UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Nonlinear Path or Pathology? A Culturally Sensitive Complex Systems Approach to Meditation-Related Difficulties in Abrahamic Traditions

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Religious Studies

by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are really too many people to thank for helping to make this dissertation possible and getting me to this point. There are certain people, however, without whom I would never have gotten anywhere close. First, I would like to thank my advisor Ann Taves, for never giving up on me despite the nonlinear path it took to get here, and for offering invaluable guidance and support at every step along such a path. I would also like to thank Elliot Wolfson for his incredible generosity and support from the day I got to UCSB. Studying the Hasidic masters in his office and the Zohar at his dining room table were some of the sweetest and most fulfilling experiences of my entire educational career. I also need to thank Lucas Wright and Dell Rose for their hearty and intoxicating companionship over the course of the program, forged over those early shabbat dinners that I'm still seeking to return home to. My parents, who never batted an eye at me spending a decade pursuing meditation research and religious studies scholarship—your love and unwavering support throughout my life for all the wild and wacky things I find meaningful means the absolute world to me. And finally, to my Hayatim Golnoosh, who literally walked with me every step over the past 3 years of this marathon, sharing every challenge and celebrating every minor and major advance, I dedicate this to you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

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ABSTRACT

Nonlinear Path or Pathology? A Culturally Sensitive Complex Systems Approach to Meditation-Related Difficulties in Abrahamic Traditions

by

Nathan E. Fisher

Clinicians and psychologists of religion have long discussed how to distinguish normal from pathological symptoms in relation to spiritual experiences, including those occurring within the context of meditation, under the heading of 'differential diagnosis. One of the primary criteria for psychopathology more broadly, and one of the criteria by which spiritual experiences have been distinguished from pathological ones, has been whether the experience is distressing and causes impairment of functioning. However, recently a group of researchers (including this author) have begun to document distressing and impairing meditation-related experiences and how some are appraised as normative within contemporary meditative traditions. In light of this, how can clinicians striving to be culturally sensitive make sense of meditation-related difficulties without doing harm? What kind of etic frameworks can explain how sometimes things get worse before they get better, whereas other times things get worse before deteriorating even more? And how might we begin to understand some of the causal factors that distinguish one trajectory over the other?

If we follow practitioners and teachers in viewing the Abrahamic contemplative paths as nonlinear, then etic frameworks for meditation-related difficulties will need to explain both normative and non-normative experiences, as well as help distinguish them from each other. In this dissertation I argue that distressing meditation-related experiences in Abrahamic traditions can be understood in a culturally sensitive manner in terms of complex systems approaches to cognitive and clinical science which acknowledge the pivotal nature of contemplative states of absorption and their involvement in nonlinear change processes that culminate in changes to trait senses of self. Doing so will help clinicians provide better culturally sensitive care and, at the same time, help them to distinguish distressing experiences that will ultimately be beneficial from those that will not be.

In chapter one we will examine data from interviews with practitioners and teachers from Jewish, Christian, and Islamicate contemplative traditions where subjects did not identify all distressing experiences as pathological but interpreted some as actually indicative of spiritual progress. In the interpretation of both kinds of challenging experiences, practitioners and teachers used particular mystical texts and ideas to discuss what was normative or not in their tradition, while, at the same time, often drawing from sources such as Jungian psychoanalysis or somatic therapy to translate and engage with the medieval purification frameworks that are embedded within traditional conceptions of nonlinear paths.

In chapter two, I argue that states of absorption cultivated in these traditions can be understood from a complex-systems perspective as pivotal mental states. While the trait has been studied for decades, *states* of absorption have been under-theorized. To better understand states of absorption, I draw on work investigating dissociation and perceptual decoupling to propose that the states of absorption cultivated in Abrahamic contemplative traditions are states

of intentional decoupling. I further argue that they can also be understood as "pivotal mental states" in that they are states of heightened plasticity that can instantiate long term changes that are either adaptive or maladaptive.

The next stage in the construction of an etic framework, undertaken in chapter three, is to explore how states of absorption lead to oscillations, which in turn lead to new base-line senses of self. While the research on pivotal states may help explain how states of absorption can lead to either beneficial or harmful long-term outcomes, it doesn't explain the nonlinear change processes that define nonlinear paths. In this chapter I argue that recent work incorporating complex systems frameworks into psychotherapy research and cognitive science provides critical insights to understand how the oscillatory trajectories reported in Abrahamic contemplative traditions can lead to goals of transformed senses of self.

In chapter four, the final stage in constructing an etic framework that can be of practical utility will be presented and tested by examining case studies of contemporary Abrahamic contemplative practitioners. This chapter will examine systems approaches to psychiatry and will highlight a recent one—the cultural ecosocial systems approach—that I argue is particularly useful in case formulation and intervention planning for meditation-related difficulties in a culturally sensitive manner. Finally, I will emphasize two features of the cultural ecosocial approach that I believe are particularly useful for differentiating between distressing meditation-related difficulties that are likely to lead to adaptive growth from those which will lead to maladaptive decline and an exacerbation of distress.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction *13*

Background and Context **13**

Problem Statement **20**

Thesis Statement **21**

Previous (Overlapping) Work **22**

Transformative Paths 22

Complex systems and Abrahamic mysticism 24

Scope and Limitations **25**

Significance **26**

Contributions **27**

Chapter Outline **29**

Chapter One: Distressing and Impairing Meditation-Related Experiences in Contemporary Western Abrahamic Contemplative Traditions *32*

Introduction **32**

Methods **32**

Distressing or Impairing Phenomenology **36**

Affective 36

Cognitive 40

Perceptual 42

Sense of Self 44

Somatic 46

"Adverse" or Non-Normative Appraisals **47**

Practices 48
Social Support 66
Worldview & Interpretive Framework 76
"Part of the Path" or Normative Appraisals 91
Judaism 91
Christianity 99
Islam 107
Discussion 115
Summary 115
Towards a Culturally Sensitive Etic Framework 118
Conclusion 120
Chapter Two: Contemplative States of Absorption are Pivotal 122
Introduction 122
Absorption 122
Trait Absorption and Perceptual Decoupling 122
Contemplative States of Absorption 126
Abrahamic States of Absorption 128
Islamic Traditions 128
Jewish Traditions 143
Christian Traditions 162
Summary 175
…are Pivotal States 179
Chapter Three: Nonlinear Paths & Nonlinear Systems 187

Introduction **187**

Part I: Nonlinear Change Processes & Nonlinear Paths **188**

Abrahamic Non-Linear Paths **188**

Jewish Traditions 189

Islamicate Traditions 191

Christian Traditions 193

Lens on Nonlinear Changes **195**

Hayes' Complex Systems Approach to Psychotherapy 195

Hipolito's Complex Systems Approach to Psychedelic Medicine 198

CST Lens on Nonlinear Paths **201**

Case Study: Michaela Ozelsel 203

Part II: A Closer Look at Goals as Transformed Attractor Landscapes **215**

Islamic Mysticism **216**

Historically - Ibn Arabi and the Akbarian Tradition 216

Today - The Nuriyya-Malamiyya 224

Christianity **226**

Historically - Meister Eckhart 226

Today – Centering Prayer 231

Jewish Traditions **241**

Historically – Early Hasidism 241

Today – Kedumah 252

Enactive Self Lens on Goals 256

Thompson's Current view 256

Complex Systems Foundation 259

Enactive Enlightenment 264

Putting it all together: Enactive Lens on Abrahamic Goals 269

Conclusion 272

Chapter Four: Putting it All into Practice 274

Introduction 274

Complex Systems in Cultural Psychiatry 274

A Brief Interlude on "Levels" and "Mechanisms" 284

An Ecosocial Systems Approach to Meditation-related difficulties 293

Abrahamic Meditation-Related Difficulties 295

"Jane" (99125) 297

"Sandy" (99122) 304

Nonlinear Growth & Differential Diagnosis 310

Conclusion: An EcoSocial, Pivotal, & Critical (EPiC) framework for understanding and addressing Meditation-related difficulties 322

Future Directions, Implications, and Applications 323

References 330

Introduction

Clinicians and psychologists of religion have long discussed how to distinguish normal from pathological symptoms in relation to spiritual experiences, including those occurring within the context of meditation, under the heading of 'differential diagnosis.' One of the primary criteria for psychopathology more broadly, and one of the criteria by which spiritual experiences have been distinguished from pathological ones, has been whether the experience is distressing and causes impairment of functioning. However, recently a group of researchers (including this author) have begun to document distressing and impairing meditation-related experiences and how some are appraised as normative within contemporary meditative traditions. In light of this, how can clinicians striving to be culturally sensitive make sense of meditation-related difficulties without doing harm? What kind of etic frameworks can explain how sometimes things get worse before they get better, whereas other times things get worse before deteriorating even more? And how might we begin to understand some of the causal factors that distinguish one trajectory over the other?

Background and Context

In 1989 Stanislav and Christina Grof edited a volume of essays entitled, *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*. In the introduction they state the central thesis of the book, that "some of the dramatic experiences and unusual states of mind that traditional psychiatry diagnoses and treats as mental diseases are actually crises of personal transformation, or 'spiritual emergencies.' Episodes of this kind have been described

in sacred literature of all ages as a result of meditative practices and as signposts of the mystical path" (x). They do issue a "word of caution" related to this proposition, namely that,

> Episodes of nonordinary states of consciousness cover a very wide spectrum, from purely spiritual states without any pathological features to conditions that are clearly biological in nature and require medical treatment. It is extremely important to take a balanced approach and to be able to differentiate spiritual emergencies from genuine psychoses. While traditional approaches tend to pathologize mystical states, there is the opposite danger of spiritualizing psychotic states and glorifying pathology or, even worse, overlooking an organic problem. (xiii)

A clear distinction between these "organic psychoses"[1] and spiritual emergencies can and should be made in order to properly facilitate the latter's, "great positive potential for growth and healing…which would (otherwise) ordinarily be suppressed by an insensitive (clinical) approach and indiscriminate routine medication" (3). They describe 10 different types of spiritual emergencies, most of which may entail distress and impairment for periods of time, and conclude that "one of the most important catalysts of spiritual emergency seems to be deep involvement in various forms of meditation" (8). In these cases, a positive and normalized (i.e., non-clinical) appraisal of one's experiences is crucial, as they explain that the "most important task is to give the people in crisis a positive context for their experiences and sufficient information about the process they are going through. It is essential that they move away from the concept of disease and recognize the healing nature of their crisis" (192). However, the context and interpretive framework that they offer is not metaphysically or

[1] Organic psychiatric conditions are ones based on "infections, tumors, vitamin deficiencies, and vascular or degenerative diseases of the brain (xi) while conditions of a "clearly psychotic nature" are ones which are "characterized by lack of insight, paranoid delusions and hallucinations, and extravagant forms of behavior" (xi; xiii).

ontologically agnostic, but rather claims that "transpersonal[2] experiences challenge the very basis of the western worldview" since they "cannot be explained as products of neurophysiological processes within the traditional scientific framework"[3] (11). As one recent paper summarized, "The Grofs and others in the transpersonal psychology movement were adamant that these experiences reflected access to legitimate realities and sacred knowledge that would result in healing, but only if they were properly supported" (Lindahl et al. 2020, 2).

David Lukoff, the psychologist responsible for adding the category "Religious or Spiritual problems" to the DSM IV, and his colleagues summarize the previous research on "Spiritual Emergence/Emergency" or spiritual problems, within the field of transpersonal psychology as follows:

> These problems present with varying intensity, ranging from a mild form of "spiritual emergence" (i.e., a gradual unfoldment of spiritual potential with no disruption in psychological/social/occupational functioning) to a severe form of "spiritual emergency" (i.e., an uncontrolled emergence of spiritual phenomena with significant disruption in psychological/social/occupational functioning). Grof and Grof argue that the milder forms of spiritual emergence should not be diagnosed or treated as mental disorders but rather as developmental crises that can result in long-term improvement in overall well-being and functioning. The more severe forms of spiritual emergency, which some still view as developmental crises (Grof and Grof 1990; Walsh 1990), may precipitate forms of mental disorders or exacerbate preexisting forms of mental disorders, requiring that an axis I or II disorder be coded along with religious or spiritual problem. (Turner et al. 1995, 437)

[2] They define "transpersonal experiences" as those which involve a "transcendence of the ordinary boundaries of personality" including "many experiences that have been called spiritual, mystical, religious, occult, magical, or paranormal" (10).

[3] They continue that, "the content of transpersonal experiences is not limited to the world of things that exist in our everyday reality. It includes element that Western culture does not accept as objectively real: we can encounter deities, demons, spirit guides, inhabitants of other universes, or mythological figures" (11).

Because, as Lukoff and colleagues note, even the "more severe forms" of spiritual problems, which fit DSM criteria for other clinical disorders, were viewed only by "some" as developmental crises, it is clear that the need for differential diagnosis, although present at this time (1995), was left unaddressed. Later the authors remark that "overlap between a mental disorder and a religious or spiritual problem is frequent among the psychotic disorders, especially manic psychosis" and highlight "differential diagnosis" as an area of particular importance for future clinical research, where

> better description of the multiple types of 'pure' religious and spiritual problems (i.e., those religious and spiritual problems unrelated to any mental disorder) would help to establish the non-illness end of the spectrum. That, in turn would highlight the need to address the co-existence of religious/spiritual problems with mental disorders at all other points along the spectrum…mental disorders may lead to religious or spiritual problems, and the converse may also be true. (442)

The authors also relate that meditation is acknowledged by the transpersonal literature as the most likely of all common spiritual practices to precipitate spiritual emergence/emergency phenomena and that "adverse effects" of meditation have also been noted in the literature (440). Finally, they mention the hypothesis put forward by Walsh and Roche (1979) that "an improper use of meditation does not generate new mental disorders but rather aggravates latent or preexisting ones" (440).

Since the mid 1990's, clinical psychologist Emmanuelle Peters and her colleagues have also been investigating the connection between anomalous experiences and the role of appraisal processes—in many ways continuing the research project initiated by the Grofs, though with the crucial difference that their research has stayed within the bounds of mainstream clinical science, while the Grofs and Lukoff pursued their research within the increasingly marginalized field of transpersonal psychology (Peters et al. 1999a; Peters et al. 1999b; Peters 2001). In 2007, Brett et al. found that a non-clinical sample made more

"positive" and "normalising" appraisals of "anomalous"[4] experiences than a clinical sample[5] reporting similar experiences (28). Following up on this study, Lovatt et al. (2010) also found that, "appraisals of anomalous experiences are central in contributing to the progression to psychotic symptoms…with personalizing and normalizing appraisals being key in differentiating clinical from nonclinical groups" (818). Farias et al. (2012) similarly called attention to the "role that beliefs and appraisals may play in the development of clinically relevant symptoms" and found that "engagement with Spirituality may actually work as a protective factor against distress or depression that might develop as a reaction to unusual experiences and ideation" (13). They elaborate further that "the meaning and contextual narrative that Modern Spiritual beliefs provide may help shape adaptive beliefs that individuals use to appraise their unusual experiences, framing them in a positive light" (14). In a large study investigating individuals with persistent psychotic experiences with and without a "need for care," Peters et al. (2016) once again found that "spirituality may be a key factor in the development of positive appraisals of PEs (persistent psychotic experiences) and in facilitating their social validation" and also that "similarly to spirituality, a mindful response style may therefore represent a protective factor against problematic outcomes of PEs" (50). Underwood et al. (2016) utilized an experimental protocol to induce PEs, and still "the study provided further evidence that how PEs are interpreted, rather than their presence, may be the key to clinical status" (1261).

[4] Such "anomalous" experiences included, "Thought transmission, Receptivity, Thought withdrawal, Controlled actions, Passivity (other), Reference experiences, Activity experiences, Loud thoughts, Voices/auditory hallucinations" (30).

[5] Those who had been diagnosed with a psychotic disorder or meeting criteria for an "at risk mental state" according to the DSM-IV (23).

The 2015 book by psychologists Miguel Farias and Catharine Wikholm, *The Buddha Pill* takes an in-depth look at meditation and 'mindfulness' practices being used and studied in western societies. One of the novel contributions this book makes, which also sets it apart from Farias' research mentioned above, is examining the "unexpected consequences" of these practices, and indeed they conclude that "peace and happiness" may not always be the end result" (back cover). Farias and Wikholm (echo the Grofs when they) raise questions about the pathologizing of "spiritual experiences," how to discern the difference between pathological and non-pathological effects of meditation, the role of a teacher in guiding meditators through difficult effects and stages of practice, and the difference in aims between indigenous and contemporary clinical uses of these practices (149-152). While certainly an interesting and thought-provoking popular examination of this topic, Farias and Wikholm (as well as the Grofs) exclusively examine meditative traditions and practices found in, and derived from, Eastern religious traditions.

Most recently, a research group at Brown University led by Drs. Willoughby Britton and Jared Lindahl has been investigating meditation-related difficulties in Western Buddhist traditions. In 2017, Lindahl et al. published an overview paper on their study of meditation-related difficulties in contemporary Buddhist meditative traditions. They clarify that their study is shaped by the "attribution theory approach" to the study of "experiences deemed religious" developed by Ann Taves and that by "meditation-related experiences" they follow this approach in "referring to a range of effects across different domains of human experience that meditation practitioners in our study attributed to one or more types of meditation" (6). Beyond causal attribution, which they also assessed independently according to standard

causality criteria employed by medical regulatory agencies,[6] the study sought to capture the ways, "practitioners and experts alike are also agents in ascribing significance, meaning, and value to meditation-related experiences, sometimes in incompatible ways" (6). In their study, they documented over 59 phenomenological categories of experience across 7 domains (cognitive, perceptual, affective, somatic, conative, sense of self, and social) as well as a range of interpretations or appraisals and a range of remedies proposed by the subjects. There have been several publications based on the same dataset since which focused on particular categories of experience including sensations of somatic energy (Lindahl et al. 2017; Cooper et al. 2021), sense of self changes (Lindahl and Britton 2019), and fear/terror (Lindahl et al. 2022).

In 2020 this group published a paper that coded the data to explore how differential diagnoses are made and navigated amongst contemporary Buddhist meditation teachers and practitioners in relation to meditation-related experiences (Lindahl et al. 2020). This study found that many of the criteria for differential diagnosis in the psychology of religion literature

[6] They write that, "causal attribution to meditation was assessed according to the causality assessment criteria that regulatory agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Federal Drug Administration (FDA), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) use to make health policy decisions" (10). Specifically, they outline, "Thirteen standard causality criteria" which "typically include 1) prior published reports, 2) expert judgment, 3) subjective attribution, 4) temporal proximity (challenge), 5) exacerbation, 6) de-challenge, 7) re-challenge, 8) specificity, 9–11) three types of consistency, 12) biological gradient, and 13) linkage to known biological mechanisms" (10). The study "assessed the first 11 criteria" and specifically investigated (in a follow up survey): "1) causal attribution to meditation by the subject (subjective attribution); 2) temporal proximity to (either during or following) meditation practice (challenge); 3) exacerbation of pre-existing symptoms following meditation; 4) occurrence on more than one occasion (consistency); 5) decrease when practice is reduced (de-challenge); 6) re-appearance when practice is repeated (re-challenge)" (10).

are also employed within these communities. "Distress,"[7] however, is not one of them since in some Buddhist traditions and worldviews "some difficult or distressing experiences may be expected as a part of progress on the contemplative path" (1). They also found that many teachers and practitioners employ "pragmatic" appraisals alongside or even in place of differential diagnostic criteria that distinguish a spiritual experience from a pathological one. The authors note that in some important ways this strategy "is in line with person-centered approaches in mental health care that emphasize the importance of considering the interpersonal and cultural dynamics that inevitably constitute the context in which experiences are evaluated and rendered meaningful" (1). Ultimately, they conclude that while the "pragmatic approach" documented within Buddhist communities "is congruent with current approaches in cultural psychiatry that emphasize how experiences are inevitably appraised and navigated in relation to their social and cultural contexts," future work should evaluate whether this data is applicable to other religious traditions and develop "frameworks for the assessment of meditation-related challenges based on the findings of this study" (17).

Problem Statement

Lindahl et al. (2020) emphasize that, while "Accurate differential diagnosis of distress related to spiritual practice is important for clinical, social and ethical reasons," it is also

[7] In a literature review on differential diagnosis between spiritual and psychotic or dissociative experiences, Menezes and Moreira-Almeida (2009) identified nine criteria with the most consensus amongst the researchers they surveyed: "lack of psychological suffering, absence of social and occupational impairments, short duration of the experience, critical attitude (to have doubts about the reality of the experience), compatibility with the patient's cultural or religious group, no co-morbidities, control over the experience, personal growth along the [over] time and an attitude to help the other ones [others]" (83). While they highlight the first criteria of "lack of suffering," they do also include a caveat: "We should remember, however, that the initial stages of a religious or spiritual experience can be accompanied by great personal suffering that can be overcome as the individual progresses in the comprehension and control of his experience" (88).

"crucial to avoid pathologizing valuable processes, which may be painful and disruptive, but yield desired growth and insight" (16). However, they do not provide a basis for distinguishing those potentially painful processes that yield growth from painful processes that "disrupt adaptation," exacerbate distress, and lead to debilitating symptoms (16). Similarly, in a recent survey-based study of meditation-related adverse effects (MRAE) that explicitly built upon the VCE study, Goldberg et al. (2021) note that, "it may also be that MRAE are, at least for some, a part of the meditative process [and that] some level of discomfort may accompany both healing and meditative insights" (11). However, they also don't offer any guidance in how to distinguish adverse experiences that may be beneficial from those that are not. Like Lindahl et al. (2020), they suggest "it may be more fruitful to consider multiple contextual and person-centered factors involved in the occurrence and appraisal of MRAEs" (11). Valuable though a pragmatic person-centered, contextual or 'need for intervention' approach may by, it is not sufficient. Culturally sensitive clinicians still need an etic interpretive framework that is compatible with (but not identical to) emic contemplative paths to guide their treatment of those suffering from meditation-related difficulties.

THESIS STATEMENT

If we follow practitioners and teachers in viewing the Abrahamic contemplative paths as nonlinear, then etic frameworks for meditation-related difficulties will need to explain both normative and non-normative experiences, as well as help distinguish them from each other. Distressing meditation-related experiences in Abrahamic traditions can be understood in a culturally sensitive manner in terms of complex systems approaches to cognitive and clinical

science which acknowledge the pivotal nature of contemplative states of absorption and their involvement in nonlinear change processes that culminate in changes to trait sense(s) of self. Doing so will help clinicians provide better culturally sensitive care and, at the same time, help them to distinguish distressing experiences that will ultimately be beneficial from those that will not.

Previous (Overlapping) Work

Transformative Paths

Ann Taves in *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (2009) highlights the utility of the "composite ascriptions of experiences within the broader context of a path deemed religious" (4). She describes how many religious traditions incorporate and define themselves according to the "basic concept" of *the path* and that both psychologists and scholars of religion have also found the path concept useful for thinking about religions as well. She suggests all paths consist of goals and means of getting to those goals, also known as practices, and concludes that it "provides us with a basic schema for analyzing more complex behaviors from the point of view of practitioners" (48). Several scholars of religion have followed in Taves' wake and analyzed various features of religions according to such transformative paths. For example, Jared Lindahl in his doctoral dissertation, "Paths to Luminosity: A Comparative Study of Ascetic and Contemplative Practices in Select Tibetan Buddhist and Greek Christian Traditions" organizes his comparative project according to Taves' formulation (2010, 37).

Chilcott (2011) similarly employed this framework to discuss and compare Bhakti Hindu traditions with Schema therapy as transformative paths.

While Taves notes that it was Buddhist scholars Robert Buswell and Robert Gimello that first seized on the utility of the path schema in thinking about religions given its emic importance within Buddhism (46), it is similarly foundational within Abrahamic religious traditions and has been employed by scholars of these traditions as well. Moshe Idel[8] (2015) highlights the centrality of the path metaphor to all Abrahamic mystical traditions when he writes how the "Abrahamic mysticisms refer to special paths, designated as *via, tariqa,* or *derekh*, that are imagined to be conducive to extraordinary experiences" (380, emphasis original). Elliot Wolfson has also explored the path schema as it is found in Hasidic sources in his monograph, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism and Hermeneutics* (1995) and notes that the "religious texture of Hasidism…is enframed by the image of walking and…the path" (xii). Blaschke (2017) builds upon both Taves and Lindahl while also expanding their framework in his exploration and ethnographic study of the Centering Prayer contemplative tradition (21-22). His study is also important for this project since we will draw upon his work in charting the challenging stages along the various paths of Centering prayer—though he focuses on the "phenomenological" stream of practice in contrast to what he describes as the "psychological stream" that is the arena of distressing experiences (119). Finally, in my MA thesis and a book chapter based on it (Fisher 2019), I introduced the concept of a "nonlinear path" to describe contemplative paths historically and today in Jewish,

[8] Cf. Jonathan Garb who, in his book *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah,* gently critiques Idel for not employing this schema enough in his analysis of Jewish mystical practice and experiences (139).

Christian, and Islamicate traditions. I argued that "in trying to understand challenging experiences associated with meditation, practitioners and teachers from all three religions (in the West) rely upon conceptions of "the path" that involve oscillations between experiences of ecstasy and euphoria alternating with periods despair and dysphoria" and that in all three religious traditions, these oscillations are conceived as "reflecting various degrees of proximity to, and distance from, some dimension of the divine" (49).

Complex systems and Abrahamic mysticism

There has been some work exploring the relationship between complex systems theory and mystical literature from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—particularly the first two. While there is no academic study I have been able to find which engages these frameworks in relation to Sufi traditions, Ozelsel (1996) uses systems theory and the work of Ilya Prigogine in her autobiography to account for the "extremely difficult transition phases on the 'way'" and the "radical mental re-organization" which she experienced on her retreat and identifies in traditional Sufi literature (156-161). Elliot Wolfson (2019) draws upon complex systems frameworks and concepts such as "autopoiesis" and "complexity and chaos as it pertains to the concept of emergence" to explore Jewish mystical ideas (104-5; 83). For example, he describes the doctrine of Lurianic Kabbalah in cybernetic terms as a "multifaceted hypersystem in which properties are not explained by the unilateral interaction of the component elements and in which compartmentalization of the parts can't be reductively subsumed under the aggregation of the whole nor aggregation of the whole under

compartmentalization of the parts" (63). Studstill (2005) employs dynamical systems theory—specifically cybernetics, chaos theory, and Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures—in his comparative study of the medieval German Christian mystical tradition of Eckhart, Suso and Tauler and the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism (10-19). Studstill's work is unique and particularly relevant for this project since he uses dynamic systems theory to discuss challenging stages of the German mystical path and frames the difficulty as stemming from the liminal space between the disruption of one's normative cognitive processes and its subsequent self- organization or re-constellation (238-239). He writes that mystical study in these traditions,

> encourage[s] attitudes and practices that function in direct opposition to the ordinary processes of the cognitive system. They undermine the variables that together constrain awareness into the dualistic frame of reference of ordinary experience. The disruption of these cognitive processes, however, leaves an important question unanswered. Why does this disruption prompt cognitive evolution? Chaos does not necessarily guarantee evolution in a positive direction. Psychic disorganization can just as easily precipitate devolution into psychopathological states. What determines which direction the system will take? (238)

Ultimately, he concludes that the difference is whether or not there exists "a sense of fundamental, existential trust, of believing that when you 'jump off the cliff' so to speak, someone or something is going to catch you" (239). It is this sense of "trust or faith in face of the unknown" that is the "crucial variable that connects chaos to growth" since, from "a systems perspective, openness allows the system to evolve, to self-organize into a new pattern of psychic organization characterized by freedom from dualistic conditions" (239).

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

It is not clear how broadly the thesis argued here can be applied. Given the size and scope of the qualitative study, which is drawn mostly from Abrahamic practitioners in North America, practitioners from other parts of the world in the same religion and even the same practice tradition may report different trajectories of meditation experiences. Although there have been some claims of similar patterns in western Buddhist traditions, these will need to be more thoroughly documented before they can be used to support broader claims (Kornfield 1979). Another limitation will be engaging mostly secondary literature on mysticism and primary texts in translation. While I will be drawing from translations and analyses from the most respected and authoritative scholars of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mystical traditions, there may be additional untranslated texts that would bolster (or challenge) my arguments.

SIGNIFICANCE

This study will provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of contemplative practice, helping both meditation teachers and practitioners to avoid dangerous pitfalls and promote flourishing by clarifying the trajectories of transformation in these traditions. More specifically, it will offer an improved understanding of the conditions under which things 'get worse before they get better' as opposed to when they get worse before they deteriorate even further. This work will also directly assist clinicians and psychotherapists who want to care for individuals navigating meditation-related distressing experiences in a culturally sensitive way but are unfamiliar with the cultural norms of Abrahamic contemplative practices and paths. While several recent studies have advocated such an approach, this project will explore these experiences in specific traditions, both in their idealized textual forms as well as their

messier manifestations in contemporary practice (where practitioners often struggle to navigate multiple worldviews and appraisals) to identify pitfalls and highlight best practices.

Furthermore, given the likely 'looping effects' or "cultural feedback loops" that are at play in popular discourse about meditation and the goals of meditative paths, it is important to publicize other models of (sense of) self changes considered goals in different traditions (Carhart-Harris et al. 2018, 726; Thompson 2017). It is quite plausible that discourses around contemplative goals, such as the currently popular "neuro-nihilistic" models of Sam Harris and others (Thompson 2015, 322; Thompson 2020, 86-117), can shape people's experiences such that they may in fact achieve new baselines of severely altered senses of self that may not be very adaptive or entail considerable impairment. Understanding that the goal of many of these traditions is a transformed sense of self and not the absence of one may help practitioners avoid such deleterious effects.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This dissertation aims to make a contribution to several different fields. First, it seeks to expand the field of contemplative studies, which has so far been dominated by research and scholarship on contemplative practices from Asian traditions. It also seeks to contribute to the academic study of mysticism, which (aside from Wolfson and Studstill) has yet to seriously engage with dynamical systems approaches to cognitive science. While there has been some interest from cognitive scientists and philosophers in several Abrahamic mystical traditions—for example, Francisco Varela was interested in Sufism as well as Tibetan Buddhism—there has been less interest from scholars of mysticism in complex systems approaches to cognitive

science, likely because the barriers of entry into this arena can be, or can feel, quite high and daunting. One pioneer of this approach to cognitive science, indeed one of the founders, recently lamented that despite being partly inspired by insights from Buddhism, it was not intended to be a "Buddhist cognitive science" but rather "a contemplative and cross-cultural cognitive science" and in that way perhaps this work can make a small contribution to the field of enactive cognitive science as well (Thompson 2016, xxix).

The fields of clinical science and clinical psychology are currently wrestling with how to make "differential diagnoses" in a culturally sensitive way, since it has become increasingly clear that experiences previously considered pathological are in fact normative in many traditional religious contexts. But in order to do this, clinicians need to have a clearer understanding of just what such contemplative paths—particularly the nonlinear ones—look like, and this work aims to help in this effort. Recently one of the leaders of the field of transcultural psychiatry, Lawrence Kirmayer, co-edited a volume entitled *Revisioning Psychiatry* which "encourages the hope that psychiatric theory is on the threshold of a renaissance, in which complex-systems thinking will allow us to integrate neuroscience, psychology, and the social sciences" in order to better "recognize and respond to others in all their diversity" (2017, 624). This dissertation hopes to make a contribution in this direction, by demonstrating the utility of incorporating perspectives from religious studies and mystical traditions in addition to the fields mentioned above, and to use complex systems frameworks to facilitate such interdisciplinary research to ultimately provide better care for meditators in distress.

And finally, this project hopes to contribute to better future research on the effects of meditation, pushing research to attend to the dynamics of change processes in ways that have

yet to be incorporated into most of meditation research still using pre/post paradigms. A complex systems approach to meditation research, like in psychotherapy, is "necessary to more fully capture the dynamics of human change processes" that can be initiated by these practices (Hayes and Andrews 2020, 1). Additionally, it hopes to make this contribution by proposing mechanisms that could lead to more basic scientific understandings of meditative practice in a way that can reduce unnecessary suffering—particularly misguided 'no pain, no gain' approaches' to spirituality—as well as promote human flourishing that may only be realized through nonlinear change processes.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Until recently, most work investigating the relationship between spiritual and psychopathological experiences proposed "distress" as a key criterion to differentiate between them; if the experience or symptom was distressing it was identified as pathological. However, in chapter we will examine data from interviews with practitioners and teachers from Jewish, Christian, and Islamicate contemplative traditions where subjects did not identify all distressing experiences as pathological but interpreted some as actually indicative of spiritual progress. In the interpretation of both kinds of challenging experiences, practitioners and teachers used particular mystical texts and ideas to discuss what was normative or not in their tradition, while, at the same time, often drawing from sources such as Jungian psychoanalysis or somatic therapy to translate and engage with the medieval purification frameworks that are embedded within traditional conceptions of nonlinear paths.

