

The spiritual potential of Relational Co-inquiry
and the relevance of Buddhist practices

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2013

Method steeped in Wisdom is freedom

The Principle Teachings of Buddhism

Tsongkapa



Following rules inflexibly

Produces fools.

*Contradiction is the essence of
human consciousness.*

Rule, rules innumerable

As grains of sand on the shore

Confuse the spirit.

From birth onwards

The only certain guide

is the silver thread.

Every spring

Blossoms open,

Only to close again.

From the scandalous poems of the Zen Master

Crazy Cloud

I discuss here the relevance and value of Buddhist awareness practices for the practice of Charismatic co-inquiry—a form of self and world transfiguring human research. I begin with a brief sketch of some of the limitations of Buddhism from a relational co-inquiry point of view (as I see them) and how these limitations can be (potentially) transformed through the practice of co-inquiry. I also want to declare a long-time appreciation of (Pan-Hindu-Vedantic) Buddhism for its unflinching awareness of the transient and impermanent nature of the human condition; the deep compassion and kindness extended to all human and non-human beings; the resolute endeavour to release all sentient beings from suffering and illusion; and the wisdom of living a life unattached from egoic entanglements. These virtues and the mindful, nature-loving and peaceful approach to existence exemplified by many Buddhists have been inspirational and supportive companions on the path.

Transpersonal Psychology and Buddhism

I also have a long time interest in transpersonal psychology, the culture of transpersonalism and transpersonal research (Lahood 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013). Transpersonal psychology was originally something of Western Vedantic/Buddhist project coupled with the psychedelic movement (associated with people like D.T. Suzuki; Allan Watts; Aldous Huxley; Abraham Maslow; Ram Dass; Chogyam Trungpa; Stan Grof; *Roshi* Joan Halifax, Jack Kornfield and Ken Wilber among others). According to some, transpersonal psychology has been more influenced by Buddhism than anything else. Transpersonal theorist, Michael

Washburn wrote, “In the early years transpersonal theory was predominantly humanistic in its psychology and Eastern in its religion, a synthesis of Maslow and Buddhism (primarily Zen) (Washburn 1995, p. 3). Philosopher Robert McDermott affirms this position:

While the transpersonal movement has been informed and inspired by peak experiences of virtually all religious traditions, it not surprisingly has drawn most comfortably from Buddhist theory and practice. With almost all forms of Buddhism, transpersonalism tends to value healing practices in response to *dukkha* (the pain of existence) without attachment to a particular ontology (1990, p. 208).

The transpersonal wave emerged in the late 60s as an extension of the Zen and Gestalt boom in California and was centred at the Esalen Institute the seat of Gestalt Therapy and counter-cultural psychotherapy.

The early movement had at its core what sociologist Donald Stone called "gestalt consciousness" (1976, p.94), a form of awareness training (with a foot in Zen Buddhism) that advocated a non-judgmental attitude to the contents of attention and an emphasis on the awareness of the immediate present experience (here and now). The Gestalt attitude was the basic foundation of various human potential groups and practices as it enabled both bodily awareness and personal insight (Stone, 1976, p. 94). Exquisite phenomenological attention to the immediate present experience could (apparently) also result in the so-called *satori* (a Japanese Buddhist term)—an awakening, and a seeing through of illusion—renamed in Gestalt theory as the 'aha!' experience (Lahood, 2010b).

Thus, its powerful techniques were capable of opening one to transpersonal awareness; and with this the secular human potential movement soon evolved toward a more mystical orientation. This evolution was a movement from the Gestalt attitude (which carried with it

the promise of Martin Buber's I-thou relationality which had a strong spiritual dimension) to the more 'trans' or beyond the personal toward cosmic consciousness (cf. Ram Dass, 1971). It was the evolution of a powerful hybrid New Age religion that oriented (and still does) strongly toward the liberations favoured by impersonal nondual Eastern religions (and the notion that the relative world and the person in it is but a dream). As Stone observed, "the self-transcendence of merging with infinite cosmic energy" (1976, p. 96) had become a very powerful religious image (which seemed to peak in the late 1980s).

Buber and his appreciation of the Between and the attention to interpersonal relationship as a potential transpersonal domain of practice, became a lover left at the altar in favour of realizing Eastern conceptions of enlightenment—the so-called 'Real', one's Original Face, Essence, or True Self—an impersonal nondual eradication of the person in favour of the (Real) One. In this way the transpersonal movement (and to some degree the contemporary spiritual movement) lost touch with its *relational, horizontal* and *interpersonal* foundation, prefigured in the human potential and encounter movement. Instead it became a transcendental and *vertically*-oriented, impersonal, non-relational movement. Vertical reality was privileged over horizontal reality; mysticism over interpersonal ethics. Once the presence of the Between was abandoned spiritual events become an individual's subjective experience.

One difficulty in construing action research itself as a spiritual practice is the subtle Cartesianism of recent transpersonal studies. This tacitly assumes that spirituality is a subjective experience, within a nonspatial individual consciousness, of transpersonal objects which transcend the everyday public space of social interactions (Ferrer, 2002). By contrast, we take a nonCartesian view of spirituality as a shared transformative event, a shared occasion of enhanced human flourishing. It is generated by collaborative action for change taken together, the action itself in part

shaping, and in part disclosing, inquiring into and being shaped by, the reality of the relational event. On this account spirituality is manifest in flourishing and liberating participatory events which persons-in-relation co-create with the reality of the presence between them in their situation (Heron & Lahood, 2008).

