

Paper Title: Many Paths, One Mountain: A Cross-Traditional Model of Spiritual Transformation.

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This paper was prepared for "Science and Religion: Global Perspectives", January 4-8, 2005, in Philadelphia, PA, USA, a program of the Metanexus Institute ([www.metanexus.net](http://www.metanexus.net)).

Paper Abstract:

Religious and spiritual traditions for millennia have advised engaging in practices involving attention to breath, awareness of sensations, intentional alteration of consciousness, prayer and other devotional practices, and physical movements designed to balance and redirect energy, based on the belief that these practices promote insight, improve health, increase longevity, and cultivate emotional balance. The U. S. General Social Survey in 1998 found that 32.7% of those surveyed reported meditating once a week or more, 57.2% of Americans reported feeling God's presence in their lives on most days, every day, or many times a day, and 39.1% of people reported having had a spiritual or religious experience that changed their lives. There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence indicating that engaging in spiritual practice can lead to a transformation that is not only spiritual, but results in overall improved well-being. A growing body of scientific literature is providing objective evidence for the beneficial effects of spiritual practices as well. As science begins to increasingly direct its attention to studying spiritual transformation and the effects of spiritual practices on health and well-being, there is a need for empirically supported models of the transformative process.

In this study we conducted in-depth structured interviews with forty teachers and scholars from a variety of religious, spiritual, and modern transformative traditions, asking each to respond to 20 questions about the transformative process, from their own experience, their observations of students, and the teachings in their traditions. Questions focused on what initiates or triggers transformative experiences, what practices or activities cultivate transformation, how these experiences are translated into lasting shifts in worldview, what milestones or stages exist along the path of transformation, what factors facilitate or inhibit integration of transformative experiences into everyday life, and what the observable outcomes are of these experiences and practices. Responses to interview questions were coded qualitatively by trained research assistants using a standard coding scheme. Two raters coded each interview, and the conservative analysis used only data agreed upon by both coders. The resulting data were sorted into categories and then further reduced into themes, which were assessed for commonality by examining the breadth and frequency of responses reflecting each theme across the interviews.

Analysis of this dataset suggests several themes that are common across both individual experiences of transformation, and across widely varying religious, spiritual and modern transformative traditions. Through this process we are identifying predictors, mediators, outcomes, and developmental milestones that appear to be common to the process of spiritual transformation. Conjoining qualitative and quantitative methods gives us the capacity to find commonalities while not losing sight of the profound depth and

variety of spiritual experience that exists. As results of this study emerge, they are being translated into a cross-traditional empirically-derived model of spiritual transformation on which formulation of hypotheses, measures and methods for future studies can be based.

Biographies:

**Cassandra Vieten, PhD** is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist and Associate Scientist at the Institute of Noetic Sciences and California Pacific Medical Center Research Institute. Her research has focused on how biology, psychology, and emotion interact in addiction and recovery; how mind-body factors, compassionate intent, and belief are involved in healing; development of mindfulness-based approaches to cultivating emotional well-being; and factors involved in the process of psychospiritual transformation. **Tina Amorok, MA Psy.D.(cand.)**, is a Research Associate at the Institute of Noetic Sciences. Currently she is completing her doctorate in clinical psychology, and is studying how integrating ecological living systems theory with clinical psychology can lead to healing strategies for our current state of alienation from nature that results in destructive behaviors. **Marilyn Schlitz, Ph.D.** is Vice President for Research and Education at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, and Senior Scientist at California Pacific Medical Center Research Institute. She has published over 200 articles in the area of consciousness studies, has conducted research at Stanford University, Science Applications International Corporation, the Institute for Parapsychology, and the Mind Science Foundation, has taught at Trinity University, Stanford University and Harvard Medical School, and has lectured widely at sites including the United Nations and the Smithsonian Institution.

## **Many Paths, One Mountain: A Cross-Traditional Model of Spiritual Transformation**

*The value of research is in developing a language relevant in today's world for expressing transformation - to complete the translation process from the ancient languages of Asia to something relevant and concrete in the world we inhabit now. Research is a primary communication tool in bringing forth these teachings and making them less esoteric. – Sharon Salzberg, Buddhist Meditation Teacher*

Spiritual transformation has been explored in depth for thousands of years, by religious scholars, philosophers, spiritual pundits, and more recently by psychologists and anthropologists. However, until recently, it has rarely been studied systematically using the tools of Western science that have dominated our quest for understanding in fields such as medicine and physics. This neglect can be attributed to several factors. At first glance, the process of spiritual transformation appears antithetical to traditional scientific study. Science requires that a phenomenon be predictable, repeatable, and measurable in order to be able to make generalizable claims about it. Transformative experiences are often described as deeply personal, mysterious, and inherently indescribable. The transformative process seems to follow a winding route, proceeding in fits and starts, without any discernable linear trajectory. It appears that each person's transformative journey is highly idiosyncratic, arising from a unique combination of experiences, contexts, inherent characteristics, and a host of other factors. Luskin (2004) calls for increased precision in defining transformation, stating that spiritual transformation is “a broad and diffuse multidimensional concept difficult to quantify and resistant to rigorous research.” Schwartz (2000) writes, “contemporary researchers and theologians share the belief that there is no cause of spiritual transformation, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process.” Due to a bias toward separation of religion and science, the study of spiritual transformation has faced questions regarding its suitability as an area of study, and its complexity has challenged its viability as a scientific construct.