In chapter two, I argue that states of absorption cultivated in these traditions can be understood from a complex-systems perspective as pivotal mental states. While the trait has been studied for decades, *states* of absorption have been under-theorized. To better understand states of absorption, I draw on work investigating dissociation and perceptual decoupling to propose that the states of absorption cultivated in Abrahamic contemplative traditions are states of intentional decoupling. I further argue that they can also be understood as "pivotal mental states" in that they are states of heightened plasticity that can instantiate long term changes that are either adaptive or maladaptive.

The next stage in the construction of an etic framework, undertaken in chapter three, is to explore how states of absorption lead to oscillations, which in turn lead to new base-line senses of self. While the research on pivotal states may help explain how states of absorption can lead to either beneficial or harmful long-term outcomes, it doesn't explain the nonlinear change processes that define nonlinear paths. In this chapter I argue that recent work incorporating complex systems frameworks into psychotherapy research and cognitive science provides critical insights to understand how the oscillatory trajectories reported in Abrahamic contemplative traditions can lead to goals of transformed senses of self.

In chapter four, the final stage in constructing an etic framework that can be of practical utility will be presented and tested by examining case studies of contemporary Abrahamic contemplative practitioners. This chapter will examine systems approaches to psychiatry and will highlight a recent one—the cultural ecosocial systems approach—that I argue is particularly useful in case formulation and intervention planning for meditation-related difficulties in a culturally sensitive manner. Finally, I will emphasize two features of the cultural ecosocial approach that I believe are particularly useful for differentiating between

distressing meditation-related difficulties that are likely to lead to adaptive growth from those which will lead to maladaptive decline and an exacerbation of distress.

CHAPTER ONE: DISTRESSING AND IMPAIRING MEDITATION-RELATED EXPERIENCES IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN ABRAHAMIC CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITIONS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will present preliminary findings from a qualitative study investigating meditation-related difficulties and appraisal processes in contemporary Abrahamic contemplative traditions. We will first present the methods (I) employed in the study and then examine the phenomenology (II) as reported by practitioners and teachers, coded according to an existing phenomenological codebook. We will then turn to themes and sub-themes that emerged in a more data-driven coding related to how they appraised those experiences as either "adverse" (non-normative) (III) or "part of the path" (normative) (IV). Finally, we'll explore these findings and their implications (V) for attempts to create etic clinical frameworks to guide care addressing these difficulties in a culturally sensitive manner.

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to explore the following questions: what is the range of meditation-related effects described by Abrahamic[9] practitioners in the West? What types of experiences do they report as challenging, distressing, or functionally impairing? What are the hypothesized causes of those experiences? What interpretations are they given by others and find compelling themselves? How do practitioners prevent, manage, navigate, or integrate such experiences? And how do teachers guide their students through such experiences? Through qualitative interviews with Abrahamic meditation practitioners and meditation experts (teachers, spiritual directors, and clinicians), the Variety of Contemplative Experience-Abrahamic (VCE-A) research study attempts to investigate the full range of experiences associated with meditation practices in Jewish, Christian, and Islamicate[10] traditions in the West. This study sought to replicate the methods of the 'Variety of Contemplative Experience' (VCE) research project's qualitative arm with a sample of Abrahamic contemplative practitioners and teachers. Lindahl et al. (2017, 5-13) provides an extensive description of the project's methodology[11] which was followed rigorously in order to enable robust future comparisons between the two data sets. The major methodological

[9] For a discussion of the category and the emerging field of the 'Abrahamic' religions, see Silverstein et al. (2015). For a critique and argument against the utility of this category, see Hughes (2012). This study, while acknowledging Hughes' concerns as valid, does not think they outweigh the practical utility of the term in describing Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religious traditions and so chooses to make use of it, while striving to represent the complexity and heterogeneity of those who identify within each tradition.

[10] This study follows Inayat-Khan (2011) in exploring the scope of contemplative practice in both Islamic and Islamicate contexts, the latter term coined by Marshall Hodgson to refer "not directly to the religion, Islam, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims" (Hodgson 1974, 59). The Islamicate context is particularly important in light of contemporary debates about how to define "Sufism" and, following Taji-Farouki (2007) and others, the term "Sufism "and "Sufi" is used in this study "to designate all figures and trends that self-describe thus, be these universal, Islamic, contemporary, or historical" (10).

[11] Which this author helped design and implement.

differences were that this was a purely qualitative study as opposed to using mixed-methods—scales or questionnaires beyond the interview protocol—and that practitioners with a mixed practice history that included a significant influence from non-Abrahamic traditions were not excluded from this study.

The VCE-A study recruited Abrahamic meditation practitioners from Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Islamicate traditions (Brown IRB # #1301000752; UCB IRB # 17220120). Inclusion criteria for practitioners required a minimum age of 18 years, a contemplative practice in an Abrahamic tradition, and the ability to report on meditation-related experience that was associated with significant physiological or psychological changes, including (but not limited to) those that were challenging, distressing, or impairing.[12] The VCE-A study also recruited meditation experts who had taught extensively in an Abrahamic tradition. Inclusion criteria for experts was an occupational identity as a meditation teacher or spiritual director in an Abrahamic tradition, or a clinician who has worked with practitioners of these traditions. The overall sampling strategy was purposive and recruitment employed both snowball and special case sampling and to meet the aims of investigating the target phenomena as well as sampling from both "continuous" and "discontinuous" traditions which together constitute the contemporary landscape of contemplative practice (Garb 2012). Interviews were conducted over Skype, Zoom, the phone, or in person. The first round of interviews was conducted through Brown University between April 2012 and May 2015,

[12] While technically this was also the recruitment criteria for the VCE study, in terms of analysis we did not include subjects who did not report distress or impairment. While future analyses of this data set may make similar decisions, for this analysis even those without distress or impairment were included since one of the goals of the study is to begin to understand the causes of meditation-related difficulties, and to this end, I argue it is important to analyze subjects who did not experience these difficulties so as to begin to discern what might be have prevented them from encountering them.

while the second occurred through UCSB between March 2021 and August 2023. 30 practitioners—10 from each tradition—and 30 experts were recruited for this study, but only 27 practitioners and 29 teachers completed interviews by the time of this analysis, bringing the total to 56 interviews analyzed.[13] While this study sought to interview both Islamic "hybrids" and "perennial"[14] Sufi teachers and practitioners (Hermansen 1998), thus far due to accessibility and the snowball sampling method the majority (though not all) of interviews have been conducted amongst perennial groups. For the Jewish and Christian subjects, there was more of an even split between orthodox and heterodox traditions, though Sephardi Jewish and Eastern Orthodox traditions are underrepresented.

Interviews were either transcribed by hand or using an automated program (Word Dictation, NVivo Transcription, and Otter AI Transcription) and were either verified in full or spot verified. Transcripts were then uploaded and coded using through the NVivo software program. The first round of analysis employed 'Applied Thematic Analysis' (ATA) to code[15]

[13] Only 7 of 10 Jewish practitioners completed interviews by the time of this analysis.

[14] Hermansen (1998, 155) defines "hybrids" as those western Sufi movements "which identify more closely with an Islamic source and content" and "generally are founded and led by persons who were born and raised in Muslim societies" aka "immigrants to the West." She defined "perennials" as "those movements in which the specifically Islamic identification and content of the movement have been de-emphasized in favor of a "perennialist" outlook" where the term 'perennialist' refers to "the idea that there is a universal, eternal truth which underlies all religions" (155).

[15] According to Applied Thematic Analysis (ATA), coding and codebook creation is an iterative process and, for this project, there will be at least one more round of coding in the future. Preliminary coding utilized the phenomenology codebook developed for the VCE study to examine what kinds of meditation-related difficulties were reported and then took a more grounded-theory style approach in coding for how they were appraised. Secondary and tertiary coding rounds will assess the fit of the VCE codebook to the VCE-A dataset, the findings of which will facilitate a comprehensive comparison between them and may result in a new or revised codebook emerging from the new data. In this way, the first round of phenomenology coding is more theory-driven (based on the VCE study) as the codes are set before the data is immersed in (codes as input), whereas future phenomenology coding and the current appraisal coding was more data-driven, where codes are more flexible and iterative such that the findings are the codes, themes, and patterns that emerge from this data set specifically (codes as output). See Clarke (2017) for more on the difference between codes as input, employed in "small q qualitative" thematic analysis approaches, codes as output in "Big Q Qualitative"

distressing and impairing phenomenology using the phenomenology codebook developed in the VCE study (thereby taking a more deductive and theory-driven approach), while coding for how those experiences were understood as either normative or non-normative took a more grounded, inductive, and data-driven approach—both of which are employed in ATA methodology (Guest et al. 2012; Lindahl et al 2017, 21). In addition to ATA, the methods employed in this study also followed the VCE study in being informed by the attribution theory approach to the study of "experiences deemed religious" developed by Ann Taves (2009). This study also adopted the construct of "meditation-related difficulties" from the VCE study, defined as "a range of effects across different domains of human experiences that meditation practitioners in our study attributed to one or more types of meditation" and specific attention was paid to the ways practitioners and experts ascribe "significance, meaning, and value to meditation-related experiences" (Lindahl et al. 2017, 6).

DISTRESSING OR IMPAIRING PHENOMENOLOGY

Below is a presentation of the phenomenology practitioners and some experts reported as challenging, distressing, or functionally impairing according to the codebook developed in the VCE study. The phenomenological categories are organized into five domains, and while the full list of each domain is included, only those items in bold were reported by VCE-A subjects.

thematic analysis approaches, and "middle Q Qualitative" approaches (like Applied Thematic Analysis) which we employed in the VCE study and I am employing in this study as well.

AFFECTIVE

The affective domain of the VCE codebook includes: **Fear, Anxiety, Panic and Paranoia;**[16] Positive affect**; Depression**,[17] Dysphoria, or Grief**; Re-experiencing of Traumatic Memories or Affect Without Recollection**;[18] Change in Doubt, Faith, Trust or Commitment; Crying, Laughing; **Empathic and Affiliative Changes**;[19] Rage, Anger, and

[16] This category was defined as, "Feelings of fright or distress--with or without an external referent--and their corresponding physiological and behavior responses." Inclusion criteria included, "Some feeling of fright or distress--ranging from anxiety to fear, terror, panic, or paranoia--usually stimulated by a phenomenon that the subject is unused to, whether an external stimulus or a dimension of their meditation experience. Fear should be coded when it is reported as a response to other meditation-related changes in this codebook. However, fear or terror may also appear as a strong feeling on its own, without known or specified content or cause. Also includes intense negative emotions such as panic or paranoia and their behavioral changes that emerge from unpleasant experiences attributed wholly or in part as effects of meditation" (Phenomenology Codebook, 1).

[17] This category was defined as, "Low, depressed, or sad moods, usually coupled with physical and behavioral manifestations that may or may not affect normal functioning." Inclusion criteria included, "feelings of intense sadness, emptiness, hopelessness, helplessness, guilt, or unworthiness" (Phenomenology Codebook, 1).

[18] This category was defined as, "Either a recollection of some past traumatic event in the subject's life that may or may not have been repressed, and which is generally associated with strong emotions, or the upwelling of strong emotions without any corresponding memory, content, thought or other identifiable stimulus." Inclusion criteria included, "references to the recollection of some past traumatic event in the subject's life" and an experience of an unexpected, or sudden onset or upwelling of emotions without an identifiable stimulus or typical causal factor, such as a memory, a thought, or an evocative external circumstance" (Phenomenology Codebook, 2).

[19] This category was defined as, "Increased or decreased empathic connection to other people or to environmental stimuli." Inclusion criteria included, "references to social emotions (love, attachment, union), valuing social communities or interpersonal relationships and, at the more extreme end, affective sensitivity and contagion (being impacted by or taking on the feelings of others). Descriptions of decreased empathic connection may include references to indifference about or increased aversion to social situations or relationships" (Phenomenology Codebook, 1).

Aggression; **Affective Lability**;[20] Self-conscious Emotions; **Agitation and Irritability**;[21] Suicidality; and **Affective Flattening, Emotional Detachment, or Alexithymia**[22] (Lindahl et al. 2017, 19-21).

99102 reported severe and unusual emotional reactivity in personal relationships during periods of challenging formal meditation and prayer practice. Three subjects (99107, 99121, 99125) reported traumatic flashbacks of events from childhood. For example, 99107 reported that on a meditation retreat he re-experienced a traumatic memory of abuse from early childhood connected to pain in the area where the abuse occurred. One subject (99109) reported affective flattening or detachment for a period of two years immediately following a significant anomalous experience. 99103 reported a period of intense affective lability following a particularly intense 7-day retreat that lasted several years. Many subjects reported significant periods of fear and anxiety (99106, 99124, 99125), some instantiations of which were coupled with (or secondarily in response to) other categories such as perceptual changes

[20] This category was defined as, "Rapid shifts in mood, mood swings, a increased range of emotions, or strong, unwarranted reactions to situations." Inclusion criteria included, "Being emotionally reactive or triggered, or strong shifts in mood. This may manifest as strong reactions to situations that would not have previously elicited such a reaction, or a greater range of both positive and negative emotions than ordinarily experienced" (Phenomenology Codebook, 1).

[21] This category was defined as, "An agitated or irritable mood, possibly accompanied by restlessness, distractibility or uneasiness." Inclusions criteria included, "descriptions of restlessness, distractibility, or uneasiness. Agitation and restlessness described with somatic language would still be coded here if an affective dimension is mentioned" (Phenomenology Codebook, 1).

[22] This category was defined as, "A narrowed or diminished affective range, a lack of affective charge, and/or an inability to identify/distinguish emotions." Inclusion criteria included,

> a lack of affect arising and/or the absence of a typical affective response to an experience that usually evokes one. Emotional detachment may be expressed as a disidentification with the emotional charge of experiences or circumstances, having emotions but not feeling them, and/or having emotions only as body sensations without a sense of affect. Descriptions of alexithymia indicate an inability to identify, understand, process, describe or distinguish emotions, or to distinguish between the somatic dimensions of emotions and other bodily sensations. (Phenomenology Codebook, 1)

like hallucinations or derealization, vivid imagery, re-experiencing of traumatic memories, or somatic changes like somatic energy or pain. For example, 99103 described a pattern that he encountered in several retreats that he underwent earlier in his life:

> *What that meant for me usually was, the first 3 or 4 days of the retreat was a relaxation, a sinking in, a going deeper. The pattern for me during my 20s, and around the 4th day I would get very restless and anxious, unable to concentrate and then something would break through, some fear, anxiety, desire that I had been holding back, would break through. And like I said earlier, I might spend a couple of days letting that happen, and then usually there would be some acceptance or resolution around it within that 8 day period. Didn't always follow that pattern exactly, but for a while it seemed to happen regularly.*

Or another subject (99106) who described on stage in her meditation practice where,

> *there had been a long [period of] darkness, very quiet […]quiet with God […] and I would feel my whole body open to this other dimension and one day as I had done that I suddenly had a experience that at the time was terrifying, it was this experience of the deity, God, whatever you want to call it, coming at me with an open mouth. And everything in my body recoiled, hands pushing out, "No! do not do that to me." And then I thought that was weird and I wondered where it came from and it happened a second and a third time.*

Many subjects also reported periods of depression (99103, 99106, 99108, 99110) ranging from days to several years. 99121 reported emotional outpouring and "crying for hours" after engaging in a particular kind of breath meditation on a consistent basis.

Some teachers discussed depression and despair that can be encountered while undertaking contemplative practices, some of which was considered normative and others of which was not. For example, one Rabbi (99204) was keen to distinguish between "depression and despair" where "Despair, the sharpness and bitterness of despair is what leads one to the maintenance of the relationship" with the divine, and as such is normative, versus depression which does not have those effects and is therefore not normative. However, another Rabbi (99210) related that both "depression and despair" were normative effects of contemplative practice according to the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, and several Christian

practitioners and teachers related that depression could be one of the expressions of the dark nights of the soul. One Sufi teacher (99233) discussed how one of the "experiences that can come from deep meditation" is "a deep spiritual depression when the outer world loses any meaning" which "can evoke a desire to withdraw completely from the world."

COGNITIVE

The cognitive domain includes: Change in worldview; Delusional, Irrational, or Paranormal Beliefs; Mental stillness; **Vivid imagery**[23]; **Change in executive functioning**[24]*;* Meta-cognition; Increased cognitive processing; Clarity; Disintegration of meaning structures; Scrupulosity (Lindahl et al. 2017, 17).

99127 reported disorientation, an inability to focus, and an inability to read books at various points in his contemplative training as well as requiring a period of 1-2 weeks after each retreat he undertook before he is able to return to work since after such periods of intensive practice, "my psyche is just not there." 99109 reported a significantly reduced ability

[23] 'Vivid Imagery' was defined as "An experience of intense, vivid and/or clear thoughts or mental images that arise involuntarily, or a report of an increased ability to visualize." Inclusion criteria included, "intense and potentially disconcerting thoughts that arise involuntarily and which are accompanied by an increased clarity or vividness. Vivid imagery or thought intrusions may also be accompanied by strong emotions such as *Fear* or bliss (*Positive Affect*)." (Phenomenology Codebook, 3)

[24] 'Change in Executive Functioning' was defined as "Either an inability to perform cognitive functions of decision making, concentration, and memory that the person used to be able to perform, or an enhanced ability in these domains of executive functioning." Inclusion criteria included, "A noticeable increase or decrease in any capacity to think, make decisions, memory recall, or the performance of other cognitive tasks. Such changes may have been noted by the subject themselves or by another observer (such as family, friends, coworkers, etc.). Diminished capacities in executive functioning also co-occur with extreme forms of *Mental Stillness*." (2)

to make decisions for two years after what the subject described as a “spiritual opening” and then afterwards an ongoing difficulty with attention and using her imagination. 99103 reported that after a 7-day retreat and a particularly intense transformative experience, he was unable to concentrate and write and was forced to drop out of his PhD program, though he reported that his focus and writing ability returned about 7 years later. 99106 reported a period of 9 months when, during formal closed-eyes practice, she had spontaneous vivid imagery of walking in a desert and eventually finding a well and slowly submerging in it over many different meditation sessions. Finally, once she was fully submerged and the water began to cover her eyes, she experienced a tremendous “infusion of mystical energy” and the perception that “the whole world was just infused with […] mystery” which was also “very frightening.” Finally, One Sufi teacher also discussed how, in his tradition, certain forms of cognitive impairment are understood as a normal if not normative effect of the particular forms of meditation they practice. He described how, “This meditation empties the mind, so this is a very beneficial state and is encouraged. Though sometimes it results in a minor memory loss, what we call "spiritual senility!"

PERCEPTUAL

The Perceptual domain includes: **Hallucinations, Visions, and Illusions**[25]; **Visual lights**[26]; Somatosensory distortions; Perceptual hypersensitivity; Distortions in time and space; Dissolution of objects; **Derealization**.[27]

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[25] "A hallucination is an experience of a percept that is not externally stimulated, is not shared by others, and is not taken to be veridical. When a visual percept that is not shared by others is taken to be veridical, it is a vision. An illusion involves a percept that is distorted, changed, or has features added to the raw percept." Inclusion criteria consisted of:

> Hallucinations can occur in any modality: visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, or proprioceptive. Hallucinations are unique to the subjectivity of the practitioner, are not a part of shared, consensual reality, and are generally understood not to be veridical. Percepts unique to the subjectivity of the practitioner, not part of consensual reality, but that *are* taken to be veridical are be better described as visions (for the visual domain, locutions for the auditory domain, etc.). Visions may be further distinguished from hallucinations by the causal origin of non-consensual percept being attributed to a non- shared agent…An example of an illusion, or a distortion of perception, would be micropsia or macropsia, in which objects appear larger or smaller than they would normally. (Phenomenology Codebook, 4)

[26] 'Visual Lights' was defined as any "Experience of a light or lights in field of vision that are vivid but not the result of external stimuli." Inclusion criteria consisted of, "Visual hallucinations or visions related to light or lights, which can be bright and/or colored, and can be experienced with closed or open eyes. Lights may be "discrete" circumscribed shapes or patterns or "diffuse" lights or changes in the overall brightness of the visual field" (4).

[27] 'Derealization' was defined as an experience where one's "Surroundings are perceived as strange, unreal, or dreamlike, or perception is experienced as mediated by a fog, a lens, or some other filter that results in feeling cut off from the world." Inclusion criteria included,

> Mentioning a feeling of unreality, strangeness, unfamiliarity or dreamlike quality of surroundings, or reports of feeling cut off or alienated from the perceptual world. Includes confusion concerning whether one is dreaming or awake. Perceptual changes include objects appearing two- dimensional, or "cartoon-like," which are often reported with corresponding affective changes about objects no longer

99101 reported a 3-day period of vivid hallucinations of lights and disembodied entities that were communicating with the subject, before she was eventually hospitalized. 99107 reported visions, some of which invoked considerable fear, of spiritual teachers who passed on teachings to the subject. 99109 described on multiple occasions perceptions of the world appearing "like sparks of light […] like pinpoints of light" during a period of ongoing functional impairment. 99111 reported many visions and hallucinations, both in the context of shamanic journeying sessions but also 'off cushion' in everyday life while not intentionally engaged in any contemplative practice, some of which were distressing and functionally impairing. 99116 reported an early experience of witnessing his father communicating with his deceased great grandfather, a distressing and vivid vision of being in the holocaust, and "out of body" experiences of other dimensions where he communicated with other beings from the past and future—some of which he felt ashamed about because, "sometimes I'll see things I shouldn't see" and "sometimes I will go to places I shouldn't go to." 99121 reported perceptions of light during a church service, and several "spontaneous shamanic experiences" involving hallucinations or visions during a time when she felt destabilized and somewhat functionally impaired. 99122 reported visual and auditory hallucinations, synesthesia, and distressing derealization experiences where the subject described reality as "a dark soup of a dream." 99124 reported distressing visual, auditory, and kinesthetic hallucinations of other entities as well as perceiving visual lights in space and surrounding certain individuals.

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feeling real. Derealization can thus be characterized by feelings of the world lacking emotional coloring and depth in addition to related perceptual changes, in which case double-coding with *Affective Flattening* may be warranted. (3)

SENSE OF SELF

The sense of self domain includes: **Changes in Self-Other / Self-World Boundaries**;[28] Loss of sense of agency; Loss of sense of basic self; **Change in sense of embodiment**;[29] **Change in narrative self**;[30] Loss of sense of ownership.

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[28] 'Changes in Self-Other or Self-World Boundaries' is defined as an "Expansion beyond or distortions in the typical sense of where the boundaries between self and other or self and world are delineated." Inclusion criteria includes,

> References to being expanded beyond one's body schema, or the sense of boundaries between self and other or self and world being dissolved. May also be described in terms of merging with, being porous or permeable to either the world or other people. Alteration of self-other boundaries includes experiencing other people's mind states or emotions…References to awareness as spacious, expansive, centerless, non-local, all-pervading, or non-dual with the world of experience would be coded here, as would references to a sense of unity or oneness with nature, the environment, the world, or the universe. Conversely, feeling more separated from the world or feelings as if distant from it could also be coded here. (Phenomenology Codebook, 4)

[29] 'Change in Sense of Embodiment' was defined as the "Feeling of being disembodied, located outside or at a distance from one's body, or located in an unusual location within one's body schema." Inclusion criteria, "Includes any change in where one's sense of self is located relative to the body schema. Includes references to a change in perspective of location within the body schema, such as from behind the eyes, to the middle of the head or to the heart. May also refer to a distance from the body schema, where the sense of self or perspective is located behind the body or in space, as in "out-of-body" experiences" (4).

[30] 'Change in Narrative Self' was defined as, "A report of a change in how the practitioner conceives of himself or herself as a person. Or, a change in the content of or their perspective on their story or personal identity." Inclusion criteria includes,

While several subjects reported alterations in their sense of self which was experienced as a positive change, only a few reported changes in this category which were distressing. 99109 reported a loss of "personal will," which she described as "not feel like I operate from my own will anymore but I can't say I have this great knowing or great whatever," and that her "personal boundary is more porous […] porous I guess is the best word." While she still reported having a personality, it was experienced as distant and decentralized and she could no longer "split between the observer and the observed." 99111 reported that after a transformative experience he no longer experienced himself as located squarely within his body, but more like "my whole body is only the hand of a larger energetic body" which was initially quite disorienting. 99127 described a prolonged experience of the "death" of a dimension of his "ego," which was initially distressing, but after a few weeks the distress associated with it was relieved. He also on one occasion reported a disorienting change in his sense of embodiment such that he felt much larger than his body and "like Alice after she ate the cake […] when I looked back at the door I couldn't figure out how I got through the door it looked so small."

One Sufi teacher (99233) discussed how, "There are also other experiences that can come from deep meditation, such as a loss of ego which can be deeply disturbing" and that the "anxiety, possibly terror from the loss of the ego is generally a passing stage. It can often

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References that compare how a practitioner used to think about themselves as a person or their story that are in contrast with how they currently feel or felt after a shift associated with meditation practice. Also includes references to a complete loss of narrative identity. The narrative self is temporally extended in reference to past or future conceptions of self or personhood. Thus, changes in narrative self include the impact of different perspectives cultivated through the theory and practice of meditation on the stories practitioners tell about themselves…Stories may include descriptions of changes in how they view the motivations for their behaviors, the type of person that they think they are, or the type of person that they think they should be. (4).

be experienced at the beginning of our heart meditation before one leaves the mind behind. Maybe this stage can last from one to two years." Another Sufi teacher (99236) described different stages of spiritual attainment, the third of which was described as "effacement" (*fana)* where, while not a permanent state of the loss of one's basic sense of self, does result in a new psychological baseline such that "one can never again put one's ego at the center of existence because the game has changed forever."

SOMATIC

The somatic domain includes: **Somatic Energy or Vibrations***;*[31] Sleep Changes; Pain; Pressure, Tension or Release of Pressure or Tension; Appetitive or Weight Changes; Thermal Changes; **Involuntary Movements;**[32] Breathing Changes; Parasomnias; Headaches or Head

[31] 'Somatic Energy' was defined as, "A type of sensation moving throughout the body or throughout a body area described with language of vibration, energy, current, or other related metaphors." Inclusion criteria consisted of,

> Somatic energy or vibrations attributed to meditation practice. Include any level of intensity (gentle to forceful, flowing to surging.) May be described as being contained within or going beyond one's body schema…May include use of emic terms like "*kundalini*, "*prana*," or metaphors of "currents," "voltage," or "electricity." Also includes related references to psychomotor agitation (adrenaline rushes, feeling "wired") or slowing…Reports of somatic energy may also affect motor patterns and may therefore be closely associated with reports of *Involuntary Movements*. (Phenomenology Codebook, 6)

[32] 'Involuntary Movements' were defined as, "A motor movement usually under voluntary control that occurs without a conscious decision for movement." Inclusion criteria included, "Involuntary movements that are attributed to meditation practice. This includes spontaneous movements such as: tics, spasms, twitching, rocking, shaking, seizing up, twisting of the torso or head, fidgeting, or others. Includes involuntary vocalizations. May be repetitive or a single involuntary movement" (6).

Pressure; **Cardiac Irregularity**;[33] Fatigue or Weakness; Gastrointestinal Distress; Dizziness, Vertigo, Syncope; Sexuality Related Changes.

99121 described many different "dangerous and uncontrollable" energetic experiences including sensations of energy "pounding" in her heart and throat area as she would lie down to sleep as well as during the day when engaged in certain breath practices. 99125 reported a feeling of "volcanic" energy rising from abdominal region in conjunction with involuntary movements (shaking) and overwhelming and chaotic affect without referent. 99107 described experiences of energy in his body rising along his spine with a sensation of heat and 7 different auditory tones accompanying the "electric" energy as it rose. 99103 described bodily energy and spontaneous movements as follows: "And suddenly a kind of creation poem began to speak itself within me that just filled my body with energy, it was kind of pouring out, my body was kind of shaking. It was full of joy, full of resolution and freedom and so forth, then feeling afterwards like I needed to do yoga postures and running to just let go of some of that excess energy." 99127 described many "energetic" experiences, including one where he experienced "a vibration in the middle of my chest where my heart is. A very intense vibration...it wasn't angina, it was a vibration as if I had plugged an electric cord into a socket and stuck it on my heart."

[33] 'Cardiac Changes' was defined as, "Irregular heartbeat, heart palpitations, or other significant irregularities." Inclusion criteria consisted of, "Cardiac irregularity attributed to meditation practice or pre-existing cardiac irregularity made worse by meditation practice. Cardiac changes include tachycardia (unusually rapid heart beat, even at rest), brachycardia (unusually slow heart beat), and heart palpitations" (5).

One Sufi teacher (99233) explained that, "The meditation practiced on this path is a heart meditation, and it can result in irregular heartbeats, as the physical body/physical heart is effected by changes taking place within the spiritual heart center." He continued, "I always advise that the individual also have a medical checkup when they have these symptoms, and often the results are clear." He then shared that 10 or so of his students over the past few decades have experienced such cardiac irregularities that a cardiologist was sought on each occasion and yet no heart issues were deemed responsible or identified in any of the cases.

"Adverse" or Non-Normative Appraisals

While some meditation-related difficulties were appraised by both practitioners and teachers as normative or involving suffering necessary for progress on a contemplative path, many difficulties were not understood in this way. Instead, they were understood to be "adverse" or non-normative in the sense that they entailed harm and unnecessary suffering and can and should be avoided. Many different factors contributed to this kind of appraisal and the different opinions of what the most optimal and propitious conditions are for different forms of meditative practice. From the preliminary (data-driven) coding, three major themes, each with several sub-themes[34] related to not normative appraisals emerged from my immersion in the data. The major themes were Practices, Social Support, and Worldview.

[34] Many of these themes and sub-themes overlap with what was coded as "Influencing Factors" (IFs) in the VCE study, however in my decision to utilize a more grounded-style of thematic analysis (as opposed to more deductively borrowing from the VCE codebook as I did in the phenomenology section) in this section, I chose to formulate themes as they emerged more specifically from this data set. This resulted in a slightly different presentation of the data given the specific emphasis of this study on normative and non-normative appraisals. In other words, the first section on phenomenology is more of a "middle q" qualitative approach to thematic

PRACTICES

FIT AND TAILORING

Both teachers and subjects reported the importance of finding the right practice for the right person…at the right time, and that the failure to do so could result in harm or unnecessary suffering**.** While some teachers believed that at least some meditation practices are potentially suitable, and would be fruitful for most people, other teachers were of the opinion that meditation—at least in the form or practice in which they taught it—was not for everyone. Thus, if either a person was not practicing a particular meditative technique suited for them, or if they were not suited for meditation more broadly, some of the teachers interviewed believed that this could result in "adverse" effects.

One Christian teacher (99224) noted that in his experience "one size doesn't fit all" and that he spends time getting to know each individual student before assigning them a specific practice based on factors such temperament, learning style, and personality. He noted that it takes him three conversations with a prospective student to figure out what kind of meditation to teach them out of three different kinds of contemplative practice that he teaches. One Sufi teacher (99231) discussed the importance in his tradition and in his teaching on "tailoring" practices to individual students' needs, at any given time. While there are practices meant to be done every day, he would also prescribe specific practices depending on particular life

analysis where the themes are deductively decided beforehand based on previous research to be employed in the analysis, while this second section on appraisals is more of a "Big Q" approach to thematic analysis where the themes are the results of the analysis. See Clarke 2017 and Clarke and Braun 2017 for a delineation of different schools of qualitative thematic analysis.

chapters or experiences that the student was going through. He also called attention to the importance of "embodied" practices and alternating between periods of seated meditation and movement, particularly modern Western forms of Sufi dancing, in retreat settings. Another Sufi teacher (99234) also emphasized both dance and walking meditation as ways to integrate experiences people have during meditation into their daily life. He explained how in a retreat setting this repeated emphasis on the immediate integration of powerful experiences, particularly through walking "as though we were walking in everyday life" results in sometimes more modest or less dramatic effects: "Maybe people don't leave quite as calm, or as transcendent as they would in a four day just sitting retreat, but maybe it's a little more useful for them. They don't have the crash and burn effect when they go home." He also discussed the emphasis on the heart in terms of embodied practice in his teaching as one way in which overwhelming or particularly challenging experiences aren't encountered in an inappropriate way:

> *So heart practice is sort of essential and in distinction from some of the Eastern traditions there's less of an emphasis on chakras, or centers, in terms of raising the awareness, the body awareness, either down from the crown to the base or up from the base to the crown. And there's more of an emphasis I would say starting in the heart. Starting near the thymus gland in terms of body awareness. And then raise, sort of expanding in a spiral sense both up and down, so that, so to speak, the centers above and beneath are then included gradually […] if that is done, you could say, in an orderly fashion then you have a safer progression so to speak. Safer meaning, that a person doesn't receive effects, out of body effects that they're not ready to receive. Because you can see if you start in the center and then spiral up and down, you're including lower centers, which would be what we would normally call psychological issues, as well as higher centers, which are the sort of so-called transpersonal effects, gradually at the same time.*

This same teacher (99234) also described tailoring practices, or needing to tailor them, for new cultural contexts and new kinds of practitioners:

> *99234: Sufis use often very energetic practice. Um, sometimes the chanting, the movement can become quite quick. You know, it can become somewhat near Reichian*

> *in a certain way, although, we tend to do things more gently these days than we did twenty years ago […] Just because people are more refined and they don't need the two hours of extended chanting and movement or the four hours like the Mevlevi's do. When I was with the Turkish Sufis in this temple in the 70's, we'd do four hours of zikhr…You know, which is an intense chanted practice with movement […] it was no problem. But these guys, then they'd go in the next room after they're done and they're chain-smoking for an hour.*
> *NF: (Laughs)*
> *99234: So you know these are bulky Turkish guys [….] meaning no disrespect. They're living rough, hard, you know sort of lives. They're men. We're dealing with mixed groups now obviously…We're dealing with men and women. We're dealing with people who are generally not working out on the land and doing hard physical labor all the time. It makes a big difference to one's body awareness, one's body image. And so the practice needs to… can be much more refined.*

With his own students in Europe and North America, he chooses not to use "this hard yang style practice really, or what the Sufis call *Jalal* practice" since "it's not helpful and, you know, no one's benefitted by it." He explained how, "when Sufi orders come from the East, let's say Middle East or East to the West, sometimes teachers don't understand that so they'll just transpose practices from there to here and then they wonder why you know people are going off or going into states they don't know how to control." In his own tradition, he shared that, "I argue with some of my colleagues" on this point and that "it's a current issue."