There has now been a move within transpersonal psychology to recover the missing horizontal dimension. One of the voices in this recovery was John Heron who wrote:

In my experience, indwelling spiritual potential is the active source and ground of my personhood. It moves me, not merely to ascend vertically in awareness, but also to extend horizontally, empowered from within, reaching out to others in both facilitative and reciprocal relations. This relational, real-person sharing, horizontal spirituality is co-created with, and grounded in the depth of, immanent spiritual life, I find that it is in certain respects more fundamental than vertical spirituality, ascending to the heights.
(1998, p. 77)

Buddhist Influences

The psychedelic/transpersonal community around Stanislav Grof with whom I trained in the late 1980s had a strong Buddhist, and indeed a strong *vertical* feel about it, and once a year Grof and Jack Kornfield facilitated a breathwork and vipassana insight meditation week.¹ I have in the past taken up a Buddhist meditation practice and done a small anthropological project in a monastery in Thailand that treated heroin addiction through forest medicine and ritual. Addiction was seen at the monastery as *dukkha* (a hellish world of suffering, pain and

¹Claims Grof's head trainer Tav Sparks, "What we learn is that breathwork is a vertical strategy—that it's totally about what happens within us" (Sparks, 2012 in the inner door). Carried to extreme this kind of intra-psychic approach totally denies the importance of the horizontal dimension of life; the interpersonal, relational, intersubjective or even the here/now situational needs or persons.

dissatisfaction) and the medicine, as well as Buddhist cosmology, was used to liberate the sufferer from the world of pain. Many years ago a man with a heroin addiction was taken from Bangkok to see a nun who lived in a cave a couple of day's walk away. She gave the addicted man a lotus blossom to eat and reputedly this blessing purged the addicted person of the heroin demon and he was released from *dukkha*. Over the years a monastery of ex-addicts grew up around the nun and the lotus blessing was turned into a group purging ritual.

In my early 20s I had been seriously considering becoming a Buddhist monk at the time I had purchased an air ticket to Japan where I wanted to study Zen at a monastery in Nara - having written to an American abbot there at the time (John Toller who died in 2006). My life took a different turn at that time into the world of psychodrama and psychotherapy. So I have had more than a passing interest in Buddhism and here I want to appraise Buddhist mindfulness as useful for the work of co-inquiry and participatory or relational spirituality in general.

Some years ago I went to a lecture in New Zealand by one of the pioneers of the participatory spirituality paradigm Henryk Skolimowski'. He was the then chair of *eco-psychology* at a university in Poland. I recall his passionate interest in 'walking with reverence through the word' and how that had touched me. He made statement that went something along the lines of "well, we all have to do something with our egos, the religious traditions agree with that, but what? The Buddhist would have you meditating for 15 or 20 years but I don't think we have that much time." I was attending the lecture with a group of friends who had formed a small ad hoc human research group—we would engage in different transformative activities including sweat-lodge; encounter work; chanting and meditation and we operated on the principles of cooperative inquiry as developed by John Heron (with whom I was in an inquiry group with for many years). Thus we explored how our unacknowledged emotions, defences, archaic distress patterns etc could derail the action cycle in a rudimentary co-inquiry we

nicknamed the "Buddhas' Bakery" (plural Buddhas cooking-collaborating together) this began about 20 years ago (a version of which is still active today). One of our activities was to enact and research something like a *co-satsang* ... an open-eyed appreciation of the other group members as manifest divinity (takes one to know one kind of thing). Since then I have relocated the Buddhas' Bakery to Byron Bay where it has been renamed "The Conference of the Birds and Bees" a play on the famous work of a Persian Sufi poet.

Buddhism as non-relational

When I arrived in Byron I was also fresh from a 7 of year stint at a university where I had studied religion, ritual and childbirth through the lens of social anthropology. I had also been working part-time on a study of Buddhism as a non-relational (as in non-theistic) religion that could be used as a defence (by some) to avoid and reject interpersonal relationship (see Lahood 2010a, 2010b). During my 20 years of leading breathwork groups, I had observed the way that we human beings can use spirituality repressively (to deny aspects of ourselves) or oppressively (to manipulate or belittle other persons) and thus I tended to see the 'fault' (for the want of better word) as being not with Buddhism or Advaita but with wounded people, yet, there is something about the religion of Buddhism that is definitely non-relational.² In his work on the evolution of religion Robert Bellah wrote: "In India we find perhaps the most radical of all versions of world rejection, culminating in the great image of the Buddha, and the world is a burning house and man's urgent need is a way to escape it" (1972, p. 264). This would suggest that escaping the relative or relating world through non-attachment is the only purpose of the Buddhist path and as such some have argued recently it is not a very *socially*

² On the other hand Buddhist meditation can help to reframe, be present, self regulate and lessen reactivity and therefore can be useful for maintaining healthy relations.

engaged practice (although to be sure efforts to create a more socially engaged Buddhism are well underway).

As another transpersonal psychologist has noted:

Buddhism explicates the non-dual world of the Impersonal Divine superlatively well, but it entirely ignores the theistic-relational dimension of the Personal Divine.

Although both Personal and Impersonal aspects can be found in most religious traditions, Buddhism is an exception to this Buddhism firmly maintains that there is no soul and that reality is impersonal and nondual in nature. (Cortright, 1997, p. 126)

Divergent Spiritual End-points

This theme of divergent spiritual ends and differing (and competing) spiritual subjectivities is important. Since the great American psychologist William James, published his influential work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) it has become increasingly accepted that spiritual experiences or, trans/personal events, can occur in a variety of circumstance and may vary in content, intent and practice. It has been recognized, for example, that "Buddhism and shamanism aspire to very different states of consciousness" (Winkelman, 1993, p. 5). This also true of Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta, their respective practitioners relate to and enact two vastly divergent spiritual universes. One ends in non-theistic emptiness or *sunyata*, the other ends in impersonal *sat chit ananda*; complete absorption in a bliss-filled God-head (Morris 1993) leaving no personal remainder.³

Divergent cultural styles cultivate transpersonal states or insights that fulfil divergent cultural needs in different epochs and contexts. The *satori* of the Japanese Zen Buddhist or the

³ Buddhism denies the existence of both Brahma and the Atman and the Atman/Brahman union of Vedanta - what they both have in common is that the person is held to disappear.