Despite these challenges, there has been a recent surge of interest in learning more about spiritual experiences, practices and transformation. Over the last several years, in large part due to the efforts of the Metanexus Spiritual Transformation Research Program, projects are underway on the role of neurobiology, emotion, and cognition in spiritual transformation, the effects of spiritual practices, the role of spiritual practice and transformation in healing from illness, and specific approaches to spiritual transformation ([www.metanexus.org](http://www.metanexus.org)). The rise of integrative health centers at many major universities has also stimulated more organized efforts in medical research to study the effects of spiritually-oriented practices and treatments on health and healing. Still, a Medline search for the term “spiritual transformation” yields only 33 total articles ([www.pubmed.org](http://www.pubmed.org)). While much progress has been made, the science of spiritual transformation is in its infancy.

Understanding more about spiritual transformation has clear implications. The vast majority of our major health and societal crises at this point in time are caused by our own behaviors. As cures are found for many infectious diseases, the overwhelming causes of human suffering are now due to maladaptive human behavior (e.g. addictions

and other health behaviors, violence, inequality in distribution of resources, damage to the environment). Because of this, studies of processes by which people change their worldview and behavior have increased in priority. The phenomenon of spiritual transformation, where such changes appear to occur quickly, drastically, and permanently, provides a naturally occurring laboratory to study such change processes.

Like many others, we argue that spiritual transformation is a completely viable scientific construct with immediately relevant implications for our understanding of how people change and grow. Like other healing or disease processes that science has shed light on or solved, the process of spiritual transformation is complex and multifactorial. It is not only possible, but perhaps urgent at this point in time, that we begin to discover what factors, practices, ways of being, and experiences increase susceptibility to such transformations, cultivate them, and facilitate their integration into long-term shifts in worldviews or ways of being - and to validate these discoveries empirically.

Many models of spiritual transformation exist, but they are often embedded within a specific tradition and have little empirical support. There are likely a number of pathways by which spiritual transformation occurs. Although each path of personal transformation is unique, there may be triggers and/or milestones along these paths common across traditions, philosophies, and worldviews. Our premise is that through generating an empirically derived model of spiritual transformation that is not specific to any one tradition but instead identifies common elements of the process of spiritual transformation across traditions, we will learn more about how people change. In addition, there are unique contributions from more esoteric methods of consciousness transformation that should be described more fully as they may contribute to our models of human development.

A natural history approach, typically used to describe a disease process, examines commonalities across individuals in the course of an illness for identification of key turning points and mechanisms by which the course can be altered or facilitated. This approach can also be applied to the process of healthy change and growth, allowing us to identify predictors, mediators, and outcomes relevant to the process, and to develop a theoretical model from which hypotheses can be drawn. In this study, we employed a natural history approach, using teachers of spiritual traditions as cases, to develop an empirically-based cross-traditional model of spiritual transformation. Our goals were to understand more about how people change through spiritual practice and experience, to generate testable hypotheses for future research, and to conceptualize the relevant variables for that research.

## **Background**

We define consciousness as the fundamental ground of being from which all experience arises. Changes in our human experience of consciousness occur daily, and most are temporary. However, at times our experience of consciousness is transformed to such a degree that long lasting shifts in ways of being occur, both positive and negative. We define transformation as a profound shift in our human experience of consciousness that results in long-lasting shifts in worldview or ways of being and changes in the general pattern of the way one experiences and relates to oneself, others, and the world.

Spiritual transformation is transformation that occurs through spiritual experience or practice.

What do we know about how people change through spiritual experience and practice? What can science tell us about how people, sometimes in an instant and sometimes over many years of incremental growth, make fundamental shifts in their perspective and behavior? What are common elements of transformative, life-changing experiences? How are the insights gleaned during transformative experiences translated into long-term shifts in worldview and ways of being, and what inhibits such integration? What is the purpose of spiritual practice, and what are the observable results of such practice? What are the psychological and biological mechanisms by which spiritual practice and experience appear to confer health benefits and enhance quality of life?

To date studies have focused primarily on the health effects of religious affiliation and practices (Koenig et al., 2001). Religious affiliation is consistently associated with health benefits, even when covariates such as income, social support, and health behaviors are taken into account (Levin, 2001; Miller & Thoresen, 2003). While the relationship between religion and spirituality is a current topic of debate (Zinnbauer et al., 1999), it is possible that spiritual practice accounts for health benefits observed. Reliance on spirituality in times of illness improves outcomes, but little is known about why (Bordreaux, 2002). A growing body of scientific literature is providing objective evidence for the benefits of spiritual practices, often subsumed under the umbrella of mind body or integrative medicine. Research on meditation, yoga, t'ai chi and other spiritually derived mind-body modalities has provided encouraging evidence supporting their beneficial effects, including enhanced longevity, quality of life, spiritual and subjective well-being, survival of life-threatening illnesses, and cardiac, respiratory, and musculo-skeletal symptom reduction (Astin et al., 2003; McCullough et al., 2000). Often secularized and removed from their spiritual tradition to varying extents, several practices have shown promise for enhancing health and reducing suffering (Luskin, 2004), but more rigorous research is needed. As Barrows and Jacobs (2002) point out, the field of mind-body medicine research "may be said to be in its adolescence, having grown out of its early years of enthusiastic case reports and small studies, but not yet fully grown into a broad catalogue of large controlled experimental trials." In particular, more studies of the mechanisms by which these affiliations and practices exert their effects are needed. Though rarely explicitly stated, it is possible that spiritual transformation might in part account for the effects observed.