PSYCHIATRIC CO-MORBIDITY

As mentioned above, some teachers were of the opinion that meditation, or at least certain styles or approaches, were not appropriate for everyone, and therefore unnecessary harm could result from these contemplative practices by these people. When asked if they thought there are some people for whom Centering Prayer just isn't appropriate, one Christian teacher (99222) explained as follows,

> *I think there's a very small portion of people that I wouldn't recommend it as a starting practice. And they will be basically either people that have a schizophrenic tendency,*

> *you know, some history of schizophrenia, or predisposition in that regard. Or people who have serious severe recent trauma, such that it's just an inch below the surface. The schizophrenic concern is because, as I said, that the Centering Prayer practice doesn't give you a firm tether for attention at the beginning. And so, if you have a mind that's already kind of inclined in the direction of splintering and splitting, there's not much to hold on to. And so, I've often encouraged people who've done, who have some schizophrenic tendencies to start with the most rigorous, attention based method they can, simply because the focus is helpful. And in both the cases I've told you about, when someone really wants to do it anyway, or when I know there's a traumatic history right there, what I'll often do with people is to say, 'we'll sit for just two minutes,' and 'we'll do the practice together for two minutes.' A very short period of time, and then we do it. So, what the idea is is that you don't want to encourage fear, so there's a strong […] if you can do it for two minutes together, you've sent a strong message to the unconscious that we're not going to be dominated by, by fears. And yet you haven't thrown people into such deep water that they lose their place.*

As in this case, the judgement around how appropriate a practice was for an individual was often related to psychiatric morbidity or co-morbidities. One Sufi teacher (99237) discussed how, "From my understanding, there are people out there for whom meditation is not a good thing." She then gave an example from her own teaching experience:

> *In one of my study groups there is this young woman, not very young, she is a mother. She is lovely. She is this kind of joyous, luminous person. But she suffers from vertigo. And for her to close her eyes in meditation, it is hell. And she accepts it. So I look at her and I think, you know, you can't say to everyone "close your eyes, look at your breath." For her, its not possible, because of something possibly in her neurological system. […] There are also people who have a background of great unhappiness in childhood or whatever. And if they feel pulled to these experiences, perhaps they shouldn't do it, until they feel more comfortable.*

One Jewish teacher (99202), who was also a licensed clinician, described how, "It has indeed been my impression that pre-morbid history definitely plays an important role" and that of the patients he treated from "adverse reactions from meditation, […] most had relatively weak ego strength and a history of emotional difficulties." Another Jewish teacher (99207) discussed one particular student he worked with at a workshop who had a history of mental illness:

> *There's one example that's on my mind [....] there was a person that came to the seminar we ran two times ago. And he came up to me and just staggered, an amazing very profound response. And he called me, I got a lot of calls from him in the three days after. So it turns out he was in a near-psychotic state after the event and I had to kind of ground him and help him through that. But then when he was talking to me about it, he was at another non-Jewish self-help seminar a year ago and ended up being locked up for three days after because he has bi-polar. He's bi-polar. So the first thing I would say to him, 'I'm astonished, why would you ever think to come back to another seminar?' So that's a discussion that him and his wife had, he informed people on my staff and they went to a professional and he said it was okay, but I'm astonished that that was allowed. So what he said is two-fold. I worked with him over about a week and half after and one of the things he said was: First of all the seminar seemed to open him up to that experience and we discussed what that means. He was right on the edge for a number of days and what ultimately happened to him, he said that ironically even though the seminar made him vulnerable to it, he said the tools at the seminar [...] for the first time stopped him from falling into the psychotic state. And he said he could feel himself right on the edge and he would use the techniques that we were teaching to save him from that and that was a big revelation that that was possible.*

This teacher then gave a detailed discussion of the psychospiritual mechanics involved in contemplative practices depending on one's psychological history. He described how in his understanding of Jewish mystical psychology, "A *kelipah* means an emotional association based on a previous experience" and "what the average person is experiencing with an average meditation …if you close your eyes, the mind is wild and it's running and there's certain imagery coming up...what we call a '*machshevah zarah m'koach ha-m'demah*' [literally a "strange thought from the power of the imagination"]. He understands this as "emotionally generated imagery which are coming from certain external associations based on a lifetime of buildup" and that "those *middot*, those emotional core elements, they can be triggered by something happening in your day: a fear, a pain, a lust, a desire, ego or something and that's resonating so to speak and as it resonates it throws up mental imagery." For "most people when they begin their meditative process, there's a certain amount of noise in their head and through being mindful, or whatever the technique you'd recommend, they would watch them

go down." However, "what happens is if there is something particularly intense, an association that's been triggered, the more intense that is: a) the more it's being triggered and b) the more hard-wired that emotion is into your consciousness." The impact of this is that "when it gets triggered you have no capacity to stop it. That's what would probably be called a trauma. So that can take control and really impinge upon the higher consciousness."

He then explained how trauma can relate to higher consciousness in two different ways, in a healing way or a re-traumatizing capacity, depending on how the different aspects of the soul relate to each other:

> *One is the middot themselves, a persons general middot, it's called the root emotions itself, but they're not really tied to emotions I would have to spend a long time describing what they were. And then there's a part of the self called 'Chochmah' which is one of the lowest levels of the soul, the lower level of the Divine soul, which is all light and all revelation. Now it's very very powerful. Now when you turn it on, let's say it's the equivalent of putting light through a slide projector. It's a very very powerful light and it floods your system with light. If done in the right way, what it does it can completely nullify all the darkness, all the resistance and that's got to do with the healing power of the meditation experience. And almost all psychological healing comes from that mechanism and that's a discussion. But let's say the light got turned on and when it was there it would actually, sometimes depending on the mechanism, it can amplify and empower all the emotions. Now if those emotions are running, you hit the slide, the projector, so what's on the screen? Is it you know a very violent, awful movie, an aggressive, violent, cruel picture or is it just a beautiful, joyful picture? So that depends what the slide is in the slide projector. So if you imagine your middot, emotional states with their emotional baggage of a lifetime of journey; if they've got pain, agony or stress whatever, it's possible to go into a certain state and that light shines in and amplifies them rather then disperses and melts them and releases them. Once that happens, the person can go into a psychotic state. And I have seen this happen.*

One teacher and spiritual director (99227) described how certain practices and approaches allow trauma to heal without re-traumatizing the practitioner and that she incorporates approaches from Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy, what she terms "parts work," to do accomplish this. She discussed how,

I've learned to work with those parts of myself that might've been activated. So I might do a sit where I'm not doing my traditional, like Jesus Prayer practice, and finding a place of contemplative space where I'm actually actively engaging the parts work. So, I'm more imaginative in my practice […] I've loved over the last couple years learning to go in and do deep healing work on parts that are, that might be holding emotion. So yes, it's wonderful. I feel now if I'm struggling with something I have the tools to go into, maybe really deep memories and do some healing work with them, inviting in the Divine to work, to heal. It's not reactivating, it's not like I'm going to cry. I don't know how much you know about that word. It's doing this beautiful deep work, but without reactivating trauma.

One Rabbi (99206) discussed how people with certain clinical diagnoses gravitate towards particular practices and experiences: "I often find that—I think it happens in all religions—that people who are psychologically sick, I mean real psychologically sick, not just tendencies towards [...] that, bipolars often like the high meditational experience because they can become manic and they can go for it, someone has to tell them that they're sick, it's not that they're great." Finally, while not quite a (formal) clinical morbidity, other teachers discussed how certain practices or approaches to practice were needed for certain personality types to avoid harm. For example, one Sufi teacher (99236) shared how early on in her teaching career during the 1970s and 1980s,

What happened a lot in those days, a lot of people with a very angelic way through life, in other words, people whose natural, um, ego structure was so sort of transcendent and angelic showed up to the path. And at first it was easy to see this people and 'gosh, they don't seem to be bothered by anything, they're full of light and, um, they often bring beauty, their idealism is very high.' And it was easy to think they were just a hop skip and a jump from great spiritual attainment. But often, as they entered the process, it became evident early on that they were, um, ah […]not yet human, and so needed actually a lot of ego strength building and character building, in a certain sense, to be prepared for the deeper catalyzing of true spiritual awakening. And so that was very confusing for me, at first, because I would feel like well maybe I failed them, I let them down […] and then over time I learned no, these people just need a great deal of time and a great deal of reassurance to come into their full human-ness, into the deeper part of life and then, and then be ready to enter into the evolving mystery, so to speak.

In other words, while appearing at first glance to be spiritually advanced or mature, in her experience she found that these individuals actually needed more basic and fundamental psychological development before they could engage with the spiritual practices and frameworks offered in her tradition in a fruitful way.

Preliminary vs. Advanced Practices

Another major theme, and point of debate, that arose in the interviews was the distinction between preliminary practices and advanced practices, where both practitioners and teachers voiced the opinion that unnecessary suffering could result from premature engagement with the latter. One Jewish practitioner (99116) described how contemplative practices oriented towards "*tikkun ha-middot*" (rectification of character traits), usually not considered a particularly advanced practice, have to be built on the "foundations" of "having our life in check." He explains,

> *I would say that a lot of people, they come to work on the character traits where sometimes they don't have the first stage in place. So, you have to be healthy, and everyone knows what health looks like. I'm sure you'd ask a random person on the street, is it healthy to live in poverty, if a person chooses, or is it healthy to have pride and work? I think most people say yes to have pride and work. Most people would say to do some sort of exercise. Most people would say to have a mentor. But again, all of that's for you to build you, to give more to this world. So when you've got that in order then we move on, but really it's not moving on because everything's evolving together. We move on to tikkun middot.*

Another practitioner (99113) described how, "there's always been admonitions throughout history from the Kabbalists that it's best if someone be more mature, be well grounded, with family life, and stable before using some of these advanced meditations." If not, "they might think that the important thing is this otherworldly or advanced states of consciousness and not

know how to reintegrate that inspired way into the daily world." He also clarified that extensive textual and legal study is certainly one of the classic preparations for these meditative practices:

> *There's an idea that theory has to be connected with practice and meditation, the mysticism is connected with Jewish law, which is basically our responsibility towards ourselves, others, and God, and even the environment and animals. We have an endless, infinite, as Levinas would call it, an infinite responsibility that we have, so that's sort of like the litmus test for any Jewish meditative practice. Is it going to enhance my ability to fulfill those responsibilities? An endless burden which also is what makes me unique because only I have my particular set of responsibilities that are upon me. I can't… It's not exchangeable.*

Another Orthodox[35] Rabbi (99206) also echoed both of these points in different terms. He described the classical teaching that mystical study and contemplative practice, compared to "wine or ice cream," must be balanced by the "meat and potatoes" of the study of Torah and Talmud:

> *People often go for the flash. It's just like, if you never had a mother or a father—at least if I never had a mother or a father—you'd find me eating Ben and Jerry's all the time. I just like Ben and Jerry's much more than I like whole wheat bread. But I know about nutrition so I eat whole wheat bread even though I don't like it. So, often times people who are [...] don't want to be mentored, are very independent, think they're very smart, they just do what they like, what they like is going with the wine and ice cream of life, which of course makes you sick. If you don't have the bread, you don't have the meat, and you don't have the potatoes, and all you have is the dessert and wine, you're going to be a very sick person. So, these people, since they're self-medicated, they go after what they like themselves. They go for the highs and can't stay there.*

One metaphor used in some Jewish mystical and contemplative traditions to refer to a similar idea is that the altered states of consciousness resulting from meditation are like light in relation to the "vessel" (like a candle or a lamp) of the physical and behavioral

[35] It is worth noting (though perhaps not surprising) that it was only the orthodox Jewish practitioners and teachers that emphasized exoteric Jewish study (Torah and Talmud) and practice as a necessary preparations for Kabbalistic or other forms of contemplative practice.

commandments (*mitzvot*), and that the two have to be balanced so the vessel can contain the light and doesn't shatter. However, when I framed a question in these terms, this teacher preferred a different way of expressing the idea:

> *Yes, I usually tell my students that I don't like that simple metaphor very much, of the lights and the vessels, because it's much too simplistic, there's not one vessel. Usually a person says 'light and vessel' and they think: "Ooh, I work on my contemplative aspects and then I work on the vessel, I'm a healthy person I'll eat whole wheat bread and I'll get 8 hours of sleep a day." But there are so many vessels that have to get expressed out. It's not one vessel and it's not one light, it's—again we're gonna go back, I can't remember now, I think Kuzari lists like 12 different basic human needs to be healthy and if you're not doing all these things you're a sick person he says, which are social, philanthropic, sensual, intellectual, emotional, sense of self confidence and making a living. He goes through all these basic needs. So, as you said, it has to be part of the curriculum, it has to always be pointed out, but it's not just the light and the vessel, that's much too simplistic and I find that usually when people read that in Kabbalistic literature, they don't [...] they just think there are these two and miss all the continuum pieces in the middle. Right, my metaphor, to make it clear to the guys, is that: the job of life is to play all the keys on the piano, that if you skip a key you're not living all of life and that's the more multifaceted vision that I think Judaism really has than just the light and the vessel.*

However, this Rabbi also challenged the idea that you have to fulfill the classical preliminary requirements (like being 40 years old) before engaging in mystical study and contemplative practice, since if you "Talk to all the Gedolim [great Rabbis of the generation], the Shulchan Aruch […] no one really holds like the Shulchan Aruch that you have to finish all of Shas [Talmud] and you have to, you know, be 40 years old." While he himself is Ashkenazi, he referred to the Sephardi *"*Rabbi Yaakov Hillel, one of the great Kabbalists in Jerusalem" who "understands that it means…you write at 40 so people won't think, 'Oh, I'm a very smart 18 year old so I can do it when I'm 20' […] It's an idea of you have to be settled in your *daas* [integrated knowledge] and settled in your understanding and then you can start doing it." He shared that he personally knows "many Gedolim" who "have very smart students, good students who start doing it when they're 28 to 30."

Several Jewish teachers identified specific practices as particularly advanced and specifically known to cause harm if not engaged in properly. One set of practices identified as such by many were the meditative practices of Abraham Abulafia, the 13th Spanish Kabbalist whose writings and practices experienced a revival in the 1990s. One Jewish teacher (99204) discussed how personally when he was younger he "made a mistake I always told my students not to make—I started doing really advanced exercises which I found in books of a particular 12th [13th] century meditator who, the way I describe it is, he can take you into outer space and the books never tell you how to get back." He also expressed that he "had a lot of criticism of some of my colleagues who started teaching Abulafian techniques" to people without sufficient preparation, since "from what I understand of Abulafia he demanded a very severe regimen of purification before doing these exercises. That is, going into silent retreats of abstinence for a month or two months with fasting and not just jumping into the exercises." He described the effects of those who were practicing these techniques in an improper manner and context:

> *Well one of the things that happened, that I observed… People were getting very high on this and I saw people doing this publicly, chanting of Abulafian names and getting very high without various controls of who was present. And some people were getting very upset or even, to use the colloquial, "freaked out" by it. It became an influx of energy and there were no channels to direct it. And that's perhaps a good way of putting it, using a kind of model that sees the different centers of a human being or different energy centers, the goal of a meditative practice—as I understand it—is to get all of them well developed and aligned and balanced. What these Abulafian and other techniques did was to amplify one particular center that became dominant and entrained all the other centers of the being so that a person was quite distorted, was hyper-charged with energy.*

Part of the preparation, especially for advanced techniques, was what this teacher judged to be proper intention in engaging in the practice, and he shared that, "if I saw someone was in

it for a sense of personal gratification and strengthening of certain aspects of their being, I used to hold them back, really hold them back." He added that "I've probably made mistakes in holding too many people back than letting inappropriate people through. And maybe that's just my kind of personal conservative approach to things, having been lost once […] I thought it was my role to help people not to misuse it. I regard it as a sacred gift and it's not something to be played with.*"*

Another Jewish teacher (99202), while critical of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's books on Jewish meditation for discussing advanced practices while "leaving out basic steps," did echo Kaplan's warnings[36] around advanced practices related to *ayin* (literally "no-thing" or "nothingness") meditations since any "meditation in which you're giving up of the self I think is definitely one of the ones where more stuff is gonna be dredged up." One Rabbi (99207) discussed another category of advanced practices that could be particularly dangerous for those without adequate preparation and/or guidance. He explained that the "levels where it could be dangerous are the supernatural levels" which for him is marked by "if a person actually reaches a state of true *hitpashtut hagashmiut* which is probably what you call the 'out of body experience,' then you are becoming susceptible, you are entering into a higher spiritual world and you are susceptible to both positive and negative forces." After being asked how this might manifest phenomenologically, he clarified that, "It could be experienced in many different ways. It could be experienced at an extreme as death. It could be experienced, explained in the Gemara, the Talmud itself says insanity. It could be experienced by a lot of

[36] Aryeh Kaplan, in his works introducing Jewish meditation in the1980s, identified this practice as "very advanced" and "extremely dangerous" since "once can get 'swallowed up' in the nothingness of the meditation and not be able to return." (Kaplan 1995, 83)

negative things happening in their life." He later elaborated on dangers associated with other advanced practices":

> *99207: And there are things where a person doesn't have to enter that consciousness, but could be using Kabbalistic names or something, so then a person does have to do them with the proper guidance and there is risk and danger in that. But most people that are looking to get into the introductory levels, when I say introductory levels: the things you could do all of your life and have extremely wondrous, profound experience—that's still introductory level. And they don't involve shemot, they don't involve names, they don't involve those in-depth Kabbalistic incantations, and they don't involve true astral projection in that sense which is the real, you know the very dangerous areas…A person's not ready. You're basically to some degree making yourself a vessel to attract. And therefore you have to be careful what you're going to attract depending on your purity.*
> *NF: Who you invite in.*
> *99207: Who you invite in, right.*

In a slightly different vein, one Sufi teacher (99234) described how he had worked with students who had experience in other traditions (like forms of Yoga) or with other breath practices that they were not prepared for:

> *Yeah, I have worked with people in this territory. And sometimes folks, the one's I've worked with in particular, they often come from a sort of "bad pranayama," I'll just say to put a label on it. Someone who was taught some sort of pranayama practice, alternate nostril breathing in other words, with holding the breath in a particular center […] um, where the person instructing them was not skillful enough and they had this sort of emergency, break-through and no container for it […]No way to contextualize it or contain it you would say, in a useful way. These are difficult situations.*

In other words, the practice was judged to be too advanced or inappropriate because of its dramatic consciousness expanding effects that were unable to be integrated and/or understood by the student (or made sense of by the teacher for the student) in an appropriate manner. Here part of the responsibility falls on the teacher for teaching unskillfully, but he continued that this issue is "gonna come up more and more because everything's being published, we have the internet. You can go online and get a YouTube for how to do all sorts of pranayama […]

that people shouldn't be doing. And you know, it's even more that way now then it was twenty years ago. So […] it's just gonna keep happening." One Sufi practitioner (99121) described such a trajectory, where her experience in a former Sufi tradition doing "heavy dhikr" caused "energy moving through me really badly" that necessitated this teacher (99234) to work with her using "softer" and more "gentle and harmonizing" breathing practices, though she reported that the "chaotic" energetic effects still lasted for about 15 years for her.

And finally, one Christian teacher described how, in the Hesychastic tradition, "there was a fundamental level that was taught to everybody, and you can learn from a book, just saying the prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." But some of the more, what you might call esoteric teachings that went with it, like how to place it on the breath, or on the heartbeat, were never taught by book. These "could only be done in direct transmission from a teacher […] because you had to gauge the psychic strength and the level of integration of the person you were working with."

CATAPHATIC VS. APOPHATIC

In Christian contemplative traditions, the discussion around dangers associated with advanced practices—and thus their potential for causing harm and unnecessary suffering—often overlapped with discussions of the relative merits of "cataphatic" and "apophatic" contemplative practices, where the latter traditionally were understood to be more advanced (and dangerous), although the Centering Prayer practice was identified as apophatic in nature and as being taught widely to beginner meditators without preparatory cataphatic practices.[37]

[37] Interestingly, one Christian teacher (99221), described how within the Centering Prayer tradition, they believe the Centering Prayer practice is actually a preliminary practice that leads more advanced forms:

One Catholic priest (99225) discussed his reservations with beginning to meditate using apophatic practices such as Centering Prayer in this way, declaring "You first have to have an identity before you forget it. And some students I know, young people, they want to forget the world. And you have to tell them, 'well, you have to grow up first.'" Another (Protestant) Christian teacher (99223) discussed the difference between the cataphatic practice he teaches and more apophatic practices:

> *So, the practice entails first of all getting grounded in your breathing, in your space, internally and whatnot. And, breathing practices, various forms of mindful practices, Centering prayer practices, apophatic practices can be really helpful for that initial state of just getting into a centered, grounded space. For some people that's plenty and that's a beautiful space you can dwell in. But where our practice becomes most important is: sometimes material comes up, that doesn't so easily get let go of. I'm continually distracted, or I'm embedded in an emotion that I can't fully dis-embed myself from. Whether it's anger or fear or attracted lust or sorrow or joy or whatever. So that's when this practice becomes most important. The other places that we find it becomes important is that people can wrestle with emotions or impulses or fantasies or internal voices of self-critique or loathing or perfectionism or whatnot that grip us that we can't get freedom from. And we can do a practice that is more apophatic that gives us a temporary respite from that, but it never really heals or transforms that experience. So we have a temporary respite, then we go back into our life, and later that day or the next day or whatever, the same things [....] we get enmeshed in the same interior movements. So, over time, these kind of more apophatic practices didn't really do much in terms of transforming our internal experience around these internal voices or emotions or impulses or fantasies or whatnot. So*, [we recognized the importance of] *creating practices that engages that material directly.*

The advantage of this practice is that it honors defense mechanisms of the psyche, as opposed to apophatic practices which can, according to him, do the opposite:

> *But I would even go a step further and say, not only that, but those spiritual practices are really irresponsibly, disrespecting the protective systems that hold trauma and*

Keating doesn't do centering prayer anymore. He considers centering prayer to be what you were talking about earlier...a gateway into something more, later. So, it's just the baby step…It's preliminary. And so, for him, I mean what he does, he just shuts his eyes and he effortlessly is there. The only effort it takes is just shutting his eyes. For him, centering prayer is a kind of baby step, preliminary, effort filled, practice, as effortless as it may seem to the rest of us. So in some ways it matches what you were saying about Buddhist practice too, the effort part being necessary but then dropping away.

> *hold really powerful psychic energy [....] It's like everything in me that's saying: 'I don't want to do this anymore...I'm done...I need a break...I want to go take a walk' or whatever, all of that is disregarded, disregarded you know, disregarded and force yourself to stay in that process. Keep your foot on the accelerator and just keep...and no wonder...I mean it's gonna work, you are forcing those protective systems away, you're getting deep experience, but the psyche knows how much deep experience it can handle along the way and that's why the protective systems are there. The other way to say all this is that our psyche knows how to heal and we have the resources to heal all that deep trauma, and that deep experience but it's by...**it is through respecting and being present to the system as it is, nonviolently, and compassionately that helps melt, and relax those systems a little bit at a time, so that a little at a time, the deeper trauma can come up in manageable ways**...that's a much more organic, much more respectful to the way our interior worlds are constructed, much more compassion-based way of healing and restoring our interior wounds and our traumas what not. As we do that...we would be violating the process if we got to a place where hospitalization was necessary, we would have been ignoring our process itself.* [emphasis mine]

He explained how he's "been at retreat centers or retreats where there is this kind of continual push towards a particular place and it gets more and more intense and around the edges it's not usually recognized, but around the edges are, 'I just don't want to do this today' or 'I just want to, enough' or 'man, I got out of today's session and I just wanted to binge on food or make love to somebody' or whatever." From his perspective, this kind of response to contemplative practice "is kind of the psyche's way of compensating for, 'something's getting too tender and too far.'" This teacher shared his own experience with Centering prayer practice where "I was a practitioner for years, and I ended up in a hospital, I mean, my own psychic breakdown, and it was…it had multiple dimensions to it, but one of them was how these practices were not helping equip me to deal with what was coming up" in the practice. He described how "it was out of having to find my own ways of really engaging in a healing, grounded and restoring way this psychic material that we developed, and I discovered, this

whole other way of engaging"[38] in contemplative practice. In his own teaching career of this alternative approach, he describes how difficult experiences can also arise, but he believes there are safeguards built into the practice which doesn't result in more severe distress or impairment:

> *We've definitely had deep stuff being triggered that needed some attention, that needed extra, extra, extra care. So I would spend hours with this person kind of working and getting them back down from whatever is happening, but we've never uncorked something that was so intense that it exceeded the resources of the person or the community that it required hospitalization or anything like that and I think one of the major differences is because we're not pushing past to try to unearth deeper psychic experience than wants to happen at the time.*

On the other side of this debate, a teacher of Centering Prayer (99222) described some of the risks associated with the practice from her perspective, that, "the most serious damage or serious danger zone in Centering Prayer for many people is the, it easily strays into the realm which some teachers have called, in the Buddhist tradition, call 'sinking mind,' in which there's no thoughts but there's no, nobody home" by which she means "the awareness and the attention get so, sort of, lax and diffuse that you really aren't meditating, you're asleep." The danger is that "there can be a cultivation of emptiness for it's own sake" which "can become a device for, in that sense, a radical escapism for yourself." She noted that, "Thomas Keating has been very, very firm when, in the one or two cases that I've watched him, note people who seem to be giving indications of using the practice for that, just sort of (laughs) cosmic

[38] One practitioner (99103) described engagement with images as central to his own Jesuit framework as well, which has a more cataphatic orientation and understanding of contemplation:

> *So for Ignatius, for instance, contemplation is not so much an imageless process. For him, contemplations are an imaginative process where you are engaging stories at deeper and deeper levels until you become the story [laughs]. You enter it at that level. Hopefully that makes some sense to you. But that's ultimately what it's about. So it's more like an image from another tradition, it's more Tibetan than Zen. It's making use of active visualization, imaginative figures, as your guide into something that opens out beyond that. And that's been the framework for me*

nihilism" and his response was "forcing them to come back to some stronger tether of the attention so they just don't disappear down their own key hole…You can hide in this prayer and uh, and just float in what John Main once called 'the pernicious peace.' This danger, though, would be a result of improper practice, where "the people who have a lot of self-hatred, and a lot of shame issues, particularly, who just really, if you ask them what they wanted to do in life, it would be to disappear down their own keyhole, can use Centering Prayer that way." A second danger results from "the very rapid engagement of material from the unconscious" that is a normative aspect and result of the practice,[39] where, "people who enter centering prayer, particularly when they come to their first intensive, where you're doing three and a half hours of prayer a day for eight straight days, enter a kind of space where the disarming of the egoic repressive mechanisms and the emergence into the consciousness of previously unconscious material, including old traumas, can be an issue." While this material can be healed when it arises, such healing doesn't always happen automatically, and sometimes the material that arises causes distress. If this happens, the normal Centering Prayer practice may need to be complemented by another practice:

> *And if it happens, as it occasionally does, [that] the material that is coming up has a lot of an emotional charge to it, so much so that people can't just return to what you would call a 'meditative state,' it's suggested that they use a parallel practice for daily life which is called "the welcoming practice," in which you become physically aware of what's going on as sensation in your body, and you stay present to the sensation, in this case the sensation of the upset or the trauma, while saying the word very quietly "welcome." So that you're not resisting it, but you're not tangling with it, you're letting it be. So, the suggestion is that during the prayer time, you get through it that way. Whatever you do, you don't engage consciously with the material during the prayer time […] And then, when the prayer period is over, then you can do what you want with the material. And, very often that welcoming practice will take you a long way, even as you move back into conscious life, that many people are just, you know, as Roosevelt or Churchill or whoever said, it's "the only thing we have to fear is fear*

[39] Called by Thomas Keating in some of his writings the "unloading of the unconscious" (Keating 2006, 15)

> *itself." And the terror of traumatic material is actually greater anticipated than it is when you're actually going through it. So, the welcoming practice helps people not to be afraid of actually being present to trauma when it surfaces. And knowing that when you get it out of story, and into allowing your whole sensate being to share it just as energy in your body, it's easier to get through.*

While some amount of discomfort and distress may be necessary to this process, by complementing the purely apophatic[40] Centering prayer practice with the welcoming prayer practice, a certain amount of added and unnecessary suffering can be avoided. This teacher added though that, "if material emerges which needs to be integrated in narrative form, you know, sometimes it's well advised to, to seek out a spiritual director or even a psychotherapist."

Social Support

Teachers, Spiritual Directors, and Companions

Teachers were emphasized, both by practitioners and teachers themselves, as important to help practitioners avoid pitfalls and the very real dangers which contemplative practice can present. For many of the *practitioners* interviewed, contemplative practices were understood to be quite powerful and could be used for tremendous healing and transformation with proper guidance, or misused with destructive results without it. On the other hand, many

[40] This teacher (99222) added that, "in the Christian tradition, it's a misconception we call apophatic, really, a theology of nothingness. It really isn't. It's really about learning to perceive isness through the more subtle faculties." Instead of "worshiping the dark, it's about learning to see in the dark, by subtle connective faculties they never even knew they had" and "what you really are learning in Centering Prayer, ideally, is not finding an access route to some preferred state, be it peace, nothingness, (laughs) non-duality, it's the capacity to be awake and okay in any state."

teachers described how they ascribed much unnecessary suffering caused by improperly trained or unskillful teachers teaching the practices in harmful ways.

PRACTITIONERS

Many subjects discussed how guidance from a knowledgeable and accessible teacher or mentor was one of the most important factors in addressing their distressing or impairing experiences. 99101 described how a key turning point in her own healing journey was when she "found somebody that I was able to talk with about what happened… because she had had some experiences that were not identical, but similar enough. So I began a correspondence with her […] for several years to help me sort out what happened to me, which was a lifeline." 99103 shared that especially "in my late 20s I feel certain Jesuits" were important in guiding him out of his spiritual crisis, "especially ones who were rediscovering the deeper meaning of these retreats that I was on, to be done more in personal way." 99110 discussed how a spiritual director helped him to understand his trajectory in contemplative practice as a classic experience of the dark night of the spirit:

> *But it wasn't until I was actually in* [cite name] *that a spiritual director that I had begun to see, and I told him this story after I'd gotten to know him a bit, and basically he just helped me to sit and reinterpret it very quickly in terms of classic mystical teaching, which is that when the influx of God floods the soul, when it really floods the soul, what you immediately experience is absence, and void, and emptiness. That's classic Christian mysticism.*

Interestingly, another spiritual director and Carmelite priest three years earlier had also suggested that interpretation to him, thought it didn't have nearly the same impact at the time:

> *I remember three years earlier I went to Rome, I went on a trip to Europe for the first time, and I was in Rome and I'd made contact with a Carmelite priest, who was a friend of a Carmelite priest who was a friend of mine in Melbourne […] He was helpful, and he said, he did say, like in what you've described, you see he offered a few suggestions and a couple of people he thought it would be useful to talk to […] But he also said, there's a lot in what you said that is very much congruent with the Dark Night, and you should really consider that. But it, it kind of was helpful, but I didn't entirely buy it. It didn't kind of work for me. But a few years later in Berkeley, when I talked through it with this other spiritual director who I was seeing regularly, and he began to reframe it, it just was, "of course, of course", it's like obvious.*

While in this case it wasn't that a teacher preemptively prevented unnecessary suffering, but by offering this interpretation at a time that the subject was able to "buy it," he relieved some of the "deep sense of distress" of the experience and "it certainly changed the meaning, and the feeling that I had interiorly, that I hadn't been betrayed."