Samadhi of the Indian yogi are not much use for an on-the-hoof hunter-gatherer people who have honed their precognition skills in hunting dreams. The ability to locate game with hunting dreams is unimportant to shaman/midwives who cultivate spirit-possession and psychic flight into the cosmic uteri of women in an effort to conceive of her client's generative potential (Lahood, 2009). On this premise alone, to try and claim anything like one spiritual ultimate endpoint that applies to all peoples in all places across time is very dubious claim indeed.

On this theme of the cultivation divergent spiritual ends another transpersonal anthropologist wrote this:

The Jewish “preexperiential” or “conditioning pattern,” ... includes the teaching that experiences of unity with the divine do not happen, given the Jewish conception of God as radically Other and the principles traditionally recommended for reaching the mystic goal. The result is that ecstatic, self-forgetting moments of unity, of absorption into God, are rare among Jewish mystics, who are far more likely to experience “the Divine Throne, or the angel Metatron, or aspects of the Sefiroth [Divine Emanations], or the heavenly court and palaces, or the Hidden Torah, or God's Secret Names” (Katz, 1978, p. 34). The complex Buddhist preconditioning, in contrast, prepares the Buddhist mystic for a rather different experience, *nirvana*, a state *not of relationship* but apparently of selfless tranquillity (Wulff, 2003).

My cosmological and trans-personal experience resonates strongly with Persian Sufism: the world is not approached as an egoic illusion but as manifest divinity—not as impersonal non-dualism but 'divine dualitude'; an ensouled and relational cosmos—the world, reality, creation *as* relationship (see Lahood, 2013). This spiritual disclosure taught me to approach the world as manifest spirit 'beholding' itself in its manifest beauty... and more, that the manifest

flowering of the world is symbolic of what remains hidden ... the world then is thus a co-creative text to be contemplated. But again this is a far cry from Buddhism... and here is Cortright with the second 'problem' (but not necessarily a problem from the Buddhist perspective):

Although the term “mindfulness” is specifically Buddhist, I am using it here to cover a broad class of very similar meditation practices that have received their greatest refinement through the nondual traditions ... Nisargadatta Maharaj’s looking for who seeks and Ramana Maharshi’s self-inquiry meditation of progressive dis-identification [e.g. the I am not a body of *A Course in Miracles*] and searching for the source can be seen as variants of this process (Cortright, 1997, p. 128).

He concludes:

The Buddhist perspective of meditation practice, though a useful one, is nevertheless limited. In its preoccupation with mindfulness, it misses the various soul aspects and manifestations of spiritual consciousness and *being* which most of the world's other spiritual disciplines have explored. But since from the Buddhist perspective there is only mindfulness, this issue can only be raised from a position outside of the Buddhist worldview” (Cortright, 1997, p.126).

Furthermore, and this is the third problem, Buddhism has, from a somewhat ethnocentric position, claimed that its aspired spiritual enlightenment is higher, better or greater than other cultural parallels (see Winkleman 1993; Morris 1993, Ferrer 2002). This hierarchal out-ranking of the other is a cultural conceit that some theorists in comparative religion and transpersonal psychology have claimed is suggestive of a deeper psycho-cultural malady; a form of spiritual narcissism - albeit a narcissism common to the world's religious formations (Ferrer, 2002). I have argued elsewhere (Lahood, 2010; 2013) that contemporary New Age

religion suffers from the same malady. Relational co-inquiry can be used to raise awareness about this malady and cultivate a more relational consciousness.

As I mentioned earlier my cosmological experience simply differs from that of the insight of the Buddha. The insight I was heir to vouchsafed the soul and its soul and this insight was not a question of 'belief' or adhering to an introjected doctrine or an authoritarian prescription. To be candid, it was an experiential relational encounter with an immortal being of light and a personification of God (see *In the Footsteps of the Prophets* www.co-inquiry.com). Here is philosopher George Adams with the fourth 'problem', and one that certainly captures something of my own doubts about the whole Buddhist cosmic story:

Buddhism seems to be content with not affirming that something – however mysterious, indefinable, and elusive - about each human being is unique and precious, and, in a meaningful universe, should in some way – again, however mysteriously, indefinably, and elusively – not be forever lost. In other words, I am suggesting that the experience of another self as known through love makes the Buddhist silence on the status of the self spiritually quite troublesome. It is not a matter of indifference, spiritually speaking, whether the entity which is my son or daughter has no substantial reality and at some point shall cease to exist forever. Indeed, the personalist [relational] might object that there is almost a spiritual callousness in such a laissez-faire attitude toward the existential status of a loved one. From this perspective, the equanimity espoused by Buddhism is achieved only at a very high price – namely, desensitizing oneself to the sense of spiritual wrongness of sentient beings being casually discarded by the universe.

In a sense, we are dealing here with competing subjectivities, or internal states from which very different views of spiritual reality are seen. Just as the Buddhist can assert

that only through the cultivation of a state of *shamatha* and meditative mindfulness can one acquire insight into the true nature of reality, I am suggesting that one could likewise argue that through the cultivation of a very different internal space, grounded in the experience of love of another, one gains insight into the spiritual nature of selves. (Adams, 2010, p. 9-10).

From my perspective Adams is getting to the nub of it. What are the possibilities of cultivating human loving as a spiritual practice; what the values; the ethics; what the life-loving and soul-enriching practices of such an endeavour? What the spiritual practice of desire and attachment. Furthermore, there is no-need for these divergent subjectivities to compete with each other for the so-called "true nature of reality" because different truths are revealed through divergent practices. To put it bluntly can the Dalai lama, for example, really comment on the path of sexual relationship, love and procreativity - since his world does not allow him participation in these deeply profound human fields of experience? The truths of divergent religious enactments are simply the products of relating in different ways to the cosmos and can surely be used to complement each other.