A great deal of work has been done on theoretical approaches to understanding spiritual transformation, but until very recently, empirical studies of spiritual transformation have been scarce. Schwartz's (2000) review of the most significant contemporary examples of empirical research on spiritual transformation shows that most have focused on the phenomenon of religious conversion, often in the context of an intensification of devotion within the same religious structure, a shift from no religious commitment to a devout religious life, or a change from one religion to another (Paloutzian et al., 1999). Some studies have examined the process of transformation within specific contexts. For example, in Alcoholics Anonymous, where the mechanism of action is intended to be spiritual transformation, researchers have identified several stages along the typical path, moving from hitting bottom, recognition of inability to control the problem, contrition and sorrow for the present state, desire for a new way, and

surrender to a higher power (Forcehimes, 2004). Other empirically-derived models of a transformative process have focused on how people experience psychospiritual transformation in response to illness. For example, Taylor (2000) used a metaphor of encountering darkness, converting darkness, encountering light and reflecting light, emphasizing the adaptive nature of the movement through darkness.

Miller and C' de Baca (1994, 2001) have described a phenomenon they term quantum change, defined as “sudden, dramatic, and enduring transformations that affect a broad range of personal emotion, cognition, and behavior.” Arising from their observations of dramatic and permanent spiritual transformations in Alcoholics Anonymous and other contexts, interviews with 55 people who had experienced such transformations were conducted which yielded several commonalities. Quantum changes were described as distinctive, surprising, permanent, and often infused with a sense of benevolence, love, and acceptance. Two types of quantum change were identified, the mystical epiphany type characterized by a dramatic alteration in consciousness, and the insightful type, or a forceful recognition of authentic Truth. Other commonalities characterized these transformations as well, including release from chronic negative affect, a change in priorities and values, an increased capacity and desire for intimate relationships, and experiences of interconnection. Our study used a similar approach, except that our respondents were selected to represent various traditions and to speak not only from their own experience but from their observations of students and peers in their tradition, and from the perspective of the teachings of their tradition.

## **Method**

In the preliminary phases of this work our team collected stories of personal experiences of transformation, which we analyzed to distinguish between exceptional experiences (typically of short duration and not crucial in life impact) and genuinely transformative, life-changing experiences, and to assess whether or not there were commonalities across experiences. We then conducted a focus group with teachers of transformative paths, to assess whether similar commonalities existed across traditions. Enough commonalities emerged from this exploratory work to justify a more in-depth exploration, and provided a starting point for developing the design and methods for the present study.

In the current study we interviewed 40 respondents who were all actively involved in teaching and studying transformative practices within a specific tradition. We intentionally sampled respondents from traditional religions and other spiritual traditions, as well as more modern and eclectic traditions. Our selection process resulted in a sample representative of teachers from diverse spiritually transformative traditions including Buddhism (Vipassana, Zen, and Tibetan), Yoga (Integral, Kundalini, Transcendental, Bhakti, Himalayan), Cross-Cultural Shamanism, Shamanism (through use of psychoactive substances), Non-Dualism, African Yoruba, Protestant Christian, Catholicism, Judaism, Kabbalah, Sufism, Mystery School, Aikido, Johrei, Attitudinal Healing, Transpersonal Psychotherapy, Somatics, Expressive Arts and Movement, Holotropic Breathwork, and other forms of spiritual reflection and self-discovery (such as use of walking the Labyrinth). Criteria included being at a teacher or master level within the tradition, and having taught hundreds of students.

We developed a structured interview with the goal of asking questions that would specifically inform identification and conceptualization of predictors, mediators, outcomes, and mechanisms of spiritual transformation. Our primary goal was to elicit information that would assist in hypothesis generation, selection of relevant variables, and selection or development of measures for those variables. We developed a set of 20 questions through an iterative process, informed by our pilot work and literature review, and revised them after two pilot interviews, responses to which were not included in our final dataset. The resulting set of questions was intended to yield a fairly comprehensive overview of each respondent's understanding of spiritual transformation based on the perspective of their tradition, their own experience, and their observations of their students. Questions focused on what initiates or triggers transformative experiences, what practices or activities cultivate transformation, how these experiences are translated into lasting shifts in worldview, what milestones or stages exist along the path of transformation, what factors facilitate or inhibit integration of transformative experiences into everyday life, and what the observable outcomes are of these experiences and practices. In order to encourage more operational elements of each construct, the interviewer was prompted after each question to: "Listen for key words that describe experiences, ways of being, processes, or attributes that are not easily defined. When these specific terms are used (i.e. stillness, non-attachment, peace, spaciousness), follow up with these questions: For example, "You mentioned "stillness" -- How do you experience stillness? How does an outside observer identify stillness in another? In what other ways might stillness manifest?" Interviewers also instructed respondents to please limit their responses to actual observed phenomena and outcomes as opposed to ideals or possibilities.

