

Touching the Void:
Working with Spiritual/Existential Crisis

by

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Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration into the process of spiritual growth. When we explore deeper realms of experience and reality and discover truths that are often very different than previously held assumptions, a process of attempting to integrate these truths into our understanding of the world will inevitably be initiated. This process can take many forms, taking place gradually and gently or taking place dramatically and even problematically. This paper explores this process, looking most specifically at the following areas: how to define the various realms of experience and their various truths; how these deeper truths are discovered; the various forms that the process of integrating these truths can take; the risks and potential pitfalls of this process; and the potential benefits of this process.

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Introduction: Journeying into “The Void”

At the root of western science, philosophy, and virtually all spiritual traditions lies a struggle with the same question—what is reality? Though they all differ in the specifics of their proposed answers, there is one aspect that they all share: the fundamental reality of the universe is quite different from the “ordinary” reality that we perceive from day to day.

In order to function effectively in the world, in our society, and with other people, there are many “truths” we take for granted. We perceive the world and its various manifestations as solid, as knowable, as graspable. Without even questioning it, we firmly assume that there is some actual ground to stand on. We perceive that there is a “me” that is separate from a “you,” and that you, me and every perceivable object is a unique and separate entity. We believe that we can “know” these various entities simply by defining their physical characteristics and behavior, and thus make ourselves feel comfortable and somehow in control by being able to file them away in the appropriate category—one more thing that we have mastered, one more reinforcement in the belief that the world really is solid, predictable and secure. Many of us remain convinced that we are only one or two steps away from having it all figured out, while others may feel somewhat further away but still persist in the belief that there is the potential somehow to figure it all out. And once we have it all figured out, we assure ourselves, *then* we can finally have genuine peace and happiness. Since we believe so deeply that the world has ground and solidity, then we believe it is simply a matter of finding the right “place to stand” that will bring us that everlasting happiness that we so long for—once we find the right partner, the right job, the right house, the right this or that, then we can finally have real security and live happily ever after.

The problem with this line of thinking is that it is based purely on our *perceptions* of the world, on *apparent* reality. According to Western science and most spiritual traditions, this line of thinking completely crumbles in the face of the deeper truths of reality. Both Western science and many of the world's spiritual traditions have come to realize that as we begin to peek beneath the apparently solid surface of our "day to day" reality, what we find is a world of absolute interconnectedness and unending change, a flowing sea comprised of all manifestations of the universe blended together so thoroughly that there is no way to say for sure where one ends and the next begins. Furthermore, these various traditions tell us that the deeper we explore, the less tangible and less substantial the world becomes. Duality continues to dissolve until we reach a realm that, say the few who claim to have experienced it, is beyond duality, and hence concepts, altogether. Those travelers who have tasted these deeper dimensions of reality often describe sensing the presence of a fundamental emptiness, a bottomless void or abyss, and those who claim to have gone all the way tell us there are simply no words to describe it. But regardless of how deep a traveler has ventured, they nearly always return with the same message—when we experience these deeper truths directly, when we touch "the void," the "solid" reality that we have clung to so dearly for most of our lives begins to crumble away; and the result can be both terrifying and wonderful, unbearably painful and profoundly healing.

Section I: Defining the Void

Defining the Indefinable

Psychologist and spiritual teacher Ram Dass tells a humorous story about God and Satan. They are walking down the street when they come across a brilliantly shiny object lying on the ground. God picks it up and says, “Oh, it’s truth.” And Satan says, “Oh, yes. Here, give it to me and I’ll organize it” (Dass, 1989, p. 179). As this simple story implies, there seems to be something fundamentally “wrong” with the idea of taking the omnipresence of truth and attempting to stuff it into a box comprised of words and concepts. On the other hand, if we go into such an endeavor with the attitude that we are merely attempting to point in the direction of indefinable truth, rather than trying to “own it” with knowledge, then perhaps we can hope to avoid the pitfall of further separating ourselves from truth with concepts. If we approach a discussion of truth with such humility, then perhaps we can find a helpful way to discuss the crisis of “falling into the truth.”

Ultimate Reality

The Buddhist perspective: Sidhattha Gautama—a scientific pioneer

When discussing the “Buddhist” perspective, it is important to remember that Sidhattha Gautama (“the Buddha,” which simply means, “the awakened one”) did not start the religion of “Buddhism,” and had no intention whatsoever of founding a new religion. He was merely interested in discovering the root of human suffering and determining if there were any possible remedy for it. He actually went about his pursuit of this truth in a very scientific manner, and if one looks closely at his story, it would be difficult to deny that he was in fact one of the first great scientists in recorded history.

We tend to believe that the scientific method can only be carried out by performing experiments on external phenomena, and that introspection falls outside the realm of “real science” because it is argued that we cannot observe inner phenomena (mental, physical or otherwise) truly objectively. Both Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and the field of Quantum Mechanics, however, have successfully demonstrated that we can’t observe *any* phenomena, be they internal or external, truly objectively. The NASA article, “The Observer in Modern Physics,” explains this principle in the following way:

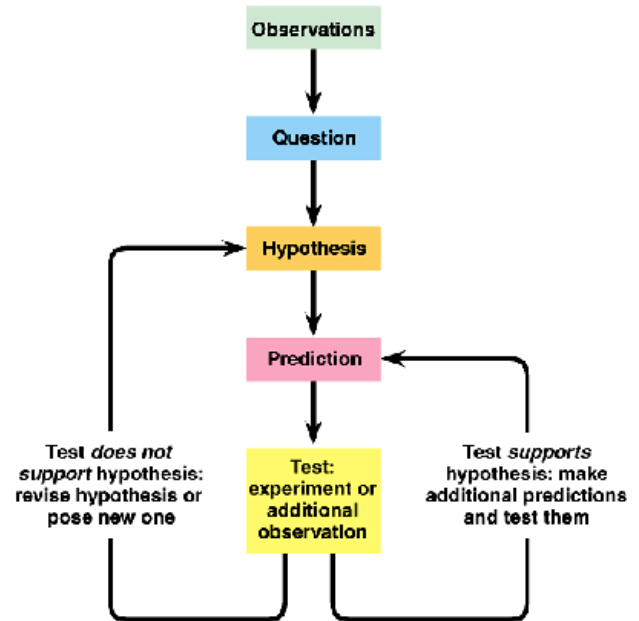
In relativity, the absolutes of Newtonian physics were banished, and observations obtained by observers in different frames of reference became all that was available . . . In quantum mechanics, the observer and the system being observed became mysteriously linked so that the results of any observation seemed to be determined in part by actual choices made by the observer. (n.d.)

In other words, since we are always limited to one unique perspective (in time, space, velocity and otherwise), our view of the universe will always be different from any other perspective; and since we are intimately connected with the world around us, since it is impossible to ever truly isolate ourselves from the phenomena we are trying to observe, any attempt at observation will always affect whatever it is we are trying to observe. So, if all of our observations of the universe are doomed to be limited and distorted, is it really wise to value external inspection so highly while being so quick to discard introspection altogether?

Since Gautama was most concerned with actual human experience, and especially with the suffering that we all apparently struggle with, he chose to study his own. Though what we refer to as “The Scientific Method” had not been specifically formulated at that time, by

looking at his explorations now, we can see that he followed it very closely (see the diagram). He made an observation: “There is suffering.” He asked questions: “What causes suffering?” and “Is there a remedy?” His first hypothesis and related prediction: “Suffering is caused by desire; therefore, indulging one’s desires should end suffering.” His test of this first hypothesis had been the first 29 years of his life. He lived as a prince, enjoying all the luxuries available at that time, having a wife and a family he loved very much. However, he realized that he was still

suffering; he was still not satisfied. Therefore, his first hypothesis was not supported by the test, and so he was forced to revise it and come up with a second hypothesis and related prediction: “Suffering is caused by desire; therefore, denying oneself of all desire by living an ascetic life should eventually eradicate desire and lead to the end of suffering.” He devoted the next six years of his life (from age 29 to 35) testing this hypothesis. He spent the majority of each day sitting in painful postures, practicing deep concentration-type meditations, eating only the bare minimum to survive, sleeping the barest minimum, and refusing any pleasures such as sex and enjoyable food and drink. Finally, at the brink of starvation, he realized that he wasn’t any closer to finding a cure for suffering. His second hypothesis, therefore, also failed to hold up under thorough testing.