The point here is that Buddhism, while venerable, compassionate, and profound in its cultivation of emptiness, may not have the practices, understanding or desire to conduct a co-inquiry into relational spirituality. And here ends my critique. Rest assured, gentle reader, it was not meant to be polemical, scathing, or triumphant and it is not based in ignorance, rather it is a modest reminder that there might be something useful beyond the mindfulness; all is one, vertical reality models that allow us to collaboratively explore the virtues of human love, the spirit of the between, interpersonal relationship, sacred dualitude, the ethic of encounter, and lived immanent divinity as a virtuous Path of Beauty. I have come to believe through experience and 20 years of practice that co-inquiry can be used to co-create profound interpersonal climates, atmospheres and communal states of being that are reparative and

deeply spiritual in themselves and which do not conform the current (and rather masculine) 'One-truth' fashion. Since we have all been wounded in relationships perhaps the Buddhist focus on non-attachment and the severing of bonds relationship are not quite enough. Perhaps a more sophisticated relational spirituality needs to be born.

Having said that, I am by no means traditional theist. The noxious dualism offered up by traditional theistic religions can be deeply divisive, separating and alienating. Indeed historically it was because of such a cruel separation from God (here meaning: all this is and all that could be) that many Westerners turned to the East. In the West we have cultivated through our philosophical and religious traditions the travesty of an isolated individual person wholly separate from spirit (and this kind of person simply won't do). On the other end of the scale in Eastern enlightenments the person supposedly disappears altogether, leaving no remainder (and this kind self-abandonment and resulting non-personhood won't do either). So I take my stand somewhere in the middle I retain the person but I open my person's body-ego to the transcendental heights and the womb of divine immanence, and thereby I divinize the relational, the horizontal, the situational and of course the body. This may be called a charismatic person (or in other words sacred personhood).

Toward a person-centred Buddhism?

Interestingly, transpersonal theorists have gone to “great pains” in their attempts to “reinterpret Buddhism and make the doctrine of *anatta* [no self] less disturbing, and more in harmony with Western conceptions of the self” (Morris, 1994, p. 66). Morris showed how various writers in the field and following Jung (e.g. Mokusen Miyuki, Claire Owens, the Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki, and later influential Western Buddhist Ken Wilber) have conflated and overlapped or, from my theoretical point of view, *hybridized* Zen Buddhism with what appear to be Hindu/Gnostic descriptions of Self and the process of merging with the divine. This

strange amalgamation has become a very influential and important New Age image (see Lahood, 2007, 2008, 2010a, 2010b).

We can potentially see a more benign attempt to recover the tacit seeds of personhood in Tibetan Buddhist theory by transpersonal theorist John Heron. Perhaps it's worth saying at the outset that the non-Western Buddhist might be interested not one jot in the prospect of Heron's project given Buddhism has managed quite nicely as a non-person-centred religion for the past 2500 years. However, clearly there is room I think to address the Western Buddhist, the New Ager, the transpersonal psychology movement.

For the Buddhist, wrote Heron (whom I will quote and paraphrase here) "there is no permanent deep centre of personhood, only a succession of transient mental states which produce the illusion of the self that connects them" (1992, p. 38). Nevertheless, Heron finds beginnings of person-centred Dharma, "deep in the heart of Tibetan Buddhist Traditions" by using modern Buddhist interpreters such as Lama Govinda (a German convert who wrote in the 1960s) and D.T Suzuki, an influential post-war, Zen Buddhist missionary to America, whom, it must be said, offered a somewhat non-traditional almost participatory notion of Buddhism (Lahood, 2008).

First Heron takes the Tibetan Buddhist concept of the *asraya paravttri* described by Lama Govinda as "a thorough transformation of our personality" from undertaking the mystic's path. Rather than vertical transcendence or a non-dual insight, this involves more of a tantric path of working with the body and emotions. An alchemical transmutation of the base metals of everyday mind, into the "imperishable jewel of the adamantine mind" thus everyday states of mind are being transformed into *Bodhichitta* (which has many meanings but 'transforming suffering into bliss' will do well enough here). Eventually, such a path of transmutation

culminates in the realization of *Dharmakaya*, the universal principle of all consciousness. According to Govinda, this is a "living force which manifests in the individual and assumes the form of 'personality' but it goes beyond individual consciousness, as its origin is in the universal realm of spirit" (Govinda, 1960, p. 82-213). Thus the trans-personal has a grounded personal locus (which gives us divine-personhood). Although this idea of personhood is minimal says Heron, Suzuki takes a more robust view implying the *Dharmakaya* has personality, "the highest reality is not a mere abstraction, it is very much alive with sense and awareness and intelligence and above all, with love purged of human infirmities and defilements" (Suzuki, 1947, p. 41). Furthermore, the five *Dhyani-Buddhas*, transcendental presences encountered in the meditative vision, have all the characteristics of personality.

Heron wrote that seeded with the concept of the Enlightened One is the notion of divine personhood and this corresponds to the three bodies: *Dharmakaya* (in which all enlightened ones are the same); *Sambhogakaya* (the normal or ideal character of the Buddha); and the *Nirmanakaya* (the human embodiment or individuality of an Enlightened One). Thus we get an early prototype of the mystic path as one in which the potential for distinct personhood within universal awareness is emerging from its cocoon of illusory egoic separateness. He ends with this statement "we need a positive doctrine of the charismatic *person* who is attuned to the one and who is an active, creative presence in the diverse realms of the many (1992, p. 189). It was my good fortune to work charismatically with John for many years.