Two researchers conducted each interview, with one as an active interviewer and one as a witness and time-keeper who took copious notes throughout the interview. These notes were transcribed when the interviews were complete, and when compiled across interviews, served as the basis from which thematic codes were developed. Codes most often reflected the questions – for example "outcomes or qualities developed through spiritual experience, practice, and transformation." However, some codes emerged from the frequency with which they appeared in the notes taken during the interviews, such as "the role of intention, choice, will, volition in the transformative process." Both the interview and the coding scheme are available from the authors.

Responses to interview questions were coded from the videotapes by trained research interns using a standardized qualitative coding scheme. Coders were instructed to categorize each chunk of information, or complete thought, of respondents into one of 20 categories. Each interview was coded by two interns, entered into a database, and the conservative analysis used only data agreed upon by both coders. Using the resulting database, thematic analysis of the data within each code followed. For example, Code 3 "Qualities, outcomes, benefits, results of transformation," yielded a list of 1200 responses across interviews. Analysis involved collapsing similar responses based on keywords and conceptually similar concepts into themes reflecting the most common responses across traditions in each area, which were assessed for commonality by examining the breadth and frequency of responses reflecting each theme across the interviews. Breadth was assessed by the proportion of respondents who referred to each overarching theme, and frequency was evaluated with an overall count of how often a theme was mentioned.

Over 11,000 responses were entered into the database, and analysis of this dataset continues.

## **Results and Discussion**

Overall, we found several areas of strong commonality among most spiritual and transformative traditions. While some practices and experiences showed a higher variability between traditions (such as the role of devotion to a higher deity or teacher), respondents from widely varied traditions reported similar practices, experiences, and outcomes more often than expected, frequently using the same metaphors and language to describe them. In this section we present preliminary results in three thematic areas: definitions of transformation, outcomes of transformation, and the process of transformation. Our intention is to present these results in a way that capitalizes on the richness of the narrative dataset and provides directions for future research, both qualitative and quantitative.

### What Changes? The Nature of Spiritual Transformation

Earlier, we defined spiritual transformation as a profound shift in our human experience of consciousness, arising from spiritual experience or practice, that results in long-lasting shifts in worldview or ways of being, and changes in the general pattern of the way one experiences and relates to him or herself, others, and the world. When conducting the interviews, rather than imposing this predefined working definition of transformation, we asked each respondent to define transformation from his or her perspective, and several themes describing the nature of spiritual transformation emerged.

#### *A Shift in Perspective*

Most respondents spoke of transformation as a fundamental shift in one's perspective. Interestingly, although the word transformation is often used synonymously with "change," many respondents noted that although transformation *results* in changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, the actual process of transformation does not require changing these things directly, but instead involves a change in perspective, or an alteration in one's fundamental assumptions about the nature of things. Many of our respondents told us that the greatest change required is no change at all, but instead involves a turning of attention and a redirecting of intention, that when made at the starting point shifts the entire landscape and one's trajectory through it. Common words used to describe this shift in perspective were "opening," "a larger, wider, more inclusive and expanded depth perception," "a shift in worldview, assumptions, values, and beliefs," "a perception of vastness and being in touch with a larger consciousness," and "an expanded awareness."

Spiritual transformation has been defined as a "radical reorganization of one's identity, meaning, and purpose in life" (Schwartz, 2000). Our respondents reported that in addition to an expanded worldview, there is also an alteration of one's sense of self, often described as radical widening and deepening of one's personal identity. Many respondents described spiritual experiences of apprehending all objects of perception, as



if the objects were contained within them, and an awakening to a witnessing self fundamentally distinct from particular thoughts, impulses, feelings, or sensations, accompanied by a feeling of being more real, more genuine, more authentically themselves. A part of many spiritual experiences involved less sense of a personal identity and a greater sense of connection to others, an experience that became over time an enduring part of the process of spiritual transformation. One description from a subject in our pilot work was, "I had no sensation of standing on the balcony, but rather was fused with all of nature . . . . There was no 'I'—only a 'we' as I became one with all I saw."

Other words used to describe this shift in sense of self were "a deep connection with all of life," "feeling aligned with a greater force," "a deepening into the self," "less feeling of fragmentation and isolation," "a feeling of not being separate, of being interconnected," "a realization that 'I am a part of a consciousness that is so much bigger.'" Among the many paradoxes our respondents described, it appears that the more people feel their connection to others and lack of separation, the more they are able to be authentic and appreciate their own self and set of circumstances. Perhaps the most reflective description came from one respondent who stated that students experiencing transformation "at once realize that they are a heart connected to many hearts, and also become more of who they uniquely are."

These experiences, when integrated, appear to result in an ability to take things less personally and to be less reactive and judgmental. Through the experience of oneself as an interconnected part of a communal identity there is a greater sense of compassion for one's own and others' failings, arising from a feeling of "we're all in this together and we're pretty much all doing our best." This notion affirms a theory of mechanism proposed by Kristeller and Johnson (2003), who suggest that though meditation is most often a solitary practice, it works to promote compassion for others and altruism by first disengaging from preoccupation with the self and suspending self-judgment, and then experiencing a focused engagement with a universal capacity for empathy and love.