The Scientific Method
("Definition of," n.d.)

After taking a very scientific approach to the above two hypotheses, Gautama decided to take the powers of concentration he had mastered during the previous six years of practice and direct his attention inwards to the natural process of his own mind and body, to the deepest fundamental truths of his experience. He sat down under the famous Bodhi tree and vowed, with a strong determination, to sit contemplating his experience in this way until he fully understood the root of suffering: “Let me die. Let my body perish. Let my flesh dry up. I will not get up from this seat till I get full illumination” (“Mara,” n.d.). By the following morning, he had found the truth he was looking for.

He came to realize that the root of suffering is not desire, per se, but ignorance to the true nature of the world. Desire is merely our natural response to viewing the world incorrectly (Epstein, 2005). He came to see that, fundamentally, there are only three qualities of the phenomenal world (Bodhi, n.d.): (1) it is impermanent, constantly changing, constantly fluxing and flowing (he called this “anicca,” in the Pali language which he spoke at the time); (2) all manifestations of the world ultimately arise from and return to the same source, are in fact all interconnected as merely different manifestations of the same underlying whole (“anatta,” in Pali); and (3) all manifestations of the world, including us, experience suffering on one level or another due to the apparent isolation and very real groundlessness and perpetual shifting of the situation in which we exist (“dukkha”). As human beings, we experience this suffering as a perpetual dissatisfaction with our situation—we are perpetually seeking a deeper love and connection, and are perpetually grasping for solidity and security in a world which is fundamentally ungraspable and insecure. So the Buddha came to realize that until we are able to experience these fundamental truths of reality, we will never be able to find peace with them and will continue seeking happiness in the wrong direction.

The Buddha taught that it is even possible for our awareness to transcend the phenomenal world altogether—to become aware of that which transcends duality altogether, that which is both the source and the destiny of all phenomenal manifestations, an experience he referred to as “nibbana” (“Nibbana,” 2005). He never attempted to describe this experience, as it lies beyond concepts altogether (which are a function of duality), though he described it as the ultimate reality, the sea from which all manifestations arise and ultimately return.

After the Buddha arrived at these realizations, he traveled extensively around the region in which he lived in order to spread his teachings, and to offer a path known as “The Noble Eightfold Path.” This path simply outlines a way of living which includes various disciplines, aspirations, and mental exercises that he felt would be important for developing awareness of deeper dimensions of reality and integrating this awareness into the apparent reality of our day to day lives (“The Noble Eightfold Path,” 1998). The Buddha’s original intent was not to start an organized religion, but simply to teach others how to come out of their suffering. “I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering” (“Buddhism,” 2006). Regardless, many organized religions have since arisen out of his teachings. On one hand, this has been very helpful in that it has allowed his teachings to remain alive for so long and has led to a variety of different ways of touching into and integrating deeper dimensions of reality. On the other hand, given the present Western paradigm with its general disregard for subjective observation and especially spirituality, the Buddha’s association with religion prevents many Westerners from recognizing him as the authentic scientist that he was.

The physics perspective

Nearly 2,500 years after the time of the Buddha, and tackling the problem from a very different angle, Western science has come to many of the same conclusions as the Buddha with regard to the nature of reality. Einstein's famous equation, $E = mc^2$, turned Western science's view of the world on its head at the turn of the 20th century. In simplest terms, this equation claims that energy and matter are equivalent and able to be transformed from one to the other (though such a transformation results in vastly different quantities—consider the nuclear bomb, for example) (Coleman, 1958). This one simple equation led us to realize that there is indeed no solidity anywhere—the entire universe is merely a dynamic ocean of energy, constantly changing, constantly fluxing and flowing. The term, “energy at rest,” is now a common term in the field of physics used to describe matter. In other words, Western science has come to the same conclusion as the Buddha about the truth of impermanence (anicca).

Along lines similar to Einstein's famous equation came the Law of the Conservation of Energy. This law, in simplest terms, states that “energy can neither be created nor destroyed but only transformed from one form to another” (Coleman, 1958, p. 83). So, no matter how many times the various manifestations of the universe change form, there is always the same amount of energy in the universe (although it may exist either in the form we normally associate with energy or in the form of matter). Nothing can ultimately be added and nothing can ultimately be taken away. In other words, all manifestations of the universe are ultimately part of the same dynamic web of energy—everything is fundamentally interconnected. Again, Western science has come to the same conclusion as the Buddha, this time regarding the interconnectedness of all things (anatta).

The limitations of the intellect

Arguably, the field of Quantum Mechanics has taken our understanding of the phenomenal world deeper than any other field of science and is now finding itself stumbling into many apparently irresolvable paradoxes. Perhaps the most famous is the riddle of how light can exist simultaneously as both a wave and a particle, though many other inexplicable paradoxes have arisen, the details of which fall outside the scope of this paper. The fact that Western science is finding itself on a stumbling block here is in perfect alignment with the Buddha's teachings. The truths of impermanence and interconnectedness still exist within the realm of the dualistic phenomenal world (though at a level that is deeper and less concrete than that which most of us ordinarily experience), and so the intellectual tools of science should eventually be able to observe these. However, what the Buddha taught as the deepest dimension of reality, nibbana, is said to lie beyond duality altogether, and would be unattainable with the intellect, regardless of how sophisticated the tools. Many physicists have now come to share similar beliefs, feeling that these paradoxes are arising because we are approaching the limits of what can be conceptualized, and some have even turned to spiritual practices in an attempt to take their understanding beyond the confines of concepts and duality (Capra, 1984).

So, the question begged here is if the science in which most of us have so much faith has come to recognize these deeper truths that the Buddha said would lead to the cessation of our suffering (namely, the laws of profound impermanence and the fundamental non-separateness of all manifestations), then why do we continue to suffer so much? Why do we still find ourselves trying to grasp the ungraspable and achieve the unachievable? Because, the Buddha would have argued, we really don't believe these truths at the deepest layers of our minds. We believe them intellectually—the scientists believe them because they have strong faith in their intellect, in

their instruments, and in their mathematics; and the rest of us believe them because we have strong faith in the scientists. But this is all merely an intellectual understanding, a conceptual understanding that resides no deeper than the surface of our minds. The Buddha taught that until we experience these truths directly, through the direct experience of them, we will only continue to spin around and around in the same futile struggles. We will continue grasping for something solid to hold onto and stand upon, we will continue clinging to the idea that the self is fundamentally separate from the other, and we will find that real peace and joy will continue to be fleeting and elusive.

Apparent (“Day-to-Day”) Reality

In order to develop the possibility of touching into deeper dimensions of reality, many say that it is first necessary to deeply explore our apparent reality. This is the goal of many meditative practices, especially those that work with the development of mindfulness. Mindfulness practice, in the context of this paper, can perhaps best be defined as “the intentional cultivation of non-judgmental, non-reactive, present-moment awareness” (Fine, n.d.). It is important to make the distinction here between “mindfulness” and simple “attention.” Mindfulness, as defined above, implies the intention to be fully aware of our present experience while remaining as *non-reactive* as possible to it. Attention, on the other hand, while also referring to the intention to be fully aware of some aspect of present experience, may or may not involve reactivity. Most teachers of mindfulness practices say that the reason it is so important to make the effort to suspend our reactivity to our present experience is because it’s our reactivity that gives our experience so much apparent solidity. It’s our reactivity that keeps us locked into our thoughts about and interpretations of our sense perceptions in a very restricted way, not allowing us to distinguish

the difference between the raw sensory input of the world and our own interpretations and distortions of that input. If we could somehow perceive only the raw information being provided by our senses without our overlying *interpretations of* that information, then we would be able to witness directly the fundamental characteristics of impermanence and interconnectedness (Walsh, 1983).