99121, a western Sufi practitioner, described how, "I remember telling [teacher's name] that I was very grateful I met him because I was somewhat concerned that I was delving more into all kinds of things especially with the spirituality and this shamanistic stuff beginning to call to me and not sure how to look at the experiences." She added, "I told him that he showed up to keep my heart in the right place." One Jewish practitioner (99116), when reflecting on his own contemplative trajectory and why he had never encountered serious meditation-related difficulties, offered that, "my journey, my journey thank God has been a healthy journey. The better you know yourself, the less likely it's going to happen. So I've been, from a very young age, I've had as I said, I've had very good mentors, my parents, grandparents. They've poured into me the self-knowledge. That's what Torah means […] drawing out that which is deep within. That's what it is." This practitioner also shared some of his learnings related to an imaginal practice of *hitpashtut ha*-gashmiut [literally stripping off corporeality] arguably comparable to the experience of shamanic journeying. He shared that at times in this practice he had seen things he shouldn't have that caused him some

distress, and when asked how he learned the line between what was fruitful and what was harmful in this practice, he responded,

> *Sometimes it's trial and error, but that's why we have mentors.*[41] *You know we have, it says in the Mishnah, it says in our law, 'acquire for yourself a Rav.' What's a Rav? A mentor. And the mentor helps you but sometimes you mess up anyway. (Laughs) Sometimes you get excited, you go like 'Woooh!' and then you're like you fly somewhere, 'Ahhhh' and then you fall. It's like imagining a bird, chick learning to fly. 'I can fly!' and then they fall to the floor because they recognize that they're flying and they forget how to fly. So both, both.*

TEACHERS

Many teachers discussed how poor quality of teaching was at fault for most non-normative suffering or harm related to contemplative practice. As mentioned above, one Sufi teacher (99234) acknowledged having worked with students who had previously encountered unnecessary difficulties where "the person instructing them was not skillful enough and they had this sort of emergency breakthrough and no container for it." However, this same teacher described how even despite the best efforts of good teachers, harm can still occur: "but you know, things go wrong. How should we say? As I say to my colleagues, you know, mistakes will happen. You're just trying to avoid really mistakes that really cause a lot of suffering."

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[41] Interestingly this practitioner shared that his communication and guidance from his own teachers was not limited to the earthly, embodied plane: "Once for example, when some of my mentors have graduated from this world they've, given me a present […] One of my… one mentor I was very close to, when he died, I could do things I could never do before. I could do things I could never do before and he still communicates with me, tells me to do this and to do that to do, and to do the other thing." Another Sufi practitioner (99123) (who was also a teacher) echoed this idea, that the relationship between him and his teachers (and students) were not bound by the normal laws of time and space:

> *like many lineages , we feel that we have a connection with the teacher not dependent on either on being in the body. So what I teach my students I call the coconut wires, so that means you and I can communicate without Skype. You know, without being in the same planet, without being in the same stage of dev - you know etc. etc, we can connect, so there's a sense , an inner sense of being guided by one's teacher and the chain of the lineage.*

For him, the teacher could accidentally cause harm by teaching "the wrong practices at the wrong time or they go to someone who's not quite experienced and they give them a practice that puts them into a state they're not ready to handle." Another Sufi teacher (99236) discussed how in the 1970's when she and her colleagues were first authorized to teach by their teachers, they were often very young and unprepared for the challenges that being a community leader or spiritual mentor entailed. She described how "in the early days, those of us who were teachers […] I was in my 20s teaching Sufism, what a joke. I was totally sincere, I was totally at the service of anybody that came to me, and I was as immature as the newest grape on the vine." She also expressed how she felt that the "spiritual marketplace" today is full of "rock star" spiritual teachers who travel the world giving lectures and retreats but are not interested in the long-term relationships with students that she feels are necessary for authentic spiritual growth. They often times "make a great deal of profit and money from people and walk out at the end of the workshop or seminar with a pocket full of money, leaving people to their own devices." Another Sufi teacher (99233) echoed this sentiment, remarking how many teachers today "are driven by financial motives to give large retreats without providing the necessary container for those following the path." He added though that "I feel strongly about people giving spiritual practices and then not taking responsibility for those who have difficult experiences while doing the practices" since he believes there "is actually a spiritual law that if you give someone a practice you are responsible for the effect of the practice on the person. But this is rarely followed in today's spiritual marketplace!" He went on to repeatedly emphasize that "in the Sufi tradition the teacher-disciple relationship is central, as the teacher is needed to help the student through the stages of the path and explain any states or experiences that may happen in or out of meditation" and that "it needs to be a

one-to-one relationship, as every individual is different and the path will be different for each of us." The sheikh or guide is the "support system" and is responsible for "keeping continual watch over the states of the wayfarer." He also related how in Sufism there are two types of teachers, the instructing teacher (*shaykh al-talim)* who provides teachings and instructions, and the mentoring master (*shaykh al-tarbiyya)* who "looks after the spiritual well-being" of the student or disciple—the latter fulfilling a critical role but which is much more demanding and time consuming of the two." Another Sufi teacher (99234) described some of the differences between Sufi traditions in different cultures in terms of the student-teacher relationship:

> *Some of the more Eastern or Middle Eastern traditions, the guides, the teachers, the Sheikhs don't really have this sort of person-to-person relationship with their students. We in the West, the orders that have come to the West, that is to Europe and to the U.S. We tend to have taken on some of that 1-to-1, psychological, you know sitting with your guide getting practices sort of thing. […] Whereas in a lot of the Eastern orders they really don't work that way. I mean as I've traveled widely in the East, I know colleagues in other countries. So, you know your murshid, your sheikh you know he may have a half a million murids. I met one guy from Bangladesh who had half a million merits. Imagine trying to get an appointment with him. (Laughing) I mean it's not happening. So in that case, but he's doing practices with people. He's sort of like the community leader. You know, and it's not to say that nothing is happening it's just happening in a much different context then we would have. So in that case the person doesn't really, isn't really that interested in […] all the different maqams and all the different states and all this stuff. But there are people who are interested and know about this stuff so[…] But it's not everybody. Again, it depends on where the lineage is, where the Tariqa is and who they're serving and like that. Some are much more social-action oriented. Like some of the African ones where the Sheikhs tend to be like, 'Okay, let's create some good for the village and build things and do things and take care of the poor.' You know, and that's all great too.*

Several other Sufi teachers emphasized how important "initiation" into their tradition under the guidance of a teacher was since students know that they can always get in touch with and rely on their teacher for guidance and advice. For example, one teacher (99231) described

how, “We have a fairly formal initiation process in which, when you take a student and they take you as a teacher, it's a lifelong commitment” and “it's quite a serious commitment.”

One Sufi teacher (99236) described the traditional understanding of the three stages of *fana* or “annihilation,” the first of which is *fana f’il shaykh (*annihilation in the Shaykh), and how important this stage is for ensuring progress occurs smoothly along the path and there isn’t any kinds of unnecessary suffering:

> *the path, as the Sufis have traditionally offered it, comes in three stages. The first is fana f’il shakykh, where you find one person, and it doesn’t have to be a great spiritual master, it could just be a wise, mature human being. And a person engages with this person and, my informal words for it, they listen as though it might be God speaking. And put their trust, take hand…it’s a mutual commitment by shaykh and by the student, a mutual commitment to the unfoldment of the student but also, with each new student, the shaykh learns and is transformed also. So fana f’il shaykh is, at a certain point one realizes that the teacher one thought was outside and one maybe met with a several times a year, you know, at the annual workshop or whatever, is inside one’s heart. And there’s no separation…one’s internal boundaries dissolve and, um, there’s a new ease in life. It’s also, many people, as you know, go through spiritual awakening without the involvement of a shaykh or another human being. And the reason Sufis emphasize having a shaykh is because it is very reassuring to know that someone walked through this fire and not only came out the other side but became useful to other human beings. It’s a good beacon and example and a stabilizing force when things get wobbly. To say, ‘well, my teacher did it and they’ve got faults and they’ve got, you know, all kinds of foibles.’ […] One’s guide is, is an oasis, especially in the early stages*.

Several Jewish teachers emphasized that many of the people they had encountered who had experienced a lot of distressing effects of meditation were those who practiced unsupervised or without an adequately experienced teacher. For example, one Jewish teacher who was also a licensed clinician (99125) shared that, “Most of the cases of adverse reactions from meditation that I treated were in the 1970s and 1980s—both in [two geographic locations in the US]. Some of the individuals were hospitalized at a private psychiatric hospital, where I worked at the time, as a result of psychotic symptoms resulting from the meditation activity, but most were people I treated as out-patients in my private practice.” He then added, “My

general recollection is that virtually all of these patients had gotten into deep forms of meditation with little or no supervision." Unfortunately, several Jewish practitioners and teachers lamented the fact that there were not many teachers of Jewish meditation around today, which one Rabbi (99204) attributed to the effects of the Holocaust where most of the living oral traditions of (Ashkenazi) Jewish contemplative practice had been destroyed.

Multiple Christian teachers also emphasized the importance of having a teacher or a spiritual director that one could consult with on an ongoing basis as one grows and develops in their contemplative practice. One Christian teacher (99222) described how, "within the Christian milieu, these days, there's a lot of emphasis that when people are on the spiritual journey at all, that they should, at some point along the way, get into relationship with a spiritual guide, be it a spiritual director or a spiritual companion." She added that "right along with reclaiming, reclaiming contemplative Christian practice, meditation within Christianity, was a renewed emphasis on something called the contemplative journey" and that "people are encouraged, healthy people, as you start moving into these depths of the emerging new self, to do so with a with a wise guide." She went on to voice that,

> *I think within the Centering Prayer movement, at least, from what I know of what they're doing in Christian Meditation, there's been a very strong and conscientious effort to make sure that people are not left unsupported. Not because they're psychologically fragile or anything, but because what we're really talking about is, is a path towards ego deconstruction, and reintegration of a new sense of self. And that's entirely healthy, as a matter of fact, it's what human beings ought to be doing. But it's not, it's not for the faint of heart. And it's not something that you should be left alone to do amateurishly. And in the classic Christian practice, around the Jesus Prayer, that there was a fundamental level that was taught to everybody, and you can learn from a book, just saying the prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." But some of the more, what you might call esoteric teachings that went with it, like how to place it on the breath, or on the heartbeat, were never taught by book, could only be done in direct transmission from a teacher, an Abba, to a student, because you had to gauge the psychic strength and the level of integration of the person you were working with. And methods that began to move around, not only the psychology, but even the basic physiology of people, can never be responsibly given as a mass movement.*

While we will look more explicitly at some of the discourse around "ego deconstruction" and an "emerging new self" below, here we see how the contemporary emphasis on working with a spiritual director is rooted (for this teacher) in precedents from earlier Christian contemplative traditions.

COMMUNITY

Another related theme was the importance of practicing meditation within the context of a coherent and supportive community. One Christian teacher who also serves as a spiritual director (99227) discussed the "American cultural shadow of individualism" and how many unnecessary difficulties could result from overly individualistic approaches to meditation. One Sufi teacher (99236) also remarked on the differences between the individualistic culture in the US and the "tribal" culture which exists in countries like Turkey where she has spent time practicing. She related an anecdote about how she was once practicing *dhikr* with a woman's group in Turkey when she started encountering various difficulties (including agitation, discomfort, and restlessness) due to the ceremony. However, each time she was about to stand up and leave the circle, a woman across from her smiled and mouthed "I love you" to her, noticing or intuitively sensing her distress and promptly offering her compassion and support that allayed all her distress. She mentioned how this level of "tribal consciousness" doesn't yet exist in Sufi communities in the US, however she is actively working to move communities she is a part of in that direction.

> *What I love about Turkish Sufism, I want to weep when I say this, is that the tribal culture in its good sense, is alive and well. And I visit this circle of women in Istanbul who have been doing dhikr together I think for 20 years or more. And, and these women hold one*

another […] and they just want to get together and be there for one another. And the tribal-ness makes me happier than… it's kind of like going your whole life without ever having tasted an orange or something and you taste an orange and go, "how come they didn't tell us about this?!"(laughs) you know? Because we don't have that in America, we don't have the same tribal sense.

One Christian subject (99109) discussed how during a particularly challenging period in her contemplative journey she realized how critical community was and actively sought out others who could understand what she was going through: "You're kind of on your own. You do end up, you know, at monasteries or different places, finding other people who have had these experiences or similar, you know, not the same but similar enough that you can kind of, at least you don't feel so alone. I think the biggest problem is really feeling quite alone in this whole thing." One Sufi teacher (99234) also emphasized the importance of having a community especially for individuals who encounter challenging "liminal" experiences:

the question is whether they have a community that can really sort of contain that. If you read in Isabelle's book[42] there are a lot of reports there that the difference between how an altered state was received […] had to do with the community around that person. Whether they could contain them, help them with that, or if they didn't have a community you know they end up…in an emergency ward.

One Rabbi (99204) also emphasized the importance of community since loneliness in a sense is based on a false perception: "You know, I'm now retired and I no longer have a community of meditators but I always regarded working within a community of meditators as extremely important…One is not alone on this journey, one is not alone, one is not an individual, one doesn't exist—only G-d exists." And one Christian teacher (99222) discussed some of the prerequisites of community even for more solitary contemplative practice, and some of the unique dangers for those engaging in multiple traditions and communities,

even the hermit practices in Christianity are typically not accessed until there has been extensive formation in community. You know, people are not set loose without a lot of

[42] Isabelle Clark (2010) Psychosis and Spirituality: Consolidating the New Paradigm

> *preparation around them to enter spiritual states, and you're entering them is sort of contingent on your ability to get yourself back again and be compassionate and loving in the world.[…] And I have a few friends, a few young mentors who have been working very, very intensely in the cracks between Buddhism and Christianity. And there, I do see a capacity to get into very bad states that are very difficult to get out of it, because you don't have either Christianity or Buddhism to crawl out on. So, and all you can really do is to try to pull people into their bodies again, put them back together again, just as simple incarnate beings and then start off again, with a clean slate. Because it certainly goes nowhere to attain non-egoic consciousness by (laughs) destroying your brain and the coherence of your being.*

Here the importance of community in contrast to "working in the cracks" between the two religions would have ideological dimensions in addition to the purely social ones, and it is to these other factors like worldview and orientation which we will turn to next.

Worldview & Interpretive Framework

Relationship between Spiritual and Psychological Frameworks

One common risk factor for unnecessary suffering identified by both practitioners and teachers was the phenomenon of "spiritual bypassing," famously coined by Jack Engler (1984) as "the attempt to bypass the developmental tasks of identity formation and object constancy through a misguided spiritual attempt to "annihilate the ego" (52). One practitioner who was also a clinical psychologist (99126) described how his own Sufi teacher, whom he began working with in the 70s, had a "very low regard for psychology" and noted that many members of that community ran into "all kinds of difficulty emotionally and psychologically" over the following 15 years. In the last few decades however, they "came around as a community to the recognition of the value of really working on yourself and changing your behaviors and working on right relationship and becoming ethical beings. That infused into

the culture." He shared that his community has been very welcoming of the psychotherapeutic training he received during the 80's, "because there is a very different perspective now on the dovetailing of practice and therapy within the whole community. I think it is a national and maybe even international phenomenon. I mean it's not just our *sangha*, but I see it within the container of our *sangha*." In particular, he sees that currently "there's a tremendous feeding of the learnings and insights that come from therapy with the learnings and insights that come from sadhana and practice and in our community." Still though,

> *We're wrestling with this, it's an ongoing, it's an ongoing issue. There are many many ideologies that conflict and compete and there are practitioners who think people get too lost in their emotional cathartic drama and there are people who embrace the nuance of emotional processes who think that the people who rejected it are just closed and, and lost. […] and bypass, spiritual bypass. And it's an interesting cultural phenomenon in our society that I see. So I'm…we're in the middle, you know…I've, I've been deeply trained in in the therapeutic world. I've logged you know thousands and thousands of hours, sitting with people, listening to them, feeling with them and I basically agree with my teacher that people can transform directly through practice. Insight is not a requirement for personal change. You can awaken to your own life nature of light being through spontaneous grace and practice. There's no requirement that you, you have to examine emotionally and psychologically the details, I don't, I don't believe that. Although I've known many people who have grown and stretched through such an examination.*

When I remarked that this sounded very much like the split in ethos and practice style between the western Buddhist Insight Meditation Society (IMS) and Spirit Rock retreat center, he responded that, "that split is very alive in the Sufi community." A Sufi teacher (99234) from a different tradition summarized the same tension as follows:

> *Yeah I think that's a, you put your finger on the other major issue really… is the how one considers the 'self'. What to do with this separate sense of an 'I'? How does that relate to the 'we'? And how does all of that relate to whatever we call 'That'? You know the Divine, or you know Allah, or Elohim…the source, the ground of reality if you want to use those terms. And then how, will connecting with the Transcendent, will that solve all the problems of the nafs* [personality]. *Or does additional work need to be done before one does that? Or at the same time?*

He related how "having started my path back in the 70's there was a general feeling that if you just connected with the Source that all your karma would dissolve, all your problems would disappear, all of your personal psychological neurotic hang-ups would mysteriously vanish. And that was the essence of what later became you know known as spiritual bypass, and then surprise, it didn't work (laughs)." Another Sufi teacher (99236) expressed this sentiment similarly: "I think there was a misperceived value in the 70s that once somebody found God or found meditation or found enlightenment or found the path or whatever, that their psycho-emotional troubles would end." Then when this didn't occur, she and her colleagues, "tried not to identify with any of our problems, we tried not to burden our communities if we were going through something, often we hid that from our communities. Not out of any malice but because we were ashamed and embarrassed that we had baggage just like everybody else." Another Sufi teacher (99234) added that "in fact, you know, not only didn't it work, but there were notable dramatic failures of major spiritual teachers crashing and burning" because they weren't "integrating the human issues. They're not relating the *nafs* level issues so they can blind-sided by, I don't know, sexuality issues or other sorts of everyday life issues and they really sort of unbalance the person." As mentioned above, this teacher believes that the focus on the heart in his tradition's contemplative practices overcomes this limitation because "if you start in the center and then spiral up and down you're including lower centers, which would be what we would normally call psychological issues, as well as higher centers, which are the sort of so-called transpersonal effects, gradually at the same time."

One Christian teacher (99222) also discussed a similar perspective when she shared how the "healing of the unconscious" that takes place in and through Centering prayer can

occur spontaneously through the practice, but "sometimes and probably more typically something will surface in prayer which then will require working through and working out in your conscious life when you return out of the meditation period into daily practice." And one Rabbi (99204) described a similar tension and how he personally tried to navigate it in his own teaching:

> *You know I often used to say there are two schools of Chassidic spiritual thought. That there are those who feel that—this is Chabad in some ways—that the work is dissolving the veils and coming closer and closer to the One. And there is the southern—which is Bratzlav or others—who basically say, "No you've got to go through the mud, you've got to go through the yuck, the stuff of who you are". To which the northerners say, "Mud is always mud, get out of the mud, don't go through there". I personally always try to contain both of these, that is, at least from my experience we live in such a complexity of our own experiences of life, experiences of self that we can't…anyways I can't just turn my back on it and go straight to the dissolving of the veils. That's what I like to call the "Bi-polar": there are times when I struggle with myself, and there are other times when I try just to be drawn to the One. And in both ends I got stuck sometimes, where going in the mud becomes self-indulgent and being drawn to the one becomes detached from…there.*

While it may seem that some of these discussions are a bit remote from questions of necessary vs. unnecessary suffering related to contemplative practices, in fact they are integral to the interpretive frameworks that inform what gets appraised as normative or non-normative according to the contemplative path of a given community. While the identification of spiritual bypassing as a risk factor for unnecessary suffering is itself a normative judgment about what the path consists of, other considerations related to the goals of contemplative paths were also relevant to which difficulties were considered "adverse."

GOALS – SELF, NO SELF & BEYOND

As was already mentioned above, the question of the relevance of personal psychological material overlaps substantially with different conceptions of the goal of the contemplative path, and particularly the question of what kind of transformation such a goal entails for one's 'ego,' self, or sense of self. One popular conception, echoed by many of the teachers interviewed, was some version of the pithy expression also coined by Jack Engler (1984) (and also related to spiritual bypass) that "you have to be somebody before you can be nobody" (31). For example, (99234) shared that,

> *I mean most of the traditions have some form of the saying "You've got to have a self to lose a self"…And the Middle Eastern traditions are no different that's why there is this emphasis on working with the Nafs. Um, to build a whole sense, then you're able to work with that and gradually expand the sense of humanness so to speak so that then…then you can go into these other realms for guidance, or for intuition, or for creativity or for whatever is necessary. But you know you have, it's the human mission so to speak to develop a fully formed, healthy self. At least that's my understanding. Um, otherwise it's very difficult and yes, we do have people coming to us for these reasons.*

The psychologist and Jewish teacher (99125) similarly noted that, "as the Kabbalah suggests, one needs a strong, healthy ego in order to surrender it, paradoxically enough." One Christian teacher (99222) also shared this idea when she shared that, "my teacher used to say, we learn to have, we gradually gain enough being to be nothing, which means that we learn to live without constant recourse to a narrative, referential point. And whether that's no-self or simply a lighter way of being witnessing, I don't know." She then shared a more in-depth exploration of the topic:

> *And with these kind of hateful idioms of 'you've got to melt this ego, you've got to destroy this ego, you've got to,' you know—It's short-sighted, and it's, it's stupid. And theoretically, Christianity ought to be able to do better because it has, first of all, an incarnational theology. In other words, that it says, being a human being, being in the flesh being in the form is good. It's not the obstacle that you have to overcome to be enlightened. It's how God is living God's life right now. So the incarnational versus the reincarnational modality gives you, theoretically, a lot more of a way of coming to amicable terms with your incarnated existence. And then with the Christian emphasis*

> *on grace, the sense that you don't have to bootstrap your way all the way there, that there's a, that something is more than halfway coming out to meet you. And I'm not talking about Daddy God, you know, that would be a kind of dualistic reduction. But there's still the sense that the field, even the interdependent arising field, is not hostile or neutral, it is in a very deep way, compassion filled and for us, and that our growth and our unfolding along the trajectory that's in us sort of like a spiritual DNA, is not blocked by anything. The cosmos says "yes, yes!" So with these two arrows in the quiver, so to speak […] it ought to be easier for Christianity to move beyond that kind of oppositional relationship with the ego to a much more integrated practice. But that's only beginning to happen nowadays, mainly because we had so much, for so many years, that metaphysics, that it was the body that that prevented our journey to heaven, that, you know, the sinful body. So much of early practice was built on mastering and mutilating desires, which were both believed at the time to be the result of the body, not the result of a disordered psyche. So we do have a strong, strong kind of backlog of practice in Christianity that that winds up in the same place, with spiritual warfare. But, I think there's any number of modern teachers nowadays that are really calling for us to go beyond that. And […] really trying to develop a theology of personhood, incarnate personhood, that says right here and now is no impediment to the full experience of enlightened life, combined with some really good integral practice for being in our bodies more. So I think that's very much a leading edge of the 21st century.*

As mentioned above, this teacher characterized the contemplative journey as "a path towards ego deconstruction and reintegration of a new sense of self." Regarding goals of "no-self", she explained that, "I would say, in general, that the whole no-self phenomenon has been kind of hierarchized, and hyped in the west, to the point where a lot of the terror is just induced by the map we're using to process it." Furthermore, "the idea that you reach this non-dual or enlightened state that everybody wants, and it's a permanent change in consciousness, and you never go back again, and it requires you to not have a self anymore, is rightfully scary. But I don't think it happens that way." She described that, in her view, "there's a permeable boundary between states of selflessness and…states of self-fullness. It's sort of like the nuclear particle that can be both wave and particle, depending on the occasion" which is also related to "some good work by largely Jewish scholars in recent times, trying to suggest that there is a transpersonal personal." This means, "you don't stop being a person with characteristics just

because you've learned to, more or less, permanently hold your consciousness in that kind of witnessing selfhood, which is no-self selfhood." She continued,

> *And that certainly you're going to, when needed, go back and pick up your egoic manifesting mechanisms to function in the world, to do the jobs that you have to do. It's your violin and you can't play in the orchestra without it. And I think there is some data, at least the data that I'm interested in, that a fundamental vibrational band, that is your created and creative self does survive beyond the grave as a resonance of identity. So, I think the maps we've been using of, all of a sudden something drops out and you're nowhere aren't…they're somewhat distorted maps. […] And it's not a contest to see who can get to no-self first. God manifests even through those that are fully in their egoic selves. So, I think what's really interesting, is the process by which we gradually shift the center of our identity from our separated and narratively constructed selfhood, which is where everybody begins, and what psychotherapy works with, and what early Enneagram personality typing, everything works with, my story of me. How we gradually learned that the story is simply, it's created, not discovered, and it's in a wonderful sense, random and superfluous.*

Other Christian teachers expressed conceptions of the goal which also complicated simple understandings of nonduality. One teacher (99221) discussed how, "I think that...it's hard to find in Christianity anything that's like that, the closest you can come is what I would call 'nondual relationality' where there's always...all reality may be infused with, completely infused with the Divine. And there's a oneness in that sense, but there's always a relationship within it." He added that, "that nondual relationality" is expressed through "the nature of the trinity. So, it's a dance of relationship. It only exists as a union, but it's still relational." One Christian practitioner (99110) described how his own contemplative practice has led to a perpetual state of "gazing at God," which can vary in intensity, but is nevertheless always present in the background.[43] He shared how,

[43] He explained further: "my awareness is contemplative all the time. I'm aware of a subtle level of existence, I kind of subtle level of consciousness that is always present, and the sitting nurtures it, but it's not the same as the sitting, it's not, the awareness is its own reality. So yeah, I'd say I'm living a very contemplative sort of life, in a disheveled sort of way. As I sometimes say, I'm a disheveled contemplative."

> *I remember one night a few years ago having a very intense experience of this, sitting quietly. I don't know if I've ever told anybody this, but having this overwhelming but very, very quiet gentle sense of watching God be God, and just knowing that it was I doing, and the grace of being allowed to do that. And again, contentless, but undeniable. So that's my, my understanding of contemplative consciousness is that, of gazing. It's not non-dual, not really. Not in that classical sense of non-dual. It's not separate either, whether there's a non-dual phase to come, I'm not sure, but I do know that there's a bias in Christianity against that full non-dual side.*

One of the Jewish practitioners (99113) described a 5-stage model contemplative practice from the Habad Hasidic tradition that include experiences of self-transcendence but the goal is described in different terms. The first stage of the practice (of *hitbonenut)* involves a kind of analytical contemplation, as he described it, but then,

> *stage two would be elevating out of let's say "ego consciousness" and sometimes we call this the transcendence of the ego or bittul. I don't like "self-abnegation" for "self-nullification" as terms even though those are popular translation, in that they imply a certain kind of asceticism that I don't think needs to be associated with Jewish meditative practice. I think that's a that's a rather later confusion that comes about post-Holocaust in terms of people like somehow latching onto that as a translation. But using the word transcendence, bittul ha-yesh would be, literally be like "the transcendence of my somethingness" as a definite object or an ego. And so the transcendence of the ego is a very big thing to allow an experience of psychosynthesis and, you know, like oneself as an other. Right, so that's very good for empathy.*

In this tradition, ego transcendence is often associated with the term *bittul,* which is sometimes translated as self-abnegation, though he believes it is a misleading translation. He clarifies that, "the transcendence of, not the ego in this case because it really, rendering *yesh* as ego is a bit of a curveball translation and it sort of works but it doesn't summarize everything that's going on there." Instead, "It means something as some definite thing whereas *ayin,* nothingness is really a no-thingness, no definite thing-ness. The word *ayin* is even taken in the same gematria as the Greek transliteration word *hyle,* which is translated into Hebrew… it's been converted into the Hebrew language" which is "an amorphous state […] It has abstract ambiguity or a fundamental intrinsic fuzziness, uncertainty, indeterminacy." Then

"there's a level of *bittul* above that that's even, we called *bittul b'metziut* which really means 'transcending reality.' It's not just the ego now, it means that what we think of as laws of nature are really much more like habits of nature." He continues,

> *That kind of level two of the meditation and then above that what's called devekut which is "cleaving" and in other traditions you might call that like kind of nondual consciousness, where you have that kind of a merger going on. And the danger of course with that is I could like so dissolve my identity that I (chuckles) may not be able to recover like any kind of cohesive sense of self after such an experience, which is why you get all the warning signs and the speed traps and everything else*

Then, in the next two stages, we get a conception of the goal. He discusses how "there's also a fourth and fifth stage where the objective is not this sort of like transcendental realm but rather it's what we might call in in the technical language an 'immanent transcendence.'" He continues,

> *So after reaching that state of cleaving, devekuth, we then see how that comes back when we want to like recover a sense of self and reintegrate that into our daily lives so we call that hitpa'alut which usually translates as like "ecstasy" and something, but it means like some kind of emotive affectation that I go through or refinement of character, like make a difference to how I relate to my kids or my spouse or other people. And then the last stage is not even that it should just be an inner transformation but stage five is called hitgaalut which means a self expressive state, that it's got to come all the way down to the realm of praxis, it now it informs how I act in the world, it does translate into a different type of behavior. Again it started in the mind and it went above and beyond the mind but then it comes down into the heart and then it ends up actualizing itself in terms of some real practical behavioral application and I think that that's really one of the defining terms that you find, not all meditative practices seek to do that in the same way. You get some disagreement exactly wherever that comes in or what and how that's to be weighted. Stages 4 and 5 are perhaps the most important and stage five is perhaps the ultimate end, the purpose of the whole thing and not to just stay up in the clouds but to bring heaven down to earth as it sometimes to described or an 'imminent transcendence,' to feel that state of limitlessness or transcendence but within the structures of my daily life, my job, my family, my friends, in this body. That's actually why Jewish mystical comments about the future and Jewish visions of redemption, the messianic age—there's not a sense of we go into a pure phase of being spiritual but rather the spiritual informs transformations of the natural world.*

Another theme—gestured towards in this quote as well—relates to the relationship between worldview, interpretive framework, and how meditation-related difficulties are appraised; it concerns how the goal of the contemplative path is understood, not only in terms of a kind of self-transformation, but also as a lifestyle and/or orientation that could be more or less world-affirming. As one Sufi teacher (99233) put it,

> *In our path we stress the ability to be present in both worlds, the inner world of the spirit and the outer world of daily responsibilities. It is actually one of the corner stones of the Naqshbandi path – Solitude in the Crowd ,"Outwardly to be with the people, inwardly to be with God.". Generally if people get into this state [functional impairment] I advise them to stop their meditation practice until they are more grounded, to focus on everyday life. It is not healthy or helpful to become so unbalanced while on the spiritual journey – in fact one cannot progress along the path while in this state – both feet firmly on the ground is needed. When the individual has become more balanced and grounded, then they can continue with their practice. This is one of the reasons that the guidance of a teacher is needed and vital.*

In other words, certain kinds of functional impairment may be judged to be normative for short periods of time—directly after periods of meditation practice or during particular transitions on the path—but if one's functionality in life is being impacted beyond this, it is judged to be non-normative and needs to be addressed. One Sufi practitioner (99127) echoed this sentiment, explaining that, "Sufis are very big on people staying integrated in society and not becoming monks and not retreating from the world completely. You have to be able to function in the world while these transformations are taking place and you see them in the light of the way your everyday life is." One Rabbi (99206) also discussed the goal of contemplative practice in terms of a transformed life. As mentioned above, he draws on Yehudah Ha-Levi's 12th century text (*The Kuzari*) to describe what such a life looks like, where "I think *Kuzari* lists like 12 different basic human needs, to be healthy and if you're not doing all these things, you're a sick person he says, which are social, philanthropic, sensual, intellectual, emotional, sense of self confidence and making a living and "my metaphor is […]

the job of life is to play all the keys on the piano, that if you skip a key you're not living all of life and that's the more multifaceted vision that I think Judaism really has." He continued,

> *But the people who tend to have a Hasidic or meditational atmosphere often do it because they fear the interface with the world is too difficult or too hard. Therefore, they retreat from the world into a meditational or "Hasidic" perception of the world—of course, the essence of being Hasidic is really that you have to sanctify the physical, but a mutated vision of that, so people who are afraid to deal with the world and don't recognize how to deal with the world, begin to think they have...for example, long beards or payes, and that makes it more important than being honest in business or treating your parents properly. They learn Tanya with a niggun and that's more important than understanding a Daf Gemara. All these external non-real aspects became much more important to them than the bread and butter of religion, according to Judaism, which is leading a good life in all the different dimensions of intellect, spirit, emotions, body, soul.*

While this teacher actually agrees that the goal of Judaism—both his Lithuanian tradition and the Hasidic traditions—is the sanctification of the physical, his critique is of a certain "mutated" approach to Jewish spirituality that actually subverts that goal in favor of a withdrawal from the world and worldly obligations (including normative religious ones) in the name of spirituality.