Other conceptual work relevant to the mechanisms by which spiritual experience might result in changes in worldview and sense of self comes from the study of emotion. For example, the prototype facial expression of awe is being validated as a fundamental cross-cultural human emotion that can be measured in the laboratory using facial expression coding methods (Ekman & Rosenberg, 1997; Shiota et al., 2003). Though not necessarily spiritual in nature, awe has been conceptualized by two components: a perceived vastness and a need for accommodation in response to an inability to assimilate an experience into current mental structures (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). It is possible that, relevant to our discussion, when a spiritual experience does not fit into one's current belief system, a choice exists to either somehow assimilate the experience into one's worldview, or to accommodate one's worldview to fit the experience. Similarly, profound spiritual experiences may demand accommodation and make assimilation less viable, which could account for a shifted worldview.

### *State or Trait Changes?*

Paloutzian et al. (1999) propose that basic personality traits (e.g. openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, neuroticism) may not change as a result of spiritual

transformation, but “mid-level” personality elements do (feelings, attitudes, and behaviors). Our research concurs to a certain extent. Many respondents reported that after transformation people report that paradoxically “everything has changed *and* nothing has changed.” This refers to the perception that although many elements of the self and world remain fundamentally the same, the way one views and relates to those elements changes dramatically. Our respondents reported that although spiritual practitioners often continue to experience negative emotion, jealousy, pride, greed, or cravings, they are less distressed by those experiences, and more able to make choices about their behavior rather than being driven by conditioning. However, respondents also reported significant shifts in core personality traits. For example, a frequently mentioned critical element of the process of spiritual transformation was the dismantling of narcissism, a trait that is theorized to be relatively stable in adults (Kernberg, 1992; Millon, 1981). Later we discuss this transition from a self-centered perspective to a more communal sense of self.

It appears that the shift that takes place in spiritual transformation is at a fundamental level, so that changes often generalize to many areas of one’s life. An analogy that may help to explain this is the concept of a common pathway in biochemical mechanisms of illness and healing. In complex illnesses, many causal factors can result in multiple symptoms, and attempting to address each of these one at a time at either the causal or symptom level is not as efficient as finding a common pathway by which causal factors influence the outcomes. In the same way, spiritual transformation involves a shift in the way that one views the world and one’s place in it, and this worldview shift may represent a common pathway by which many aspects of life are improved at once.

Another analogy that might shed light on the mechanism by which spiritual transformation may result in apparent changes in personality comes from the psychological literature on post-traumatic stress disorder. It is well documented that the experience of trauma, sometimes from a single event, can produce lifelong difficulties in patterns of relating to oneself, others, and the world – as though the trauma cuts so deep that it is imprinted, and the reaction to it generalized in such a way that it continues as a pattern of reaction long after traumatic stimuli have ceased (Yehuda, 2002). It is possible that there is a similar pathway by which an experience is so profound that in a similar fashion, it imprints and generalizes in a positive way to one’s overall patterns of viewing and relating to the world.

### *Spiritual Experience vs. Spiritual Transformation*

Among our respondents, a strong distinction was made between spiritual experience and spiritual transformation. Although spiritual experience can lead to spiritual transformation, the former was often described as transitory and the latter as more fundamental and permanent. Our respondents warned against mistaking spiritual experience for transformation, and noted that often people become in a sense addicted to repeated spiritual experiences because of their intensity and often pleasurable nature, while ignoring the more mundane work of integrating realizations into day to day life. While most respondents agreed that spiritual transformation could happen very quickly, most of our respondents, though not all, differentiated spiritual transformation from spiritual experience by the presence of observable changes in behavior. One respondent

referred to spiritual experience using the metaphor from a Native American teaching story of the “floating cloud” stating: “It’s just there, it's beautiful in its shape, we describe it, we talk about it and then it dissipates because it has not been mobilized or grounded or sustained...Nothing changes unless it's grounded and manifested. True transformation is sustainable, it's something you can see has made a difference, it's tangible, it's not a floating cloud.” True transformation requires actual manifested changes in behavior in addition to changes in perspective on self and world. This premise echoes Hood et al. (1996) who propose six criteria for spiritual transformation including “if behaviors from these new ideals and changed habits of life do not follow, then there has been no transformation.” Greater identification of precise behaviors are needed that might meet these criteria and therefore serve as objective outcome measures, and our findings in the area of outcomes suggest several.

### What are the Relevant Outcomes?

#### *Asking the Right Questions*

The impetus for this line of questioning came from a conversation one of us (CV) had with a resident of a local Zen center. When asked if she would mind participating in a research project on the outcomes of spiritual practice, the Zen practitioner responded that their center had already participated in a similar study, and were happy to do so. However, the residents of the center were concerned that their experience had not been adequately assessed because they felt they had not been asked the right questions. For example, in response to forced choice questions about whether or not practitioners felt improved positive mood and reduced negative mood, the residents wanted to respond that they felt *less attached* to whether or not they felt positive or negative mood at any one point in time. This story reminded us that when studying the outcomes of spiritual practice or transformation, we must be careful to study the relevant outcomes - to ask the right questions. When evaluating the benefits of spiritual practice and transformation, it is important to take into account the desired goals of the practitioner or the claims of the tradition.

