelia Krystal, *The Sacred Mirror: Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy* (St Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 2003), 5.

⁶⁹⁰ John Welwood, “Double Vision: Duality and Nonduality in Human Experience” in *Ibid.*, 138-163.

the tendency to elevate the unconditioned over the conditioned and argues that both relative and absolute truths must be honored:

(There is a) one-sided perspective circulating in the contemporary spiritual scene that uses the absolute truth of nonduality to disparage or belittle the relative play of duality in human experience. This perspective casts nonduality in a primary transcendent light, regarding only absolute truth—the nonexistence of separate entities—as real, while seeing phenomenal existence—the play of duality—as unreal, illusion, untruth... Yet in regarding the play of duality as only unreal, this one-sided transcendentalism verges on nihilism—negating the significance of relative experience altogether. In the name of nonduality, it creates its own form of dualism by setting up a divide between absolute truth and relative human experience.⁶⁹¹

Welwood suggests that we need to develop a more comprehensive ontology that recognizes the nonduality of the transcendent and immanent, absolute and relative, emptiness and form and notes that such an understanding can be found in varying degrees in Buddhist and Hindu Tantra. He calls for practitioners to honor immanent truth within the wider frame of what he calls an “embodied or balanced nondual perspective.”

Following Welwood, John Prendergast and Kenneth Bradford outline the conditions necessary for the emergence of an embodied nonduality. The aim of spiritual awakening, they claim, is to awaken and transform our body-minds, relationships and society so that they become more transparent and creative expressions of Spirit. While

⁶⁹¹ Ibid.,143.

some nondual spiritual traditions emphasize the realization of emptiness as the final goal, they believe that a “mature nondual realization fully embraces the paradox of emptiness and fullness” and they locate such a realization in the Tantric schools:

Most major Eastern nondual spiritual traditions recognize that awakening is the beginning rather than the end of an open-ended spiritual process of spiritual transformation. This recognition is particularly strong in Dzogchen, Zen and Kashmiri Saivism, while less so in Advaita Vedanta, which tends to favor the transcendent over the immanent. It is one thing to thoroughly wake up to one’s true self as the formless ground of being or no-self; it is another to actualize or embody this awareness in one’s daily life in the body and in relationship and to transpose those changes to collective, societal structures.⁶⁹²

In a similar vein, Marianna Caplan, a popular commentator on Asian-inspired contemporary spirituality, explores the challenge of integrating nondual wisdom into “every microfiber of dualistic expressions.” She cautions against instant Neo-Advaita approaches of “instant enlightenment” and calls for the integration of nondual wisdom into the everyday life of the body, feelings and relationships. As she warns, however, experiencing nondual states is no means equivalent to embodying them:

I could not have imagined then that the mere insight into nondual reality –as awe-inspiring and life-challenging as it is—was merely the beginning of the spiritual

⁶⁹² John J. Prendergast and G. Kenneth Bradford, “Towards an Embodied Nonduality: Introductory Remarks,” *Listening from the Heart of Silence* (St Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2007) 1-34; 12.

journey rather than its completion. That I could not and would not be satisfying until I had found a way to integrate that nondual wisdom such that it would gradually transmute all aspects of my experience—from intimate relationships and friendships, to sexuality, to child-raising, to my relationship with the environment... To embody my nondual realization would be no small task.⁶⁹³

Practitioners must “come down from the transcendental mountaintop” and “penetrate and transmute the dualistic world of form and manifestation with the diamond perception of nonduality.”⁶⁹⁴ According to Caplan, the main task facing contemporary spiritual seekers is to individually and collectively embody nondual spiritual realizations. Quoting liberally from different Tibetan Buddhist teachers and the Heart Sutra, she stresses that both the form and emptiness aspects of nonduality must be honored. Similarly, contemporary nondual teacher Peter Fenner draws heavily on Mahayana Buddhism to advocate an “embodied transcendence” that “closes the traditional rift between physical embodiment and spiritual transcendence.”⁶⁹⁵

There is much evidence, then, that within contemporary American Asian-inspired spirituality, a Tantric model of nonduality that affirms the world has been favored over a Advaita Vedanta form in which the world is undervalued as an illusion. This does not mean, however, that the Tantric traditions have been embraced wholesale but rather that a Tantric metaphysics is drawn upon to support a contemporary creative hermeneutics of nonduality in which key aspects of modern western life—such as intimate relationships,

⁶⁹³ Ibid., 182.

⁶⁹⁴ Mariana Caplan, “Walking the Talk: The Principles and Practices of an Embodied Spirituality,” 181-196.

⁶⁹⁵ Peter Fenner, “Nonduality and Therapy: Awakening the Unconditioned Mind,” in *The Sacred Mirror: Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy*, 35.

psychological issues, social justice and evolution—are embraced, incorporated and legitimated under the relative side of the Tantric equation. Situating this in relationship to the experiential legacy, we can see that after nonduality has been decontextualized from its traditional moorings within various Asian schools, it is now being (re-)embedded not through a return to tradition but rather through the creation of a new context that speaks to the different elements and needs of contemporary Western worldly life.

3. The Shadow of the Guru and the Myth of Perfection

The guru-disciple relationship has been the source of much debate and controversy in America with numerous tensions arising from attempts to transport what is essentially a premodern Eastern hierarchical model into a modern American culture that values individualism, democracy, and pluralism. As Kripal notes, the problems with the guru institution are many, but foremost among them are the guru's absolute authority, his or her claims of a divine infallibility and the theocratic structure of the guru-disciple relationship.⁶⁹⁶ These tensions erupted in the now well documented “fall of the Western guru” the series of sexual, financial and alcohol scandals that rocked a number of North American religious communities in the 1980s.⁶⁹⁷ Kathy Butler, for example, uncovers what she calls a number of common “shadow” elements arising from the clash of Eastern hierarchy and devotion and Western individualism across American Zen and Tibetan Buddhist communities: patterns of denial, shame, secrecy and invasiveness reminiscent of alcoholic and abusive families; an unhealthy marriage of Asian hierarchy and

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁹⁷ See also Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Debating the Mystical as the Ethical: An Indological Map,” in *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, 53-55.