Heron's more full-bodied view of transfigured personhood has some support in the work of Christopher Bache, a transpersonal psychologist, religious scholar, psychedelic researcher, Tibetan Buddhist meditator, and Gestalt therapist. Bache is influenced no doubt by American transpersonalism and its enthusiasm for Hindu-Buddhist perspectives of self. It shows up in

the way he has to work very hard indeed to make the case for personhood. I suggest the apologist position he seems to take points to the cultural power these ancient discourses have at the moment in contemporary American/Western spirituality. I will quote and paraphrase Bache here. He says,

Faced with the vast scope of the experiences that arise in various states of consciousness, some philosophical systems, such as Vedanta, have simply swallowed the individual as a transitory illusion created by the Divine within the Divine. What is ultimately real, they have said, is not the individual but the One-without-a-second. To think otherwise is to be caught in the dualistic maze created by Brahman to know Itself from within diversity. We can experience everything that exists because in essence we are everything. In the final analysis, there *is* no small 'I,' there is *only* the One, The Divine Reality. (2000, p.259)

He then goes on to say that because so many hold this view to be the truth he tries to remain open to it, (as do I) and concedes that this may well be the ultimate realization - "and yet there is something left out of this account, something that is not represented in its pure monism" and by that he means some kind of individual personhood. After exposing himself again and again to the Divine in a methodological way (e.g. psychedelic exploration, meditation, Gestalt therapy, Holotropic breathwork - all valid forms of human research) through purification after purification therein exploding and exposing the self to rigorous refinement, he concludes, there is still yet *remainder*. "There is a subtle residual sense of individuality that carries over ... it never disappears entirely". However, he says, "The sense of identity that I am describing is an identity that is not at all separate from the infinite field of experience, as this boundary has long been erased." While he is clearly not talking about a conventional/socialized individual person it is nevertheless,

an individual, though not an individual within any frame of reference one is previously familiar with. Within the contextual presence of an Intelligence and Energy that is so vast that it can only be understood in terms of Divinity, this refined sense of [Divine] individuality persists. It is not in any way *other* to the Divine Matrix but rather seems to be a delightful expression of it (Bache, 2002, p. 260).

Bache then speaks of deep Guidance (my own experience owes great debt to a personified deity that I relate to as a personal guide and Angel twin/other of whom I am an aspect:

This guidance takes different forms at different times—sometimes plural, sometimes singular—but one always senses that one is surrounded by or immersed in a Presence that is instructing you. Step by step you are bent backwards and forwards, turned inside out, fired and cooled by something that is entirely trustworthy. And as the veil between "you" and this Presence gets thinner and thinner, even as it momentarily dissolves to give you a foretaste of what lies ahead, one gets the sense that it is diligently working to *protect your individuality* even while stretching that individuality to its absolute limits. As one learns how to cooperate with the process, one senses sometimes that one is being fed the experience of transcendence drop by drop, thus being allowed to assimilate the experiential possibilities gradually (2002, p.263).

Bache is clearly offering up a counter-model to that of traditional Vedantic or Buddhist models of self. It is much closer the Heron's account of a transfigured person as a distinct Divine presence within another Divine presence

However, while this distinct person is missing in Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta (which is simply a doctrinal fact bound to their radical liberations) the notion of *personhood* is central to the theistic-relational traditions. According to religious scholar George Adams, "personalist spirituality,' in various forms, is at the heart of theistic religions". It is perhaps useful to note that within Christianity there is a parallel to the kind of personhood we have been imaging here. Transpersonal psychologist, Dwight Judy, wrote that in Christian thought attempts to describe the surrender to God in the following doctrinal terms; "it has been called *sanctification* and by its more recent term *divinization*, the Christian church has declared the possibility that an individual might grow toward incorporating the completeness of God within his or her heart. A scriptural basis for this process is contained in many places, but none more eloquent than the injunction to 'let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus' "(Philippians, 2:5) (Judy, 1996, p. 135). If we tentatively claim, on this scriptural foundation, that the Mind that was in Jesus, or the Mind he had opened to, or was imbued with, and informed by, was a multi-storeyed affair of the nature that we are describing here, then perhaps we begin to get another ancient prototype of the Divine-human or charismatic person. This Grace is potentially, at least, available to all human beings and therefore the notion of developing a Christ Consciousness similar to Eastern notions of Mind is not unthinkable. Of course thinking it and achieving it belong to two vastly different domains of experience. Nevertheless, I believe the inclusive bestowing of this kind of Grace (as the birth right of all human beings) has been the great endeavour of the transpersonal psychology movement. And, in its current historical moment, the project is to embody the transcendental domains and bring them into collaborative intentional interpersonal relationship—it's a horizontal reality.

The Person in Persian Angelology

Yet there is another ancient tradition that holds absolutely primary the notion of transfigured personhood and that is the Persian Sufism and the Angelology of Shayk Shurvardi, Shayk Ibn Arabi, and Shayk Rubezan of Shiraz masterfully outlined by the scholar of Arabic, Islamic and Persian religion Henry Corbin. The goal of this spiritual orientation is not that of the 'universal' nondualism privileged by the early transpersonal movement and set as the goal and zenith of spiritual evolution (e.g. Wilber 1980; Grof 1985) rather, the goal of Corbin's person-centred cosmology is a relational, sensuous, and embodied spirituality, a “‘spiritual corporeity’ of Divine Presence rooted in Personhood” (Lakhani, 2009, p. 155). The blessing of unity and distinction within that unity. The very coming into being of personhood in Persian cosmology is a thorough going act of intentional embodiment by the dynamic Ground (i.e. spirit). And it is the human discovery and unveiling of this level or reality that converts the cosmos into a sacred Presence within which we sacred persons are embedded and have evolved.

The question is this: what if personhood is *the* central actor in the cosmic order and will not be discarded, annihilated or reduced to a Godhead no matter what the weighty traditional story tells us. What if it is an illusionary story that we do not exist as embodied Divine presences within a Divine Presence as a complementarity, a seamless whole encompassing both the vast cosmic fields and the person as a distinct co-creative agent in this bi-unity. What if such stories, are, in the final analysis, pervasive cultural defences against the coming in to being and the realization of Divine personhood and embodiment? What if the traveller in time and space is an enigmatic extension of manifest divinity into embodied being in a world - and a cosmic bodying forth?

What is co-inquiry?

Relational Co-inquiry is a spiritual practice aimed at promoting human flourishing and it does so largely through mindfulness and other contemplative skills (reflection, non-attachment, self-surrender, self-remembering, ego-transcendence, intentional loving, open awareness, compassion).