NORMALIZATION & PATHOLOGIZATION

Many practitioners reported that being introduced to explanatory frameworks by peers or teachers that "normalized" the experiences they were having—by contextualizing them as expected effects of their practices or necessary "parts of the path"—was tremendously helpful and relieved unnecessary (secondary) suffering based on an inaccurate conception of the nature of their experience. Both practitioners and teachers therefore identified that the opposite stance, of "pathologization" of experiences which are actually a part of their spiritual

path caused unnecessary suffering, which is basically the central thesis of Stanislav and Christina Grof's concept of a "spiritual emergency"[44] mentioned above.

One Christian practitioner (99101) described how she navigated different interpretive frameworks for her acute and challenging experiences that she attributed to her contemplative prayer practice: "So I thought 'okay I have to consider some possibilities. Maybe I am crazy, and if I'm not crazy I need to figure out what to keep and what to get rid of from what happened to me and I need to make sense of it someway.'" She discussed how she stopped seeing her psychiatrist, whom she felt never valued her own understanding of her experiences, and eventually "found somebody that I was able to talk with about what happened… because she had had some experiences that were not identical, but similar enough. So I began a correspondence with her…for several years to help me sort out what happened to me, which was a lifeline." Another Christian practitioner (99102) found it very helpful to discuss her challenging experiences with Catholic priests and nuns who were spiritual directors and, perhaps surprisingly, found traditional interpretations of them related to demonic forces "less scary" and more helpful "than when you try to psychologize everything." Yet another Christian practitioner (99103) discussed how one friend and one spiritual director were particularly helpful in "normalizing" his experience whereas "if I had gone to some directors or some psychologists…they might have said, "Quick, get medication."" He shared how, "I did feel like I had psychological issues that were being worked out, I wasn't in denial about that, but I didn't think that I was essentially crazy for having these kinds of experiences. There were precedents in the tradition and in the psychological reading I was doing and in the actual

[44] They write, "some of the dramatic experiences and unusual states of mind that traditional psychiatry diagnoses and treats as mental diseases are actually crises of personal transformation" and that they need to be recognized as such in order to unlock their "great positive potential for growth and healing" (1989, 3).

people around me who weren't scared by what was happening." One Christian practitioner (99105) described how a friend recommended she speak with a particular meditation teacher, whom she knew had had similar experiences, and during the conversation she found the teacher "so compassionate and so understanding it was like I didn't have to talk about how crazy I was feeling and she knew exactly what I was talking about. And all of those things helped it just, not that I feel like I needed validation, but it sure helped me know that I wasn't going crazy." Another Christian practitioner (99109) related how she found the books of Bernadette Roberts particularly helpful in contextualizing her experiences and how "as I went through and read her books it was, 'oh yes, that, that, that….It was just really helpful, she was the only one who talked about what it had been like for her and for me it happened to be very similar." As far as people she consulted with about her experiences, "the monks were the most helpful…they would say, 'oh yea yea yea yea'. The least helpful were counselors, you know, going to counseling. They were the least helpful because if they didn't know this than they just looked at you as if you were nuts." She also shared that,

> *What I became obsessed with for a while is how does this fit it, how can this be part of the spiritual journey? Did I just have a psychotic break? What is going on? You know, I really don't think that is or was it at all. […]I think they say there's similarities or that maybe some psychotic cases are spiritual things gone wrong. I don't think that's…it's different. While some of it sounds similar, I think it's a very different kind of deal…Because there is so little awareness out there in the mainstream that, I can see where people might diagnose it wrongly or might have wrong advice for people thinking its 'oh my god, this person has lost it' when its really not the case at all.*

One Sufi practitioner (99125) shared how once while practicing dhikr with a group in Turkey she underwent a particularly intense experience of somatic energy where, "As I stood up a lightning bolt[45] went through me, from my head down to my heart, belly button, out into the

[45] She explained that, "Only because there was not a storm cloud in the sky do I know this was not a meteorological lighting bolt (laughs)."

earth… I grabbed my husband's hand and I said 'oh my God, I don't know what's happening! you might think I'm kind of nutty after this one.'" However, one of the other Turkish women in the group normalized her experience by describing it as ""Allah boom boom" and that "it good, don't fight it." She then shared that at that moment she felt, "Finally somebody gets it, I'm getting a big dose of 'Allah boom boom' today," which helped relieve some of the secondary distress related to the experience.

One Sufi teacher (99236) also discussed how "it's really important to steer people away from anything where they are going to be psychopathologically, uh, designated and put in a box that isn't really there." She reported how when her own students report especially challenging experiences, she will sometimes refer them to psychotherapists who are themselves "longtime travelers on the path." She described how one of her students experienced a lot of functional impairment on her Sufi path and,

> *This person had people say, 'it sounds like schizophrenia, what's happening to you' but it wasn't that at all. It was her inner conflict about coming into her body, coming into her world. And eventually she resolved that but it took gravity pulling […] so instead of pulling her towards a transcendent direction it was my job as her guide to be very no nonsense, not speaking in spiritual language, very like, 'did you have breakfast this morning?'*

One Jewish teacher (99203) shared how, "I always taught: 'it can happen that you can feel ungrounded for a while, that's just part of the process, when that happens it's really important to find ways to ground yourself'" and that "'You do have some kind of control over what happens here, what's happening is you're expanding your boundaries of consciousness, and sometimes it's scary.' I did my best to normalize it, in other words."

On the other hand, two different teachers expressed reservations about contextualizing experiences as "spiritual emergencies." One teacher (99232) who worked in the offices of the now defunct "spiritual emergency network" at one point reported that by the time people

actually called the hotline it was too late and that the spiritual framing was more harmful than helpful at that point. She reported that for some people, "by the time they got to spiritual emergency network, they were really typical of somebody really set into the illness where spirituality just reinforces the illness, you know, so they just wanted to go there more. And so I didn't find it to be, that I could really, or other people could really offer a lot of help. Had a lot of pretty far out people calling." She first got connected to the spiritual emergency network in the early 1990s as part of a practicum for her master's degree, working in their office in Menlo park. But while there she shared that,

> *my experience was that 80% of those folks were fairly psychotic…they just wanted somebody to listen to a lot of psychotic stuff and they didn't want to do much other. And so I didn't find it really effective. It was for some people but it was like, you know, people that are having trouble with schizophrenia. And I am a believer that with psychotic breaks, if you have connections in the very beginning before they get totally into that social contract, because I think a lot of mental illness is, in a sense, socially promoted, that there is a great opportunity for change. And even some of the very progressive people that have tried to create environments for people to go through their process when they're having those original psychotic breaks, they've been shut down.*

When I asked about the training to be on the hotline, she responded that she didn't remember any "real training, I think it was just an open-mindedness, I don't recall what the training would have been." And that "it was mainly meant as a referral service. Later on I became a referral myself. Rarely did I find it of much help." Another teacher (99236) mentioned how within their religious organization they had setup internal mechanisms for identifying and dealing with "spiritual emergencies" but ultimately felt that the framing was causing them.[46] Thus we see that opinions related to distress, harm, unnecessary suffering, and normalization

[46] And in fact, Stanislav and Christina Grof also acknowledged this possibility and "the opposite danger of spiritualizing psychotic states and glorifying pathology" (1989, xiii).

were multifaceted and more complex than just harm being caused by pathologizing spiritual experiences.

"Part of the Path" or Normative Appraisals

Again, for the purposes of this study, "part of the path" or normative appraisals were ones that understood distressing or impairing experiences as actually indicative of growth or development (despite appearing otherwise) and as such, involve necessary suffering that is instrumental to the attainment of emically significant goals. As these normative appraisals were particular to specific contemplative paths, we will explore each religious tradition individually.

Judaism

Practitioners

Meditation-related difficulties understood as "part of the path" and entail necessary suffering were described in many different ways and using different analogies and metaphors. For example, one Jewish practitioner (99112) described how,

> *I think yeah, trajectory of practice is kind of like the trajectory of maturation in general and as a human being which is to say that when you're younger the peaks are higher and the lows are lower and you know with time you kind of stabilize and figure out the way in which your practice will realistically look like in the context of a normal day-to-day life and make peace with that move forward with that and work in that context without resisting it.*

Another practitioner (99113) discussed how for many people there is often a "honeymoon period" where "things are clicking, they're making sense and so on. It's sort of like you are learning to do tricks like the safety net. Where everything seems to just make those first few steps are so big and so significant and we get really turned on." After the honeymoon period inevitably ends, "some people become very quickly disillusioned and run away. Some say, I was only there for that feeling." However, he didn't specify exactly what phenomenological difficulties would be associated with such a period, nor what the teleological direction of this trajectory looks like. Someone else (99115) discussed how his major interpretive frameworks are from Jewish mysticism, a "purification" framework from western mindfulness and Buddhism, psychotherapeutic models, and most recently, a particular Hasidic Rabbi who provides a "meta-framework"[47] for him integrating all three. But part of both the therapeutic model and the Hasidic meta-framework consists of "emotions being stored in the body" and that there may be some pain involved when they are released as there was for him at times. One Jewish practitioner (99111), whose contemplative practices overlap with what is normally termed shamanic practice, describes how he understands that "what the shamanism did was put into focus for me that the entirety of the 24 years of depression was in fact, what would be called shamanic initiation." He shared that, "as soon as I started engaging in the

[47] He explained:

> *Now I'd say he's my meta-framework. I was debating...but...He's really kinda structured the way I think about all of these things together. And he has a powerful way of thinking about him. And it has all those different pieces, and powerful affirmation. And what's interesting about, maybe some of the way that Western mindfulness teachings are interesting in that way, is that he's drawing on an ancient tradition which has its own psychology and everything. He's pulling on that. He's also doing his own work. He's also a ...with a kind of modern psychology, kind of psychodynamic notion, which he's obviously in contact with in certain ways. He's an intense practitioner and he's doing that and sharing that with you in various way. He has a real theory of like the emotion in the body, the mind, some of that I know more clearly, some of that I know less clearly.*

shamanic work, although I had been in for years of psychotherapy, and pharmacological approaches, none of which actually abated the depression. As soon as I started engaging in shamanic work the depression simply wasn't an issue." However, "On the other hand, since then, I now have chronic fatigue, which is constant chronic pain in a way that I never had before" and his understanding is that both the depression and the chronic fatigue and pain were about teaching him certain lessons:

> *This feels to me like it's about variations on a theme. From earliest childhood, I've never been afraid of death. I felt I was…it was familiar territory, I could walk back and forth with no problem or no interruption. On the other hand, what did, did frighten me deeply was the idea of ongoing prolonged suffering. So 24 years of depression, now going on seven years of constant physical pain, fits, fits, that (laughs) was like, "do I really have to learn it this way?" (laughs). But that's an ongoing constant challenge. In this case, the depression taught me again, about deepened compassion, about death as not necessarily an adversary. All sorts of levels of understanding that stuff. This is, this seven year stint, if you've ever been, which I'm still in, has taught me the boundaries between pain and suffering, that they're not the same. One can undergo chronic constant pain and suffering need not be any part of that.*

For this practitioner, the idea of needing to learn certain lessons was embedded within his understanding of reincarnation or transmigration of different dimensions of one's soul, and therefore suffering associated with learning certain lessons was normative since it allowed those aspects of the soul to be perfected.

TEACHERS

One Rabbi (99204) described his understanding of the trajectory of meditative practice in ways that include some periods of difficulty and challenges:

> *Spiritual practice is bipolar, you move from close to distance, close to distance and it's living with the rhythm. I mean post-Freud you can't talk about abandoning parents as a way of describing G-d. It just doesn't work anymore.… So I would never use that imagery but the idea of the…of moving closer…but most of what I write about these days is navigating the flow, the closeness and the remoteness… seeing the remoteness as part of the relationship…its very much a part of the path. […] And, as one other thing I mentioned I think the first time we spoke, distinguishing between depression and despair. Despair, the sharpness and bitterness of despair is what leads one to the maintenance of the relationship as opposed to…that is, seeing the remoteness as part of the relationship is very much a part of the path that…the best of Bratzlav deals with that very much and a few other the others. […] We don't use the term 'Dark night of the Soul' but…Look, finding G-d where there is no G-d is part of the way that I see this. And also, not necessarily helping people navigating it but describing my own experience or giving some kind of context that…they are the phases of the moon. The moon is the most wonderful example that is used. The moon goes into occultation once a month, and so does the divine face. So yes, anybody who wants to get high and stay high has come to the wrong place.*

He explained later that he "used to teach Dante with my students and talk about the 3 books, yes, the Inferno, Purgatory and the Celestial Realm. I mean yes, purgation is not a Jewish term but" he still found it relevant and meaningful to teach his students about what the contemplative journey entails. He also shared that "there was a great Chassidic teacher, Menachem Mendel of Chernobyl who was asked the question, 'Why, why do we have these dark nights?' And he said, 'Isn't it written in Genesis, 'There was evening and there was day and the next day'. I mean its absolutely part of a natural cycle, and there is the night work and there is the day work."

Another Rabbi (99207) explains these difficult stages on the path by drawing from teachings from the very beginning of the Hasidic movement:

> *This is discussed in many of the Baal Shem Tov's texts and all the Chassidic literature that follows. The term used in the mystical writings is "mochin d'gadlut" and "mochin d'katnut." Mochin means mind, I guess consciousness would be the best translation. Gadlut means big and katnut means small. So big mind and little mind, but more*

> *accurately means constricted, expanded and constricted consciousness. So, I think this is an extremely important point. It's discussed in a tremendous amount of Hasidut, and the rules of how it works and the techniques of how to access it and subvert it and work around it and work through it. But I've seen, when I've been exposed a little to non-Torah paths in awareness, I'm always astonished that this is not mentioned.*

He continued to describe this idea in the Baal Shem Tov's teachings by also referring to a famous story attributed to him where the oscillations of the spiritual path are compared to a father teaching his son how to walk. In the teaching story, the father helps the child stand up at time but then lets go and moves away so that the child can learn to walk unassisted. The psychological experience of the child standing up is described as times when, "Hashem turns up the volume of your soul," the result of which is that, "it doesn't matter how much darkness that you have, your lust or your fear…that's called the *mochin d'gadlut,* the light of your *Daat,* of your *Neshamah* can flood your being and wipe out everything [….] usually in a temporary way, but that can have a long-term imprint and impression." Those are the times when "the child doesn't know how to crawl even, but suddenly the Father comes down and picks him up and carries him around. The child opens their consciousness and has a whole new understanding. He can see higher than the couch, he can see the whole living room etc. So sometimes we are given that as a taste of love, a taste of possibility." However, just as "someone is opening you up," God is also "closing you down as well" since in this understanding, "there's certain assumptions here that there's someone guiding our path." The times when "the child falls down" are times of,

> *the refining of the mind and the purifying of the mind and then slowly, slowly you get to a level where your mind is clear and you can get into that state. But some days if you do a lot of work you can get there quite well. Some days it's easier and some days it's slower. But that's coming back into the child learning how to walk. The child stands up. The child falls down. Now the father wants to rush in and help the child stand, but the father realizes, if the Father constantly helps you up you'll never work that pain and those issues. You'll never train your muscles to be strong enough. You'll never remember the goal of life according to Torah; is, the transcendent, omniscient*

> *source behind all of creation wants to teach us to be in the image of God. So there's two aspects necessary to do that. He has to lift us out of the world of the animal to expose us to the Godliness within us, what's possible. Then He has to place us back down so we now recreate and develop ourselves to achieve that level our self, and once the child has learned to walk, then the Father can take the child hands and they can both walk together which is the most beautiful thing in the world. Then they can be eye to eye in a real relationship. So that's what's called the "itaruta di-letata'ah, itarutah di-le'eila". There's a constant relationship of awakening from above, Hashem awakens us, and then awakening from below that we now have to do the work to create that.*

He then went on to describe another aspect of this "non-linear trajectory": "there's many texts that discuss, we are in this world to *metaken* our *middot***,** we are in this world to fix and elevate. There's two things we're in this world to do and one of them is to fix and release all these negative emotional, physical, tangible associations we have of this world. But if it was released into our consciousness, all the negativity we carry, it would TKO. We would be knocked down. We would be overwhelmed." Instead, it gets "released…you know how they have in medicine, like in vitamins the slow release formula, how it gets released every 24 hours? So that gets released over many years." Furthermore, the idea of divine providence or "*hishgachah pratis***"** is involved such that "all of what is happening to us in our life, the reason everything happens in the world, the reason, quote on quote, "bad things happen to good people" is because when we get up to the next level of what we have to work on, something happens to awaken that fear or awaken that lust" in such a way that "there's a direct causal relationship between the things that are happening in the external world to awaken the things that we need to deal with." He explained as follows,

> *So Hashem will say "Wow you've achieved that level great, now we can go to the next level." (laughs). And brings the next one up. So Rebbe Nachman discusses in great depth, he says, like a person thinks, they've gone through a struggle and they finally achieve success and they feel well now I'm getting big and suddenly something happens and they get even worse, then their life goes (inaudible 2:36) and they get a state of yiush, of despair. "I thought I'd grown so much, I've worked so hard" and*

> *Reb Nachman says "don't give up because in truth, this greater struggle is indicating not that you failed, but that you're going to the next level and when you go to the next level all deeper stuff comes up."…Imagine like a video game. Say you go up a round and they you beat the bad guy and then you go to round 2 and there's a bigger bad guy…the monster with ten eyes is now a taller monster with 50 eyes and 20 arms…but your skill set is stronger. Your skills, your understanding of how to use the joy stick, of how to pay attention, of how to punch and shoot at the same time, that for sure is ongoing. Because there's a difference, I always say, one of the thing I say to my students is, "do not watch your development monthly but watch your development yearly." Because on a monthly, weekly, daily level you can be up and down, but every time you look back over a year or two years you see very significant, consistent growth.*

Another Rabbi (99210) also referred to the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav to describe difficult stages of the path. In fact, its "one of the pillars of his thinking, that there is no movement forward without a fall and every up has to be preceded by a down." When asked what those "downs" looked like, he described how, "For him it was depression and despair but it could be bad middot, I mean this is a theme in a lot of Hasidic literature. It could be desires, it could be anger, it depends on a person preconditioning in a certain sense but him, he dealt a lot with despair." He added that "I used to explain to people that Reb Nachman sees every ascent as preceded by a descent, right? That Nachman sees you go up and then you have to fall" but that more recently he has come to understand that "what Rabbi Nachman is saying is like this [draws a diagram where diagonal lines go progressively higher above and then lower below a horizontal plane]: You go up, you have to fall. You go higher, lower. Higher, lower. Right? So for Reb Nachman…every high is paralleled by an equally low form. So when you're at the very highest point, your falls gonna be much lower than the guys at the beginning!" He then adds,

> *One of the themes in Reb Nachman that a few scholars have tried to address that nobody's gotten right, in my mind, because they just dont' know what to make of it, and I can't say that I have it worked out either, but I know that that's not it, the way they're explaining it, is that Reb Nachman talks about, recalls, yeridah tachlis aliyah right? Which technically means that the, its usually translated as tachlis hayeridah aliyah in other words is, the purpose of the descent is the ascent…Reb Nachman says another*

> *phrase, yeridah tachlis aliyah, which I don't think is his phrase, but meaning in the literal sense, would be the yeridah is the ultimate ascent […] that the distance is actually the closeness.*

He also shared one particular teaching where the chronology and progression of highs and lows of spiritual life is disrupted and/or collapsed:

> *Nachman writes, he says, he writes in the translation, he says that "I'm a beautiful tree that gives forth beautiful fruit and down below I'm lying in the ground," In Yiddish it is I'm lying in the dirt. Which means to him, he seemed to experience the two simultaneously. It wasn't just up and down. It seemed to be that at the very same moment he felt he was just giving out the most amazing perot (fruits) of Torah and teachings and devekut and at the same moment he was somehow feeling paradoxically like nothing and nothing, nothing, nothing. So its more than just a cycle, apparently, at least the way Reb Nachman teaches it, from the way I understand it.*

Finally, he discussed how the classical source of the understanding that the contemplative path entails both "ups and downs" is "the whole concept of shevirat ha-kelim" (the cosmogonic act of the breaking of the vessels) which is " intrinsic to all Kabbalistic thinking and all Hasidic thinking, that our job here is the process of tikkun which means dealing with the *shevirah*."[48]

CHRISTIANITY

[48] He added that "in Lurianic Kabbalah, and especially in Kabbalah of the Rashash, Reb Shalom Sharabi, he was the great Yemenite expositor, it's a process that happens every day, in other words, its not like there's a period in history called shevirah and a period called tikkun, its every day has the entire range of shevirah and tikkun in that. So, its definitely an ongoing process, you know." This is why, "in Lurianic Kabbalah you're not allowed to learn the sections of the Etz Chayyim that deal with shevirah during the week, because the matzav [situation] of shevirah is the present matzav, you're not allowed to learn those things since learning those things actually, you know, engenders it. So you only learn on Shabbos where you're protected by Shabbos." In other words, there is an understanding that delving in to the cosmic process of creative fracture will "engender" that state in the individual, and one can only undertake this without bringing forth unnecessary suffering on the sabbath when one will be protected by the additional soul resources one is granted on that day.

Many of the Christian practitioners interviewed discussed certain difficulties which they viewed as difficult stages along the contemplative path that entailed necessary suffering. Almost all the practitioners that understood some of their challenging experiences this way referenced or invoked St John of the Cross's doctrine of the dark nights of the senses and spirit. When asked about her own difficulties she understood in this way, on practitioner (99102) described how, "I think I should preface it by saying: everyone has difficult, what you might call 'Dark Night' experiences in very different ways. And mine have never been—from some of the things I've heard from other people—they've never been out of this world, wacked-up, you know?" She went on to explain that, "some of the things I have experienced are very much in line with what St. Teresa of Avila or what St. John of the Cross would talk about" where God is "kind of distancing God's self for a while in order to make us less dependent on certain consolations or certain gifts or certain things we have been given" and "burning us like a log from the inside out to just trust more." She describes a "purgation of the senses" where "we really work on letting go of all concepts when we sit and all attachments and all of that, and when we get to a certain point there comes this kind of purgation of the spirit, and that's where God does the rest." For her, this two-pronged process of "burning away of the self" manifested as experiences of "extreme anxiety" and "extreme disgust" and "it's sometimes been like the whole world just flopped on its head and I don't know what the hell is going on anymore and nothing makes sense." Finally, she shared an important caution about how such experiences are understood in her community:

> *In my tradition, it's this, difficult experiences, Dark Night experiences—we're very careful to hold them very lightly. So it's important to have people who know, it's clearly*

> *very important to have teachers who know how to help people through them, because getting stuck is not a good thing. And people can get into cycles too where it almost becomes like a...it can almost become like an ego thing to get stuck and stay stuck, I would say. We tend to hold things really, really lightly and almost kind of work on laughing at it and just putting it in perspective, knowing what the bigger picture is.*

Another practitioner (99103) also referenced the teachings of St John of the Cross in understanding some of his own path, specifically that "there's a dark night of the senses, where you're beginning to make this transition from an outer orientation to an inner spiritual experience" where "what you feel is dryness, emptiness, doubts, questions and so forth. I think that's what I was going through." He added that this period "is only transformed when there's a breakthrough and that kind of happened to me after about 3 years in that – 2 or 3 years – in that state." His understanding is that, "these dark nights" are "transition periods" which believes occurred "at different times in my own life." The night of the senses was "a dark night of leaving behind your ordinary, everyday sensory consciousness and entering into an inner world, but then eventually [in the night of spirit] leaving both the inner world and the outer world behind and entering into this transcendent place, that integrates all of that, that's not attached to either the inner or the outer but seeing God present in all of it." He elaborated that,

> *Yeah, there's the dark night of the sense and then the dark night of the spirit, where you're leaving behind even your God images, your deepest self-images. All of that, I think, comes back, but you're leaving it behind to taste directly that God consciousness, which then you see all around you. You see it in yourself, in other people, in the world, in nature. Which is kind of where Ignatius ends up too, I was mentioning that you've got to leave behind even the image of Christ and you go to seeing as he sees. But that can be very anxiety provoking if for years and years and years you've been focused on Christ and suddenly he seems to disappear. But maybe he's disappeared into you and you're no longer seeing him in front of you but you're seeing through his eyes or loving with his heart, or that kind of thing. So that's how I would interpret it.*

He also shared how another challenging period during his late twenties also fit with both the life of Jesus and St Ignatius of Loyola, the creator of the spiritual exercises where one "lives into" the life of Jesus over a 30-day period:

> *I think Ignatius, who founded the Jesuits and who developed that retreat process, I think went through a similar thing where he went through a personal psychological crisis that led him to the place of despair. Then he began to open up into these mystical, archetypal experiences of Christ and creation and the Eucharist and so forth. And then he went through an experience that was beyond images that seemed to be the very divine foundation of reality. And all of that happened to him when he was about 30, but he spent the rest of his life trying [to]integrate and share that. […] So my sense of the framework is that framework of his life story, Ignatius's life story, and the framework of what he showed in the exercises, fit my life experience. They said to me that yeah there were these ten years in my 20s where I was dealing with healing of psychological issues, inhibitions, acceptance of darker parts of myself and then there was not leaving that behind, but working with it on this deeper symbolic level, more full bodied imaginative and intellectual journey. And then I think in more recent years, maybe after that retreat at 55, more of this integrated resurrected place where I begin to see reality through that lens more from a sense of identification with that consciousness of Christ, rather than seeing it as something he has and I don't, you know?*

He then elaborated on his understanding of the relationship between St John's dark nights the life of Ignatius, where "I think this is where Ignatius, too, the spiritual exercises were meant to be a retreat process, but his whole spirituality was about finding God in all things" and "being a contemplative in action." In other words, spirituality "doesn't need to be found in these private, inner special experiences but it can be found in your work and in your relationships. That's where the mystery is unfolding too. So that's very congenial to me, that way of interpreting what's going on."

One practitioner (99106) discussed how she understood difficult experiences, including the resurfacing and re-experiencing of trauma, as "holy disturbances" that "socks me to the core and it wakes me up for the next invitation." She reported oscillations between

positive experiences of "great aliveness" and then "periods of heavy darkness, emptiness, nothingness where all I can do is be there and wait…and then there will be a emersion and immersion in what comes next. So it flows back and forth." In Jungian terms she describes how, "its painful, I mean, it can be excruciating, you know, to go into those places of darkness…. And pain and all that that evokes, inside and out, the chilling voices inside, I mean, there's a lot to be grappled with and wrestled through in the shadow." And yet most of the shadow is "nourishment for a greater wholeness" as she has found that some of the most grueling and challenging periods have "brought me to a place of greater interior freedom today." She described one particular holy disturbance as,

> *an initiation into an even deeper place than I had been before of things that needed to be cleaned up and let go. The process is internal journey, external journey. Cataphatic, apophatic. You know, for a long time I thought maybe you arrive some place...I don't think so. I think it really is just a journey and as long as we're willing, I expect I, we, will keep being met by further invitations. I can say today, that initiated a horrendous year that was most interior with manifestations externally. And it brought me to a place of greater interior freedom today*

Another practitioner (99108) described how he has experienced periods of "absence" in his own path but that it's "a healthy sign if something is painful that is absent, it means you miss it." He related his own experience to the "terrific medieval Mystic by the name of Richard of St Victor and he says 'What could be more wonderful than when it is present, it is absence; and when it is absent, it is present.'" While one "will find books on meditation, contemplation, especially in the Christian tradition, and emphasis on the presence of God, Christ, the Saints, Mary. That's true, no doubt about that. But also, there's a strong sense there were periods of absence, painful absence, dereliction, suffering, mental and psychological anxiety, the so-

called dark nights of the senses and the spirit." He then shared his understanding of the dark nights:

> *The dark night of the senses, according to Saint John of the cross, is the person who contemplates for a long period of time, and is purified. Ordinary prayer becomes distasteful. There are periods of aridity. In fact meditation, let's say loud prayer, busy prayer, doing a lot of thinking and emotional work and trying to do acts with your spirit—it just doesn't work. That's a dark night of the senses and what's happening there is you're being called to the deeper prayer, being called to something more simple. Now the prayer, the spirit, or the dark night of the spirit, it's really a mystical dying. Ignatius went through it, some Dark Night of spirit lasted probably nine months and you will find someone, for example such as Mother Teresa 50 years night, John of the cross it's hard to say. But it's excruciating, it's mystical death, the temptations of blasphemy, despair, and even suicide. The marvelous woman, the Mother Teresa, the incarnation, she's the first woman missionary to North America. She worked with the Algonquin and the Huron Indians up in Canada and she wrote dictionaries of Algonquin. She worked with even the Iroquois. But her experience is absolutely incredible and she was a first rate trinitarian mystic. At one point she wanted to commit suicide. So intense was her feeling of rejection by God, that's absence. That's a classical sign […]So these are just manifestations of how the dark night of the spirit takes all of a person. It's darkness. A person walks in darkness, a person who walks and makes it, faith. Nothing these spiritual directors, nothing a friend says helps.*

When asked if this resonates with his own experience, he admitted that "I did not die, I must admit. I did not go that deep" and that he's "had dark nights of the senses, but not the full blown manifestation of the dark night of the spirit" and "was never tempted to suicide. Depression? Yeah. Just hanging on by the skin of your teeth? Yes. But I'm too stubborn for a full blown dark night of the spirit."

One practitioner (99109) reported how contrary to her expectations, she experienced a massively disruptive and impairing stage where she learned that the spiritual path, "doesn't sorta go along on this ladder kind of progression, that's not how the journey goes…when people talk like, you know, they'll say, "oh I was in a dark night." They have no idea what a dark night is! They're talking about a little period in their life where things didn't go so well,

no that's not, that's not it (laughs)." This practitioner drew on the work of Michael Washburn[49] to understand this trajectory of her experience, whose work presents a path and model, "which is like a spiral and actually going down and not that Ken Wilber ladder going up." She explained that,

> *someone who I think has absolutely nailed, actually is Michael Washburn and the ego and the dynamic ground..I think he's got it. He knows that. I think he's had the experience and …he really details the journey as a transpersonal psychologist in a what I find to be fairly aligned in my understanding of Bernadette's work. And my experiences of the journey, Michael Washburn has nailed it.*

One practitioner (99110) reported experiencing what he understands to be both the dark night of the senses and of the spirit. The former he experienced as a teenager when he experienced a spiritual awakening that brought with it "intense joy during prayer" and "overwhelming euphoria." Then, "sure enough, after a few months, this juice dried up and it became difficult to pray, it became boring and dry and there was a sense of emptiness and absence where before there had been presence and joy" but even then he knew that aridity was part of the process from reading about the dark night of senses in St John. Later, in his 20's, one day he was at work and all of a sudden,

> *it was gone, there was absence. Someone else described like suddenly white noise had been switched off, for him more visceral, "it was almost like I was looking out and instead of seeing God sort of subtly there, I was just seeing emptiness, I was seeing a void…it was only actually when I was actually in Berkeley that a spiritual director I had begun to see, I told him this story after I had gotten to know him a bit. And basically, he helped me to just simply reinterpret it very quickly in terms of classic mystical teaching which was that when the influx of God floods the soul, like when it really floods the soul, what you immediately experience is absence and void and emptiness. That's classic Christian mysticism. Its actually, you've actually moved closer, if you like. Jesuits don't think like this but Carmelites think like this…that the immediate impact of the grace of God on the soul blinds you, blinds the soul. So what you experience is blindness and then gradually, over time, you may start to learn to*

[49] Washburn's work is also drawn upon by Father Thomas Keating in his formulation of the Centering Prayer path, particularly his idea of "regression for the sake of ego-transcendence" (Fisher 2019, 5). See Spittles (2018, 183-191) for more on the genealogy of this idea in transpersonal psychology.

see in a different kind of way. It won't be the experience of light in that sense but you will start to, in a sense, see in the dark. The impact of God's mystical grace is always, you feel empty, a deep release. So in a sense, he helped me to see that what I'd actually experienced was almost a textbook case of God leading me dramatically deeper in a single kind of week or two. But the emptiness stayed and, I don't know how much reading you've done, but in the Christian mystical tradition, the experiences of dark night, whether it's the dark night of the senses or the dark night of the soul, they can take a long time. They can take, you know, years to actually move through.