American license that distorts the teacher-disciple relationship; a tendency, once scandals are uncovered, to either scapegoat the teacher or blindly deny that anything has changed.⁶⁹⁸

After an initial wave of enthusiasm, idealism, and involvement with Asian gurus, then, many American participants began to question how effective a model of complete surrender to and absolute authority of the guru was in a contemporary American cultural climate. This led to the guru model being subject to a variety of modifications ranging from a complete rejection to a modified recovery and rehabilitation of the guru model. At one extreme, commentators claimed that the guru-disciple model was inherently corrupt and unworkable. An active anti-guru and anti-cult network has developed in America, which is best represented by Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad's *The Guru Papers*.⁶⁹⁹ Kramer and Alstad argue that the guru-disciple relationship is structurally dysfunctional as the absolute authority of the guru inevitably generates an unhealthy relational dynamic and a corruption of power. In a similar vein, Stephen Batchelor speaks against any form of authoritarian religion in which a figure or group claims absolute authority and seeks to impose that authority on others as the only way to reach liberation.⁷⁰⁰

In the wake of the guru scandals, many Buddhist and Hindu-inspired communities have developed more democratic models of authority that they believe are more suitable for contemporary Western culture than the traditional guru model. This includes the recommendation of having multiple mentors rather than a single absolute authoritative

⁶⁹⁸ Kathy Butler, "Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America," in *Meeting the Shadow*, 137-147; 139.

⁶⁹⁹ Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad, *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (Berkeley California: Frog Ltd Books, 1993).

⁷⁰⁰ Stephen Batchelor, foreword to *American Guru*, xi-xii.

guru.⁷⁰¹ From its very inception, for example, the Insight Community has been committed to a collective team teaching structure and has promoted the model of the spiritual friend rather than guru. Although beginning with the traditional hierarchical guru model, after head abbot Richard Baker was embroiled in a sexual scandal, the San Francisco Zen Center also adopted more democratic forms of decision-making that placed authority with a board of directors rather than a single figure.⁷⁰² Similarly, the Hindu-inspired Kripalu Yoga Center has also functioned as a collective and guru-less community since students forced the married Indian guru and head of the center Amrit Desai to leave after it was discovered he had been having affairs with several female students.

Much attention has also been drawn to the plethora of psychological dynamics such as transference and counter-transference, projection and idealization that occur within guru communities and many communities invited psychotherapists and addiction counselors to work with them in the wake of the guru scandals.⁷⁰³ Many figures persuasively argued for the need to discriminate between spiritual realization and psychological development and pointed to the common need to supplement spiritual discipline with psychotherapy. Put bluntly, they argue that even the most enlightened masters are not necessarily free from neurotic traits or unconscious psychodynamics. As Georg Feuerstein claims, enlightenment experiences leave many basic psychological structures intact and much additional psychological work is required to integrate one's "shadow" or complex of repressed unconscious material.⁷⁰⁴

⁷⁰¹ Mariana Caplan, *Do You Need A Guru?* (London: Thorsons, 2002)

⁷⁰² Butler, "Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America," 140.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid*, 143-145.

⁷⁰⁴ Georg Feuerstein, "The Shadow of the Enlightened Guru," in *Meeting the Shadow*, 148-150.

All of these arguments then undermine the narrative of the perfectly enlightened teacher, a model that functions as the main legitimating factor for what I earlier identified as an “enlightenment ethic,” in which otherwise disturbing ethical actions are legitimating through a liberative pedagogy. Indeed, the rejection of both the possibility and desirability of perfection has become a common trope within contemporary East-West integrations. In an often-quoted incidence, for example, when addressing the Kripalu community in the wake of the Amrit Desai scandal, Jungian therapist Marion Woodman stated:

As long as we try to transcend ourselves, reach for the sky, pull away from ground and into spirit, we are heroes carved in stone. We stand atop the pillar alone, blind to the pigeon's droppings. Don't try to transform yourself. Move into yourself. Move into your human unsuccess. Perfection rapes the soul.⁷⁰⁵

This perspective calls for both guru and devotees to give up their fantasies of perfection. Devotees must give up the search for a perfect parental figure and the guru must relinquish his or her fantasy of complete control:

One of the first indications would be a visible willingness not only to reflect disciple's back to themselves but also to have the disciples to be a mirror for the adept's further growth. However, this kind of willingness calls for an openness that is precluded by the authoritarian style adopted by most gurus.⁷⁰⁶

⁷⁰⁵ Marion Woodman quoted in Bridle, “A Call to Mediocrity,” *What is Enlightenment?*

⁷⁰⁶ Feuerstein, “The Shadow of the Enlightened Guru,” 150.

Other voices, however, have cautioned against the rejection of the guru-disciple model and suggested instead a recovery of the relationship that is more attuned to the western cultural climate. A good example of this can be found in Mariana Caplan's 2002 book, *Do You Need a Guru?*, which includes interviews with numerous key figures in the contemporary spiritual world. Caplan opens the text by lamenting that guru has become a "four-letter word" in America because of the guru scandals and the American tradition of "rugged spiritual individualism. Outing herself as a devotee in a traditional guru-disciple relationship, she cautions against the democratization of the guru model and advances rather a model of "conscious discipleship" that she claims enables the guru-disciple relationship to work effectively in a Western cultural climate. Conscious discipleship acknowledges the psychological challenges of the guru-disciple relationship and places responsibility on the student to relate to the guru with more discrimination and maturity.⁷⁰⁷ In a similar vein, others have attempted to recover the guru model by putting it into dialogue with, rather than reducing it to, Western values. As John Welwood notes, for example:

There needs to be a dialogue between the traditional Eastern model of liberation and surrender, and the Western model of individuation, where individuality is seen to have an important value. Conscious discipleship in the West might include the recognition that individuality is not just some flaw, or obstacle, or resistance

⁷⁰⁷ Mariana Caplan, *Do You Need A Guru?* (London: Thorsons, 2002).

to the teachings, but rather that it can be a vehicle for embodying the teachings more fully.⁷⁰⁸

Many of the above themes also appear in the accounts of Cohen's critical former students. Luna Tarlo left Cohen after a decisive meeting with the anti-guru teacher U G. Krishnamurti, and she joins the anti-guru chorus at the end of her account quoting from Kramer and Alstad in several places. Similarly, van der Braak claims that the major problem with Cohen was that he imported the traditional authoritarian Eastern guru system into a modern Western culture that respects individual difference and autonomy. Rather than attempt to annihilate such individuality, Cohen, he suggests, should have integrated it:

Andrew's revolution was flawed from the start because of Andrew's own personal shortcomings (especially his conviction that he had none). And because of the inherent limitations that arise when you import an authoritarian Eastern system of a guru, with disciples, to the West, with our respect for individual differences. His teaching was of the "one size fits all" variety. There was never any room for personal initiative or personal experimentation with life.⁷⁰⁹

Many of my interviewees also stressed that the main problem with Cohen was the myth of perfection invested in and projected by him. After their experiences with Cohen, they believed that a model of absolute authority is not appropriate or effective for the West

⁷⁰⁸ John Welwood, "East Meets West—The Psychology of the Student-Teacher Relationship," in *Do You Need A Guru?*, 20

⁷⁰⁹ van der Braak, *Enlightenment Blues*, 214,

and advocated an alternative model of awakening which allowed for human imperfection and integrated individuality.