Apparent reality, therefore, is comprised almost entirely of our interpretations of the world, interpretations that are by their very nature a distortion of what really *is*. It is important to keep in mind, however, that these interpretations are essential for us to be able to function in the world. Without them, we would not be able to communicate with others, function as a useful member of the society, or even be able to take care of ourselves—we would presumably find ourselves lost in a chaotic and dynamic sea of energy, without any point of reference. The way we get in trouble with apparent reality and perpetuate our suffering is when we mistake our interpretations as ultimate truth. The question, then, is how can we integrate our perception of these different realities? Is it possible to keep one foot firmly grounded in apparent reality, in order to function as a useful member of society, while allowing our other foot to dance in these deeper dimensions of reality, which in turn will allow us to loosen our grip on the futile pursuit of solidity and security so that we may develop more genuine peace and joy? This is the point where physics has generally stepped out of the discussion, whereas Buddhism, transpersonal psychology and most other spiritual traditions have dived in deeper. Each of these traditions, in their own way, has come to the conclusion that this type of integration is indeed possible, and that there are many potential benefits to be attained in such a pursuit. They have also come to the realization, however, that this path also contains many potential risks and hazards.

Section II: Entering the Void

A Personal Journey into the Void

Several years ago, at the age of 29, I had a very powerful experience of falling into deeper dimensions of reality. At the time, it seemed to happen very unexpectedly, very spontaneously. But in hindsight, I've come to realize that this was a journey I had begun many years earlier.

My first experience with LSD

When I was 14, I took LSD for the first time, and it played a major role in beginning the process of chipping through a very thick shell of isolation and disconnection that I had built around myself as a result of a difficult childhood. During the course of this psychedelic “trip,” it had become apparent to me that I had spent much of my life asking, “why, why, why...,” desperately trying to figure out what life is, *why* life is, and why it has to be so damned painful. Now, with the aid of this mind altering drug, it had suddenly become clear that I had spent most of my life struggling against the way things really are, desperately wanting them to be different. This experience opened my eyes to the futility of that kind of struggle for the first time and demonstrated the potential peace and clarity that could be found by learning to accept that things just simply are what they *are*—get over it! Once I was struck by this epiphany, I spent the remainder of the trip reveling in thoughts and feelings revolving around the theme of, “Of course! It is what it is!”

After that epiphany, I dabbled with other psychedelic drugs (primarily psychedelic mushrooms and a few mild experiences with mescaline from the San Pedro cactus) for the next couple of years, hoping to go deeper into this revelation of “presence,” but found that each trip was ultimately just revealing the same theme, and was generally weaker each time. I finally had to conclude that psychedelic drugs, while having the ability to initially point to deeper truth,

ultimately would have to be abandoned if I really wanted to learn how to *embody* that deeper truth.

In search of truth

Thus began my wandering around the planet, desiring to “take it all in,” to see everything, meet everyone, explore every kind of experience. I combined my love of wandering with my love of flying, and pursued the mastery of hang gliding until winning the U.S. National Championships in 2001 and the Australian National Championships half a year later, in early 2002. Initially, I really reveled in the feeling of finally making it to “the top.” I had finally attained the position I had always dreamed of. Every major hang gliding manufacturer was offering me sponsorship, eager to send me all around the planet to compete in hang gliding competitions—to race the sleekest human wings ever designed across beautiful landscapes, all expenses paid. I was so happy! Or was I?

The painful slap of Dukkha

Wait a minute. What’s wrong here? I should be ecstatic, I should be ready to write the words “and he lived happily ever after” to the end of my autobiography; but actually, I was still ultimately just as unsatisfied and unhappy as ever. Like a slap in the face, I finally realized the essence of what the Buddha had called “dukkha,” and it touched me in a very profound and painful way. I could see all too clearly that, ultimately, there would never be any external achievement or attainment that would lead to lasting happiness. I suddenly found my entire world turned rudely onto its head by this depressing realization. Just a week after winning one of the most difficult international competitions in the world, I found myself spiraling into a deep depression, fueled by a strong sense of meaninglessness and futility.

A deep drink of Anatta

To all outward appearances, my life couldn't have appeared better. I was hanging out with some good friends in a beautiful seaside town in Eastern Australia, recuperating from over a month of hang gliding across some of the world's most beautiful landscapes. And yet, on the inside, this deep recognition of dukkha left me falling headfirst into what felt like an interminable abyss of despair. One of my friends' birthdays was coming up, and we decided to go to the top of a mountain that was uninhabited and celebrate it with an Ecstasy party. I had made the decision not to indulge in drugs a number of years before, but considering how utterly depressed I felt, I decided to go ahead and partake.

Late in the evening, after having my spirits lifted dramatically with the help of some powerful chemicals and good company, and after our group was cheerfully exhausted from hours of intense dancing, we lay down under the stars and chatted about life. It was then that another powerful revelation rocked my world. It hit me, deeply and undeniably, for the very first time that I could remember, that I really wasn't alone—that all people, and all beings, truly *are* intimately connected. I was finally drinking in the fundamental truth that the Buddha had called “anatta.”

Actually, the first thing that hit me was the realization of an underlying assumption that had colored my world for as long as I could remember—the mistaken belief that I was all alone in the world, that I was the only one really suffering, and that somehow I was the only one who had been missing the big party called “life.” I never would have admitted previously to myself or to anyone else that I believed such a silly thing. But there it was, a false belief that had so saturated my world that it was like becoming aware of the existence of air for the first time. And along with this realization came the fact of its falsity—that these people who were sharing this

mountaintop with me were also struggling through life; that, in fact, everyone all over the world shared similar feelings of suffering and loneliness along with me, to greater or lesser degrees. I could now, for the first time, really feel a connection with these others and with all of life; and suddenly, I found that the deep realization of dukkha that had hammered me so intensely the week before was much easier to take, realizing that we all suffered from the same ailment. I felt the first stirrings of real compassion.

I took the long flight back to the U.S. a few days later, feeling as though I had to relearn the world all over again. The pain of everyone I passed was suddenly so exposed; the way people contracted their bodies, their strained expressions, their tones of voice, all revealed the deep insecurity and struggle that we all must deal with. It seemed so obvious now—I wondered how I had never really noticed it before. When I returned to Florida, to the hang gliding school/community where I had lived seasonally for a number of years, I could now clearly see the suffering of people who I thought I had known so well. At first, it was hard to take, seeing so much suffering everywhere, but along with this new view came a much more intimate sense of connection with others, which was actually a really nice change.

Falling into the abyss of Anicca

A week had passed after being home, and I still felt quite wobbly. The foundation of my view of the world had seriously shifted, and I could feel the ground beneath my feet still settling as I tried to find a new sense of stability. I joined a couple of friends to go watch a movie at the theater, being intrigued by the name, *Beautiful Mind*.

Having been a bit of a math geek myself, I immediately found myself associating with the protagonist of the movie, and at the point in the movie when the other characters believed he was going mad and hallucinating, I found myself firmly believing that his experiences weren't

hallucinations, but were in fact really happening. About two thirds of the way through the movie, however, in a scene of real directive brilliance, it was suddenly revealed that he *had* in fact been hallucinating his experiences. Just as this twist in the plot hit me, a much more personal realization crashed home, and I suddenly realized that *my* entire experience was *also* a hallucination. Of course, my delusions were nowhere near the level of those of the movie's protagonist, but the reality of my own delusion was plainly revealed, and I found myself simultaneously both enormously exhilarated and utterly terrified.