TEACHERS

One Christian teacher (99223) also acknowledged that difficult stages in the form of "the dark night," which can manifest as "lethargy, or depression, or a deep sense of aloneness and forsakenness by God," are actually "an organic part of the process of spiritual integration". He explains that in his system and approach,

> *we would deal with the dark night in the same way we would deal with anything else: 'So, what's going on with you right now.' 'I'm in a profound darkness'…So, let's do the […] practice with that, let's pay attention to that, so allow that to be here, cultivating awareness of that, and what's underneath that, what is the need, what is the wound, and there's a shedding or there's a dying or whatever, but you're [...] as you're doing that, you're backing into the sunrise that's going to happen on the other side of the dark night. And that's how you participate in the nighttime deepening into the dawn, you participate in it by working with it and being with it as opposed to fighting it and pushing against it. So, absolutely that's part of our experience and we engage in things in that exact same way.*

Another Christian teacher (99221) described difficult stages and the necessary suffering involved in them as the "purgative process" that is catalyzed in the centering prayer practice and tradition, according to one of its founders, Thomas Keating:

> *There is a purgative experience...it's talking about the untying of emotional knots. The images he describes...there's all this stuff, emotional entanglements in you and the process of releasing, just releasing yourself, opening yourself to God's presence again and again releases all that stuff, opens all that stuff. And then it starts to come out and it's expected that at some point there will be dryness, there will be agony, there will be emotional pain. And in the process of centering prayer, you're supposed to release*

> *that and let it go and God will take care of it. So there is this purgation that happens in this very simple, very simple prayer.*

He explains further that, "the brief description of centering prayer on the 'Contemplative Outreach' website, centering prayer is like 5 brief steps, but there's one that describes how you may feel physical pain as a result of this untying. There is a somatic sense, and then also emotional. But yeah, that's definitely part of it and that's consistent with the tradition." When asked to clarify the mechanism of this process in this tradition, he explained that "in their framing of this, just being silent and not distracted leads to the untying of these emotional knots…In the centering prayer process, though…ultimately the relaxing, it does bring you a certain kind of suffering, but then that suffering gets purged and transformed and then something new comes which is not that kind of suffering." One Centering prayer teacher (99222) elaborated on this expected purgative stage and process of centering prayer:

> *The other area where problems occur, and this is probably of central relevance to your work, is Thomas Keating very early on observed, that because of what he called the 'receptive' nature of centering prayer, in other words you're not giving the egoic consciousness very much to do…it encourages an early and very vibrant engagement of the unconscious, of material that is usually safely repressed by egoic presence. And the people who enter centering prayer, particularly when they come to their first intensive, where you're doing three and a half hours of prayer a day for eight straight days, enter a kind of space where the disarming of the egoic repressive mechanisms and the emergence into the consciousness of previously unconscious material, including old traumas, can be an issue. And Thomas has built a whole teaching around this to his credit, he first put it together in the 1980s when he realized that people in centering prayer were moving very quickly to a state that you actually see in most advanced meditation retreats but the centering prayer people got there faster, of the very rapid engagement of material from the unconscious. And he developed a theology to explain in and a practice to contain it.*

In this tradition, the "constant repeated letting go which is done, theologically in Christianity, in solidarity with Jesus' letting go attitude" is understood as "*kenosis*" but this process translated into the psychological arena has some "unique shadow earmarks." This teacher

added that, “over the thirty years or so that they’ve been offering Centering prayer intensive retreats, it’s been very, very safely handled, and nobody has freaked out or had a psychotic breakdown. But people are mindful of the fact that, that this is part of it.” Furthermore, Keating has,

> *in a very helpful way identified this as what he calls the “divine therapy” or “the healing of the unconscious.” And he points out how this material is in us anyway, and just because we don’t know about it doesn’t mean we aren’t acting out of it. And so as it comes to the surface in the environment of what he deliberately calls “prayer,” by which he means a relational field with a benevolent and caring Being, or Being-ness, as it surfaces there, it’s part of a healing that allows it to be, to move out of the people and their bodily, their incarnate being is free of this kind of repressions.*

As mentioned above, while “sometimes it actually happens spontaneously, sometimes and probably more typically a, something will surface in prayer which then will require working through, and working out, in your conscious life, when you return out of the meditation period into daily practice.” And its this process that is where sometimes, “Centering prayer has its own kind of areas of what you might call “spiritual emergence” material.”

ISLAM

PRACTITIONERS

For practitioners of Islamic forms of meditation, there were only two practitioners who shared more in depth about meditation-related difficulties that they understood to be normative and involve necessary suffering. 99125 understood two distressing events to be necessary on her own contemplative path. The first, an acute “psychotic” episode that occurred over a week, she later interpreted as part of a process of purification on her Sufi path and was necessary to have undergone. Towards the end of the five-day period, an early

childhood memory of extreme guilt surfaced, and she later understood the experience as purifying her of this guilt and its associations in her psyche, which had been an integral part of her identity for many years:

> *And, about a day and a half into the workshop I started going psychotic and I started shaking, like overwhelming feelings, I'm not talking about fleeting feelings of happiness or sadness. I'm talking about a volcano of epic proportions, at least for my psyche (laughs), a rising from my belly into my heart. My head couldn't process any of it and my body was physically shaking. I was terrified, I didn't know what it was …I knew where I was, but it just felt like everything was smashing to smithereens everything I understood. I mean in retrospect, yea I was losing cortical control but, you know, when its really happening, you're not thinking that. I wasn't thinking that. So, a lesser person than my teacher would have dropped me off at the local psych ward where they would prescribe anti-psychotics, calmed me down—oh, I couldn't sleep either, that started to happen—prescribed some kind of anti-psychotic probably, which I would probably still be on now (laughs). But this person, and we, again, over many years built a trusted relationship, he and his wife piled me into their little Volkswagen van and took me to the next town where their next workshop was." Stayed in guest room of some friends. "He would come and see me twice a day. This is not something this guy did all the time, its not like he was a therapist or counselor. He was a very wise grounded person and a sincere understanding, a deep understanding about life. So I would sit there like, my hands and fists hitting against the air saying "I just don't know what's wrong, I just (gurgling noise)." At a certain point he figured out…that I felt guilty about something. And he started saying "notice what happens when you hear this: you haven't done anything wrong." This is my most trusted friend on the planet, saying "you haven't done anything wrong.". So that it (prompted? Helped?) my guilt, because I was willing to try on what he said as a better reality than the one that was rattling around inside me. So then he's watching me hit my fists against the air…I was on the bed and he was in a chair, "he took over my holding back of my musculature, so I could still do the movement but he was (inaudible) on the holding back. So it (inaudible, whipped?) Nathan, and I started screaming and sobbing, screaming and sobbing. Really I'm sure I looked like pictures of somebody who had been possessed, having a de-possession, because even having a baby I never screamed like this. My whole body-mind screaming, sobbing, screaming, sobbing…when I was little, my family had moved west and they said it was because of my health. My grandfather had died and my mother said, "If we had never left (home) he wouldn't have died." In my little kid brain-heart, I had put those two things together, that it was my fault that Grandpa died. And that seed had stayed with me clear until I was, I guess maybe 27 or 28 […] And it took me maybe 20 to 30 minutes of screaming and yelling and sobbing and slobbering as this unwound, this scary distorted belief about reality and my self and my guilt…And then I was returned, to not just reality but an enhanced reality. And my teacher walked me outside and there was a hose sprinkler going on and there was a rainbow above the sprinkler […] I feel it was the fruit of practice and*

> *trust and development that took me to my deepest (holding crack?), my deepest misunderstanding about life and myself, and freed me…to love and safety.*

She explained how her appraisal of the experience was related to a dream she had before this event, in which this same teacher showed her the word "*agni*" which "means purification by fire" which she understood as an "inner encounter where basically he was asking me 'well what's next? Purification by fire?' And I go 'sure' […] so then he shows up and I start entering that fire, which was like that volcano coming up from inside me at his workshop." While this event occurred at a Sufi retreat, she didn't attribute it to the workshop itself, but rather "it was catalyzed by my practice and my relationship to him" and the "timing in my psyche." She reflected on how,

> *my language for it now would be unconscious emotional material and fear and trepidation, because my language is I was so identified with that, I had built so much of my experience of myself around that, that that coming up is going to look like death to me, because so much of what I believed about life was that it was my fault, you have to be a good girl because it was my fault, I have to put my own (deeds?) on it because it was my fault, it was all my fault. What I call the psychosis lasted about 5 days, may have even been coming on prior to his arrival because I think the catalyst was that inner experience with him.*

The second event, mentioned already above, occurred while visiting a Sufi center in Turkey where she felt "a lightning bolt went through me, from my head down to my heart, belly button, out into the earth." After feeling struck by this experience of somatic energy, she went into a nearby shed "and I start sobbing as if the Pacific Ocean was backed up inside of me, sobbing, snot in the face, crying" which was unprecedented for her and went on for an hour and a half. While no identifiable material was involved in this "whole body crying," when she returned to the others she was told by the mother of the Sheikh in broken English, "allah boom boom…is good, don't fight it." After feeling that finally "somebody gets it, I'm getting a big dose of Allah boom today," at that moment the Shaykh entered the room and shared that the

group had been given permission to participate in a very unique spiritual event at the Sufi center. She described how later, after she had the opportunity to share all this with her teacher, he had offered his interpretation: "everything that happened to you was so the group could" engage in the spiritual event, it "doesn't make you more or less important than anyone else, this was just what the universe used you for that day."

One other Sufi practitioner (99127) also spoke about distressing experiences he had had in a context of purification. During his first retreat, he reported a week of extreme emotional turmoil during which he was crying continuously and later understood it to be an "emotional purging, like there were deeply rooted sorrows in my life that I was getting out, that I had not cried about that I needed to cry about." He also experienced it as.

> *almost a sensation of something dying, like something that I had felt was really important and really central to my identity was dying. Was dying off, was disappearing. And I didn't know how to deal with that, it was very difficult. I realize now what was dying, in my perspective now, was what the Sufis call 'the death of the commanding self.' This is the aspect of the self that wants to maintain control of things and, from my perspective, this was a spiritual state that I was going through where that controlling self was having to let go of some of its control and just let the experience take over. And it didn't want to do that…it was fighting back, my response was to cry.*

He also understood other anomalous and distressing somatic experiences, particularly in and around his chest, as related to purification on an energetic level according to Sufi subtle body frameworks:

> *The body is composed of energetic centers. The Sufis recognize many of these and some of them are similar in location to the famous Hindu chakras. They're slightly different and I think they have a different, maybe, possibly a different set of psycho-social, psycho-spiritual associations, maybe. But definitely as the body purifies we become more open to the movement of the cosmic energy through you and sometimes you reach blockages, you reach places where those energy points, they call them 'latifas' in Arabic, 'subtleties,' those subtle energy centers don't expand or don't respond to the energy or don't let the energy flow smoothly for God knows what reason.…evidently, something had been shifted energetically in me and it wasn't moving smoothly through my heart center…And kind of like when you have a circuit*

that has some resistance in it, the wiring will get hot or if it's a light bulb it glows, I think of it analogously to that.

He understood his teacher to be "a very powerful energetic being" and believed that just being in his presence has been the catalyst for powerful experiences, some of which were distressing or challenging, while others were quite blissful and ecstatic. He believed that his teacher also sometimes intentionally manipulated his "energy system" and described the experience as "like being slapped with something very intense and it breaks up some of your psychological structures" and that "it takes time for the more useless ones of those to fall away and the more useful ones become reintegrated again to your daily life." He described how, as a result of contemplative practices like chanting and the subtle energetic interactions with the teacher, a surplus of energy might be generated in one's body and if one doesn't "have the capacity yet to contain and assimilate and make use of the energy so it spills out in a lot of ways" and manifests as anger, irritation, "hugely inflated egos," or depression. He reported how it was quite common during retreats for himself and others in his community to become upset without provocation or uncharacteristically angry and that such symptoms were understood by him and other students as indicating they were "being hit by the work," in other words, that they were normal and expected effects of this Sufi path. Finally, this subject reported difficult experiences associated with the teacher "pulling the rug out" which meant when the teacher would unexpectedly completely ignore a student or "barely acknowledge your existence." He described how, despite seeing the teacher do this to other students and knowing that it is a pedagogic technique of the teacher to "see if you can walk on your own," when it happened to him, it "still hurt." He added that it was "very easy to feel good when the master is spending

a lot of time with you," but when he cuts you off, "it's a real ego thing man, you know, it's a real grinding down of the ego. It can be painful."

TEACHERS

One Sufi teacher (99234) spoke about how necessary periods of difficulty and challenging experiences on the Sufi path "are all over Sufi literature" since "the Sufis thought a lot about this even starting back a thousand years ago." He discussed how traditional Sufi literature discusses two categories of experiences, states (*hal)* and stages (*maqamat),* and that some of them are what "you could call endarkenment states, which are, you know, dark night of the soul, confusion in different phases, and it's not necessarily just one stage that a person may go through in their life, although that may happen. We may be going through these stages more or less continually at different times." He mentioned how these states feature prominently in the Sufi poetry of Jalal ad-Din Rumi and Farid ud-Din Attar among others, and specifically points out the stage described in Attar's *the Conference of the Birds* (*Mantiq at-tayr)* as "the valley of bewilderment" (*wadi-i hayrat)* as a phase "where the person has to go through some sort of deeper sense of letting go, of confusion, of unlearning…sometimes that's easy to do, sometimes that's difficult to do and can very disorienting depending on their position in life."

Another Sufi teacher (99233) also indicated that there "are many psychological and spiritual states experienced by wayfarers on the path" including difficult ones such as "despair, anxiety, longing, abandonment" and "states of bewilderment and confusion as one journeys inwardly beyond the mind and its limited understanding." He mentioned that on the Sufi path

"of course each individual has to experience their own inner darkness, which can be a painful and difficult process" and referenced Carl Jung who wrote that "Enlightenment does not consist in imagining figures of light, but in making the darkness conscious. The latter process is difficult and therefore unpopular." He also described how experiences in meditation such as "a loss of ego…can be deeply disturbing" and that the "anxiety, possibly terror from the loss of ego is generally a passing stage" that can "last from one to two years," but that it is "helpful to know that others have had this experience and it is a passing stage." He stressed the importance of the teacher to help navigate the landscape of these states and stages and to "help discriminate between psychological and spiritual states–-what belongs to the path and what is something that may require psychological help."

Another Sufi teacher (99237) discussed how Irina Tweedie invented the term "yo-yo" syndrome to discuss her own experiences on the Sufi path as well as the experiences of the community of her students. She described how,

> *the classical Sufis, writing in Arabic in the 10th, 11th, 12th centuries. They really did this job of mapping the path that a spiritual seeker is going through, in terms of these oscillations. In fact, they saw the whole program as composed of two different dimensions […] God reveals himself to you by different attributes. And the attributes kind of, like, situate themselves, very much like later on in the Kabbalah, in two realms. And the first realm one can call mercy or love, which is expansive, and all the things we can say about love. And its opposite, which is constricting, and ruthless and demanding and judgmental. And all these things which we can say, modern people, who don't have religious beliefs, can say, its psychological. But that's our interpretation. For these people it was the revelation of God in his different manifestations or attributes.*

However, she notes that, "You can say, in clinical terms, it's almost like bi-polar syndrome. Everything has a term. But the fact that it has a term and a name doesn't mean that you know how to handle it, or that you know how to understand it." She describes how the Sufi path is described using this "polar" language and, "say I go through an expansive state…be sure that

either tomorrow or sometime in the future, I'll be thrown into its opposite" which are the "constricting" experiences. The Sufi path is not, "not just wonderful and ecstasy and the ahh, love, and you know, the people read Rumi and they go ballistic and its wonderful. Not at all, not even in Rumi, you know…I sometimes bring out provocatively things in Rumi that don't say it's all wonderful." In her understanding, the states of constriction (*qabd*) are truly "an awful place to be. Awful in the sense that one of the synonyms for it is despair. You know…what the later medieval mystics in Christianity, I think, the Spanish, called the 'dark night of the soul', that's the dark night of the soul." She recounted how when she first read St John of the Cross and how he blessed the dark night of the soul, she understood from the Sufi sources how these kinds of experiences are really "transitional points, full of potentialities." That just like in "therapy, if the therapy is deep, it becomes terribly uncomfortable… But eventually, if you persevere, things change…[you] reach a plateau and this plateau allows [you] a new perspective on things", so too are deep abiding transformative changes borne out of distress and despair on the Sufi path. This perseverance is key though, since

> *if you are in this situation and you can hold it somehow…you just hang onto it…then, it changes, it has the potential to change to its opposite. Not in the sense of expansion, you know, all of a sudden you are in ecstasy, you are in good mood. No. In the sense of…being lifted up. Relinquishing any pretense for control. Because this despair comes from the…like you have to climb up this huge mountain and you are at the end of your physical and mental power and you don't have a rope to climb on and you are…'what do I do now? I can't climb back and I can't climb up.'*

The ability to persevere in this state, though, is contingent upon having some "notion of something out there. And this something out there can be God, an angel, a memory of your mother or a teacher. But there has to be this sense of 'I am not alone.' If I am alone, you know, that sense of loneliness when its total and dark, it's really depression, clinical depression."

Discussion

Summary

We have seen how meditation-related difficulties were reported across different domains of phenomenology amongst contemporary Abrahamic contemplative practitioners and teachers. In terms of affective changes reported as distressing and/or impairing, practitioners reported fear and anxiety, depression and despair, re-experiencing of traumatic memories, empathic and affiliative changes, affective lability or reactivity, agitation and irritability, and affective flattening or detachment. Cognitive changes included vivid imagery and change in executive functioning, while hallucinations, visions, and illusions, visual lights, and derealization were reported from the perceptual domain. Sense of self changes reported as distressing or impairing included changes in self-other/ self-world boundaries, change in sense of embodiment, and change in narrative self and somatic phenomenology included somatic energy or vibrations, involuntary movements, and cardiac irregularity.

There were also two major categories of appraisals of distressing or impairing meditation-related experiences. The first were "adverse" or non-normative interpretations, where the experience was judged to involve unnecessary suffering that can and should have been avoided. From the data-driven coding, three major themes—practices, social support, and worldview—emerged from my engagement with the interviews.

In the practices theme, practice fit and tailoring were emphasized as optimal for successful and responsible contemplative practice, and if practices were not tailored or appropriate for particular individuals, harm and unnecessary suffering could result. Relatedly, psychiatric morbidity was identified in many interviews as an important consideration in

practice since certain practices and approaches were thought to result in harm for individuals with certain clinical conditions or histories. The difference between preliminary practices appropriate for more people and advanced practices appropriate only for a minority of people under specific conditions also arose as a sub-theme influencing some interpretations of distressing or impairing experiences as non-normative. Specific to Christian traditions, the distinction between cataphatic and apophatic contemplative practices was also invoked as important for teachers' and practitioners' appraisal processes and determinations of suffering as unnecessary, since apophatic practices in particular were discussed as having unique risks which required careful navigation.

The second theme important for non-normative appraisals was the absence or presence of sufficient social support, where the former was judged to be responsible for a lot of unnecessary suffering. The first sub-theme of this category was the importance of (well-trained) teachers, spiritual directors, and companions to help one navigate the contemplative path successfully and avoid unnecessary harm from it. The other sub-theme was the importance of community and the appraisal that the absence of a supportive community could also contribute to unnecessary suffering associated with contemplative practice.

The third theme, worldview and interpretive framework, also contained several sub-themes that had a bearing on whether subjects appraised meditation-related difficulties as adverse. The first, 'the relationship between spiritual and psychological frameworks,' was invoked by many subjects as crucial for shaping one's (or one's tradition's) understanding of the nature of distressing or impairing experiences and included constructs like 'spiritual bypassing' or questions around if psychological challenges were necessary to address as part of a contemplative path. The answer to this question often depended on the second sub-theme,

the particular 'conception of the goal of the contemplative path,' and oftentimes the understanding of what kind of self-transformation or realization of nonduality was the goal. Finally, the third sub-theme related to one's worldview and interpretive framework was 'normalization and pathologization,' where several subjects followed Stanislav and Christina Grof in attributing unnecessary suffering to incorrectly appraising meditation experiences as pathological, although the opposite danger of normalizing or "spiritualizing" mental illness was also understood to cause harm and unnecessary suffering in some cases.

The other category of appraisal of distressing and impairing meditation-related experiences were that they are a "part of the path" or are normative signs of progress despite surface appearances to the contrary, and therefore involved necessary suffering. In Judaism, challenging stages of the path were associated with: purification frameworks; the need to learn certain lessons in this lifetime or soul transmigration; the conception of the path as "bi-polar" and/or that it consists of both expanded and constricted consciousness (*mochin d'katnut*) necessary for the achievement spiritual development; the doctrine that the purpose of creation is to rectify one's emotional and character traits which entails some amount of suffering; and the idea that certain kinds of spiritual descent are necessary for spiritual ascent and/or that descent and absence is paradoxically the greatest ascent and experience of the presence of God. In Christian traditions, difficult stages of the path were understood by many subjects as: related to St. John of the Cross' conception of the dark nights of the senses and spirit; St. Ignatius of Loyola's own life and contemplative trajectory; the more idiosyncratic idea of "holy disturbances"; Carl Jung's conception of the shadow; Michael Washburn's model of the spiral path and "regression in the service of ego-transcendence"; Thomas Keating's formulation of the Centering Prayer path as entailing the purgative untying of emotional knots,

kenotic unloading of the unconscious, and as one of "divine therapy." In Islamic traditions, difficult stages of the path entailing necessary suffering were appraised as: related to psycho-emotional and subtle energetic purification frameworks; the ideas that some kinds of distressing experiences are necessary for certain kinds of spiritually significant events or spiritual maturation; indicative of the classical Sufi states (*hal)* and stages (*maqamat*), such as those discussed by Sufi poets Rumi and Attar, and understood as revelations of the two dimensions of the divine; and that some distress or discomfort is unavoidable for Jungian shadow work towards individuation.

Towards a Culturally Sensitive Etic Framework

One thing that should be clear from our thematic survey of the appraisals of meditation-related difficulties is that etic frameworks that consider all distress and impairment to be signs of psychopathology are not actually culturally sensitive since many traditions investigated in this study view some distressing and impairing experiences as important parts of the contemplative path. For example, Menezes and Moreira-Almeida (2009; 2010) in their reviews of the psychological literature on differential diagnosis suggest both "lack of suffering" and "lack of functional impairment" as secondary criteria by which psychotic experiences can be differentiated from spiritual ones (discussed in Lindahl et al. 2020, 3). A truly culturally sensitive clinical understanding requires the acknowledgment of distressing and challenging stages of contemplative paths, but additionally can account for other kinds of distress and impairment that traditions understand to be pitfalls and involve unnecessary suffering.

Another question this study raises is: if our aim is to be culturally sensitive, which particular culture do we choose to be sensitive to? As we saw above, there are active debates within specific sub-traditions of each religious tradition, never mind between different traditions, regarding normative practice approaches, contexts, and goals. Hopefully it is clear that to be truly culturally sensitive, we actually need to be sensitive to all the micro-cultures that exist within a tradition, since any one culture, even contemplative cultures, are extremely multi-vocal. Hartogsohn (2022) proposes the notion of "sociocultural microclimates" to "describe the distinct types of expectations, intentions, and cultural contexts that have produced drastically different psychedelic experiences" and my contention is that these microcultures also exist within worlds of meditative practice. Dupuis and Vessiere (2022) argue, in light of Hartogsohn, that "rather than simply freeing up habitual constraints on perception… psychedelic encounters typically entail processes of sense-making, crystallization of meaning, and enculturation into contextually mediated assumptive worlds (or ideologies) and behaviours that necessarily install novel constraints with potentially maladaptive consequences" (1). In the next few chapters, we will discuss how contemplative practices may have similarly hyper-plastic effects based on a several different neurobiological mechanisms, and that some contemplative states can catalyze similar sense-making processes in the critical zone where some habitual cognitive and perceptual constraints are freed and others can be reinforced, challenged, or left alone entirely. But in order to represent such contemplative effects accurately, our lens must be fine-grained enough to capture the 'differences that make a difference' between different contemplative micro-climates and micro-cultures.

As such, not only does a culturally sensitive etic approach require an intimate understanding of classical religious teaching and frameworks, but it also requires a familiarity with how those frameworks are interpreted today, including how they have been translated, adapted, and refined in light of non-religious psychological frameworks. For example, we would need quite a fine-grained approach to offer culturally sensitive care to: the Jewish practitioner whose interpretive frameworks weave together western mindfulness traditions, psychodynamic conceptions of the embodied unconscious, and a modern Hasidic tradition that was itself impacted by early psychoanalysis and other early 20th century psychological trends; or to the Centering prayer practitioner that understands medieval purification frameworks and understandings of kenosis in light of analytical psychology and Michael Washburn's transpersonal psychological understanding of "regression for the sake of transcendence"; or to the western Sufi practitioner whose contemplative path involves Jungian "shadow" work and psychodynamic translations of purgative frameworks of the states (*hal*) and stations (*maqamat*) first canonized a thousand years ago. To offer culturally sensitive clinical care to meditation-related difficulties is to offer care that is sensitive to the rich histories of particular contemplative sub-traditions *and* to how those sub-traditions and interpretive frameworks are themselves interpreted and adapted by specific microclimatic communities today.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have demonstrated that a range of distressing and impairing affective, cognitive, perceptual, sense of self, and somatic meditation-related experiences are

reported by contemporary practitioners and teachers of Abrahamic contemplative traditions. We have also seen that these difficulties are understood by these traditions as either "adverse" and non-normative, or "part of the path" and normative, even though there may not always be consensus about which is which even within religious traditions. Any culturally sensitive etic frameworks must be able to account for both appraisals of these difficulties, both the "adverse" effects of these practices resulting in unnecessary harm and the challenging "part of the path" understandings that entail suffering that is necessary for the achievement of some emically significant goal as well.

CHAPTER TWO: CONTEMPLATIVE STATES OF ABSORPTION ARE PIVOTAL

INTRODUCTION

In order to understand meditation-related difficulties from a culturally sensitive psychological perspective, we first must familiarize ourselves with how these experiences are interpreted within particular religious and contemplative traditions. As we saw in chapter one, these experiences can be either normative, non-normative, or sometimes a combination of the two, aka "normal but not normative." In this chapter I will argue that meditation-related difficulties are often emically understood to be related to contemplative states of absorption that are cultivated in these traditions and that a recent complex systems approach to understanding ascetic practices and psychedelic experiences—the Pivotal Mental States model (PiMS)—can help with our culturally sensitive etic understanding of these difficulties. We will first explore the psychological construct of "absorption", then examine the *states* of contemplative absorption cultivated in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, and finally, see how they may be understood etically through the lens of the PiMS model.

ABSORPTION

TRAIT ABSORPTION AND PERCEPTUAL DECOUPLING

In 1974, Tellegen and Atkinson first introduced their Trait Absorption Scale (TAS) to measure "a disposition for having episodes of "total" attention that fully engage one's representational (i.e., perceptual, enactive, imaginative, and ideational) resources" (Tellegen

and Atkinson 1974, 268). These states of "total attention" were characterized by "a heightened sense of the reality of the attentional object, imperviousness to distracting events, and an altered sense of reality in general, including an empathically altered sense of self" (268). Tellegen continued to refine the definition of the construct in 1986 adding that such states can also have "a dissociative…character" (Roche and McConkey 1990, 92). This feature of the construct led to the incorporation of "absorption and imaginative involvement" as one of the three subscales of the widely used Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES) (Soffer-Dudek et al. 2015, 338). The construct of dissociation has been criticized for "the muddiness of the definition" (Dalenberg and Paulson 2009, 145) and for being "quite vague, in large part because it has been promiscuously applied to disparate phenomena" (Dell 2009, 710); clinical scientists and researchers have responded to this lack of clarity by distinguishing between "pathological" dissociation and "normal" or normative dissociation, the latter of which includes states of absorption (Dalenberg and Paulson 2009, 146).

In an attempt to avoid conceptual ambiguity and still be interdisciplinary, Seligman and Kirmayer (2008) proposed an "integrative" model of dissociation that takes into account both pathological and normative forms, the former involving "distress" or "impairment" found in depersonalization and derealization disorders, while the latter "typically involve experiences of absorption, defined as the profound narrowing or concentration of attention and focused deployment of cognitive resources," such that "the absorbed individual becomes unaware of the external environment, self-awareness and critical thought are suspended and time perception may become distorted" (34). Normative dissociation can be of two types, external and internal, since a state of absorption "often involves engagement with external objects or events, such as films, television, books, music and the like" and can "also involve

engagement with internally generated thoughts, images, or imaginative content; examples include daydreaming, reverie, deliberation and fantasy" (34).

Tanya Luhrmann, an anthropologist studying spiritual and religious experience, has used the construct of trait absorption to interpret some of the findings of her ethnographic fieldwork, particularly in charismatic Christian communities. In their 2010 paper, Luhrmann and her colleagues introduce the idea that there may be training effects on the trait of absorption—which have not been recognized in empirical psychological research investigating the trait—and argue that there is considerable shared territory across different fields and other related psychological constructs:

> We believe that "absorption" is best understood as the mental capacity common to trance, hypnosis, dissociation, and much other spiritual experience in which the individual becomes caught up in ideas or images or fascinations. From this perspective, "absorption" is the name of the capacity to become focused on the mind's object—what humans imagine or see around them—and to allow that focus to increase while diminishing attention to the myriad of everyday distractions that accompany the management of normal life. (Luhrmann et al. 2010, 75)

Here again the trait or capacity for absorption is specified as having two components: becoming focused on a particular object that can either be external or internally imagined and the diminishment of attention to anything else. In the case of an internally imagined mental object, any sensory perception would be inherently distracting and draw one's attention from the object, and thus there must be a diminishment of attention to sensory stimuli in order for such focus to be maintained.

Research into "trance"[50] states in shamanic traditions, some of which have incorporated neuroscientific methods, also explores these two components. The latter is

[50] Definitions of "trance" are contentious and contested; for a historical overview, see Harrington (2016). Taves (1999) notes that "various academic disciplines have developed distinctive discourses to designate the general sort of experience in question" where "Psychiatrists most commonly refer to dissociation (or more

sometimes described as decreased sensory encoding; this "perceptual decoupling" is defined as "the capacity to disengage attention from perception" (Schooler et al. 2011, 319). For example, Hove et al. (2016) describe how "Perceptual decoupling or sensory gating would limit disruptions from irrelevant stimuli and help sustain an absorptive internally directed train of thought" and that this "decoupling, closed eyes, and a still body would help close down the external sensory world, and facilitate transfer to the internal world of shamanic journeying" (3121). Perceptual decoupling is also recognized as a one of the major components of mind wandering and has been investigated most thoroughly in that domain of research (Schooler et al. 2011; Smallwood and Schooler 2015).

While some psychological anthropologists have emphasized its role in shamanic trance states, meditation researchers have been slower to embrace perceptual decoupling as an important component of meditative practice to investigate. This is perhaps because the emerging field of 'contemplative science' has focused on mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) and only recently begun to explore contemplative states of absorption that are cultivated in other contexts (Hagerty et al. 2013; Berkovich-Ohana and Glicksohn 2017; Glicksohn and Ben-Soussan 2020; Sparby 2019). While *trait* absorption has received attention in psychological and clinical scientific research and is now being investigated in relation to

distantly hysteria); anthropologists to trance, spirit possession, and altered states of consciousness; and religionists to visions, inspiration, mysticism and ecstasy" (7). In his wonderful study, *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah*, Garb (2011) notes the overlap between trance and the scholarly category of "ecstasy" but "with its multiple definitions, it is less useful for our purpose than more scientific terms, such as trance, which are supported by both clinical practice and anthropological observations" (48) especially given his interest in "contributing to the field of psychology of religion" and facilitating "far greater integration of social science in the study of Kabbalah" (8). Instead of employing either of these categories, this study will follow the consilient spirit of the "building block approach" (BBA) in using the more generic psychological construct of absorption, which may (and often does) overlap with both depending on specific formulations (Taves 2009; Asprem 2016; Taves and Asprem 2020).

spiritual experiences (Lifshitz et al. 2019), the *states* of absorption that the trait refers to have been comparatively under-theorized and understudied, particularly in meditation research (Roche and McConkey 1990, 92; Hall et al. 2016, 2).