#### *Outcomes Relevant to Spiritual Transformation*

We identified outcomes of spiritual transformation using two questions (although outcomes were sometimes described in response to other questions as well, and were pulled from those responses through the coding process). First we asked directly, “What are the outcomes of your spiritual path or practice,” but more complete and descriptive responses came from the question, “How do you recognize someone who has integrated the teachings of your spiritual path or practice into their life?”

In response to this second question, the most common indicator across traditions of a “transformed” person was a consistent sense of presence, an authenticity, and a lightness or ease of being, across situations. Despite prompts, respondents often had difficulty operationalizing outcomes. For example, many respondents used the phrase “a light in the eyes,” to describe a phenomenon that most people understand, but is difficult to quantify. Other words used commonly to describe a transformed person were:

childlike, simple, transparent, loving, wise, compassionate, patient, tolerant, forgiving, collaborative, mindful, solid, real, whole and possessing the qualities of equanimity, integrity, peace of mind, generosity and a deep acceptance of self and others as they are. Others characterized this state of being by what was *not* present – not ego-driven, ostentatious, achievement-oriented, narcissistic, not hiding anything, and not necessarily perfect or having everything worked out, but bearing difficulties and failings with grace and humor.

Many reported that these qualities radiated from the transformed person, and were sometimes perceived as being transmitted to those in a transformed person's presence, often evoking those experiences in that person as well for a brief period. As Mark Matousek stated in the film *Ram Dass: Fierce Grace* (Lemle, 2003) about his spiritual teacher, "What surprised me was not that Maharaji loved everyone...but that when I was in his presence, I loved everyone too." Respondents from certain traditions also described the phenomenon of a full spiritual transformation as a result of being in a spiritual teacher's presence, an intersubjective form of spiritual transformation that warrants further study.

Finally, in the interest of identifying potential outcomes for prospective longitudinal studies given the potentially non-linear process of spiritual transformation, we asked about outcomes that remain even in times of turbulence, which might still be observable even if the person was in a difficult time in their lives. Here, our respondents observed that again, it was not the actual life events or experiences that were most crucial, but instead how one viewed and dealt with those events and experiences. As one respondent put it: "Pain may not decrease, but suffering decreases," partially due to an altered perception of pain and its meaning. One enduring outcome commonly reported was the presence of an observing or witnessing self, described as a heightened awareness, detachment, or mindfulness, of one's experience, regardless of the content. This appears to allow for a sense of curiosity and the ability to wonder what can be learned from an experience. In their meaning making, some relied directly on their spiritual faith, which framed how they conceptualized what was happening (for example, beliefs that "God works in mysterious ways," or asking "What is the guru trying to teach me?"). Another commonly reported outcome that remained present in times of difficulty was an increased ability to stay open, to allow, to not attempt to avoid, contract, resist or harden in response to painful experience. An increased capacity for acceptance and compassion toward self and others in times of conflict was also a theme. One respondent said that as his students progressed along the spiritual path, they were able to "hold difficulties differently" and to "make peace with challenges." An overarching theme was less reactivity to painful experience and a greater self-efficacy for coping.

Notable here is that with some exceptions, the list of outcomes we have presented here, though clearly relevant to quality of life and well-being, are in varying stages of conceptualization and measurement. Their relationship to health and well-being, and methods for cultivating them, are just beginning to be explored scientifically. Exciting work is underway to develop scientific methods and measures for many of them, and we argue that most are measurable with a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The complexity of these constructs should not challenge their scientific viability; rather their potential importance for quality of life demands that science rise to the challenge by improving its methods as it has in other areas. We argue that with a

combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, these constructs can and should be further conceptualized and operationalized for study.

It is also important to note here that in the field of adult personality development, these qualities and capacities have been conceptualized as advanced levels of personality development, or have been located at the top of Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs. However, our respondents frequently pointed out that capacity to love, to forgive, to tolerate differences, to delay gratification, to regulate one's own state and behavior, to relate to others with respect, integrity and compassion are fundamental capacities for healthy functioning. These capacities may not only improve quality of life at the upper reaches, but show promise for directly benefiting basic physiological and emotional health. Indeed, empirical evidence is growing for the role of such qualities as gratitude and forgiveness in healthy functioning (Emmons & McCullough, 2004). Methods for cultivating these kinds of skills have been neglected to a certain extent in traditional education and healthcare. As one of our respondents stated, "In the West we have educated for an industrial society, now it is time to educate for a wisdom society." Scientific inquiry into spiritual transformation may result in greater understanding of these capacities that have relevance beyond spiritual or religious arenas.

### The Process of Spiritual Transformation

As noted earlier, while some spiritual transformations are of the "quantum change" variety, more often the process of spiritual transformation occurs over the lifespan. One goal of our study was to find out whether we could identify milestones or critical periods along the more gradual path of transformation, and whether there was a discernable trajectory. We found that most respondents, all of whom were in advanced stages of spiritual practice and scholarship, rejected the notion of a simple, linear, causal model. While many conceptualizations of transformation find a stage model useful, our respondents overwhelmingly reported that spiritual transformation is a journey that not only meanders, but may not "progress" in a hierarchical manner at all.