It should be evident then that Cohen forms a strong counter-point to contemporary American trends regarding the guru-disciple model. Since, his Neo-Advaitin days, Cohen has been very comfortable in the role of guru. He has been a vocal supporter of what he calls the guru principle and has strongly criticized and scorned contemporary American revisions such as the democratization of the guru-disciple relationship and the incorporation of psychology. One of his responses to critiques by former students was to write a book, called *In Defense of the Guru Principle*, in which he claims that the “spiritual establishment” wants to see him fail because they have become “comfortable with something less than the goal of ultimate freedom” and are afraid of his revolutionary stance that “dares to set a standard at a time when all of the most renounced gurus and masters have “fallen on their face:”⁷¹⁰ As he puts it:

Because most Gurus and Masters have indeed used their position of power at times for their own personal gratification, there is an almost unified collective conviction in our time that pure motivation is an impossibility in a guru. That is why even the very word ‘Guru’ (which means ‘destroyer of darkness’) has fallen into such disrepute. Though there has never been a hint of scandal whatsoever in my thirteen years of teaching (and even my worst critics struggle with that fact), there has certainly been, from the very beginning, a trail of wounded egos claiming abuses of power.⁷¹¹

⁷¹⁰ Cohen, *In Defense of the Guru Principle*, 9.

⁷¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

Cohen has also repeatedly denied that he has a shadow and claims that this fact has generated much suspicion and resentment against him:

It dawned on me that it simply wasn't acceptable not to have, nor to be more than happy to speak in depth about one's 'shadow' if one was a spiritual teacher these days. In fact, in the wake of the rampant corruption of spiritual authority figures in the times we're living in, if one doesn't refer implicitly or explicitly to having a 'shadow' it seems to make one instantly untrustworthy.⁷¹²

Cohen's community has also dismissed attempts to remodel the guru-disciple relationship. In a review of *Do you Need A Guru?*, Elizabeth Debold rejects Caplan's model of conscious discipleship on the grounds that by granting the student too much authority it, "puts the ego in charge of ego death" and inadvertently reinforces the spiritual individualism that it seeks to challenge. Similarly, it psychologizes the relationship by engaging in "psychotherapeutic conversations about fears of trust and surrender" and expresses a deep cynicism that a relationship of trust and integrity is possible by calling for disciples to separate the teaching from teacher. The solution, Debold declares, is not conscious discipleship but rather overcoming cultural distrust about spiritual authority:

What does it mean to revitalize the guru-disciple relationship for the twenty-first century? ... We are far too worldly-wise and know too much about the human

⁷¹² Ibid., 18.

psyche to simply try and adopt the traditional Eastern model of this relationship. But updating the relationship doesn't mean turning it into some variant of the therapeutic relationship, subverting it with our psychological knowledge in a defense against moving beyond ego. What it does mean is that we authority-phobic, wounded postmoderns have to take the risk to evolve beyond our cynicism about spiritual authority.⁷¹³

Cohen, then, has very vocally positioned himself in strong opposition to the contemporary climate that undermines the absolute power of the guru. In doing so he has set up a rigid either/or model: either absolute surrender to the guru or egoic resistance. As one commentator put it, however, the "alternative to spiritual authoritarianism is not boomeritis spirituality but 'deep democracy' where teachers do not insulate themselves from an open flow of feedback within their teaching systems as Cohen does."⁷¹⁴ Also, while Cohen attributes the blame to postmodern American traits, many highly respected and traditional Asian teachers have also called for a more measured and discriminating response to the guru. For example, the current Dalai Lama, who is head of arguably the most traditional guru lineage in the world, has called for more responsibility and maturity on the side of both the guru and disciple:

Part of the blames lies with the student, because too much obedience, devotion and blind acceptance spoils a teacher...Part also lies with the spiritual master because he lacks the integrity to be immune to that kind of vulnerability...I

⁷¹³ Deborah Debold, "The Future of the Student-Teacher Relationship: Definitely NOT Just a Book Review of Mariana Caplan's *Do You Need a Guru?*" *What is Enlightenment?* Spring-Summer 2003.

⁷¹⁴ WHAT Enlightenment?! Anonymous posted 23 April 2003 .

recommend never adopting the attitude towards one's spiritual teacher of seeing his or her every action as divine or noble. This may seem a bit bold, but if one has a teacher who is not qualified, who is engaging in unsuitable or wrong behavior, then it is suitable for the student to criticize that behavior.⁷¹⁵

Also important to recognize is that while Tibetan Buddhism enshrines the guru-disciple relationship, the guru is embedded within a lineage and is always positioned as both student and teacher, which, in theory if not always in practice, functions to modify absolute authority.

While Cohen has historically gone against the stream in terms of contemporary revisioning of the guru-disciple model, as I have noted, however, there are signs that he is modifying his approach to bring it more into alignment with contemporary trends. For example, he now talks of the future of the guru as emerging through a collective rather than an individual and has begun to stress the need for partners rather than followers. One interviewee and former student who retains ties to the community also told me that Cohen was listening more to his senior students. Also, while Cohen has historically been very resistant and dismissive of psychology, in a retreat call with a student, I was very surprised to hear him acknowledge the need for psychological work.⁷¹⁶

This represents a very significant shift for him, and I can only surmise that it is due to the fact that Ken Wilber is a big advocate of shadow work. Whatever the source, it is an important step forward for Cohen as his resistance to psychology, particularly in the wake of his own controversies, has limited useful areas of inquiry. Acknowledging

⁷¹⁵ Butler, "Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America," 146.

⁷¹⁶ "Being and Becoming Virtual Retreat," 13-14 February, 2010.

psychological dynamics at play in the guru-disciple relationship, however, does not necessarily reduce the relationship but on the contrary has the power to develop it through illuminating the multiple aspects operative. The most sophisticated revisions of the guru-model, I suggest, are those that hold a both/and perspective by utilizing psychodynamic knowledge to clarify relational dynamics while also leaving a space open for the ontological narrative in which the relationship occurs. This type of dialogical approach, which can be seen in both Asian and Western teachers, stands in sharp contrast to Cohen's historic oppositional either/or stance.