Feeling overwhelmed, I had to leave my chair and go out into the theater hallway. I could suddenly see so plainly that, beneath my long held delusion in ground and solidity, I was actually swimming in a dynamic, chaotic sea of energy. It was obvious to me that my senses were taking in this energy around me in the form of light waves, sound waves, tactile sensations, etc., and that my mind was automatically labeling and categorizing all of this to give an incredible illusion of ground, of permanence and understanding, of control. But with this new shift in perspective, it had suddenly become all too clear to me that there really wasn't any ground—everything, myself included, was in a state of perpetual change and flow, and there was absolutely nothing solid to hold onto anywhere. I now found myself in an interesting state where I was aware of both the delusion of permanence—of the categorization of chairs, a floor, walls, people, etc.—as well as the totally groundless flow of which all of these things ultimately consisted. I had intuited the idea of this condition before, but now I was really experiencing it, and I found it nearly impossible to accept. The feeling of being so out of control, of having nothing solid to stand on, was almost too much to bear. I found myself unable to stop myself from cognitively attempting to grasp something solid, something tangible, even though it was obvious that this futile grasping was only leading to more pain, more terror. Even though all of this was going on within my

mind, I managed to keep my “cool” on the surface, and no one, not even my friends, noticed that anything out of the ordinary was happening with me.

When we returned home, I was hoping this high level of awareness would fade away, but it didn't. Finally, late into the night, being still very wide awake and filled with a difficult mixture of profound awe and powerful anxiety, I decided to drink some liquor I found in a cabinet and hit the bed, hoping the comforting illusion of stability and permanence would return in the morning. I woke up to the same intense awareness of impermanence, only now combined with a severe hangover. I reluctantly acknowledged that I would somehow have to come to terms with the fact that I was in this one for the long haul. I had somehow stumbled into a deep awareness of this underlying world of impermanence, of the fundamental truth the Buddha had called “anicca,” and there was no putting the blindfold back on, no matter how much I wanted to. I would somehow have to find peace with this new realization. Fortunately, I had previously established myself somewhat in a mindfulness meditation practice, and not knowing what else to do, I began to meditate diligently.

Exploring the stormy impact of these three truths

As the deep realization of these three truths (dukkha, anatta, and anicca) sank in, my previous precarious worldview was almost completely shattered. Over the next many months, very powerful emotions continued to sweep through me (especially rage, terror and despair), which were in turn compounded by the nearly constant terror that they would overwhelm me. I used my mindfulness practice as a means to find some kind of ground in the midst of these storms, and it was fortunate that, due to the nature of my work and lifestyle, I had a lot of time to deeply explore them and work towards making some kind of peace with them. I recognized these many storms as long-suppressed emotions, finally free to flow to the surface, seeking new balance as

my previous defenses had now become so seriously undermined. And exploring ever more deeply into these emotions, I came to discover that fear and desire was at the root of all of them.

I discovered that there were ultimately two opposing fears (and their corresponding desires) that did battle with each other and created the entire spectrum of all of the other emotions. On one side, I discovered the fear of losing my sense of self, and of losing the general sense of control that goes along with this. This fear in turn compelled me to contract and isolate, to continue grasping in futility for some solid sense of self I could depend upon and some kind of ground that this self could hold onto. On the other side of this battle of fears, I discovered the fear of isolation, of being all alone, which in turn compelled me to transcend my limited sense of self and connect with something larger than the self.

My mindfulness practice gave me the opportunity to maintain something of a witness to this profound intrapsychic struggle, and I came to recognize that both fears have validity—that the two extremes of overwhelming loss of self on one side and overwhelming isolation on the other are very real possibilities within existence. Yet I also realized that these fears were each maintaining and reinforcing the other. The contraction resulting from my fear of losing my sense of self and of losing control was keeping me isolated and removed from the deeper love and connection that I longed for; and my fear of having to endure an isolated existence and my corresponding impulse to expand and dissolve my sense of self was keeping me locked into the terror of self annihilation. To understand this dynamic better, I found that it was helpful to view this polarity of two opposing fears from a different angle and see them as a polarity of two opposing desires—on one pole I found the desire for control, for ground, for a solid sense of “me” living in a somewhat stable world consisting of solid and separate “others”; and on the other pole I found the desire for love and connection, for the transcendence of an isolated self.

I found myself overwhelmed by the dilemma of being painfully aware of two truths, both of which appeared to be so valid while simultaneously appearing to be so diametrically opposed to each other. To believe in the delusion of permanence, of some ground to hold onto, of some solid “me” to hold onto this solid “ground,” would necessarily lead me into isolation and away from the transcendent love and connection that I longed for, would it not? Yet would not my longing for this transcendent love and connection require me to abandon my desperate attempts to solidify a “me,” a “ground”? Finding myself grappling so fiercely with this apparently impossible dilemma, I was terrified I would completely lose my grip on consensus reality and be swept away into utter madness.

Spiritual Emergence vs. Spiritual Emergency

In the language of transpersonal psychology, a gentle descent into deeper dimensions of reality is referred to as “spiritual emergence.” Spiritual emergence is perhaps the most common path followed by relatively healthy individuals who experience spiritual growth in their life. The insights and changes are gentle enough so that the individual is able to cope with them in a way that doesn’t significantly interfere with other aspects of their life. Of course, the degrees and intensity of this process will inevitably vary from time to time, but someone experiencing spiritual emergence would not say that they felt overwhelmed by the experience.

“Spiritual emergency,” on the other hand, refers to a sudden and potentially overwhelming plunge into these depths. Cortright (1997), a transpersonally-oriented psychologist and author of *Psychotherapy and Spirit*, defines spiritual emergency more specifically as a process in which “the self becomes disorganized and overwhelmed by an infusion of spiritual energies or new realms of experience which it is not yet able to integrate” (p.

156). Reflecting back upon my own experience, I would say that this definition describes it quite accurately.

It seems that there are two variables that, when occurring together, tend to open the doorway to a spiritual emergency. The first is any spiritual experience that is particularly difficult to integrate, and the second is the experience of some sort of stress. When a person is particularly stressed, his defenses and inner resources are likely to be weakened. According to Cortright (1997), “it may be this very vulnerability or ‘thinning’ of the person’s ego structures that allow spiritual experiences past the usual filtering mechanisms of the psyche” (pg. 160). He says these stressors may be either physical, emotional or spiritual, or some combination thereof. Physical stressors frequently include near-death experiences, pregnancy and childbirth, fasting, injury, or physical hardship. Emotional stressors frequently include emotional deprivation or loss, experiences that evoke emotional intensity, drugs (especially psychedelic), and intense sexual experiences. Spiritual stressors typically involve some kind of intensive spiritual practice, such as intensive meditation retreats or vision quests.

Distinguishing Spiritual Emergency from Regressive Pathology

Many of the experiences encountered in spiritual emergency—such as hallucinations, delusions, severe anxiety and depression—are very similar to those found in so called pathological psychosis. So why is it believed that one has the potential for great healing when the process is allowed to complete, while it’s believed that the other needs to be checked as quickly as possible to avoid an ever worsening spiral? And considering that the interventions of each are essentially opposite, how can we be sure to distinguish one from the other?

Lukoff suggested that spiritual emergency can be distinguished by “using good prognostic indicators, including a) good pre-episode functioning, b) acute onset of symptoms (3 months or less), c) stressful precipitants, and d) a positive exploratory attitude toward the experience” (Turner et al., n. d., pg. 438).