However, it is practiced in an active, engaged and interpersonally oriented group situation in which participants are intentionally attending to and transforming their relationships. It places great store in *relating* and *feeling* as the tools of inquiry. Therefore it is more like 'spirit-in-action' (eros) and it has therapeutic value because planning; taking action and reflecting together (and making meaning) are contacting processes (as in Gestalt therapy) that generate self. Co-decision making can be construed as a form of intentional therapeutic democracy. Relational Co-inquiry then can only be learned by immersion and practice...the practice itself brings about an increase in contemplative, intuitive and communicative skills.

Relational co-inquiry pays extraordinary attention to and puts extraordinary value on the 'between' which it sees as the true locus of spiritual inquiry and enlivenment. This stems from the relational revolution set in play by the Jewish anthropologist-theologian and Hassidic mystic Martin Buber for whom community was primordial and primary. He famously said; "Spirit is not in the I but between you and I". Buber gave this 'between' ontological status—"a mysterious force, 'presence' or creative milieu, in which the experience of being a self arises" (de Quincey, 2005, p. 198). Co-inquiry then, is a self-generating culture. Thus, the here and now, immediate present experience and relational process of the co-inquirers is one important focus of the inquiry. Care for the between then becomes a mutual responsibility. This principle of mutual care perhaps has a resonance with the Bodhisattvic orientation (that ultimately no one can be enlightened unless we all are). The

Bodhisattva cycle is a soteriological pattern in which a Buddha-to-be refuses Nirvana and returns to the samsaric realm to help all sentient beings end their suffering and attain nirvanic release - a similar pattern is intimated in the story of Plato's cave.

Buddhist meditation is a practice for the liberation from suffering and illusion. Co-inquiry, while it is not Buddhist meditation (and does not require one to meditate) does require a similar phenomenological and meditational attitude wherein consciousness and experience are investigated and described. As with Buddhist mindfulness meditative practices, the quality of this phenomenological attention is open and compassionate. From the co-inquiry side I would add the qualities of interest, appreciation, and delight.

Some basic co-inquiry skills are:

Presence: through attunement, empathy and harmonic resonance, participatory communion with what is. Here I feel the presence of other people and entities and participate in their experience. The practice of mindfulness can help with emotional self-regulation, aid the ability to cultivate a re-framing mind, and thus it can bring about a greater quality of Presence

Imaginal Openness: through ownership of our participative transaction in perception and the co-creation of reality. "being open to the total process of enacting the forms of people and other entities, I participate in their manifest patterns". We attend to the imaging of presences, people and events - which then gives us more scope in how we relate to the world (Heron, 1996, p.122).

Dialogue: We can bring a quality of mindfulness to our subjectivity to become more aware of its shaping but also to the realm of intersubjective and interpersonal process. This allows us to be more aware of our feelings, consciousness, bodily-senses etc as we engage in collaborative and compassionate communication in our relations - be they with human or non-human presences. There are two forms of dialogue we utilize. The first from the quantum

physicist David Bohm. This version of dialogue (which not competitive debate or combative discussion) is a method for exploring *group consciousness* as it unfolds its spontaneous meaning. Paying attention to the meaning of what we say and to silence coupled with the ability empty oneself (open awareness) are important aspects of the process. We can add to this mindful listening. The second form of dialogue (for me) comes from Buber through Gestalt therapy. Rather than succumb to the tyranny of knowledge about an "it" (an objectified client) the co-inquiry group members are liberated through face to face encounter with other persons in conditions cultivated to promote respectful dialogue and 'I-thou' relatedness.ⁱ

Becoming Collaborative: this is both a skill and the harvest of the co-inquiry. The Western mind has become catastrophically entangled in an individualistic, competitive, aggressively capitalistic and consumerist culture...we are a 'culture of narcissism' and the New Age is likewise entangled. Becoming collaborative is a deeply humane process that can help disentangle our sacred Minds from competitive, capitalistic modes of being. Collaborative practice generates a healthy self in active participation with others. Collaboration is a discriminative practice: when to 'let go' is balanced with self determination and when to 'hold on'. How to meaningfully work with others in developing and opening sacred soul space and the modes of conscious that carry the miraculous with them.ⁱⁱ

Becoming or enacting our unique charismatic presence. We define charisma as deep wellness which in its celebration is relatively distress free. The charisma we seek is the kind of naturally healing presence that empowers others to be charismatic. It is allowing the ground of being to express itself through our relative divine personhood. We define it as open-hearted, spontaneous, creative, enlivened, sacred, holy, numinous, and filled with spirit or Eros - the joy of existence.

An associated skill or set of skills is something akin to emotional intelligence: a basic competency around *recognizing*, feeling and expressing emotional states. Learning how use the group to let go of out-moded patterns, doom-laden stories, unhealthy relating and unaware projections. A related skill is the cultivation of feeling as the instrument of the inquiry especially empathy, communion and attunement. And related to this is the already mentioned ability to cultivate a quality of attention that is at once empty and open.

The Relevance of Buddhist Practice

Let us turn now to how Buddhist awareness cultivation can support a co-inquiry. There are several features found in Eastern/Oriental spirituality in general that resonate well with co-inquiry. For one, co-inquiry makes much of the art self-reflection and, as is well understood, reflective practice has long been at the heart of the great transformational traditions including Buddhism, Taoism, and Vedanta; Christian. We include in this mystical Judaic prayer; Jesuit and Ignation spiritual exercises, and the call of Socrates, Jesus and Muhammad and to ‘know thyself’. I have recently written at length on the potential relationship between Gestalt Therapy and co-inquiry but here I wish to focus on the relevance of Buddhist practices in the collaborative paradigm.

The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Tich Nat Han claimed "the next Buddha will not be an individual but a community". Taking him seriously, I believe co-inquiry has the potential to be one such wisdom community. Likewise, contemporary Western Buddhists like Jack Kornfield and John Welwood call for a horizontalization of spiritual events, and attention the processes we undertake to “embody our realization”. The question here is how do we horizontalize (in other words bring into conscious relationship) our awakenings and experiences? Again, I believe co-inquiry, has the potential to collaborate in a concerted way

as a skilful community and skilful means to co-create a more relational (horizontal) spirituality.