In reflecting on these three areas—mystical experience, nonduality, and the guru-disciple relationship—we can ask how Cohen fits with Jeffrey Kripal's hermeneutic of a mystical humanism and his American Tantric transmission thesis, both of which have served as fundamental frameworks against which I have measured much of contemporary East-West integrations?⁷¹⁷ In short, Cohen fits well on a metaphysically level but less so on a cultural one. At first glance, Cohen's evolutionary enlightenment is a perfect illustration of Kripal's claim that we are witnessing the emergence of new forms of American mysticism that draw on both the ontological revelations of Asian religions and the scientific, pluralistic, and democratic revolutions of modernity. Central to these traditions, Kripal argues, is an embrace of world-affirming Tantric forms of Asian spirituality over world-negating traditions such as Advaita Vedanta.

Yet, while Cohen's evolutionary enlightenment—which he himself has aligned with a Tantric approach—metaphysically fits Kripal's hermeneutic so well, there are also significant differences. According to Kripal, a definitive mark of these new traditions is that they are suspicious of hierarchy and authority and affirm the value of the individual

⁷¹⁷ Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, 16-21, 449-469.

over tradition. As we have seen, however, Cohen has supported a more traditional authoritative model of the guru-disciple relationship, has reinforced both an institutional and metaphysical hierarchy, and has relentlessly targeted individuality. Similarly, while Kripal applauds the new American mysticism for integrating psychology and spirituality and producing more psychologically sophisticated forms of modern religiosity, Cohen has historically derided such attempts as self-indulgent dilutions of authentic enlightenment traditions. In these important areas, then, he has gone against the grain of contemporary Asian-inspired spirituality. Still, even in those places where Cohen opposes contemporary trends, he nonetheless illustrates the centrality of such themes and this is what ultimately makes him such an important figure in the study of the contemporary assimilation of Asian enlightenment traditions.

My own final reading of Cohen is that of the three traditions under examination here, he is the least dialectically sophisticated. In a number of important areas such as the relationship between mysticism and ethics and the guru-disciple, his position is marked by a rigid oppositional either/or that is at odds with the both-and attempts that characterizes West Coast Vipassana and the Diamond Approach. Ironically, for all of his interviews with different spiritual figures in *WIE?* and *EnlightenNext*, Cohen has consistently refused to consider competing or alternative sources of authority, be it the experiences of his (former) students or other discourses of knowledge such as psychoanalysis.⁷¹⁸ I see Cohen's resistance to question his own position as ultimate, authentically dialogue with the other, and entertain a more pluralistic perspective as his

⁷¹⁸ It should be noted that Ken Wilber has been heavily criticized on the same grounds. See Michael Bauwens, "The Cult of Ken Wilber: What Has Gone Wrong with Ken Wilber?" accessed August 31, 2010, http://www.kheper.net/topics/Wilber/Cult_of_Ken_Wilber.html.

greatest pedagogical limitation and the biggest obstacle to evolutionary enlightenment as truly reflecting a postmodern, “postmetaphysical” spirituality.

Conclusion

Enlightenment Beyond the Enlightenment

I want to conclude by briefly revisiting and reflecting on the main common themes that have emerged from my three case studies. First, I will explore the interplay between culture and ontology that I have discovered across my three communities and which supports Kripal's Tantric transmission thesis. Second, I will consider how the cultural shift from the modern to postmodern has affected East-West integrations. Third, I will offer a couple of suggestions for the future development of East-West integrative spiritualities and note how promisingly such directions are already being pursued by contemporary communities. Finally, I end with a few personal reflections on the intellectual and existential trajectory of the dissertation.

Linking Consciousness and Culture: The American Tantric Thesis

As noted in my introduction, one of the aims of this project was to take seriously the new metaphysics and ontologies emerging from contemporary East-West integrative spiritualities. While numerous studies have illuminated the modernization of Asian traditional spiritualities and advanced convincing interpretative cultural categories such as McMahan's refined model of "Buddhist modernism," attention to the ontological or metaphysical dimensions of the new traditions has been neglected. Drawing from two

recently advanced and analogous hermeneutics, Ferrer and Sherman's "participatory turn" and Kripal's concept of "consciousness and culture," I want to place more attention on these new ontologies and how they are shaped by but not reducible to cultural components. To briefly recap, a participatory approach accepts the influence of culture and language in religious phenomena while simultaneously recognizing the importance of noncontextual factors in shaping religious experiences and affirming the ontological value of spiritual realities. In doing so, it attempts to utilize modern critical thinking and postmodern epistemological insights to understand religious phenomena without reducing those same phenomena to their cultural components.

A specific example of a participatory approach can be found in Kripal's dialectical model of "culture and consciousness." By culture, Kripal refers to the multitude of discursive practices, histories, social systems, power and politics that construct human meaning and which are the intellectual focus of the humanities and social sciences. Drawing from a wealth of psychical and paranormal phenomenon, however, Kripal opposes the ethos of constructivism that reigns in the contemporary academic climate to claim that there are specific forms of human consciousness that are not reducible to local and historic cultures even if they must always express themselves in the terms and languages of those cultures. According to Kripal, psychical and paranormal phenomena "provide us with some of the most suggestive evidence that *consciousness and culture cannot be collapsed into one another but work together, in incredibly complex ways, to actualize different human potentialities, different forms of reality, different (im) possibilities.*"⁷¹⁹ In exploring this multidimensional relationship between consciousness and culture, Kripal notes that the coding of consciousness within

⁷¹⁹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible* (Chicago University Press, 2010).

culture is “a radical dialectical process between two forms of human experience.”⁷²⁰ The source of consciousness is “the real” that exceeds culture but can only be known through it.

Kripal, therefore, agrees with Ferrer and Sherman (and Eliade before them) that there are certain classes of phenomena—normally designated as religious, spiritual, psychic and paranormal—that cannot be reduced to the cultural matrix within which they emerge, even if they are always shaped by it. The usefulness of this intellectual lineage for my project is that it carves out a space for taking seriously the metaphysical or ontological dimensions of the new integrative spiritualities. Reading these traditions through a consciousness and culture dialect, then, what do we find? From the consciousness side, there is much evidence to claim that the metaphysical vision emerging from these new East-West spiritualities is essentially a Tantric one. I have argued at length that an embrace of a Tantric world-affirming metaphysics marks both Spirit Rock and Cohen. A similar argument can be made for the Diamond Approach. On numerous occasions over the last six years the main teachers from the Gulf Coast Diamond Approach have compared their approach to a Tantric one. Recently at a public retreat in Seattle, Hameed Ali and Karen Johnson, the co-founders of the Diamond Approach, identified their teachings as Tantric. In other words, the Tantric thesis it is not just an interpretative strategy read onto these communities; it is also an emic category promoted by them. Further, it is worth reiterating that the primary teacher of Ali was the Chilean gestalt therapist, Claudio Naranjo who Kripal describes as a “Tantric Shaman” and places squarely in the Tantric lineage at Esalen.⁷²¹ Also suggestive of the Tantric

⁷²⁰ Ibid., 202.