Stanislav and Christina Grof list the following three items as indicators of spiritual emergency:

1. Changes in consciousness (perception, emotion, cognition, psychosomatic functioning), in which there is significant transpersonal emphasis.
2. Ability to see this condition as an inner psychological process and to approach it in an inner way.
3. Capacity to form an adequate working relationship (therapeutic alliance) and maintain a spirit of cooperation. This excludes severe paranoid states and those who consistently use mechanisms of projection, exteriorization, and acting out. (Cortright, 1997, p. 169)

Assagioli noticed that a spiritual emergency is frequently preceded by a shift in an individual’s outlook in which he begins to strongly question the meaning of life, “to question, for instance, the meaning of his own sufferings and those of others, and what justification there may be for so many inequalities in the destinies of men . . . [This process may escalate] even to the point of contemplating suicide. To the man himself it seems as if physical annihilation were the only logical conclusion to his increasing sense of impotence and hopelessness, of breakdown and disintegration” (1989, p. 32-3). Assagioli felt that although feelings of such intense despair could sometimes be indicative of pathology, and be considered as regressive, when these feelings accompany what is clearly a higher level of awareness, the same feelings can actually be part of a *progressive* process, facilitating “the achievement of a new personal integration, a more inclusive one, at a higher level—one for which crisis itself paved the way” (p. 34).

Nelson (1990), in his book, *Healing the Split*, worked diligently on the problem of distinguishing regressive pathology from healthy processes of spiritual emergence that often look

very similar. At one point, he more specifically compares diagnosed schizophrenia and spiritual emergency, pointing out several distinctions:

1. Schizophrenia usually emerges when a person is in their late teens or early twenties, whereas spiritual emergency can happen anytime, and most frequently occurs near mid-life.
2. Schizophrenics usually have little insight resulting from the process, whereas those experiencing spiritual emergency usually have very powerful insights.
3. Schizophrenics usually experience a bleak and gray feeling tone, one that is often incongruent with the person's words; whereas the feeling tone in a spiritual emergency usually consists of high intensity, and typically fluctuates greatly from highly positive, rapturous states to highly negative, desperate or terrified states.
4. Schizophrenia interferes significantly with a person's ability to cognize and observe [apparent] reality, whereas a person experiencing spiritual emergency usually maintains these abilities.
5. Even when a person in the grip of a spiritual emergency experiences hallucinations, they are of a higher order, possibly advising, but never commanding.

So, while the above researchers all apparently agree that there is often a gray line between spiritual emergency and regressive pathology, what they all point to is that while regressive pathology typically takes one in the direction of less awareness, or of at least more distorted awareness, spiritual emergency ultimately takes one in the direction of greater awareness and greater clarity. As Cortright (1997) says, "There is a better chance that some observing ego is present in spiritual emergency than in a mental disorder. Many times in spiritual

emergency the person is afraid of *going* crazy whereas in psychosis the person *is* crazy and lost in the experience, that is, there is little or no observing ego” (p. 170).

Pathological Psychosis: Is the Psychotic drowning in the Same Ocean in which the Mystic is swimming?

Considering the above distinctions between spiritual emergency and pathological psychosis, it is important to remember that even after decades of research and countless millions of dollars spent, there is still no substantial evidence that schizophrenia is a brain disorder (Dorman, 2004). In fact, many spiritual leaders and highly experienced clinicians have speculated that those who experience spiritual emergency and those experiencing “schizophrenia” are diving into the same deeper dimensions of reality, but that the difference lies in the level of self-awareness and ability to work with the process.

Perry, a Jungian-oriented psychiatrist with lifelong experience working clinically with those diagnosed with schizophrenia, says, “Our new understanding shows that the process . . . which these millions of [schizophrenics] go through in a way that's usually so very hazardous, isolated and uncreative, is nonetheless made up of the same stuff as what seers, visionaries, cultural reformers and prophets go through” (in an interview in O’Callaghan, 2001). Perry goes on to suggest that one way of looking at this relationship is to consider that there is a continuum of self-awareness and workability, with high self-awareness and workability on one end and low or even no self-awareness and workability on the other. In other words, those who are able to maintain higher levels of self-awareness and distinction between conscious and unconscious material would be considered to be having a spiritual emergency, while those whose self-awareness and distinction between these different realms are lowest would be considered to be “schizophrenic,” doomed to be lost in chaos and confusion indefinitely (O’Callaghan, 2001).

Section III: Working With the Void

A Personal Account of Working with the Process

The pain of resisting the process

When I look back to my own painful and terrifying experience of touching into the void, it is clear that such an experience does not necessarily have to be so painful. In fact, there are numerous stories from others who have touched into the void to varying degrees in a way that was much more gentle and peaceful. Many of them describe their journey as being full of many more positive and even blissful experiences than negative and frightening ones (Walsh, 1983). I would ascribe the dramatic collapse of my own world to the strength of my nearly lifelong fear of my own feelings and depths and, related to this, my powerful fear of being “out of control.”

I spent the majority of my life terrified to find out who I really am, terrified to unharness the “truth” of what lay just beneath the surface of my conscious mind; and now that these truths were making a real effort to surface, I fought them with everything I had. Each time a powerful emotion, feeling, subconscious thought or impulse would arise, I feared it represented the beginnings of a hole that would open widely enough to let loose the “horrors” that lay just beneath the surface, and I would fight fiercely to hold it back. I had always believed it was much safer to filter the world through my conscious thoughts, through my intellect. I had convinced myself, as it seems have many other members of contemporary society, that this would allow me to remain in control; and by remaining in control, I could be relatively happy and peaceful. Conscious thought and intelligence should be the masters, I had come to believe; feelings and emotions, the slaves. Throughout what I have come to realize was the most painful period of my experience, I was determined to keep my conscious thoughts in charge, believing that if I could

continue to hold back this intense flow of feelings a little longer, then perhaps they would finally subside again and everything would be all right.

I came to realize, however, that along with my fierce desire to remain in control was a desire to allow some of these feelings to surface, to be able to feel the world. But only a *little*. In time, however, I came to realize that not only did I merely desire to feel the world, I desperately *thirsted* for it. My desire for control, however, would continue to fiercely grapple with my desire to feel. Any more than a small controlled taste, said the “voice” of my desire for control, and there was every risk that the “evil” forces lurking just beneath the surface would consume me, would send me plummeting into an unimaginable abyss of destruction, chaos, and hell.

This struggle raged on and on for many months—the struggle between the need to be in control and the need to feel, to love, to connect. And along with this struggle came the most intense physical and mental anguish I have ever experienced.

Using mindfulness meditation to loosen my resistance

As my own struggle raged on, and as I continued to spend most of my time feeling as though I were hovering over an unimaginable abyss, seemingly held by only a few strands of sanity, I eventually had to come to terms with the fact that my conceptual mind was no longer a refuge for me. Whenever I turned my attention there, I was only met by confusion, chaos and futile conundrums spinning themselves around and around, caught in infinite, self-destructive loops represented visually by the image of a snake eating its own tail. No, the world of conceptual thought was no longer a refuge. Where, then, could I possibly turn to for help? How could I possibly find some kind of footing in this torrential flood of energy and feeling? It soon became apparent to me that my only choice was to somehow find the courage to dive directly into the heart of that rushing river itself.

Denying meditation's potential for a gentle integration

A year and a half before my descent into “the void,” I sat my first intensive 10-day vipassana meditation retreat. The instructions were remarkably simple, but carrying them out was remarkably difficult. “Remain aware of physical sensations,” instructed the teacher again and again. “Remain equanimous with those sensations. Don’t make any attempt to change whatever arises. Don’t try to push away whatever is present; don’t try to manifest what is not. Simply remain with the awareness of whatever is present, and learn to accept it.” Much, much easier said than done, but after 10 days of making the effort to follow this advice, even though I felt I was only marginally successful, it was clear that I was experiencing a level of peace more profound than any I could ever remember experiencing previously. I found that I had become much more aware of the incredibly heavy load I had been carrying around on my shoulders, but I was also aware that I had been able to let go of a small amount of that load by the end of the course.