Western culture operates on narrow version of the possible participatory mind. In Western culture information is gathered only in normal waking consciousness whereas traditional cultures often had access to a range of modes of consciousness suggesting multiple subtle realities. For example, the integration of waking, dreaming, trance and meditation in Tibetan Buddhist Tantrism. Likewise co-inquiry evokes and enacts a multi-storied mind that extends into spiritual dimensions denied by Western science, including a mind that extends into nature. To quote Richard Tarnas

The human spirit does not merely prescribe nature's phenomenal order; rather, the spirit of nature brings forth its *own* order through the human mind when that mind is employing its full complement of faculties – intellectual, volitional, emotional, sensory, imaginative. In such knowledge the human mind lives into the creative activity of nature. Then the world speaks its meaning through human consciousness. Then human language itself can be recognized as rooted in a deeper reality, as reflecting the universe's unfolding meaning (Tarnas, 1991, p. 435).

Relationship-based spirituality goes along with the notion of the compenetration of the seer and the seen—the knower and the known—in a participatory subject-object epistemology. To some degree this understanding is central to all of the great mystical traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Neo-Platonism and Sufi and Christian mystics etc. In Buddhist mythology the Web of Indra is an infinite a string of pearls shaped like a web in each pearl all the other pearls are endlessly reflected. In the world of modern physics a similar understanding exists in that the observer changes what is observed – suggesting uncanny levels of connectedness, relationship and participation, fields within fields within

fields, and this 'participatory/relational universe' has been given credence by theoretical and quantum physics.

Approaching the World as Spirit

How do we know if the world is in fact a spiritual one? We can't know it through Western science because Western science cannot cope with the spiritual dimensions of being. The exploration of psychic, subtle and spiritual dimensions of being asks us to liberate our hearts, minds, and senses from socialized perception so that we can come into contact with the reality that lives beneath the screen of language. The primordial encounter with the immediate presence of *what is* before language and artistic representations of that ongoing bodily encounter (unbeknownst to the ego) is perhaps what the Zen Buddhist means when he says that 'language is the finger that points at the moon' but the finger is not the moon.

Is this world then a spiritual one? Participatory theorists would say 'the nature of the world is not fixed but rather it may be considered *relational*. In other words - the many ways in which the world can unfold relies upon how the 'world' is approached, engaged, enacted, spoken to and listened to. It then is as true to say that the kind of world that declares itself to us is contingent upon how we relate to the world. In a sense this is what Corbin called *kanothenism*— the idea is taken from early Greek religion where there were many Gods yet each one could be related to as the Supreme deity. Thus one can perceive emptiness and this is valid or one can see manifest beauty everywhere and this is equally valid. The evolution of our sensitivities and perception itself seems organized toward the appreciation of beauty once it has been freed from the routine subject-object dichotomy: the Cartesian splitting of our culture. And the world becomes capable of being a Presence, a Deity, an Angel, a Person. This *personification* of the world; this insight into the world as a living co-created entity - turns the world into a Divine Person to relate to; love and care for.

Buddhist/Participatory Convergence

It seems to me that the question of spiritual wellness and human flourishing is inseparable from relationality. What causes un-wellness and much human suffering is *isolation* in its various guises (compartmentalization, separation, solitude, alienation, narcissism, and obstructed relations) and this is critical. According to transpersonal theorist Jeanne Achterberg this sense of “alienation” from “family, community, the environment, the self, and the spirit world” (1992, p.159) is axiomatic with illness in many tribal societies and requires transpersonal rituals for its amelioration. Yet, as anthropologist Jurgen Kremmer points out, these are the very relational fields severed by the march of Western progress (including Western biomedicine and science). The Eurocentric ego is “constructed dissociatively from nature, community, ancestors” (Kremmer 1996, p.46).

Indeed the categories equating with *alienation* are the very ones associated with the *demonic* in many traditional societies. For example, anthropologist Bruce Kapferer says of Buddhist exorcism:

In Sinhalese cultural understandings a demonic victim approximates what I refer to as an existential state of solitude in the world. The demonic as conceptualized by the Sinhalese is similar to that which Goethe recognized from within the worldview of European culture as ultimately everything that is individual and separates one from others. Demons attack individuals who are understood to be in a state of physical and mental aloneness. Solitude and its correlate, fear, are among the key essences of the demonic (Kapferer, 1986, p.195)

Kapferer writes, “At the paradigmatic level and in accordance with Buddhist cosmological view and worldview, demons are at the base of a hierarchy dominated by the Buddha along with a host of major and lesser deities” (1986, p.193). Kapferer, arrestingly, links Buddhist

thought to Goethe's Romantic, *participatory* thought - both of which are *seminal* ancestors of the transpersonal movement (McDermott, 1993). Here is the crux of the matter; the modern European worldview as spelled out by Richard Tarnas (1991) is very much an ego-centric one and therefore according to Kapferer's Buddhist/Romantic formulation; categorically 'demonic'. The picture Tarnas paints of the Western ego - is one of absolute solitude, solipsistic, alone, and isolated. Our "cosmological estrangement ... ontological estrangement [and] epistemological estrangement [results in] "a threefold mutually enforced prison of modern alienation" (Tarnas, 1991, p. 419). Seen from our Buddhist/ Romantic/transpersonal standpoint the European mind is cathected to a flawed image of the universe. The mystery of nature is demystified through 'objectivity' and we are severed from participation in the sacred worlds of our ancestors. In other words, if we peer into the archaeology of the Western mind, we are, structured by the history of ideas to be demonically (individualistically-narcissistically) closed.