⁷²¹ Kripal, *Esalen*, 173-177.

thread is the participation of many former Osho followers in the Diamond Approach, an Indian guru who also promoted a westernized Tantric approach.

Moreover, it must be noted that in the case of west coast Vipassana and the Diamond Approach what characterizes these teachings as Tantric is not solely a wider affirmation of the world as a site for awakening, but also a very specific approach to practice. In both the west coast style of vipassana practice and the Diamond Approach practice of inquiry, the aim is to remain aware and accepting of whatever is arising in one's experience with the understanding that receiving an emotional or psychosomatic experience with non-resistance attention allows for a transmutation of the pure energy of that experience.⁷²² This alchemical approach is characteristic of Tantric practice. Further, in the case of the Diamond Approach, a reasonable argument could also be made that its practice of working directly with negative associated emotional and instinctual energies such as hatred, envy and desire is a modern analogy to the Tantric practices of working with the defilements or polluting substances. Again, this is not just an etic interpretation but also one of the ways that teachers within the tradition understand their practices. It is this element of the transformation of the emotional and instinctual energies rather than their suppression that convinces me to finally designate these spiritualities as essentially Tantric.

It needs to be acknowledged here that Romanticism provides another convincing lineage through which to locate these traditions, particularly in relationship to their concerns of balancing individuality with a monistic metaphysics. Indeed the Romantic pattern that M. H. Abrams classically labeled as "natural supernaturalism" can be

⁷²² At a joint public teaching I attended, Ali and Kornfield discussed the similarities between the main practices of their respective communities. Hameed Ali and Jack Kornfield, "Savoring the Fruit of the Path: Spiritual Maturity," October 19 2009.

detected in all three communities.⁷²³ However, considering both methods and metaphysics, and adding to it the emic understanding of participants, I remain convinced of the value of the “Tantric thesis,” which as Kripal argues allows one to detect patterns and phenomena that otherwise would go unnoticed.

My findings then both support and strengthen Kripal’s Tantric transmission thesis. To briefly reiterate, Kripal claims that in the first half of the twentieth century, Americans privileged the ascetic Advaita/Theravada forms of Asian religions but began to privilege the Tantric models beginning in the 1960s. Within this wider interpretative agenda, he presents Esalen as a fundamentally modern American Tantric tradition. According to Douglas E. Cowan, however, Kripal’s reading of Esalen through a Tantric lens is very problematic because he “does not provide any empirical evidence to support this perennialist conjecture, a problem that pervades his insertion of Tantra through the book.”⁷²⁴ In absence of such evidence, Cowan claims that rather than being empirically demonstrable, the Tantric thesis is merely “personal idiosyncratic, meaningful only to the author as an extended exercise in confirmation bias.”⁷²⁵ From a similar angle, Lola Williamson has asked why it is necessary to use the term “Tantra” when none of the participants at Esalen describe it as Tantric and when it does not contain the magical ritualistic practices or *siddhis* associated with Indian Tantra.⁷²⁶

My case studies show, however, that the participants do understand and articulate their practice as Tantric and they are engaging spiritual practices that do have their counterparts in traditional Indian Tantric traditions. Yet if these traditions are Tantric,

⁷²³ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971).

⁷²⁴ Douglas E. Cowan, “Review of *Esalen: American and the Religion of No Religion*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol, 77 No. 4 (December 2009), 964-968; 965.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, 968.

⁷²⁶ Lola Williamson, personal correspondence, March 23, 2010

they are also modern and American, which is where the cultural element comes in and why a both/and perspective is so vital. As I argued earlier, all of the traditions are marked by a commitment to American modern values such as democracy, transparency, pluralism, and individualism that make them decidedly different than any historic Tantric tradition.⁷²⁷ Similarly, a notable addition to the Tantric worldview is that of evolution. This, of course, is most striking in Cohen's evolutionary enlightenment and is also evident in the Diamond Approach, which describes ultimate reality as a dynamic infinite evolutionary unfolding. Hence, while such traditions do display a distinct Tantric flavor, they are strikingly different from any of their premodern Asian predecessors.

Such an observation only emphasizes the importance of a cultural and consciousness hermeneutic. Those who read these new integrative spiritualities through a purely socio-cultural, economic or political lens, such as Carrette, King, and Urban, miss their creative metaphysical, experiential and pragmatic dimensions. For example, a predictable and often-touted interpretation of the world-affirming dimensions of these spiritualities is that they simply allow Americans to be wealthy and spiritual at the same time. In her recent study of "Hindu-inspired meditation movements, Lola Williamson, for example, notes that a Tantric metaphysics has been embraced but at a later point dismisses it as merely the infiltration (and its implied corruption) of American materialism into Asian renunciate traditions.⁷²⁸

Something more, however, is at work here. A solely material analysis does many of the pioneers and participants of these traditions a great injustice in reducing their efforts to the lazy hermeneutic of "spiritual marketplace." It misses the pragmatic and

⁷²⁷ One finds also a perfect fit between Weber's socio-cultural category of inner-worldly mysticism and the metaphysical category of Tantra.

⁷²⁸ Williamson, *Transcendent in America*, 3-25.

existential aspects of these endeavors and the chance to illuminate how new ontologies are negotiated within complex cultural matrixes. There is, in short, a creative, dialogical, existential, cultural and metaphysical endeavor here that is flattened by reductive analyses.

And yet, at the same time, one of the main American cultural values that these contemporary ontological visions are shaped by is its materialism. Participants of these traditions often fail to realize the extent to which their spiritual practice is interacting with (and often being produced by and reinforcing) the political and economic realities of the moment. Mesmerized by their own subjective explorations and transformations, they can fail to acknowledge the ways personal subjectivity is always negotiated and constructed within complex socio-cultural matrices and relationships of power. Dialogue between the two groups can all too easily get stuck at an impasse: with one side convinced of and guarding the sacrality of individual interiority and the other fully committed and holding tight to a sobering structural analysis. A both/and approach such as a consciousness and culture model allows for more productive dialogues and a more encompassing hermeneutic. The tension between Asian asceticism and American materialism can reduce Asian spiritualities to material units of consumerism and profit but it can also produce complex, creative and more progressive worldviews. The advantage of a cultural and consciousness approach is that it has at least the potential to apply pressure on both interpretive positions and at its best can temper and challenge the limitations of each.