Unfortunately, I only managed to maintain this mindfulness practice for a few weeks after the course ended, and I quickly fell back into my old ways of continuously and blindly reacting and fighting against most of my emotions, feelings and experiences. You might say that this meditation technique had offered me a ladder with which I could have used to descend into the depths relatively gently, but I had ignorantly denied this wonderful gift. As a result, a year and a half later, I had fallen head over heels into the depths. The river of feelings and emotions were now raging, threatening to consume me, and it occurred to me that this meditation technique was the only tool I had that could provide me any hope of not drowning. Since it was a little too late now to use meditation as a gentle ladder, I had no choice but to dive right into the heart of that raging river and hope that meditation could provide me with the means to swim.

Forced into a meditation “crash course”

I found myself carrying out the first instruction of vipassana—to remain aware of present feelings and sensations—whether I wanted to or not. I was not merely aware of my feelings, I was *drowning* in them. I immediately learned that the act of trying to ignore them merely intensified them to the level where they threatened to completely overwhelm me. It was quickly apparent that it was only by directing my attention directly into these feelings that I could maintain any sense at all of “holding onto my seat.” I also quickly learned the importance of applying the second instruction of vipassana—to accept the present feelings, to avoid the desire to change them or push them away. Just as it became immediately apparent that trying to turn away and ignore the feelings only intensified them, it also became immediately apparent that not accepting them—resisting them in any way—would also quickly intensify them.

So here I was, forced into a meditation crash course, forced to spend every waking moment developing my ability to be aware of and equanimous with my present experience. Every time I faltered, I was immediately punished with intense mental, emotional and even physical pain. After spending so much of my life fortifying my wall of blindness and resistance, how ironic it is that I now found myself forced to find the courage to open my eyes wide and meet the world with open arms. It felt as though I were being crucified, my arms spread wide and held with sharp nails, and my eyelids propped wide open with sharp toothpicks. I learned quickly that the only refuge available was right in the center of the tornado.

Finding refuge in the realm of feeling

Even with such persuasive and painful learning, it was still quite difficult to break the lifelong habit of attempting to seek refuge and peace within the conceptual mind. During this period of my life, whenever I looked to my conceptual mind for refuge, I realized with horror that there

was simply no “seat” to be found—there was only an empty void filled with artificial meanings and contrived interpretations of the world. Time and time again, I looked desperately into this void, hoping to find some solid truth that I could cling to; and time and time again, this futile grasping would send me spinning in circles, threatening to never let me go. I eventually and begrudgingly came to realize that I had no choice but to somehow seek refuge in the realm that I had previously been so terrified of—that of feelings. It was clear that here, too, there was no stable ground. In the realm of feelings, there existed only a swirling, seething sea of impermanence. However, I soon came to learn that this sea itself was quite reliable—certainly not the kind of stable ground that I was so desperately longing for, but there was no question that the flow of energy and sensations itself was reliably present. I eventually came to the realization that it is this groundlessness itself that is the only true ground, and that this is all the ground I would ever need. As long as there is consciousness, there is feeling. I could count on it. I recalled my vipassana teacher, S. N. Goenka, offering this same truth a year and a half before. I now had the opportunity to experience this truth directly, and I could feel the beginnings of a very profound shift taking place within me.

Many months later, I read an essay by a different vipassana teacher, Joseph Goldstein (1993), where he compared the spiritual path to jumping out of an airplane, and I found that this resonated very well with me. At first, he said, the thrill of the fall, of the air rushing past you, is exhilarating. But then, the time comes when you’ve had enough and decide to open the parachute. To your dismay, however, you discover that you don’t have one! At this point, the real panic sets in. You’re falling and falling and it’s impossible to stop. You finally gain enough courage to look down at the ground that must be very close now, and you discover that there is no ground! You can now begin to relax and find peace with the falling itself, coming to realize

that while it's true that you will continue to fall forever, you can take refuge in the fact that there will never be any ground to hit.

This analogy describes very well my developing relationship with feeling. I remained terrified of the impermanence, groundlessness and seeming unpredictability of the flow of feelings, and yet, in time I began to learn what an excellent refuge feeling truly is—feelings are always there. And while, at first, the idea of “feeling” seemed somewhat vague and ephemeral, once I realized that feelings always manifest themselves as tangible physical sensations somewhere within the body, their usefulness as a reliable refuge became very apparent. I came to realize that these physical sensations are always present—I simply have to make the effort to be aware of them. This insight, as simple as it may seem, completely changed my life and provided me with the courage to really begin to *live* life. I had an anchor now that would allow me to explore my experience directly. Whenever it seemed that some feeling or emotion would threaten to overwhelm me, turning my attention to my physical sensations and embracing these sensations would allow me to find peace with that experience, or at least provide me with the means to work with it. Here was a means that, with practice, would allow me to remain with an experience, any experience, without blindly struggling against it, without having to “figure it out,” and without the complex distortions and exaggerations that always seem to be present within the conceptual mind.

I came to realize that while the conceptual mind is an excellent tool for making plans, solving practical problems, gaining an understanding of patterns, etc., it is not the right tool for directly experiencing the raw essence of existence. Dass (1989) says that “the intellect is a beautiful servant, but a terrible master. Intellect is the power tool of our separateness. The intuitive, compassionate heart is the doorway to our unity” (p. 186). And, as my own experience

demonstrates, allowing the conceptual mind to wield too much control may eventually result in a very painful world collapse.

Transpersonal Psychology's Framework for Working with the Process

Although different specific approaches to working with the process of spiritual emergency have emerged within the field of transpersonal psychology, they all have come to recognize that the approach for helping individuals process through a spiritual emergency is significantly different than the conventional treatment of psychosis. Whereas the conventional approach to psychosis is to view it as being strictly pathological, and to suppress it as quickly as possible, transpersonal psychology views spiritual emergency as positive and seeks to encourage the process to continue to its natural resolution. “Converting spiritual emergency to spiritual emergence means creating a set and setting that support and encourage the unfolding of this transformative process” (Cortright, 1997, p. 170). Taking this line of reasoning further, if we consider that many of the experiences that get labeled “psychosis” are actually forms of spiritual emergency in which one’s observing ego is relatively weak, then perhaps this philosophy of transformation rather than suppression is relevant for most types of extreme states, regardless of the particular label used.

Cortright (1997) went on to suggest that the most powerful tools for supporting the process of spiritual emergency are education, the establishment of a safe container, the presence of a compassionate therapist or guide, the ability to find some form of grounding, and the use of experiential therapy:

Education

Education refers to providing the person with a psychospiritual framework that will help her or him to understand and yield to the process.

The establishment of a container

The establishment of a container refers to ensuring that the person has some kind of sanctuary that is quiet and private, and preferably close to nature, where the person feels uninhibited to express whatever arises, be it running, shouting, meditating, etc.

The presence of a compassionate therapist or guide

The presence of a compassionate therapist or guide is extremely helpful in providing a source of support and guidance for the person, as well as for encouraging confidence in confronting whatever arises.

Methods of grounding

The person should experiment with ways to find grounding, especially during the most intense periods of the process. Working with the body is typically considered the best source of grounding, especially the development of mindfulness of sensations and body movements as well as exercises such as walking, jogging or yoga. Grounding foods, such as whole grains, beans, avocados and any that are high in fat and/or protein are also helpful. Processed foods and stimulating foods such as sugar, juice and caffeine should generally be avoided.

Experiential therapy

The therapist working with the person should be very open to experiential therapy, exploring whatever comes up, and should be available to work for sometimes several hours at a time, and sometimes many days in a row.