### *The Spiral of Transformation*

One metaphor that emerged is that of a spiral of deepening into oneself and into greater awareness and connection with consciousness, defined earlier as the ground of all being from which experience arises. Names for this consciousness varied between traditions, for example "pure awareness," "Christ consciousness," "the Tao," "the grace of God," "the Truth of What Is," but there appeared to be a common understanding of what was meant by this, and some agreement that an ever-increasing awareness of, alignment with, and embodiment of this consciousness through manifesting it in one's life characterized the long-term process of spiritual transformation. Moving away from a "ladder approach" that includes hierarchical stages adds to the complexity of studying spiritual transformation, but does not preclude developing causal models and hypotheses regarding mechanism of action. A more parsimonious model that emerged from our research was that of a deepening spiral, wherein one encounters critical issues and periods repeatedly, but each time from a slightly different and often more open, deep or expanded perspective. As one travels down the spiral, one increases awareness of,

alignment with, and embodiment of a consciousness from which an organizing principle for one's life emerges naturally.

From this perspective the purpose of spiritual practice is to clear the blocks to this process, to maintain a sort of equilibrium in the midst of restructuring of one's worldview and sense of self, and to cultivate repeated spiritual experiences of that consciousness that will stimulate further restructuring. One respondent likened spiritual practice to preparing the soil for a garden to grow, or cultivating the proper conditions for a natural process of spiritual development to take place. Another noted that her practice of meditation did not cause compassion to arise per se, but instead created a state of being where an authentic state of compassion followed naturally.

### *Be Here Now: The Importance of Direct Experience*

A common point made by most of our respondents was that direct subjective experience was an essential element of spiritual transformation. Although insight, belief, observation, and behavior were elements contributing to a shift in worldview, the primary causal factor was at least one direct personal experience of a spiritual state of consciousness. It was reported repeatedly and with emphasis that the only antidote to previous conditioning, or societal pressures, or faulty assumptions, is a direct experience that often carries with it an unshakable certainty of the nature of things. Whether these experiences were of God's love, of essential emptiness, of the interconnectedness of all life, of insight into the causes of suffering, or took another of a seemingly infinite variety of possible forms, they held in common a noetic understanding that often stimulated a shifted worldview, without need for objective confirmation. Our respondents confirmed William James (1902/1982) statement that, "mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for aftertime." Notably, this certainty without need for confirmation was differentiated from dogmatism or fundamentalism by an accompanying sense of inclusiveness and tolerance for other worldviews - an increased capacity to hold complexities. The teachers we interviewed were clear about the idea that transformation could not be taught or grasped intellectually, but that it had to be experienced directly. From this perspective, one purpose of spiritual practice is to make possible such direct experience. Words used to describe this were "a realization," "a moment of clarity," "a remembrance," "becoming fully present," "an awakening," "a coming home," or "a recognition of something that has always existed but one has only just become aware of." One of our respondents noted that "transformation is about radical self-engagement with life, as it is, in the moment."

### *Plateaus, Valleys and Peaks*

Our work supported two kinds of transformation, sudden and gradual, and suggested that the transformative path often entails a dance between the two. Peak experiences such as, moments of insight or epiphany are often followed by plateaus, and one of our respondents noted that "learning to love the plateau and explore the valleys"

facilitated the process of transformation. It was often noted that insights arising from spiritual experience, whether gathered from the peaks, plateaus or valleys, can fade quickly without the presence of mediating factors, such as having a language and cultural context for the experience, having supportive like-minded community, encountering or intentionally placing daily reminders of the experience in one's environment, continuing to access similar teachings, or expressing or manifesting the insight through art, writing or other action. The process was inhibited by lack of quiet solitude, not enough time in nature, staying too busy, and too quickly returning to contexts apathetic or inimical to transformation. To a large extent, if one's social structure supported a transformative experience or process, it was more easily integrated, but unsupportive social structures made lasting change less likely. Most spiritual traditions recognize this and provide a structure in which reminders, participation with supportive community, and a language for transformation are an integral part of the tradition. In addition, most traditions provide some sort of "scaffolding" for the learning process, in which contact with more experienced practitioners is encouraged, as is receiving continuing teachings.

### *The Convergence of Life and Practice*

Another theme among our respondents was that as one becomes more experienced, spiritual practice becomes less formalized, so that as one respondent put it, "one's life becomes one's practice, and one's practice one's life, so that there is no longer any distinction between the two." Over time, transformation becomes less about seeking spiritual experience and more about living virtues such as truth, goodness, beauty, love, kindness, compassion, generosity, and service. Spiritual experience over time becomes less of the fireworks variety and more of the traffic jam and diaper change variety, so that each activity is imbued with a sacred or mindful tone. As with the outcomes of spiritual transformation that we identified, spiritual practice over time becomes not necessarily "spiritual" at all, but simply right living. Some of our psychologically oriented respondents framed spiritual transformation as a natural part of healthy human development, and at times had difficulty separating the two, with comments like "I'm not sure if this is transformation or simply becoming more mature." This finding supports Kristeller & Johnson (1999) who state, "Meditation, rather than being construed as only an esoteric or religious practice can be considered a powerful means of shifting one's relationship to one's own mind, of uncoupling conditioned reactions that may have outlived their time and value, and opening the mind to qualities of experience that create new meaning, wisdom, and love."