From the Modern to the Postmodern: East-West Spirituality in the 21st Century

In chapter one, I reviewed the common themes emerging from the encounter of premodern Asian religious traditions with western modernity. Here I want to reflect on how the cultural shift from the modern to late-modernity or the postmodern, which has been tracked from numerous quarters, has affected East-West integrations. Are there differences between contemporary East-West integrations and their historic predecessors and, if so, can they be located and explained within the wider cultural narrative of postmodernity?

One of the dominant themes emerging across the communities is a negotiation or struggle with the modern understanding of Asian religions—as essentially experiential, universal, perennial—that they have inherited. This struggle particularly plays out in a reconfiguration of the relationship towards spiritual or mystical experience. As I have discussed in some detail, the emphasis on mystical experience as the essence and goal of Asian religions is one of the defining marks of the modern presentation of Asian mysticism. What Ferrer calls the “experiential vision,” however, has been questioned and moderated by all three of the communities under examination here. To briefly recap, west coast Vipassana has been at the forefront of a trend within the Insight community to replace an emphasis on spiritual experiences with an emphasis on the integration of those experiences in daily life. In a related vein, the Diamond Approach places its focus on the psychological integration or “metabolization” of spiritual experiences rather than the mere attainment of them. Similarly, Cohen has been consistent in critiquing the experiential emphasis of contemporary East-West spirituality and has defined his teachings in contrast to this common tendency.

In all three cases, however, experiences are not dismissed but rather deemphasized by being placed into a larger integrative context. Also, it should be noted that the modern epistemological authority of experience is still maintained. The advice to see or test whether things are true in your own experience, for example, remains a central tenet of both west coast Vipassana and the Diamond Approach. Spiritual experience and particularly the “enlightenment experience,” though, have been dethroned from its modernist place of privilege as the pinnacle of spiritual practice and attention has shifted towards how such experiences can be integrated and expressed in the world. In this movement from mystical experience to the results or products of that experience, these communities can be seen as heirs to William James’s pragmatic perspective that mysticism is to be judged by its fruits rather than its origins.⁷²⁹

Another related key theme is a move beyond the individual to the relational and collective. Cohen has always been a staunch critic of the individual and his teaching is centered on a collective rather than personal enlightenment. West coast Vipassana has also been increasingly stressed the importance of the interpersonal and the communal. Some participants go as far to suggest that the future Buddha may come in the shape of a sangha rather than an individual. Such rhetoric shows the importance of the collective as an aspiration and ideal. It is also witnessed through an emphasis on building community or sangha within groups and through the development of specific relational practices such as Kramer’s insight dialogues. Interpersonal activities, such as having a short formal verbal interaction with people sitting near you, have also been introduced into some of the vipassana sitting groups, which previously consisted solely of silent sittings and a

⁷²⁹ William G. Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997).

teacher dharma talk. In a similar vein, the Diamond Approach has introduced interpersonal practices such as “dialectical inquiry” or “group inquiry” and on a theoretical level discuss the manifestation of the “group pearl” or a “dialectical pearl” in addition to the individual one. While the Diamond Approach has historically discouraged students from joining the group for social needs, in a recent edition of the in-house publication *The Diamond Dust* that centered on the themes of ‘community’ and ‘service,’ Ali declared that a need for and more conscious building of community had begun to naturally develop in the group.⁷³⁰ This shift brings the Diamond Approach in line with a contemporary trend towards developing internal and engaging external community within Asian-inspired spiritualities.⁷³¹

While trends towards integration and relationality show a clear move away from the modern presentation, one might reasonably argue that Asian-inspired spiritualities still promote the same universalism and perennial vision of their modern predecessors. A glance through any of the popular west coast Vipassana texts, for example, reveals that one is as likely to find a quote from Rumi as the Buddha, the poet Mary Oliver as the *Dhammapada*. However, while a spiritual eclecticism characteristic of universalism continues to reign, there are important contrasts from earlier perennial assumptions. One of these is that participants are much more aware of and respectful of differences between traditions. Many of the participants in these groups practice and even teach in other traditions or other lineages within the same tradition. Others are well-versed or even scholars in Asian religions and all practitioners have unprecedented access to a variety of excellent translations and academic texts such as those that populate the shelves in the

⁷³⁰ Hameed Ali, “Ask Hameed: His View on Community,” *The Diamond Dust*, Fall 2009, 20-21.

⁷³¹ Kripal makes the same observation about Esalen. Kripal, *Esalen*, 229-249.

Spirit Rock bookstore. Commonalities tend not promoted through ignorance or dismissal of difference, as was often the case in early forms of East-West spiritualities, but rather through a more informed and conscious choice and some teachers have written about their process of reconciling these differences while honoring them.⁷³² Indeed, none of the three communities promote a metaphysical perennialism, although some lean towards a moral or ethical one in their general agreement that different schools are united not by a common metaphysics but rather a common set of ethical principles.

Within these communities, I have identified two main strategies or responses to the limitations of the modern emphasis on individual experience: a return or recovery of tradition and the development of new more contemporary contexts. The recovery of tradition is seen in the recently instituted programs at Spirit Rock that offer a more foundational and systematic teaching of Theravada Buddhism and in the dharma talks at related insight groups. Relationships between monastics, particularly Ajahn Chah's community, and lay communities are flourishing and one also finds the appearance of daylong events incorporating ritual, another element that was neglected or discarded in the modernist presentation. In this respect, it is worth noting that participants appear hungry for this. In an informal conversation with a regular vipassana practitioner at Spirit Rock and SF Insight, I was struck by her reflection on the dharma talk of a guest monastic. As she put it, "It was so refreshing to just hear the dharma and not have someone try to relate it to a crazy traffic story or parenting crisis." The fact that the monastic retreats and events are amongst the most popular and widely attended at Spirit Rock attests further to this recover of interest in more traditional elements.

⁷³² See, for example, Sylvia Boorstein, *That's Funny You Don't Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist* (New York: HarperOne, 1998).