One example of such therapy comes from *Psychosynthesis*, a transpersonally-oriented system of psychotherapy developed by Assagioli. In this system, Assagioli has gone into fairly extensive detail regarding an approach to working therapeutically with an individual

experiencing spiritual emergency. He recommends the following as being the most important goals of such work:

- To enlighten the individual as to *what is really going on* within him, and help him to find the *right attitude* to take.
- To teach him how, *by the skillful use of the will, to wisely control and master the drives* emerging from the unconscious, without repressing them through fear or condemnation.
- To teach him the techniques of the *transmutation and sublimation* of sexual and aggressive energies. These techniques constitute the most apt and constructive solution of many psychological conflicts.
- To help him in the proper *recognition and assimilation* of the energies inflowing from the Self and from superconscious levels.
- To help him *express and utilize those energies in altruistic love and service*. This is particularly valuable for counteracting the tendency to excessive introversion and self-centeredness that often exists in this and other stages of self-development.
- To guide him through the various phases of the *reconstruction of his personality around a higher inner center*, that is, in the achievement of his spiritual psychosynthesis. (Assagioli, 1989, p. 47).

Applying the Brakes

Grof & Grof (1989) point out that one important aspect of working with spiritual emergency is knowing when and how to slow down the process (p. 196). Slowing things down should be a consideration when the process is threatening to become overwhelming or when it is important to apply one's energy to other responsibilities. They suggest changing one's diet to one that is lower in carbohydrates and higher in protein and fats, taking warm baths and spending time doing simple manual work in the garden or around the house. It is also advised to identify activities that have been known to activate the process of spiritual emergency and avoid doing them, if possible. These vary from person to person, of course, but some examples might be

complex social situations or crowded areas, a noisy atmosphere, or even certain vibrations, like the hum of the engines in a jet airplane.

It is important to remember that the process does eventually need to be fully worked through, so “applying the brakes” should not become a more permanent attempt at avoidance or denial. Taking on an attitude of resistance such as this, as mentioned previously, is almost guaranteed to prolong the process and cause unnecessary suffering.

Recognizing How the Mind and Body Affect Each Other: The Importance of Stabilizing Blood Sugar during Extreme States

Someone working through such extreme states of consciousness will, by definition, be frequently experiencing very intense emotions, especially fear. It is important, then, to recognize the impact that such powerful mind states have on the body; and just as states of mind have powerful effects upon the body, states of the *body* have powerful effects on the *mind*. If this interaction is not properly recognized, a vicious cycle can ensue that may add tremendous difficulty and complexity to an already difficult and complex process.

During the first few months of my own experience, I was experiencing anxiety attacks several times a day (with varying intensity), and even outside of the attacks, I was experiencing a nearly constant state of fear. I noticed, on top of everything else, I was having the classic symptoms of hypoglycemia (low blood sugar). I went to the hospital, underwent the basic blood test for hypoglycemia, and was diagnosed as having severe hypoglycemia. After researching the known causes for hypoglycemia, it became clear that my case was almost certainly caused by having overtaxed adrenal glands.

While most people know that the pancreas, with its production of insulin, plays a major role in stabilizing blood sugar, few people realize that the adrenal glands play an equally

important role. When we consume simple sugars or refined flours, the sugar (glucose) is quickly absorbed into the blood, raising the blood sugar level. The pancreas then excretes insulin, which reduces the blood sugar by increasing the permeability of cells in the body to glucose and also telling the liver to store any excess glucose in the form of glycogen. As the blood sugar drops, when it falls below a normal level, it is now the job of the adrenal glands to secrete adrenaline, which plays an important role in converting the stored glycogen back to glucose, making it once again available to the cells of the body. So, when the adrenal glands are overworked due to intense emotions, their other important job of maintaining a healthy blood sugar level may be seriously compromised, and the individual can experience hypoglycemia. Due to the deficiency of glucose available to the brain during hypoglycemia, the result is symptoms such as anxiety, fear, sleeplessness and confusion, and it is easy to see how someone experiencing psychological turmoil can become caught in a very vicious cycle.

The most effective way to avoid or to come out of such a cycle is to make every effort to stabilize one's blood sugar with a healthy diet. Any substance which creates a sudden increase in blood sugar level should be avoided altogether. These include simple sugars (sugar, honey, molasses, dextrose, lactose, corn syrup, fructose, fruit juice, etc.), processed and refined grains (white bread, white pasta, white crackers, etc.), alcohol and caffeine. An ideal diet should be high in complex carbohydrates (whole grains, oats, vegetables, etc.), since these break down slowly and provide a gentle trickle of blood sugar; and moderate in proteins and fats.

("Hypoglycemia," n.d.). The Glycemic Index is a valuable resource for determining which foods should be eaten, and which should be avoided. It gives foods a glycemic rating, from 0 to 100, indicating how quickly the sugars from the particular food are digested. The higher the number, the quicker its sugars are absorbed, and the more it should be avoided. Foods should be chosen

which have the lowest glycemic rating. Avocado is a particularly helpful food, as it is known to have the most complex (slowest digesting) carbohydrate known.

Regarding my own experience, I found regulating my diet in such a way to be very helpful, and once the emotional volatility of my experience began to taper off, and my adrenal glands were no longer being worked so hard, I noticed that my sensitivity to high glycemic foods diminished accordingly. Though I have not been formally tested again, I can say with certainty that I would no longer be diagnosed as having hypoglycemia.

Surrender

A final note on working with spiritual emergency is the importance of understanding what it really means to surrender to the process. As Welwood (2000) points out, in our culture we tend to equate surrender with the act of admitting defeat or being humiliated; or it may imply giving up one's individuality and adopting a weak, dependent, and submissive stance. "True surrender, however, is never an enslavement, but rather a step toward the discovery of real power. It is the act of yielding to a larger intelligence, without trying to control the outcome. True surrender is not blind. It requires real discrimination—the capacity to recognize the necessity of completely opening oneself and letting go" (pg. 277). Based on my own personal experience, I would say that this is the real balancing act of working wisely with spiritual emergency—making the experiential distinction between surrender and submission; letting go into the process while maintaining unwavering presence.

Section IV: Benefits of Touching the Void

Potential for the Profound Healing of Past Trauma

Both the empirical research conducted in the field of transpersonal psychology as well as stories and teachings passed down in spiritual traditions give evidence that although the process of spiritual emergency may seem chaotic, out of control, and even harmful, the end result is often one of greater order, greater peace, and profound healing (Cortright, 1997). The process itself is seen to entail a transformation into greater awareness, and a higher state of being; and in order to accomplish this, an individual must typically go through a painful process of disintegrating old structures and restrictive conditioning before a newer, more liberating way of being can emerge.

It is easy to imagine how frightening such an experience can be, how out of control one can feel when everything one has ever counted on for security and stability is suddenly removed, like a carpet being yanked out from under one's feet. The overriding desire is typically one of desperately trying to hold onto some ground, to remain in control; but ironically, if in this very moment of terror and groundlessness, "a person...can be facilitated to let go into the process and be born anew, the end result can be a higher level of integration for the person, both psychologically and spiritually" (Cortright, p. 157).

Development of "The Four Immeasurables"

Most spiritual teachings and branches of psychology tell us that the more deeply we come into contact with truth, the more strongly and more frequently traits such as love, compassion, and equanimity will manifest within us. Buddhist teachings, in particular, go into a lot of detail about the development of these qualities, often referring to them as the "brahma-viharas" or "the four immeasurables" ("The Four Immeasurables," 2006). The first is "love," which is defined briefly

as wanting others to be happy; the second is “compassion,” defined briefly as wanting others to be free from suffering; the third is “sympathetic joy,” defined briefly as being happy with the fortune and happiness of others; and the fourth is “equanimity,” which is defined with two aspects—“not to distinguish between friend, enemy or stranger, but to regard every sentient being as equal,” and “a clear-minded tranquil state of mind—not being overpowered by delusions, mental dullness or agitation” (“The Four Immeasurables”).