The antidote to the demon of isolation could be what Tarnas calls "radical kinship with the universe" (1991, p. 437), that is, to restore one's ability to remember one's primary relationship, kinship and connection to the world. The starting place for our inquiry is in experiential presence of persons in their world—this is the fundamental ground of all knowing. Experiential knowing is by being present with, in a face to face encounter with person, place or thing. It is communing with the life-world through empathy, resonance and attunement. Our work with co-inquiry, mindfulness practices, ceremony, ritual and charismatic embodiment (Heron and Lahood 2007) and attempts at everyday aware living convince us that experiential encounter with the *presence* of others is the ground of being and knowing. This encounter is prior to art and language although it can be symbolized in art and language. The I-Thou encounter with another person (or being) cannot be confused with our symbolic constructs. Thus if we personify the cosmos instead of reducing it to materiality, we

risk ourselves in the encounter instead of hiding behind abstract knowledge and rationality and thus we begin to live again in a re-enchanted, personified and relational universe. Each time we feel more connected we are transforming our narcissistic modes of being and moving toward something more wholesome.

Two Suitors

Richard Tarnas wrote a little parable a couple of years ago (that I had the pleasure to edit for Revision) called *The Two Suitors* - he suggests that our so-called objective knowledge is in fact radically constituted by subjective factors - most of which are unconscious or out of awareness. The very structure of a 'subject' (inner) knowing an 'object' (outer) has been rendered seriously problematic. The great gift of the post-modern mind is its potential ability to discern the hidden assumptions that structure and shape our realities. We have been able to cultivate discernment skills such as critical subjectivity and reflexivity (the skill of showing ourselves to ourselves).

Here is a little cosmological role play: imagine that you are a cosmos, not the disenchanting, mechanistic, and objectified cosmos of modern European culture but rather a “deep-souled, subtly mysterious cosmos of great spiritual beauty and creative intelligence”. That you are essentially divine - you are then approached by two suitors: two different epistemologies come seeking you out—let us, for the purpose of this essay, divide them here into 'Scientific Knowing' and 'Encounter'. *Knowing* comes on to you as if you are “essentially lacking in intelligence or purpose” and his primary wish is to “exploit your resources and to satisfy his various needs; and whose motivation for knowing you was ultimately driven by a desire for increased intellectual mastery, predictive certainty, and efficient control over you for his own enhancement.” The second of our suitors, *Encounter*, approaches you with an open and loving attention - unafraid to encounter you as “intelligent and noble, a worthy being permeated with

mind and soul, as imbued with moral aspiration and purpose, as endowed with as much spiritual depth and mystery as he” and who seeks to be with us and participate in “a more richly responsive and empowered participation in a co-creative unfolding of new realities” Tarnas asks: to whom would we be more able to disclose our deepest truths and secrets? Most likely with the one that has the capacity to *listen*.

The Persian poet Rumi wrote that to “completely become all hearing and ear” meant we could wear the sunrise like an earring, meaning, I take it, that the human ego is transfigured by the luminous ground and that the world revels its participatory mysteries with us as we approach the world as an Other worthy of reverence. Another famous Persian poet Hafiz wrote "every being is God speaking... why not be polite and listen to him? (Hafiz, 1999, p.269). And herein lies the subtle spiritual democracy that I believe so many thirst for in our times - by attending to and mutually caring for the spirit of the between we become co-creators of a an interpersonal spiritual event that is ongoing and open-ended.

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ⁱ The Relational Turn in Gestalt Therapy

The recently re-named relational-turn in Gestalt therapy emerged partially as a reaction to the aggressive and confrontational style of the 1960s, which is now seen as shaming. Shame occurs when a person perceives a lack of environmental support for their needs. The confrontational style grew from the assumption that clients needed to be frustrated out of their manipulations and neediness - an assumption that is no longer tenable. It is now deemed better practice to understand the client's experience rather than confront or frustrate them and support is now a key feature. Nevertheless, elegant and humane confrontation around distressed behaviours, language or patterns which are out of awareness is sometimes necessary.

It is also to be remembered that Gestalt therapy always had a relational perspective built into it. The theory and practice of Gestalt therapy is methodically relational. It is the relationship between client and therapist that is central. Backing up this view is a philosophical relational perspective in which relationality is irreducible ... our very existence is situation-dependant. In other words, we are conceived and born in relationship and we develop always in relation with and to another. Gestalt has shifted from a mono-personal approach to understanding and responding to the real, relational situation we are in. However, while much has been explicated, in the Gestalt record, on the nature of dialogue with dyads little has been written in relation to group work.

ⁱⁱ Todres in *Embodied Enquiry* (2007) speaks elegantly to the notion of 'soulful space' and by this he does not mean necessarily the spaciousness that characterizes much of contemporary Western Buddhist-Hindu practices such as the work of A.H. Almass. The profound nondual mysticism created by Almass joins together Western self-psychology and object-relations with Eastern concepts of enlightenment is interested in cultivating a spaciousness that is free from 'everyday narcissism'. While I am generally a fan of spaciousness and the reduction of narcissistic modes of being - a quad of gentle criticisms and cautions of the Almass work are as follows:

- the focus on intra-psychic life, as in self-spirituality in general, can itself be harnessed to a narcissistic project - can even be seen *as* such a project.
- Making Nondual monism supreme is potentially a narcissistic mode because it eschews relationship.
- The precious jewel of human vulnerability is sometimes lost in the desire for this spaciousness - the drive to the sanctuary of a somewhat triumphant spaciousness itself may have a dissociative quality.
- If personhood is depicted in theory and practice as being nothing but an egoic knot ala Buddhism-Wilber then there is a question as to the legitimacy of the whole project.

By soulful space we are speaking more of space in which human vulnerability can emerge and not be judged as somehow less than the wide (but potentially dissociative space) offered up as the answer or refuge for human vulnerability. The myth of narcissus is the very real and tragic flight from human vulnerability (a valiant attempt to not contact the pain in relationship) so by soul-spaciousness we mean the ability to not flee from vulnerability - soul-spaciousness means freedom and space for such vulnerability to emerge - to encounter and dwell with the wounds that create separation and aloneness. Contemporary spirituality 'can' emit a mask of invulnerability and purity, the transcendental winner, a vision of great eternal power - rather than gentle, inclusive, emphatic, Eros encounter.