A second strategy is the creation of what can be thought of as more contemporary or culturally appropriate wider contexts for individual spiritual practice. This is the one of Cohen's stated goals and is also evident in the rhetoric of the Diamond Approach, which promotes itself as a spiritual school for the contemporary western world. The Diamond Approach has recently built a couple of new centers to provide more stability and cohesion for practitioners and within individual groups attempts are being made towards developing stable contexts and networks with which to ground their practices. In the Hawaii group, for example, which is led by the same teachers of the Gulf coast group, there are plans to build a retirement community for participants. West coast Vipassana has initiated numerous networks such as the "dharma buddy system" and the community leaders program. All of these centers, networks and programs are designed around contemporary values such as commitment to nonsexist principles and the use of ecological sound materials and practices. I read these endeavors as a move away from a privatized individual spirituality to a contemporary revisioning of religious institution and community.

The differences appearing across my case study are similar to those McMahan tracks in his study of Buddhist modernism. In a glance at the contemporary Buddhist scene, McMahan notes that the practitioners are taking a variety of positions along the traditionalist-modernist spectrum. He sees this as a sign of the emergence of conditions associated with later-modernity or postmodernity such as multiple interpretations of tradition, increasing pluralism and a combining of various forms of modernism and traditionalism.⁷³³ Following McMahan, I argue that contemporary Asian-inspired

⁷³³ McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, 249.

spirituality is demonstrating clear signs of a shift away from modernist forms to display trends more characteristic of late-modernity or postmodernity.

Dialogue, Diversity, and Depth: Thinking Towards the Future

A common rationale or/and legitimating strategy for contemporary East-West integrations is that having emerged in a different historic and cultural moment than their premodern predecessors, they have new important knowledge that can benefit and improve the latter. Such traditions, including each of the three communities under examination here, commonly claim that they are uniting the best of the premodern, modern and postmodern worlds. Accepting this claim on its own terms, I want to reflect on the issues of economics, diversity and social justice.

One of the biggest and most valid criticisms of the new Asian-inspired spiritualities is that they are economically inaccessible and overwhelmingly white and middle-class. My research certainly confirmed this as the case. Of the three communities, Spirit Rock is to be applauded for its efforts at diversity; on first entering the grounds of Spirit Rock, one is greeted with a sign affirming diversity and the community initiated an investigation into racism, has a diversity committee, and offers reduced and free scholarships for minority groups. For all of these efforts, though, it still remains populated by an overwhelming white and middle-class audience. The Diamond Approach, in contrast, has failed to initiate any sustained reflection on why the student body is predominantly white and middle class. In response to a public question I posed Ali about the Diamond Approach's relationship to diversity, he commented that, "we do

not actively pursue it, but we are open to it and encourage it. The fact is that we do not pursue any demography, and we do not actually pursue spreading our Work at all. We simply respond to the needs that arise.”⁷³⁴ The problem with the Diamond Approach is that it does put this metaphysical and mysterious category of “needs that arise” in dialogue with any type of structural analyses. For example, in a discussion about making the group more economically available, one teacher said that only people whose lives “weren’t together” were unable to afford it. The implication here of course is that is all the responsibility lies with the individual, a type of metaphysically buffeted conservatism. A little better is Cohen’s evolutionary community, which, at least, has a sliding scale for events. However, he has similarly failed to address the issues of diversity in the student body and when discussing those “individuals at the leading edge” does not reflect on what socio-economic conditions may account for the fact that these individuals are all of a certain demographic.

During a fieldwork visit to Abhayagiri monastery in Northern California, however, I was struck by how much more diverse racially, ethnically, and socio-economically the visitors were when compared to those participants at Spirit Rock and related Insight groups. The same point would be equally true for Cohen’s community and the Diamond Approach. While there are undoubtedly numerous factors involved in this, the fact that the monastery is free to visit must be considered one of them. Indeed, in an informal chat with one university student at the monastery she told me that she liked to visit because it was donation-based and therefore much less expensive than doing a retreat at Spirit Rock.

⁷³⁴ Hameed Ali, “Ask Hameed,” *The Diamond Dust*, August 2010, 9-10.

However, one is still struck by the paradox that while the gift economics of the monastery allows for, or at least contributes towards, a wider socio-economic, ethnic and racial mix of participants, at the teaching and institutional level women are excluded and subordinate. Here then we have a dilemma. Many of the western innovations challenge the problematic hierarchical and patriarchal aspects of Asian religions such as the elitism of traditional Advaita Vedanta in which only Brahman males can fully receive teaching or the sexist structures of Theravada Buddhism in which the most senior nun is subservient to male laity. The challenges based in the modern values of gender equality and democracy have resulted in an unprecedented number of female teachers and participants in the new spiritualities. This is the case at Spirit Rock, which has a large number of female teachers and a commitment to non-sexist practices firmly in place. The same is also true for the Diamond Approach, in which the majority of teachers including the co-founder are female. Yet, at the same time such women, and participants in general, are overwhelming white and middle-class. Hence, while there have been great strides in gender equality, race, class and sexuality have not been sufficiently addressed. There is a disturbing gap that needs to be interrogated rather than justified between the promise and practice, ideal and actuality, of the democratic ethos motivating certain innovations. Such a gap, I believe, is reflective of the problem of the modern humanist subject who critics have revealed that far from representing the universal subject as is claimed, represents the white western male. Here is where I also depart from Kripal, who I see as more enamored of the classical humanist subject and not as fully embracive of its postmodern critique as myself.

As such, I call for Asian-inspired spiritualities to fully embrace the postmodern critique of the modernity and go beyond the limitations of the modern subject. Promisingly, a contemporary inspired-Buddhist community, the East Bay Meditation Center, is already pursuing such a direction. The East Bay Meditation Center was founded in a “spirit of diversity” in Oakland in 2001. The challenge of the group was to create a meditation center that met the needs of very diverse and multicultural groups of the East Bay. Its mission is to unite the mindfulness practices and wisdom teachings of Buddhism with a commitment to diversity, transparent democratic governance, generosity-based economics and environmental sustainability. The center runs entirely from donations and voluntary work and offers separate meditation groups for people of color and LGBTQ community as well as open meditation groups. It runs workshops and events on a number of issues such as “meditation and social justice” and “being mindful and white in a multicultural world” as well as offering a foundation course “essential dharma’ in Buddhist teachings. EBMC has managed to find a way to negotiate the economic demands of operating an urban center in a central real estate location with making its programs available to what is arguably the most diverse Buddhist sangha in America.⁷³⁵ In bringing together such a diverse sangha, EBMC also undermines distinctions between Asian immigrant and white American sanghas—many of the participants are second and third generation Asians who are bridging the two worlds in ways that will have interesting consequences for the future. I see the EBMC as a living example of how the social justice aspirations of modernity can be fully developed and integrated into Asian renouncer tradition. At EBMC, one really does come close to

⁷³⁵ “East Bay Meditation Center,” www.eastbaymeditation.org.

finding the enlightenment for *all* bodies that Kripal sees promised, if not fully realized, at Esalen.