It is not difficult to imagine how coming into alignment with the truths of impermanence, universal interconnectedness, and the inherent suffering of the phenomenal world would naturally lead to the qualities mentioned above. When we connect with the universality of suffering, we naturally feel compassion for ourselves and all other beings. When we connect with our intimate interconnectedness with all other manifestations of the universe, we naturally feel love for ourselves and for all other beings and take great delight in others’ happiness. And when we are able to make peace with impermanence, we naturally arrive at a state of equanimity.

A Personal Taste of Profound Healing

Several months after my initial plunge into the depths, I finally had a break from my job (teaching hang gliding) and I felt that I had found enough stability to attend an intensive 10-day silent Vipassana retreat. This would be my third (having taken my first course two years prior) and by far my most challenging course. After ten days of even more intensified waves of emotions, the course was over, and I found myself wishing I had another 10 days. I felt I had made some progress in a lot of ways, yet it was painfully obvious that I was still in a state of intense grasping and non-acceptance (*dukkha*). I slept very little the next few days and found very little peace—my entire being was almost continually racked with the pain of struggle,

which consisted primarily of terror, rage, and despair. Then, during a dream several nights after the end of the course, something very different happened.

I was standing in a field, soaked with sweat from the unrelenting terror. I looked around and saw a number of others also standing in the field with me, sweat dripping from their faces, each one clearly stuck in a struggle very similar to mine. I then turned around to a fellow struggler standing behind me, looked him in the eyes, and said, "I'm not going to drink." This statement refers to a previous inclination of mine to get drunk with a few friends when I was experiencing a lot of pain; but now, I was determined to work through this hell with clarity and courage. He nodded back to me, indicating that he was also willing to stand strong and work through the pain and terror, and then I turned to look forward again. We then found ourselves being led into a meditation hall.

We "strugglers" each stood on our own meditation cushion with our eyes closed, listening to the gentle murmur of a group of teachers standing at the front of the hall, discussing our condition. After a few moments, they were silent, and I knew that they had come to an answer. I felt one of them approach me, and though my eyes were closed, I could sense vibrant warmth and motherly love emanating from this being, whom I sensed had the form of a beautiful woman. I sensed her bringing a spoon up to my mouth, filled with some liquid; and with the most tender, compassionate voice, she said, "don't suffer, take this... please don't suffer, take this." Though I sensed nothing but pure compassion, love and wisdom from this woman, I found myself struggling to trust her. "What if they've come to the conclusion that the only way to end our suffering is to kill us with poison," I thought. "But maybe they're right—maybe death is better than living in this hell state—anything would be better than this. But no, I don't want to give up! There must be some other way..." I stood there, completely tormented, not knowing what to do,

feeling my soul stretched to the edge of its limits, not being able to imagine any hell worse than this state of intense terror and despair... and yet... somehow... I found the courage to open my mouth and take the liquid. Pushed to my furthest extremes, I somehow found the courage to let go and accept...

Just as the spoon touched my lips, I felt a wave of cool, refreshing relief flow through my body from head to toe, and I woke up. My sheets were still soaked with sweat from my terror (not unusual for those months of my life), but now I felt unbelievably peaceful, in a state of ease that I had hardly recognized. I noticed that the fiery coal that had been burning in my solar plexus constantly for the past three months was gone.

It was about 4:00 am, and everyone in the community was asleep. We lived on a large grass airfield, and I walked across the field to the lake, taking in the stars and the sound of the crickets, feeling so connected to everything, so peaceful and relaxed. I was a bit confused as to what had just happened, but I knew that a very profound shift had taken place. After sitting by the edge of the lake for awhile, drinking in the world in the light of this new perspective, it became very clear to me exactly what had happened. I had finally experienced what it was like to “let go.” I had seen vividly how for months I had been tenaciously holding on to the delusion of permanence, of stability, of the need to be in control; and I had experienced time and again the intense pain and fear associated with that tenacious grasping; yet I didn’t know how to let go. Most spiritual teachers say to “accept the present moment,” to “let go,” “don’t cling.” *But how?* That night, I had had my first real taste of “letting go,” and there was no denying the cessation of suffering that came with it. By finding the faith to accept the present moment for what it is, by not struggling against it, by relinquishing my need to be in control, I had finally touched the peace that had always been waiting for me just beneath the surface of all that turmoil.

Egolessness also revealed itself now that the flames of my willful struggle had subsided. I realized very deeply now how it had been my own struggling that had isolated me, solidifying my bubble of pain and despair; and giving up the battle (at least temporarily) had allowed the boundaries of my “self” to soften and expand, to take in the world around me. So *this* is love!

Impermanence, egolessness and attachment—what a wonderful, horrible, loving and terrifying universe these truths weave.

As a sliver of light formed on the Eastern horizon and began to swallow the stars, one by one, impermanence revealed itself again, and I recognized that this state of profound peace would also pass; after all, everything in this world is impermanent, even peace. Recognizing the tenacity of my will, even after tonight’s epiphany, I could foresee a fresh new batch of suffering on the way as I would inevitably attempt to hold onto this peaceful state, and I had to smile. I would enjoy the delicious nectar of this peace while it lasted, but I would have to learn to let it go like everything else.

Conclusion: Accessing Life's Guidebook

I have found it very illuminating to contemplate on the fact that none of us—our friends, our parents, our teachers, our scientists nor even our heroes—came into life with a guidebook. To think that all living beings must struggle to find their way in this world fills me at times with a sense of fear and hopelessness and at other times with a sense of companionship and adventure. Yet, in spite of this extremely precarious predicament in which we find ourselves, the miraculous potential for wisdom, joy and love seems to be present within each and every one of us.

Though it may be true that none of us emerged from the womb with a guidebook in our hands, somehow it seems that such a book resides within the very essence of our being. Some have referred to it as “divine will” while others have referred to it as “evolution.” Carl Rogers (1980) has eloquently defined it as “the formative tendency,” saying that there “is an evolutionary tendency toward greater order, greater complexity, greater interrelatedness...from a single-cell origin to complex organic functioning, to knowing and sensing below the level of consciousness, to a conscious awareness of the organism and the external world to a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system, including mankind” (p. 133). I would venture to guess that most of us, upon deep reflection, would acknowledge having contacted this formative tendency, this “guidebook,” though each of us may have experienced it in different ways: some may have perused several rich and heartfelt chapters during a lifetime of intention and contemplation; others may have traveled through a life that has been filled with isolation and mostly devoid of meaning, rarely having captured more than a glimpse of its cover; while still others seem to have had the entire volume hurled at them so forcefully that they have been knocked completely off their feet.

Though this innate wisdom seems at times to be so distant as to be virtually inaccessible and at other times so present as to be terribly destabilizing, it strikes me that developing the ability to trust and access it is essential if we are to find any real peace, joy and meaning in our lives. Regardless of the worldview with which we make sense of our lives—whether we view the world from a spiritual perspective, a purely materialistic one, or simply choose to humbly honor our ignorance—no one can deny that life is full of struggle. Like shipwrecked castaways, we all find ourselves struggling to keep our heads above the water and survive on the vast and turbulent sea we call life. Each and every one of us finds ourselves getting thrown about by the powerful waves of vicissitudes that are an inevitable part of life. We do, however, have a choice in how we choose to respond to our predicament. We can choose to exacerbate the struggle, flailing and thrashing around desperately, exhausting ourselves and drowning others around us as we seek in vain for something solid to hold onto. Or we can find the courage to relax in the midst of all of this apparent chaos and discover that we already know how to swim.

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