Contemplative States of Absorption

One notable exception to this oversight is Markovic and Thompson (2016), which, through the lens of neurophenomenology, compares states of absorption in hypnosis to those cultivated in the Theravada Buddhist context of *jhana* (Pali) or *dhyana* (Sanskrit) practice—the terms that are usually translated as 'absorption.' They point out that while Tellegen and Atkinson "and other early researchers, connected absorption with imaginative involvement—a tendency to become attentionally and emotionally involved in an imaginative scenario…Current researchers are more likely to define absorption purely in terms of the quality of one's attention to an object" as they themselves do[51] (82–83). After an overview of both hypnotic and Buddhist meditative practice, they note that in "both the hypnosis literature and Buddhist texts, absorption is a state of focused attention in which there is reduced awareness of or attention to peripheral stimuli, and due to which one may experience altered boundaries of the self," such as "alterations in one's body image or even the sense that one's body has disappeared," as well as "an altered perception of reality" that can include the "cessation of speech and thought," being "unresponsive to external, even painful, stimuli," or

[51] That being said, moments of imaginative involvement would also be considered states of absorption in the definitions of Seligman and Kirmayer (2008), Luhrmann et al (2010), as well as Markovic and Thompson (2016), and we shall examine some states of imaginative or imaginal absorption below.

even the "loss of individual identity, sense of unification with all things, and experiences of emptiness or voidness" (85–86). They also explore whether and to what extent "meta-awareness" is present in these different states, defined as "one's ability to access one's current contents of consciousness," pointing out that "Low meta-awareness can occur in mind wandering (when a person is unaware that their mind is wandering[52])" as well as "in states of craving, in which object orientation is high but the individual is unaware both of how the object appears to them and of their thoughts, feelings, and desires about the object" (89). Finally, they note that meta-awareness is crucial for both "open-monitoring" and "focused attention" meditation practices but that in the latter, particularly "at later stages, in which attention is absorbed by the object, meta-awareness may no longer be present" (90).[53]

While there has been considerable scholarship and research on Asian meditative traditions, some of which focuses on the states of absorption cultivated within them, this dissertation explores states of absorption cultivated in the lesser-known contemplative traditions found within Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.[54] For the purpose of this

[52] The prototypical example of which is reading something—perhaps as you are doing right now—and then at some point realizing one hasn't registered anything one just read. For more see Smallwood (2011).

[53] More recently, Metzinger (2020) introduces what he terms "minimal phenomenal experience" (MPE), which can include "full absorption episodes" such as those that occur "during lucid dreamless sleep . . . and deep meditative states during the practice of calm abiding and highly focused attention, for example in Buddhist jhana practice" (16). He describes how "the content of a full-absorption episode cannot be reported, because the self-referential mechanisms of forming an autobiographical memory are suspended" and that "only the process of entering into it or of emerging out of it can be faithfully represented in the autobiographical self-model; as such the episode itself is not a part of the subject's inner life narrative" (15). In other words, low or no meta-awareness is present in Metzinger's MPE formulation of absorption episodes as well.

[54] Many of these traditions are found within what scholars sometimes describe as Jewish and Islamic "mysticism" despite the term not being indigenous to either religion. While there has been considerable debate around the appropriateness of the term to describe currents within each religion, I follow the approach of Garb (2011, 3) who argues (contra Huss 2008) that avoiding the use of scholarly terms like mysticism "would effect an unnecessary atomization of contexts while depriving us of a useful bridge to wider scholarly domains" and "exacerbates the existing gap" between domains of scholarly discourse "and the broader intellectual arena."

investigation, we shall follow Seligman and Kirmayer (2008) as well as Markovic and Thompson (2016) in viewing a state of absorption as *a state of concentrated attention that can be either internally or externally oriented in which there is reduced awareness of, or attention to, peripheral stimuli*. In cases of internally focused absorption, which characterizes many (though not all) contemplative states, sensory perception is definitionally the 'peripheral' stimuli that awareness is being 'absorbed from' as in instances of perceptual decoupling. Additionally, in acknowledging the role of absorption in experiences appraised as either pathological, normal, or normative depending on the context, we will also highlight distressing and/or functionally impairing effects of such states when described, as well as the absence or presence of meta-awareness when relevant or explicit.

ABRAHAMIC STATES OF ABSORPTION

ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

SECLUSION (*KHALWA*)

In the Islamic mystical traditions known collectively as Sufism,[55] contemplative practice is commonly undertaken in intensive retreat environments such that retreats are understood to be "the crucible of mystical experience" in these traditions (Ernst 1997, 111).

[55] See Sells (1996) for a discussion of resonances and dissonances of Islamic traditions with the category of "mysticism". See Sviri (2005) for a historical account of when such traditions first began to be considered or known as "Sufi."

The Arabic term *khalwa* is usually translated as "seclusion" or "retreat," the practice of which is often "accompanied by intense meditation, self-imposed strictures, vows of silence, and spiritual exercises" and "constitutes one of the fundamental principles of asceticism (*zuhd*)" (Knysh 2000, 314). Sara Sviri (2020, 171) notes, however, that there is an important distinction "between a pietistic approach that upholds asceticism as an idealized way of life and a mystical approach that sees asceticism as a mere technique, often a temporary technique, whereby inner transformation can be achieved." Most of the traditions that eventually come to be known as Sufi can be characterized by the latter, such that "Asceticism, in this context, becomes no more than a station, a stage – manzila, maqam – on a mystical journey (*sayr*) or path (*ṭariqa*), whose destination far outreaches it" (Sviri 2020, 172). Nevertheless, the practice of retreat, oftentimes for 40 days (*arba'in, chilla*) at a time, "became, very early, a regular institution in the Sufi path" (Schimmel [1975] 2011, 104).

One of the first to provide detailed and comprehensive instructions on the practice of retreat was Najm al-Din Razi (12th-13th CE), who wrote a list of conditions to be observed when one undertakes one:

> The first is to sit alone in an empty room, facing the qebla with the legs crossed and the hands placed on top of each other. The morid should have made a total ablution, intending it to be like the washing of a corpse, and imagine the room to be his shroud, leaving it only to perform ablution and prayer and fulfill other needs. The room must be small and dark, with a curtain drawn over the door so that no light or sound penetrates. The senses will then cease functioning-seeing, hearing, speaking, and walking-and the spirit, no longer preoccupied with the senses and sensory phenomena, will direct itself to the world of the unseen. Moreover, once the senses have ceased functioning, the misfortunes that assail the spirit through the apertures of the five senses will be effaced by means of zekr and the negation of stray thoughts. The veils that derive from the senses will fall; the spirit will gain familiarity with the unseen; and its familiarity with men will cease. (Razi 2003, 280)

The instructions are intended to create a secure sensory deprivation environment (no sound or light) which allows the senses to "cease functioning" and, when combined with concentrative

effects of the meditative practice of *zhikr* (the repetition of divine names or Quranic verses) and the banishment of distracting thoughts, the 'noise' of the bodily senses and the ordinary mind is eliminated, such that the spirit can then tune in to the signal of "the world of the unseen." In this way, the "shutting of the external senses" is understood to be crucial to the "opening of the internal senses," which allows mystical experience and divine realities to be perceived (Knysh 2000, 316).

Annemarie Schimmel notes, however, that such intensive (dark) retreats were not understood to be appropriate for all seekers at all times, and that a Sufi Sheikh "might exempt a disciple for a time from the forty-day seclusion, for instance, because he was spiritually too weak, or because his spiritual ecstasy might overwhelm him" (Schimmel [1975] 2011, 104). These potential dangers of the practice were also highlighted by Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi (12th-13th CE) in his own retreat manual. He advised that "for God's sake, do not enter retreat until …you know your strength in respect to the power of imagination. For if your imagination rules you, then there is no road to retreat except by the hand of the shaykh who is discriminating and aware" (Arabi [1981] 1989, 30). Such discrimination, whether one's own or (more commonly) 'outsourced' to one's teacher, is necessary "to distinguish between angelic and demonic spiritual influences" since the latter can cause "physical disorientation, pain and distress, bewilderment and…mental disorder" (32). While generally the means of discernment is to 'judge by their fruits', or, in Ibn al-Arabi's words, "distinguish…by what you find in yourself when they [the experiences] come to an end" (32), Schimmel adds that this advice is not always sufficient, since "the murid [aspirant] may even feel uplifted and consoled by certain experiences that are, in reality, insinuations of his lower self or of a misguiding power" (Schimmel [1975] 2011, 103). Furthermore, sometimes experiences of

distress, "constriction" (*qabd*), terror, and bewilderment are actually interpreted to be of divine origin and indicative of genuine spiritual progress, which makes the process of discernment even more complex (Fisher 2021).

While undertaking retreats is an unquestionably central practice in many Sufi traditions, the ultimate aim of any physical seclusion is actually a "seclusion in spirit" (*khalwat al-ma'na*) or what came to be known in Naqshbandi traditions as "seclusion in the crowd" (*khalwat dar anjuman*), a state in which one could be with God outside of specially curated environments and even amidst other people (Knysh 2000, 317). Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (11th-12th CE) wrote about both these external and internal meanings of the term, clarifying that the latter is an absorptive state that "consists in evacuating from the heart and spirit all else but Allah and filling them with Him" (quoted in Fenton 1995, 284). And while in his retreat manual Ibn al-Arabi writes, "if you want to enter the presence of the Truth and receive from Him without intermediary…seclusion from people will become inevitable for you, and preference for retreat (khalwa) over human associations, for the extent of your distance from creation is the extent of your closeness to God—outwardly and inwardly," in another work he specifies that retreats are actually only appropriate for novices (Arabi [1981] 1989, 29–30). In *The Meccan Revelations* (*al-Futuhat al-Makkiya*), he writes, "The retreat is only correct for him who is veiled (al-mahjub). As for the people of Unveiling, the retreat is never correct for them" since they perceive all of creation in its truly 'unveiled' state as a new and constantly unfolding divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*) (Chittick 2005, 158). In this vein, he writes that "For him whom God has given understanding, retreat (khalwa) and society (jalwa)[56] are the

[56] Chittick notes that *jalwa* literally means "the unveiling of the bride", but in this context it means the period of "leaving the retreat" [*tark al-khalwa*] though "closely connected in meaning to "theophany", which is

same. Rather, it may be that society is more complete for a person and greater in benefit, since through it at every instant he increases in sciences about God that he did not possess" (161).

Thus we see that physical seclusion, often in a sensory deprivation environment, helps to cultivate certain absorptive states that are conceptualized as "retreating" within one's spirit from the body. Nevertheless, the goal is always to be able to realize such states of intimacy with the divine even in the 'marketplace' of society since God is actually just as present (if not more) in the world. While we will explore this goal of contemplative practice below, we turn now to those intermediary absorptive states (*ahwal*) often cultivated in retreat settings.

THE STATES (*AHWAL*) OF ECSTASY (*WAJD*)

In classical Sufi manuals, we find several terms that can be used to describe states of contemplative absorption, though there is tremendous variability in the definitions or associations of the terms amongst different Sufi authors. For example, Carl Ernst explains how the "wide variation in the definitions themselves, from one author to another" stems from the fact that "each one seems to have felt a considerable freedom to add or to subtract from the received definitions, in accordance with personal experience or the authoritative pronouncement of a teacher" (Ernst 1992, 187). Sometimes the discrepancies between authors may even be intentionally trying to confuse the uninitiated, as Sufi writings can also have an esoteric character to them where "the vocabulary…is defined both to facilitate understanding

derived from the same root" and is the association Ibn al-Arabi is drawing on to re-interpret the word (2005, 158).

among Sufis and to frustrate it for outsiders…The terms of Sufism, then, are explicitly intended both to conceal and to display, to show and hide" (Ernst 2018, 120–121).

Nevertheless, there are several terms that consistently refer to some kind of absorptive state, and in fact, the technical Arabic term *hal* (pl. *ahwal*) usually translated as "state" is one such term. In classical Sufism, experiences of some dimension of the divine are often presented as either a "state" (*hal*) or a "station" (*maqam*), and they are usually differentiated by whether they were the result of one's own efforts in the case of the latter or bestowed purely by divine grace in the case of the former. The word itself "is derived from the root h.w.l." and "the basic meaning of the root is to change from one situation to another, or from state to state" (Chittick 1989, 264). The states "were generally defined as gifts from God that overtake the wayfarer involuntarily" whereas the stations "form a series of discrete psychological and ethical qualities that the individual must attain and progress through" (Ernst 1997, 102). Although there was often debate concerning whether specific experiences were one or the other, or over the nature of the difference between the two, in many formulations the states themselves are understood to be inherently absorptive. For example, Knysh (2000, 304) explains how these divinely bestowed states "cannot co-exist with any other state or sensation…the heart possessed by a hal is seized entirely." And as Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri (11th CE) explains, these experiences can range in valence: "the state is a mode of consciousness that comes upon the heart without a person's intending it, attracting it, or trying to gain it—a feeling of delight or sorrow, constriction, longing, anxiety, terror, or want" (Sells 1996, 103). While such experiences can be euphoric or dysphoric, in cases of the latter the lack of control or predictability with which they are experienced may add an additional layer of distress or challenge.

William Chittick notes that while the *ahwal* "include all the experiences and delights which so many Western seekers are anxious to achieve," it is also true that the "states, in Ibn al-Arabi's view, are a sign of immaturity and instability" (Chittick 1989, 263). He clarifies that, "like a madman, the possessor of the state loses his reason in the overpowering experience of his states" and therefore "true masters have passed beyond the ruling properties of the states, always keeping a "cool head," no matter what they may be experiencing inwardly" (264). Even for Ibn al-Arabi though, he understands that one's particular psychological constitution will largely determine how overpowering and absorptive these experiences are. In his discussion of a category of states called "inrushes" (sing. *warid*) associated with particular divine names, he distinguishes three categories of people based on the impact of the state: "In the first case, the inrush is greater than the strength of the soul, so it rules over the soul. He is dominated by the state and follows its ruling property, so the state turns him this way and that. He has no ability to govern himself as long as he remains in the state" (Chittick 1989, 266). This state of functional impairment can even become permanent, in which case it is referred to as "madness" (*junun*) (266). In the second category of people however, the phenomenal experience is largely the same as the first but somehow there is no resulting functional impairment: "the person's rational faculty is taken away, though the animal understanding remains. He eats, drinks, and goes this way and that without self-governing or deliberation. These are called the "rational madmen" (uqala' al- majanin), since they take care of their natural livelihood, like other animals" (266). Finally, in the third case which is the ideal, "the inrush does not last, so the state disappears. Such a person returns to his fellows with his reason intact. He governs his own affair, and he understands what he says and what is said to him. He turns this way and that on the basis of deliberation, like any human

being" (267). In other words, the less impairing and absorbing these states are, the more spiritually mature the individual is understood to be. Examples of this third category are cases where,

> the person's inrush and self-disclosure are equal to his own capacity. No one sees any effect of the ruling property of the inrush over him, but one becomes aware upon seeing him, through a hidden kind of awareness, that something has happened to him, since he has to listen to the inrush in order to take what it has brought him from the Real. His state is like that of the sitting companion who is conversing with you, when another person comes with a command for him from the king. He stops talking to you and listens to what that person is saying. Once he receives the message, he returns to the conversation. In such a case, even if you do not see anything with your eyes, you notice that something has distracted him from you, as if someone were speaking to him. Or he has suddenly begun to think about something, so his senses turn toward it in his imagination, and his eyes and his gaze become dull, even while you are talking to him. You look at him, but your words do not register with him, so you become aware that his inward dimension is thinking about something else, different from what you are busy with. Sometimes the person's capacity is greater than the inrush, so when it comes to him—while he is conversing with you—you do not become aware. He takes what the inrush casts to him, and he takes from you what you say to him, or he speaks to you. (Chittick 1989, 267)

Here we see examples of a context where absorption is normal but not actually normative since the co-existing of spiritual and normal sensory perception without any withdrawal or functional impairment is the ideal. In many normal cases however, perceptual decoupling and absorption will occur, and in classical Sufi manuals these states were often termed *wajd*, usually translated as "ecstasy" though Michael Sells emphasizes "the difference in metaphor between the Latinate term ecstasy (ek stasis) as "standing outside of oneself" or "rapture" (from raptus) as "being taken" or "seized up" out of oneself, and the Arabic term wajd" which "combines the meaning of "intense feeling" with the notion of "finding" (1996, 111). Ibn al-Arabi gives us some sense of the phenomenology of states of *wajd* when he defines them as "the states (ahwal) that come upon the heart unexpectedly and annihilate it from witnessing itself and those present" (Chittick 1989, 212). While the latter part of the definition is easily

understood as perceptual decoupling such that one is no longer aware of one's surroundings, I would argue that the "heart being annihilated from witnessing itself" is pointing to the lack of meta-awareness in such states, again usually defined as "the ability to take explicit note of the current contents of consciousness" (Schooler et al. 2011, 319).

Sells (1996, 111-112) introduces a spectrum of "ecstatic" states (all sharing the same Arabic root) understood and presented by al-Qushayri, beginning with the state(s) of *tawajud*, translated as "self-produced ecstasy" or the somewhat awkward "making-ecstatic" which means "the petitioning of ecstasy through a kind of self-will" or the act of "attempting to achieve ecstasy through [one's] own initiative." Next comes the absorptive states of *wajd* proper, and culminate in *wujud* ("existence"), the ecstatic state where one finally finds or encounters ultimate reality, that which truly exists. This spectrum of existentially ecstatic states and the relationship between the three is compared to "one who witnesses the sea, then sails upon the sea, then drowns in the sea" (Sells 1996, 114). This transformative experience of drowning in the sea (of divine unity) is also commonly known as *fana*, to which we will now turn.

ANNIHILATION (*FANA*) AND SUBSISTENCE (*BAQA*)

The states of *fana* and *baqa* are traditionally understood to comprise the goal of the Sufi path, though different traditions elucidate different stages and flavors of both. *Fana* is often translated as "annihilation" (Ernst 1997, 94), or "the annihilation of the ego-self in mystical union" (Sells 1996, 6), though Schimmel notes that the "German term *Entwerden*, as used by the medieval mystics, is closer to its meaning than words "like annihilation," "being naughted," or "passing away," since it is the opposite of "becoming," warden" (Schimmel

[1975] 2011, 142). *Baqa* is often translated as "persistence" or "subsistence" (Schimmel [1975] 2011, 143), "God's becoming present" (Ernst 1997, 60) or "the abiding of the person in union with the divine" (Sells 1996, 78) and is understood to come after *fana,* either immediately after the state concludes or only with extra guidance and/or grace.

The state of *fana* is widely understood as an absorptive one, such that, as al-Qushayri explains, the person experiencing this state "has no knowledge of self or creatures, no perception, no information, so that even if self and creatures exist, he is utterly unaware of them, not perceiving them in any way" (Sells 1996, 120). The fact that meta-awareness is absent in this state is stated explicitly by Abd al-Rahman Jami (15th CE), who writes that ""Annihilation" means that the overpowering force of the manifestation of God's Being to the Sufi's inward reality erases his awareness of other than God […] if the annihilated traveler is aware of his own annihilation, he is not truly annihilated, since both the attribute of annihilation and the possessor of that attribute are in the category of "other than God"". Hence awareness of annihilation negates annihilation" (quoted in Nurbakhsh [1982] 1993, 88–89). This lack of meta-awareness in *fana* is explicit in al-Ghazali's understanding of *fana* as well, which he describes in a passage outlining several stages of the contemplative practice of *dhikr* (recitative "remembrance" of names of God or Qur'anic verses) in which he provides a particularly cogent description of different depths of absorption:

> Know that it has been revealed to the possessors of insight that remembrance is the best deed. However, it also has three layers, some of which are closer to the core than others. It has a core behind the three layers, and the layers have been given precedence due to their being a way to the core. The first layer is remembrance of the tongue only. The second is remembrance of the heart-if the heart is in need of supervision until it becomes present with remembrance, and if it were abandoned it would be preoccupied with various thoughts. The third is for remembrance to be established in the heart and to overwhelm it, to the extent that it would require force to turn it away from remembrance to something else-just as, in the second layer, force is needed to establish remembrance and constantly maintain it. (Al-Ghazzali 2016, 69)

A distinction is made here between dhikr where one has to exert a lot of effort to maintain one's focus and attention and the latter stage where focus has become effortless such that it would actually take effort to break one's focus on the practice.[57] He continues,

> The fourth, which is the core, is for the remembered to be established in the heart, and remembrance to be erased and hidden. This is the core which is sought after, whereby the heart turns its attention neither to remembrance nor to the heart; rather, its entire being is immersed in the remembered. Whenever, in the course of this, the heart becomes aware of turning to remembrance, it is a distracting partition. This state is what the gnostics call 'self-oblivion' (fana'), which is for a person to be oblivious to himself to the extent that he does not sense anything from his outer limbs, anything external, or any of the inner fluctuations within him…If, during this, it occurs to him that he is oblivious from himself entirely, then that also is an adulteration and a blemish. Rather, completion is for him to be oblivious to himself and oblivious to oblivion as well, for indeed oblivion of oblivion is the pinnacle of oblivion. (69–70)

Here, the state of absorption entails both perceptual decoupling in that nothing is being perceived through the senses as well as a lack of meta-awareness of "any of the inner fluctuations within" causing one to be "oblivious to oblivion." While it seems possible from this passage to experience perceptual decoupling with meta-awareness, the completion or fullest realization of the state is one in which it is absent. Al-Ghazali then, in a manner remarkably resonant with contemporary discussions, compares this spectrum of focus and absorption to being immersed in feelings towards a human beloved or even anger towards an enemy:

> Indeed you could become immersed in extreme anger by thinking about your enemy, or extreme desire for your lover, to the extent that there is not room in your mind for anything else. You are spoken to, yet you do not understand; someone passes in front of you, yet you do not see him although your eyes are open; a conversation is taking place next to you, yet you do not hear despite there being no deafness in your ears. In this immersion, you are heedless to everything, including the immersion itself; for

[57] This experience can be profitably compared to the stage of "coalescence" described by Rose (2016) and Sparby (2019, 13) where "the object of focus has been imbued with a magnetic power that draws attention automatically back towards it when it strays."

> surely the one who is attentive to immersion has turned away from that which he is immersed in. (70)

This passage describes normal states of absorption we have all experienced, and the lack of meta-awareness involved in them, in ways that are very resonant with contemporary psychological accounts. In fact, Markovic and Thompson (2016) specifically highlight the reduction of meta-awareness involved in states of craving, as we saw above.[58] But *fana* is not defined only by its features of perceptual decoupling and lack of meta-awareness —since other ecstatic states may share these two characteristics—but also by its fruits which endure after the state has passed, traditionally understood as an ethical transformation where one takes on God's attributes. The return to normal sensory perception with eyes anew and a resurrected divine Self (the after sense of self dissolution) is often understood as *baqa*, but some traditions divide this realization into several stages, an example of which we shall turn to next.

TODAY

In a contemporary Turkish Sufi tradition that has recently spread to North America, the Nuriyya-Malamiyya, one must progress through several states of absorption en route to the contemplative transformation posited as the goal of their path. The Sufi aspirant in this tradition is trained in both audible and "subvocal" dhikr "in a way that induces ecstasy" (*wajd*), though the spectrum of ecstasy is acknowledged and one is led from what they call

[58] Interestingly, Rabbi Dov Ber of Lubavitch (18th–19th CE) also uses the example of someone flying off into a fit of rage to describe the lack of meta-awareness involved in states of absorption known as *hitpa'alut* (Jacobs 1963, 14).

the "cultivation of ecstasy (*tawajud)"* to states of ecstasy proper (*wajd*) which come to fruition in the state of encountering "existence itself (*wujud*)" (Toussulis 2010, 168–171). In a description reminiscent of (and likely rooted in) the metaphor and comparison al-Qushayri used above to describe the continuum of ecstasy (*wajd*), the contemporary scholar and adherent of this tradition Dr. Yannis Toussulis describes how,

> The outward dimension of vocal dhikr involves audibly chanting the names in a wind like manner, thereby raising waves on the surface of the ocean. These waves are hidden thoughts, images, sensations, and emotions, which rise to the surface and empty themselves into the greater motion of the sea. During this period one becomes what some Sufis call an imitative drunkard. Such a one is merely a "possessor of tastings" and his or her ecstasy is sporadic and of short duration. The inner dimension of audible dhikr is one in which one recognizes that one habitually mistakes the surface of these waves with the sea itself. Progressively, the waves sink into the sea; the wind stops and the surface becomes calm. The ocean is gradually revealed as a single body composed of two activities: waves in motion and calmness. Here, as some Sufis put it, one becomes a "possessor of drinking" and is completely overcome by ecstasy. (Toussulis 2010, 170)

While Toussulis notes that the ultimate goal is "a state of more authentic sobriety," during the states of ecstasy preceding this "one may find oneself feeling and acting, at times, like one who is mualla (mad in Allah)" though this "is considered to be a sign of immaturity, especially if it is indiscriminately displayed to others who are not adepts in Sufism" (171).

Ultimately this path culminates in the realization of *fana*, which he understands as "a condition of self-effacement in the reality of God's Omnipresence" and "a gradual effacement of the false sense of a separative self (or ego)", and *baqa* understood as the subsequent "reintegration into an authentic selfhood, which, according to Ibn Arabi, is also the condition of intrinsic servitude (ubuda)" (172). The Nuriyya also break up the transformation of *baqa* into three stages, the first of which is *jam* (gathering), where,

> all the former realizations in the phase of fana—the effacement of actions, attributes, and essence—are powerfully "gathered" (jam) together. As a matter of fact, they are synthesized so intensely that the servant temporarily ceases to be, often falling into a

> state of total intoxication in which the apparent world disappears…This condition completely alters one's sense of self-identity in a way Attar has expressed as follows: "I have no news of my coming or passing away—the whole thing happened quicker than a breath; ask no questions of the moth. In the candle flame of his face I have forgotten all the answers."…one cannot remain in this state for too long for to do so would be to risk becoming "mad in allah" (mualla). Because of this, the malamati guide immediately coaxes his student into the next stage of baqa. (177)

While many states can be absorptive such that one 'temporarily ceases to be' and 'the apparent world disappears,' as well as being comparable to madness, not all of them alter one's sense of identity at baseline in an enduring way. Whereas in the earlier states of ecstasy, one is like one who is *mualla*, here there is actually a risk of inhabiting this state in an ongoing way.

In the second stage of *baqa*, called both the "second separation" (*farq al thani*) and "the presence of gathering" (*hadhrat al-jam*), "the student returns to sobriety, yet the one who returns or who is reborn in this way is radically divested of the myth of separate selfhood" though "there is still, however, a vestige of separation" that remains and marks it as an incomplete realization (178). The third and final stage of *baqa*, described and translated as the "integration of gathering" (*jam al-jam*) consists in the realization "that creation is truly the locus for God to manifest the fullness of His own nature" which results in a condition where "sobriety (*sahw*), induced through perception of the forms, and intoxication (*sukr*), induced through the perception of God, alternate in such a way that the integrative state of human being as a servant and deputy gradually ripens" (180). In response to the question of whether the experience of union with God requires "a complete transcendence of one's individual "I," a contemporary Shaykh of this tradition (and Toussulis' teacher) Mehmet Selim Ozic answers:

> Yes, a total effacement is required in order to transform individual "I-ness" into "We-ness." But the essential uniqueness of a person is not lost in this form of relatedness. In reality your uniqueness is *enhanced* through that greater relatedness. After effacement, there is an effacement of the effacement, and one returns to being an individuated human being—but with a critical difference in one's perception and discernment. (154-55)

Toussulis then summarizes that,

> Continuance (*baqa*) was thought to be a fundamental reorientation of the separateness of the human being and God, which does not constitute the permanent dissolution of the individual. Instead, according to the Pir, human maturity, "completion" requires the comprehension of a fundamental paradox: that one is (figuratively) "one" with God and yet quite separate. This conviction was…exemplified by Bahauddin Naqshband who said, "The existence of the lover who has found baqa with the Beloved does not become overwhelmed in the Awesome Lights of the theophanies [tajalliyat] and does not become nonexistent—on the contrary, it is strengthened…In the first separation, the ego-bound identity is convinced of its separateness from the interrelatedness of Being. At the apex of the Sufi path, this divisive delusion is dispelled by the experience of momentary union (jam). The second separation that follows jam consists of a reintegration of the personality after the dissolution of the separative ego; and this stage is grounded in an ongoing perception of the inseparability of all beings. In short, individual existents are viewed as manifold expressions of Being itself, and the human entity is perceived to be the primary vehicle *through which* Being realizes its inherent unity. (183-4)

Ozic clarifies that even in this perfected realization, "Human beings can never be truly perfected as human. Perfection—or as we prefer to call it, "wholeness"—can only be realized through the recognition of our own imperfectability. In our tradition, "perfection" should be viewed as relative…Insan al-kamil, the "mature human being", is one who has achieved greater wholeness through a greater awareness of both perfection and imperfection. Our aim is not static—and therefore we cannot subscribe to any notion of self-perfection that is fixed" (153-154). Toussulis concludes the presentation of this final stage by quoting Abi'l-Khayr (10^{th}-11^{th} CE) who writes, "The perfect mystic is not an ecstatic devotee lost in contemplation of Oneness, nor a saintly recluse shunning all commerce with mankind, but 'the true saint' goes in and out amongst the people and eats and sleeps with them and buys and sells in the market and marries and takes part in social intercourse, and never forgets God for a single moment" (198).

JEWISH TRADITIONS

CONCENTRATION (*KAVANNAH*)

In the formative period of Rabbinic Judaism (1st – 6th CE), we find an important example of states of heightened concentration and absorption being cultivated and employed in prayer. In the earliest strata of the Babylonian Talmud, the Mishnah, we find a passage that becomes paradigmatic for all later traditions of contemplative prayer:

> One may only stand and begin to pray from a state of 'heaviness of head' (*koved rosh*). The early pietists would wait one hour and then pray, so that they would focus (*l'kaven*) their hearts toward 'The Place of Divinity'. Even if the king greets him, he should not respond to him; and even if a snake is wrapped on his heel, he should not interrupt. (Berachot 5:1; translation mine)

Elliot Wolfson (1996) elaborates on this "ideal of mental concentration" called *kavannah*, which he defines as "the setting and focusing of the mind on a fixed object and the blocking out of all distracting thoughts" (140). This ideal state of concentration is correlated with a *koved rosh,* literally a "heavy head,"[59] but in this context perhaps referring (paradoxically) to a lightness or clarity of mind, or more speculatively, to the capacity to direct one's mind in a way that it gravitates towards its object and one's attention does not easily disengage or 'float away.'[60] As Wolfson writes, "the worshiper's concentration must be so intense that nothing—

[59] Again, an interesting locution to potentially refer to the phenomenon of 'coalescence' described by Rose (2016) and Sparby (2019).

[60] This likely confluence of a heaviness and lightness in the term is reminiscent of hypnotic induction techniques and states, where the induction suggestion is often around feeling bodily heaviness which is a common experience in hypnotic states, but often precedes or simultaneously evokes experiences of "body floating and being disembodied" or a "'free-floating' attention" (Cardena 2005, 48). These experiences can often co-arise with experiences of "flashes of light" and "brightness" as well—a connection perhaps as well to the definition of *kavannah* for both Maimonides and Jacob ben Asher, if we acknowledge that the "iconic

neither king nor serpent—should divert his attention" (140). Here, from a contemplative perspective and interpretation of the passage, prayer is situated in relation to a state of heightened attention and non-distraction such that one wouldn't notice even if one's life were in immediate physical danger (snake) or faced with extreme social pressure (king). In the Jerusalem Talmud, there is an elaboration of this ideal and perhaps a window into the kinds of techniques used to engender this concentrated state. Joel Hecker summarizes the passage (JT Berachot 2:4) when he describes how the Rabbinic sages used different methods towards this end: "Rabbi Hiyya meditated on the Persian political hierarchy to help him concentrate. Rabbi Samuel counted birds. And Rabbi Bun bar Hiyya counted rows of bricks" and explains that these "latter approaches are strikingly similar to the simple act of counting one's breaths as a means to calm the mind, a method used in mindfulness meditation as practiced today" (Hecker n.d.).

While the Talmudic texts discussing *kavannah* are open to multiple interpretations and readings[61] such that, as Afterman writes, "it remains unclear [to scholars today] what…is meant by this term" in the Rabbinic materials (Afterman 2007, 53), nevertheless later Jewish contemplative traditions certainly understood the term (and these passages) in the light of its absorptive connotations. For example, Maimonides (12th CE) writes: "What is…concentration [kavannah]? That one empties one's heart of all thoughts and envisions oneself as if he were

visualization of the divine presence" from a "state of disembodiment" often took on a luminous quality (Wolfson 1999, 605). See also Wolfson's (2004) article, "Hermeneutics of Light in Medieval Kabbalah."