In terms of fully embracing the insights of the premodern, predominantly Asian contemplative traditions, I call on contemporary East-West spiritualities to maintain a dialogical tension between and not a collapse of the integrating strands, whether it be tradition and innovation, psychology and spirituality, meditation and daily life, the immanent and the transcendent. As noted, one of the dangers is that as lay traditions in a hectic modern world, Asian-inspired spiritualities can become diluted and the contemplative depths are sacrificed. In respect to the three communities examined, the signs are promising. Spirit Rock is undergoing a renewed commitment to the tradition side of its preservation-innovation dialect; the Diamond Approach employs a dialogical approach between psychoanalysis and spiritual awakening rather than reducing the latter to the former; and Cohen organizes his retreats around a “being and becoming” model that attends to the formless ground and the evolving world.

Another community that models a sophisticated integration of contemporary knowledge into Asian contemplative traditions is Dawn Mountain Tibetan Buddhist center in Houston, Texas. Dawn Mountain impressively unites traditional Tibetan Buddhism and modern psychological knowledge largely due to the expertise of its two founders, Buddhist scholar Anne Klein and former Buddhist scholar turned psychotherapist Harvey Aronson. It can be considered a successful iteration of East-West because it holds together a number of different narratives of traditional and modernity such as the contemplative and psychological without blurring them or having one swallow up the other. For example, Aronson draws from object relations theory to

illuminate the different relational patterns that students bring to the practice of guru devotion and asks students to reflect on what self-images are stirred up personally for them in relationship to different aspects of teachings such no-self. At the same time, Klein and Aronson maintain close contact with traditional Tibetan Buddhist gurus in Nepal and Tibet, are deeply versed scholastically in the different philosophical schools of Buddhism and teach the classic Tibetan practices. The community also operates a policy of no one being excluded due to lack of funds and offers several community programs.

Final Thoughts

In ending, I want to offer a few final reflections on the research trajectory and the intellectual and existential distance I have travelled with this project. Just before I began graduate school, I had spent five months in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Nepal where I became progressively disillusioned with its heavy-handed “traditionalist approach”: the literal readings of cosmology that appeared ludicrous in light of western science; a psychological naivety that mistook psychological dysfunction for spiritual merit; a narcissism that regarded each and every action of the guru as an act of cosmic significance: his cough was not because of the notorious winter damp, but because he was burning “our” bad karma; he wasn’t hours late for the teachings because demonstrations had closed down the roads to the monastery, but because he was teaching “us” patience (and maybe he was, but nonetheless, we *all* had coughs because of the damp and the roads *were* closed); and a masculine competitiveness towards accumulating merit that set my feminist radar off the scale. Particularly testing were the attitudes of

many of western devotees towards the guru: a self-effacing subservience that was all the more troubling given some of the personal trauma histories some had confided in me. That, I reflected, is not guru devotion it is rather masochistic submission. Troublingly the monks and nuns did not just seem not to notice but also to encourage such behavior with the regaling of heroic feats of self-abnegation for the guru. One female friend who woke up several times in the night screaming after her meditation practice uncovered sexual abuse memories by her father was told that in the infinite cycle of samsaric existence, we had all been “abusers and abused many times.” It might have been true metaphysically, but it was not helpful practically and, to me at least, it was offensive ethically.

For consolation, I turned, as I often have, to books and spent many afternoons in the well-stocked monastery library. I read literally years worth of back editions of *Tricycle* pouring over and gobbling up articles on the need to integrate Buddhism with social justice, feminism and, psychology. I discovered—amazingly! —a copy of June Campbell’s *Female Traveler in Space*, a penetrating and relentless feminist critique of Tibetan Buddhism that amplified my discomfort at the massive discrepancies between the very comfortable male monastery (where the western guests stayed) and its very basic sister nunnery hidden just down the road.⁷³⁶ I clung to Kornfield’s *A Path With Heart* and *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* as if they were old friends. It was through another Kornfield article in the library that I first encountered the Diamond Approach and its attempt to elucidate the relationship between meditative states and psychological dynamics and make sense of disconcerting events such as the guru scandals. These, I thought, are my people. And, these have indeed been the books and traditions that have formed the major primary written and lived texts of this project.

⁷³⁶ June Campbell, *Traveler in Space: Female Identity in Tibetan Buddhism* (London: Athlone Press, 1996).

Hence, I began the dissertation with a sympathy bordering on the defensive for the new East-West integrations. Unexpectedly though, after six years emerging myself in the contemporary East-West climate of integrative spiritualities, I have surprised myself by coming to a renewed appreciation of certain aspects of tradition that such innovations have neglected and an acknowledgment of some of their own limitations. I realized, for example, that just as an overemphasis on discipline can easily slide into a masculine competitiveness or provide fuel for a vitriolic super-ego, so can self-acceptance easily morph into self-indulgence. On several occasions at Vipassana daylong events at Sprit Rock, for example, I have been bemused at the amounts of visits to the bookstore and tea station that occur during the transition from sitting to walking meditation periods. I have been dismayed at some of the prices for food and accommodation at the Diamond Approach retreats and at perennial complaints such as there is not enough protein in the diet or there wasn't any dessert at lunch. It's a retreat, I want to scream, not a holiday camp. While it is true that comfortable surroundings can facilitate some of the work, I think it is time to rethink priorities when other students are not attending because of the cost. Most troublingly, I have witnessed, across both communities, what I think of as a reification of the super-ego defense teachings in which practitioners use the teaching of defending against the super-ego to justify and excuse all kinds of indulgent behavior or "acting out." Here the problem is not so much a lack of psychological knowledge, but a manipulation of it. I have come to think of as a contemporary manifestation of Chogyam Trungpa's spiritual materialism, in which the ego can use anything, including a psychoanalytically astute spirituality, for its own edification.

At the end of the project, I have come to realize, in other words, that the situation

is complicated. I have come to see that there is truth and wisdom to be found in both the defenses and the critiques of the new Asian-inspired integrative spiritualities. Most of all I have become convinced of the importance of always striving for a both/and perspective, a dialectical that puts pressure on and furthers both sides, the traditional and the innovative, the psychological and the contemplative, the political and the religious, and convinced too of the fact that this is a complex, fluid and dynamic process rather than a final definite position to be reified and defended. Much, of course, depends upon the participants; holding a both/and approach demands an honesty, openness, commitment and maturity that are not always easy to come by. After spending many years with these participants, observing and practicing alongside them, however, I, for one, am hopeful.

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