### *I to We*

In every great story of the Hero's Journey (Campbell, 1990), the transformed Hero returns bearing gifts (the trophy, the wisdom, the chalice, the bride) and the community is also transformed. Our respondents emphasized that spiritual transformation, often in those who are more experienced, is perceived as not only an individual process, but a collective one as well. One essential milestone commonly described in the transformative process was the movement from "I to We." This was described as a sort of spiritual watershed, prior to which one can remain stuck in what

has been termed “pseudo-enlightenment,” where spiritual experience and practice is gained in service to one’s narcissistic needs. Though many, if not most, initially seek spiritual seeking to ease their own suffering, there appears to be agreement across traditions that eventually, transformation requires a greater communal identity and service orientation. As one respondent put it;

“If we remember that our spiritual life is not just for ourselves alone, and our own private satisfaction of having had a great experience, but it is about how we live, then it becomes a very keen motivator, and this is not very common in the west. The classical understanding is that spiritual life is how we live, it is how we live everyday, how we relate to our children, how we relate to our parents, how we earn a living, how we speak to one another, how truthful we are...”

For many, spiritual transformation entails a greater sense of responsibility and sometimes manifests as activism in small and large forms. One respondent stated that:

“The overall result of transformation is a richer connection to nature. Coming out of feeling like “I’m a victim of my life” into “I am working with nature, community and spirit to design and shape *our* lives.” You go from a “me” to an “us.” You go from a victim to an actor or an initiator. You go from feeling devalued to valuing what’s already really around you...”

This theme emerged not only from direct responses to questions, but also through our experience as researchers. Respondents were invited to be “co-researchers” during the interview, and to alter questions and format if it served their purposes. These alterations, while infrequent, were instructive. In our initial interviews, we asked our respondents to identify the benefits of their spiritual practice or path. Repeatedly we were told that, though there may be benefits, the meaning of spiritual transformation cannot be defined by personal benefit, because spiritual transformation is not about gains for oneself, but for all. We changed the question, and our perspective, to ask about the outcomes one’s spiritual practice or path leads to.

Miller (2004) calls quantum change a “developmental metamorphosis” and muses that it may represent an evolution in consciousness as the human race matures. Many of our respondents echoed this idea. Although we have moved away from a hierarchical stage model as a result of this research, we concur that the shifts in perception, identity and worldview that many spiritual transformations entail are important aspects of, and many cases define, both personal and collective maturation and development.

## **Conclusions**

Though religious affiliation has been consistently associated with health benefits, little is known about why, and few studies exist on non-religious spiritual practice. Spiritual transformation is an understudied phenomenon that occurs more commonly than



may be recognized, and there are common elements across traditions that shed light on what the predictors, mediators, mechanisms and outcomes are of the transformative process. Though complex, it is a viable scientific construct that is worthy of study, in part because of its implications for changing behavior in a dramatic and lasting way. In this paper we have presented several themes emerging from a study that utilized a natural history approach, interviewing 40 teachers and masters of a variety of spiritual traditions to learn more about the process of spiritual transformation. As results of this study emerge, they are being translated into a model of the natural history of transformation, not specific to any one tradition or type of person, which can inform hypotheses and selection of variables for future studies.

We have started the process of taking the themes generated by these interviews and examining whether they apply to a more general population of people engaged in spiritual practice. We have surveyed 500 individuals so far, and these data are being analyzed. Preliminary analysis has suggested elements of the transformative process that are common across individuals, and some that are more idiosyncratic or specific to each individual's process. Several recommendations for survey item and format change resulted, and factor analyses suggest a set of items that might reflect the degree to which someone has experienced either a gradual or sudden transformation. A larger survey study is currently underway.

Like Miller and C'de Baca (2001) found in the experiences of their transformed individuals, we found striking similarities across traditions. As Miller says of their respondents, it is 'as if they have in some way glimpsed the same truth.' We agree with Miller's assessment that these experiences are not rare, and that we know too little about them. More research is called for, and we recommend attending to the hypotheses and variables generated by the models developed by the qualitative work of groups such as Miller's, ours, and others. In addition, much work must be done to develop measures and methods to adequately assess the variables relevant to the process of spiritual transformation suggested by these models.

Finally, we propose, as did many of our respondents, that the study of spiritual transformation may challenge our scientific methods to adequately inquire into the more difficult to quantify dimensions of human experience. Wilber (1990), Braud & Anderson (1998), and Valle (1998) among others have proposed that the study of transformation will require a transformation on the part of the researcher, and perhaps it will of science as well. An integral science brings together qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as multiple ways of knowing, giving us the capacity to find commonalities and make generalizations, while not losing sight of the profound depth and variety of experience that exists. We approach the topic of spiritual transformation with humility, heeding a final common theme among our respondents reflected in one respondent's statement that "sometimes the most important things in life can not be expressed at all, but only experienced."

This work was sponsored by Richard Gunther, Peter Baumann, and the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) ([www.ions.org](http://www.ions.org)), a non-profit organization whose mission is exploring the frontiers of consciousness to advance individual, social, and global transformation. For 30 years IONS has been at the forefront of research and education into human

consciousness, including such areas as mind-body medicine, consciousness and healing, transformational practices, and emerging worldviews.

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