[61] For example, the more standard scholarly reading of Babylonian Talmud passage sees it more as demonstrating determination over attention or that the Jerusalem Talmud passage is about sages being bored and/or distracted as opposed to more concentrated. In the words of Wolfson, ultimately the question and debate concerns whether, as Scholem assumed, "the kabbalistic notion of kawwanah was an innovation imposed upon the rabbinic texts" or whether "the gap separating the rabbinic and medieval mystical should be substantially narrowed" given "a continuity of tradition" between them (Wolfson 1999, 598–99).

standing in the presence of the divine presence" (quoted in Russ-Fishbane 2015, 110; Wolfson 1999, 601) and also that "True kavvanah implies freedom from all strange thoughts [distractions] and complete awareness of the fact that one stands before the Divine Presence" (Tishby 2008, 44). Concentration was indeed the pivotal component of Maimonides' own contemplative system, as Persico (2022) emphasizes: "Maimonides instructs his followers to practice a meditative path of focused concentration, progressing through steps along which they train to concentrate, until reaching complete control of their mind" (397). These "increasing periods and levels of concentration" are achieved through a gradual program where,

> Maimonides admonishes his pupils to first "empty your mind of everything" while reciting daily prayers. After a number of years practicing and perfecting this, the aspirant should also clear their mind while reading the Torah or hearing it read in synagogue. Then one should concentrate on God also while reciting the numerous blessings required by Jewish law, and finally one should concentrate any and all time but the periods needed for daily business and family matters. (Persico 2022, 397)[62]

Similarly, in the mystical group known as the 'German Pietists' (12th-13th CE) (*Hasidei Ashkenaz*), *kavannah* continues to have a connotation of concentration and non-distractibility (Tishby 2008, 945).[63] And Gershom Scholem, in his discussion of this ideal in early Provencal and Geronese Kabbalah, notes that,

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[62] See Wolfson (1999, 601-602n23) for a discussion of the iconic dimension of kavannah for Maimonides in relation to the contemplative ideal he elaborates in *The Guide of the Perplexed* (III:51).

[63] See also Wolfson (1999) for the connection between *kavannah* and "the imaginary representation of God" in the contemplative traditions of the German Pietists (620). I view my own reading as aligned with Wolfson's but with a different emphasis: while I am drawing attention to the absorptive dimensions of the ideal as it developed and evolved throughout Jewish contemplative traditions, I read him as emphasizing the term's association with enhanced imaginal capabilities (that I believe such states absorption and perceptual decoupling afford) and particular imaginal practices leading to the paradoxical envisioning of an image of an imageless invisible God. See Wolfson (1999, 600n15) and the quote from Wolfson (2005) below where he discusses the relationship between sensory withdrawal and imaginal vision in R. Hayyim Vital for his poetic and pithy encapsulation of (what I take to be) the connection between these two associations of *kavannah*.

> It is most remarkable indeed that kabbalistic usage is, in this respect, very similar to that of the scholastics for whom *intentio* does not mean "intention" in our usual sense but rather the energy or tension of the act of cognition. (the etymology would be derived from the tension of the bow when directing the arrow). The kawwanah of meditation is the tension with which the consciousness (of a person performing a prayer or another ritual act) is directed to the world or object before him." (Scholem 1987, 243).

In other words, for the early Kabbalists, this state of mental concentration is likened to pulling the string of a bow back and aiming an arrow at a target: the greater the tension, the greater the attentional ability; the further the bow is pulled back, the further one's consciousness can be aimed and projected toward a target. In one source from this school, the non-distractibility of the state is again emphasized where it clarifies that "True kavvanah [is achieved] when a man rids his heart of all alien thoughts," also known as distractions, and in another we find an interpretation of the Talmudic story from above in this vein as well: "It was in this way that the early sages used to spend an hour before prayer, so that they might rid themselves of other thoughts, and prepare their methods of concentration (kavvanah) and the power with which they practised it" (quoted in Tishby 2008, 947). And finally, in a very influential legal compendium influenced by Geronese Kabbalah, the same Talmudic passage is understood in an even more absorptive sense:

> It has been taught "he who prays should direct his heart"…He should arouse the intention and remove all thoughts that burden him until the point that his mind and intention are pure in his worship…Thus the pietists and men of action would concentrate and intend in their prayer until they attained the stripping away of corporeality and the augmentation of the rational spirit, thereby approximating the level of prophecy. (quoted in Wolfson 1999, 602)

Summarizing the passage, Moshe Idel writes that the "inner concentration of thought and the intensive channeling of the attention during the act of prayer may culminate in a paranormal state of consciousness that resembles ecstasy, described here as prophecy" and calls attention to the locution of 'stripping away of corporeality' (*hitpashtut ha-gashmiut*) which we will see

below means developing concentration to such an extent that complete sensory withdrawal occurs (Idel 1995, 64).

In *Sefer Ha-Zohar* (The Book of Splendor) that emerges in the 13th century, considered the canonical text of Jewish mysticism, *kavannah* corresponds to the Aramaic phrase *reuta* ("will") or *reuta d'liba* ("will of the heart") and in some passages takes on new somatic associations and characteristics:

> Come and see. When a man applies his will to worship his Master, the will alights first upon the heart, which is the support and foundation of the whole body. Then this good will suffuses all the bodily organs, and the will of all the bodily organs and the will of the heart combine together, and they attract the radiance of the Shekhinah to dwell with them, and that man becomes a portion of the Holy One, blessed be He. (quoted in Tishby 2008, 954)

Here we can observe two phases of a meditative movement, one in which the kabbalist takes an active role in the process—in applying the will/concentration such that it involves the heart and the body and they combine—and a second passive aspect or result of this process where the lowest dimension of the divine (the *Shekhinah*, from the Hebrew root "to dwell") comes to rest or dwell upon (or within) the complete entangled heart-body system, i.e., the embodied mind. The second phase can either be read as a natural result of the first part of the process, thus emphasizing human agency, or in a manner that makes more room for divine agency and grace such that the first part is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the latter. As opposed to just a mental quality, there is now an "involvement of all the limbs in kavvanah," which "helps to make man into a tabernacle for the Shekhinah to dwell in"[64] (Tishby 2008, 954).

[64] Hellner-Eshed (2009) describes how, while not presented systematically—since systemization is antithetical to the ethos of the text (316)—one of the three distinct states of consciousness that are described and cultivated by the protagonists of the Zohar, which she calls "Tree of Life Consciousness," has clear absorptive features, including "the experience of centeredness or concentration, comprising all the different vectors operative in this state," "full presence" and "focused intention" (343). She also notes the affinity with states of "flow,"

SECLUSION AND PROPHETIC CONCENTRATION (*HITBODEDUT*)

Another key term in Kabbalistic literature related to states of absorption, which is sometimes connected to *kavannah* though at other times stands on its own, is *hitbodedut*. As Paul Fenton (1995) writes, "The term hitbodedut, as also its Arabic equivalent khalwa, may signify according to context either spiritual retreat to a secluded place, most often a cave or a cell, or, by extension, the meditational technique practiced during such a retreat, or else the psychological state resulting therefrom, i.e., oblivion to the sensual world" (273). In other words, in some places the term refers to a practice of physical seclusion, whereas in other cases, the term connotes "an act of mental or intellectual concentration preceding, primarily, prophetic acquisition" (Reiser 2020, 134). But in the history of Jewish mysticism, it was Rabbi Abraham Abulafia (13th CE) who introduced *hitbodedut* as the ideal arena for contemplative practice as well as describing specific meditative techniques to be undertaken within it (Fenton 1995, 275). For example, he describes the process as follows:

> Prepare yourself by uniting your heart and unifying your body. Then choose a special place where nobody in the world can hear your voice. Retire to the most complete isolation and attain the state of solitude (hitboded). Sit yourself in a particular place, in a room or a cell and disclose your secret to none. If possible practice this method in the daytime in a house, even if it be for an instant. However the most propitious moment is at night. Take heed that all vanities of this world be emptied from your mind at the time you prepare yourself to converse with your Creator, if you desire that He manifest His greatness to you. Wrap yourself in your prayer-shawl and adorn your head and arms with the phylacteries, so that you may be smitten with reverence in the

identified by Seligman and Kirmayer (2008, 34) as "external absorption": "This state of consciousness is familiar to us in states of breath meditation or concentration, sometimes in prayer, and sometimes in particularly concentrated moments in writing or some other such activity where the ordinary sense of the dimension of time disappears. This state is also familiar to us in states of performance—for example, virtuoso musicians or talented dancers during a recital, or Olympic sprinters during a race" (Hellner-Eshed 2009, 343–48). See also the description of "the sleep of prophecy" entailing the cessation of sensory activity by Rabbi Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, a suspected member of the Zoharic circle (Hellner-Eshhed 2009, 403) as well as Wolfson (1993) for a survey of imaginal states of absorption in the Zohar.

> presence of the shekhinah (Divine Presence), which henceforth encompasses you. Take care that your garments be clean and clad yourself in white if possible, for such preliminaries heighten concentration in love and fear. (quoted in Fenton 1995, 275–6)

Once one has satisfied all these conditions, then one can begin "the meditation of Divine Names, called sod ha-hazkarah" which Fenton notes is "an appellation again evoking the specific term dhikr used by the Sufis to denote solitary meditation" where one similarly pronounces different divine names in a specific rhythmic and melodic manner accompanied by breath control and particular head movements (275). A similar procedure for *hitbodedut* as physical retreat is prescribed in the text, *Shaarei Tzedek* (Gates of Righteousness) (13th CE), identified by Idel as written by the student of Abulafia Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar (mentioned in Wolfson 2004, 424-24n292), which describes the practice as follows:

> This method consists, first of all, in the cleansing of the body itself, for the physical is symbolic of the spiritual. Next in the order of ascent is the cleansing of your bodily disposition and your spiritual propensities (…) On this account seclusion in a separate house is prescribed, and if this be a house where no (external) noise can be heard, the better. At the beginning it is advisable to decorate the house with fresh herbs in order to cheer the vegetable soul which a man possesses alongside his animal soul. Next, one should have recourse to musical instruments or to the chanting of liturgical verse through love for the Torah in order to arouse the animal souls which all men possess alongside the rational soul. Then one can resort to the visualisation of the intelligibles and contemplation. Next one will proceed with the pronunciation of consonants which (in permutated form) are unintelligible in order to detach the soul and purify it of all forms formerly within it. (quoted in Fenton 1995, 282)[65]

Fenton continues to point out "the recurrence of similar stipulations in the Sufi and Qabbalistic texts" such as "absence of light" in such settings (though more explicit in other sources) and

[65] Wolfson (2004) describes the goal of this particular practice as a state of passing "beyond the threshold of thought and speech" and a "state of mindfulness devoid of concepts, images, and words" which "leads experientially to the breakdown of the perceptual distinction between inside and outside, as the external form beheld by the adept is the radiance of the internal light, which in turn is a reflection of the external form" (234-34). He then compares it to a state Hindu Yogic *samadhi* described in a practice of deity veneration and emphasizes its paradoxical and nondual characteristics: "the heart of the mystic becomes a translucent mirror, the screen/veil through which the internal is externalized and the external internalized, the seeing of one's form projected outward as the outward image propelled inward, the vision in which the different of identity between seer and seen is overcome in the identity of their difference" (235).

that "one should be isolated and remote from external disturbances" (282). Here, we can notice a few remarkable things about this practice, the first of which is the house or cell in which this occurs, by being remote and at least a partially sensory deprived environment—especially a dark room or cell, or at night—aids in the withdrawal of the senses. Before such withdrawal occurs however (presumably in the visualization and contemplation stage), one is advised to either play music or chant/sing songs that evoke feelings of love and longing and can aid in a preliminary external absorption into the affectively infused music. After a visualization practice—likely one or more of the divine names of God with either an active or passive perception of lights within the letters—one begins the "pronunciation" (*hazkarat*) of unintelligible consonants (with different vowels), another external absorption practice that can result in the 'detachment' of the soul, which we can understand as an even more absorbed state where one no longer has any sensory perception.

The sensory deprivation and withdrawal dimensions of the practice of *hitbodedut* as solitary retreat are even more pronounced in the Egyptian Pietist movement led by the son of Moses Maimonides, Abraham Maimonides (12th-13th CE), who was himself highly influenced by Islamic mystical traditions and praxis (Idel 2000, 201). Elisha Russ-Fishbane (2015) describes how Abraham and the movement more broadly practiced solitary retreat but also made a distinction between ""outer solitude," namely the act of physical isolation and meditation, and "inner solitude," or the spiritual transformation and withdrawal for which the outer discipline serves as practical training" (119). This state is attained by ascetic practices like fasting and physical seclusion that provide the conditions to attain such a "mortification of the flesh" which consists in,

> the emptying of the heart and mind of everything other than Him, may He be exalted, and allowing it to be filled and inhabited by Him (wa-ta'ammurihi bihi). This is

> achieved by suspending the sensory part of the soul, or most of it, directing the appetitive part away from all other worldly matters and inclining it toward Him, may He be exalted, and preoccupying the rational part with Him. (quoted in Russ-Fishbane 2015, 119)

Russ-Fishbane describes this state as a "complete absorption of the heart and mind in the divine" in which "the withdrawal of the soul in the act of meditation culminated in a total silencing of bodily sensation and self-awareness" (119). Here the role of sensory withdrawal is even more explicit in the "suspending of the sensory part of the soul," which is undoubtedly aided by the solitary retreat setting. "The goal of khalwah," Russ-Fishbane emphasizes using the Arabic term for seclusion that R. Abraham used, "was to deaden the body to all worldly stimuli and thereby refine the soul's natural inclination to its divine origin" since for the practitioners within this movement, "the darkening of outer vision is the preliminary to inner illumination" (120).

As mentioned above, *hitbodedut* can also refer to particular contemplative states as well—those that may be accessed (more easily) in such a secluded environment but can also be realized in other circumstances—which we find in Abulafia as well as later mystics such as Rabbi Isaac of Akko (13th-14th CE) and the Safed school of Kabbalists (16th CE) (Fenton 1995, 283–293). Idel, though he recognizes the term sometimes refers to physical seclusion, particularly emphasizes *hitbodedut* as a concentrative and contemplative state in what he calls the school of "Ecstatic Kabbalah" (1988b, 107). While Fenton also noted *hitbodedut* can refer to a psychological state resulting from physical seclusion and/or meditative practice within that context, Idel argues that for Abulafia the state of *hitbodedut* often means the state of concentration necessary to successfully engage in specific contemplative practices, not just the result of them. He explains that in certain passages of Abulafia's writings the term "is understood in the sense of the concentration of one's mental activity" that is the "precondition

for pronouncing the names of God" and the practice of "letter combination" (1988b, 107; 110), since these practices are quite complex and involve representing the names and combinations of names in written form, verbally, and mentally in sync with specific patterns of breathing, singing, and bodily movement (Idel 1988c, 22–41). In this meaning of *hitbodedut* as concentration, closing one's eyes and shutting out other sensory input was understood to aid in the cultivation of the state and thus became associated with the achievement of *kavvanah* too, for which Idel brings a passage from an early anonymous Kabbalistic text, which explains: "What is the essence of Hitbodedut? By closing the eyes for a long time, and in accordance with the length of time, so shall be the greatness of the apprehension. Therefore let his eyes always be shut until he attains apprehension of the Divine, and together with shutting his eyes negate every thought and every sound that he hears" (Idel 1988b, 134).

One of the mystics Idel associates with the school of 'Ecstatic' or 'Prophetic' Kabbalah, Rabbi Isaac of Akko, describes the state of *hitbodedut* in his book *Meirat Einayim* (Light of the Eyes), where he writes how, "He who merits the secret of communion [with the divine] will merit the secret of equanimity (hishtawwut), and if he receives this secret, then he will also know the secret of hitbodedut, and once he has known the secret of hitbodedut, he will receive the Holy Spirit, and from that prophecy, until he shall prophesy and tell future things" (quoted in Fenton 1995, 283; Fishbane 2009, 256). For Rabbi Isaac, *hitbodedut* is "a mental state in which the adept empties his mind of all else but God" and the way to get there is by first realizing the stage of "cleaving" (*devekut*) which corresponds to the stabilization of attention by visualizing the letters of the tetragrammaton "as if they were written before him in Hebrew script, each letter appearing to him in gigantic dimensions" (Fenton 1995, 284). If

one is able to stabilize the visualization of the letters to such an extent that one achieves a "separation from or equanimity toward worldly things"—which Idel correlates with "a condition of ataraxia ("absence of passion")" and may be understood as an experience of being neither attracted nor repulsed by any distracting thoughts or sensory stimuli—then the heightened state of concentrative *hitbodedut* can be reached, itself the platform for the attainment of the Holy Spirit (*ruach ha-kodesh*) and even prophecy (Idel 1988b, 113). My suggestion, aligned with but extending the conciliatory reading of Fishbane (2009, 259),[66] is that this state is associated with a solitary retreat—even if it wasn't realized within one—because it is as if one's concentrative awareness is secluded from sensory stimuli, as if one were in an environment of complete sensory deprivation.

These same five stages, with some elaborations and developments, can also be found in Rabbi Hayyim Vital's (16th CE) text *Shaarei Kedushah* (Gates of Holiness) (Magid 2015, 244–245). As Wolfson points out, "Vital considers subjugation of the body (achieved through

[66] There, Fishbane seeks to "resolve the disparate interpretations of Idel and Fenton" by positing that "It may very well be that the specific meditative practices alluded to by the word hitbodedut originated in seclusionary implementation (owing to the literal meaning of the word), and subsequently came to connote those meditative techniques themselves (i.e., irrespective of the physical act of isolation). This would explain the perplexing use of the word hitbodedut in the nonseclusionary settings that Idel so convincingly documents" (259). On this account, the "practices originally associated with seclusion (and conducted under those conditions) may therefore simply have taken on the name of their original framework, while still maintaining the mode of meditation cultivated therein" (259). Fishbane elsewhere remarks on the "recurring theme in Isaac's writing" of his "repeated emphasis on the need for the kabbalist to transcend the realm of physical sensation for the sake of mental attachment to the intellective dimensions of the spirit" (248). He argues that the "complete detachment for the senses" and "necessary transcendence of corporeal sensation" was indicative of Isaac's "deep state of anxiety and discomfort with his own embodied life—articulating an ideal of physical self-transcendence and a highly negative view of the body and its desires. Sensate experience, and the inevitable appetites that follow, is a condition of being that must be restrained, even harshly subjugated, for the sake of a pure attachment to the divine realm" (248). This attitude, however, was hardly unique to Isaac, since "the prevalence of such attitudes within the three Abrahamic traditions in the West…is ultimately indebted to Platonic and Neoplatonic conceptions of an existential tension between the eternal celestial soul and the mortal physical body" (249).

specific acts of asceticism) as the necessary precondition for the mystical experience of contemplation" (2005, 120–121), the process of which he describes as follows:

> You already know that all manner of apprehending the divine requires solitude so that the mind will not be distracted. The individual must be alone with his thoughts until the last moment and peel away his body from his mind/soul until he no longer feels that he is a material being but a purely spiritual entity. The more one is able to do this, the stronger one's apprehension will become. If one is disturbed by a noise or a movement, one's thought process will cease. Or, if one has thoughts of material existence, one's thought process will be disrupted and one's communion with the upper spheres will be severed, at which point one will apprehend nothing. This is because the holy spheres above do not rest on one who is attached to physicality, even tangentially. This is why prophecy and the Holy Spirit are called slumber (tardama), dream (halom), or vision (hazon). In the end even though a person may be fit to attain the Holy Spirit, if he does not accustom himself to sever his body from his soul, he will not achieve it. This is the secret as to why the disciples of the prophets used musical instruments (drums and fifes) (1 Samuel 10:5). They were able to enter into a sustained state of contemplation and separation of body and soul by means of the sweetness of the music. At that moment, the musician ceased playing and the prophets continued in their state of communion and prophesied. (Magid 2015, 238)

This passage might provide us some additional insight into the use of music in retreats mentioned in *Shaarei Tzedek* above, given the Biblical precedent Vital sees for the use of music to cultivate states of absorption and ultimately even prophecy. The disembodied (or completely absorbed) nature of prophecy is why it is sometimes referred to as a special kind of sleep (*tardema*) and the extreme level of absorption is emphasized such that even the slightest "tangential" sensory perception, literally meaning as if "by a thread" (*ke-khut ha-sa'arah*), will sever the connection with the divine worlds (Magid 2015, 238). In another passage, this state is even compared to death: "He should close his eyes and separate his thought from all matters of this world as if his soul departed from him like one who has died who feels nothing at all" (quoted in Wolfson 2005, 121).

Earlier in this same text, this separation of the body from the soul is referred to as *hitpashtut ha-gashmiut*, often translated as "divestment of corporeality," and R. Vital

describes the process similarly though with a critical role for the imagination: "The meaning of divestment is that he remove all his thoughts…and the imaginative power…will cease to imagine and think of any of the matters of the world, as if his soul has departed him, and then the imaginary power transforms his thought, so as to imagine and visualize as if he ascends to the supernal worlds" (quoted in Garb 2011, 51). Here we see that there are multiple stages of this process, the first of which is roughly equivalent to the one referenced in the first quote, seclusion leading to sensory withdrawal and heightened concentration. However here, once one has detached from physicality (and the senses which perceive it), one must also silence one's imagination so that it no longer is fed by corporeal images based on the memories of sensory perception, and can eventually 'tune in' to imaginal perception from the upper worlds, which for Vital are the Sefirot or the divine emanations which together constitute the body of the divine, so to speak. Garb describes how for Vital, "The emptying of thought, which is frequently presented as the summit of meditative practice, is here but…a necessary prelude" for the second stage of a "more effortless reception of concrete [divine] images in the imagination" (Garb 2011, 52). And Wolfson summarizes this whole trajectory when he writes that "The ultimate secret of the prophetic experience is the imaginative representation of the divine as an Anthropos" (2005, 121), like we find in the Biblical books of Isaiah and Ezekiel where God is envisioned in human form, and that it is the "soul's separation from the body in the imaginative ascent to the divine realm that culminates in the spiritual entities assuming corporeal form within the imagination" (122).

Lastly, it is worth noting that the dangers of such states of absorptive "divestment" (*hitpashtut*) were explicitly discussed by the practitioners of these techniques and were known to include 'madness' and psychological harm. For example, Rabbi Yosef Ibn Sayyah's (16th

CE) meditative instructions present a similar trajectory of "sensory withdrawal, ascent, concentration, and stabilization of visionary experience" where the practitioner is instructed to "bow his head like a servant between his knees,[67] until his sensory perceptions (*murgashav*) are abolished, as his senses are absent" (Garb 2011, 63). However, he advises that "his teacher needs to stand over him on the first time, so that his hands may be firm, so that he should not be one who glances and is damaged as we find that it happened to some of the early sages" (64). This is a reference to a Talmudic story of four sages who entered a paradisical orchard or palatial garden complex (*pardes*), which was commonly interpreted in later mystical traditions to refer to entering contemplative states of divine intimacy or union (Subtelny 2004). Only one of the Rabbinic sages, Rabbi Akiva, "entered in peace and emerged in peace" while the others suffered—one died, another became a heretic, and the one referenced by Ibn Sayyah became psychologically damaged (Hellner-Eshed 2009, 63). Relatedly, the ideal of the Jewish contemplative in the Zohar is to be one who "entered and emerged" (*man de-alu ve-nafku*) in peace or (psychological) wholeness, but even some of the heroes of the text "entered and did not emerge," where their "souls [became] more closely bound to divinity than to their bodies," likely manifesting as psychological imbalance (Hellner-Eshed 2009, 65). The Talmudic story became a well-known and oft-repeated warning of the dangers of mystical practice and study in Judaism more broadly, but within Jewish contemplative traditions, the warnings were often more specific to particular techniques and/or the states of absorption that resulted from them.

[67] Garb (2011) also notes that, "this is the classical Elijah posture" mentioned in the biblical book of Kings, "which induces a state of sensory withdrawal, and may be found in both Jewish […] and Sufi sources" (64).

NULLIFICATION (*BITTUL*)

We find a very explicit description of a trajectory of deepening absorption during contemplative prayer in a teaching attributed to the founder of the Hasidic movement, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (18th CE):

> In prayer, one must place all of one's energy into the words. To do so, one proceeds from letter to letter, to the point of forgetting one's corporeality. One should be aware of how the letters combine and unite with each other. This practice brings about great bliss. For is on the physical plane the union of two human beings results in great pleasure, certainly this is so one the spiritual plane. This is [the experience of] the World of Formation (Olam ha Yetzirah). From this first step, one proceeds to the elemental letters of Thought, and in doing so, one does not [physically] hear what one is saying. One then arrives at the World of Creation (Olam ha Bri'ah). Thereupon one arrives at the place of No-thingness (Ayin), wherein all of one's physical presence is transcended. This is the World of Emanation (Olam ha Atzilut)—the attribute of Wisdom. (Kallus 2011, 14)

Here, we see an echo and development of the idea of the "divestment of corporeality" (*hitpashtut ha-gashmiut*) we saw in Vital, called "forgetting" corporeality and it is similarly accomplished in stages, though here the trajectory is through the four worlds first introduced by Kabbalists in the late thirteenth century. The first world, the world of "action" (*asiyah*) is presumably the physical world perceived through the senses that the practitioner starts in as he begins the prayers. In the next world of "formation" (*yetzirah*)—the first world mentioned in the passage—the most salient experience is bliss or pleasure, and no particular absorption is alluded to. It is only in the world of "creation" (*bri'ah*) that is marked by the beginning stages of sensory withdrawal, such that one can no longer hear (or notice) the sound of the prayers emanating from one's mouth, and perhaps the other senses are decoupled as well. The

final world of "emanation" (*atzilut*), is the world of the *sefirot* proper, which also corresponds to the experience of ayin (nothingness) where all of one's senses and bodily awareness (lit. "powers of corporeality") are transcended, or, more literally, "nullified" (*nitbatel*).

This last term is significant, as it is a form of the term *bittul* ("nullification" or "annihilation") which becomes a technical term relating to states of absorption that are particularly emphasized in the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov's successor, Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch (18th CE). We find similar prescriptions for prayer in his teachings that point to this state, for example, R. Dov Ber writes that "the body should be God's house, for one should pray with all his strength until he is stripped of corporeality and forgets his self; everything is the vitality of God. All of one's thoughts should be focused on Him, and one should not be the least bit aware of the intense devotion of his prayer, for if he is, he is aware of himself" (quoted in Matt 1990, 142). Once again, we see the move to "strip off" sensory awareness, though here it is potentially an additional (or additionally specified) dimension of the experience of 'forgetting his self,' pointing towards the transcendence of the sense of a separate self altogether in a state with explicitly no meta-awareness. Rabbi Dov Ber elaborates on this process and brings together several of the terms from our survey in a homiletical interpretation of the service of the high priest in the Bible as relating to cultivating these states during prayer in a synagogue:

> 'and the priest' -that is, the one engaged in worship -'shall wear his linen garment'. For it states in Hovot ha-Levavot, that man must accustom himself to the practice of solitude, to be separated from other people, until he accustoms himself so that, even if he is among a thousand people, he will also be attached to Him, blessed be He, and there will be nothing separating or interrupting him from his attachment to Him, blessed be He. And as I explained the verse, 'And no person shall be in the Tent of the Meeting when he enters to atone for himself and for his household'. For it is known that prior to prayer a person must cast off his corporeality and attach his thought to the exaltation of God, as if he is not standing among people, he is able to pray with great kavvanah and without self-interest. Of this it is said 'And no man shall be in the Tent

> of Meeting' -that is, the Synagogue or the House of Study, in the place where people gather to pray. Then, 'there shall be no man' in your thoughts -that is; you shall cast off your corporeality so much so that you shall forget that you are standing among people. (quoted in Idel 2000, 197)

While the "dissolution of the self" or "complete self-annulment" of *bittul* is the final goal of the practice of contemplative prayer, there are other preliminary stages mentioned in his other teachings (Persico 2019, 134). For example, Brody (1998, 11) notes that "Dov Ber presents mystical illumination (devequt) as commencing with the mind's perception of the material world as permeated with and animated by [the] creative vitality of the divine, often perceived as indwelling light" which "is often designated as bittul ha-yesh (the annihilation of reality)." He continues,

> Furthermore, bittul ha-yesh, the vision of the world irradiated by divine light, proves to be but the first stage in the mystical transformation of human consciousness. When delving deeper into the structure of the mind and cosmos, the mystic discovers that this creative energy arises out of a more primordial level of divine reality, Hokhmah, or Transcendent Wisdom. Wisdom serves as the generative ground of all reality, ranging from the divine vitality animating the universe to the human mind and physical phenomena. Encountering Wisdom, human consciousness loses its sense of individuated existence as a distinct self and merges with its transcendent source. (Brody 1998, 11)

This experience of *ayin* (no-thingness), then, is a second deeper kind of *bittul*—called *bittul b'metziut* (annihilation of existence) in later Hasidic traditions—which Brody translates as the realization of "non-dual consciousness" (1998, 10). Once again we see the mystical path begin with a state of *devekuth* (cleaving) as in the writings of R. Isaac and R. Vital, though here it is innovatively specified as a certain form of (dualistic) *bittul* or "nullification." And again the path culminates in a state of absorption also understood to be the entry into the realm of the *sefirot*, but here it is one that (perhaps more) explicitly entails the dissolution of a sense of separate self.

TODAY

In the teachings of the contemporary Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Meir Morgenstern, we find a further development in the understanding of the different experiences of *bittul* that are possible and understood to be the ultimate goal of Jewish contemplative prayer. But we first need some context to track some of the associations and correspondences that interlace and interweave throughout his discourses. In one of his teachings, Rabbi Morgenstern describes the goal of the Kabbalistic contemplative path as the unification with "the light of Keter" (lit. "crown") which is the highest of the divine emanations (*sefirot*) after *Hokhmah* (wisdom) and, as Wolfson describes, the "summit of the scala contemplativa, the place of the coincidentia oppositorum in the Godhead, where limitlessness and limitedness intersect and collude in the identity of their (in)difference, where nothing becomes something and something nothing" (Wolfson 2011, 230). R. Morgenstern writes that "by means of the power of prayer, that is, when one prays in the aspect of 'I am prayer' (wa-ani tefillah) (Psalms 109:4), can one also merit the light of Keter, which is the aspect of unification and fusion with the actual light…for Keter is the power that unifies…that is, it is in its power to unify the emanated and the emanator" (quoted in Wolfson 2011, 230). Wolfson explains that since the light of *Keter* is understood as "the unifying light", "the one who fathoms that unity, moreover, is incorporated within it; indeed, only one incorporated in the incomposite unity of the nothing can be cognizant of it, but the one so incorporated is nothing and therefore no longer the one who may be cognizant of anything, including the unity wherein all things are no thing" (233). Morgenstern continues that "it must be known that this aspect of complete union (*ha-yihud*

ha-gamur) is what the soul in truth needs and desires, and this is the whole matter of prayer, to yearn to be in complete oneness [*ahdut gemurrah*] with the creator" (233). Wolfson emphasizes that with the attainment of this "complete" oneness, "the dialogical underpinning of the petitionary aspect of worship is severely compromised" and perhaps even collapses into a nonduality between subjectivity (the "I") and the prayer, as the passage from Psalm 109 can be radically interpreted to mean (Wolfson 2011, 233).

This realization of the light of *Keter* corresponds to a third form of *bittul* in R. Morgenstern's teachings. He argues that at the end of Rabbi Dov Ber's life he merited the realization of this highest level of *bittul*, beyond the nondual *Hokhmah* (Wisdom) level of *ayin* (no-thingness) we discussed above, which corresponds to an aspect of prophecy (Morgenstern 2020, 36). He explains that while the level of *Hokhmah/ayin* corresponds to the aspect of no-self we saw above, and the previous *sefirah* (divine emanation) of *Binah* (Understanding) corresponds to a level of divine Self or subjectivity (ani),

> The yichud of Keser, however, is comprised of both the aspects of "ani" and "ayin" at once. And because of its profound and lofty nature which is far beyond the level of the yichud in the aspect of Chochmah, it is capable of transforming the levels of "ani" and "yeishus" (self and something)—which in and of themselves stand in total opposition to the level of "ayin" and bittul—from their essential state of separation and division to be included within the levels of holiness. To the extent that the "ani" is completely nullified from its essential state which is the aspect of separation and yeishus, on which Chazal state, "I cannot dwell along with him in the same space", and transformed back into the inclusion of holiness. At which point the "ani" becomes the vehicle (merkavah) for the aspect of "the true Ani" referred to in the passuk "I am Hashem your G-d", and is now included within the full unity of the holy yichud. It is for this reason that Keser is referred to as a "wonder" (pelah) since it is comprised of two opposites- the "ani" and the "ayin"- something that the human mind is incapable of comprehending. (Morgenstern 2020, 37)

In other words, the light of *Keter* refers to a state of both the presence of a divine Self and the absence of any sense of separate self. This state he calls, *bittul ha-gamur* or "The complete nullification," which is beyond both *bittul ha-yesh* and *bittul b'metziut* (Morgenstern 2020,

20). Once again a Biblical quotation using the word *ani* ("I") is interpreted to refer to the ultimate divine subjectivity, one that paradoxically combines a state of (lesser) divine subjectivity with the absence of any subjectivity and sense of separate self at all. If *Hokhmah* and *bittul b'metziut* represent a state of nondual awareness, then we might borrow the locution from David Loy to refer to this ultimate state as the "nonduality of duality and nonduality" (Loy 2019, 18).

CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

HESYCHASM

Lindahl (2010) argues that 'ascetic' practices should not be seen as wholly distinct from 'mystical' ones and particularly that ascetic practices that cultivate sensory deprivation and sensory withdrawal are an important foundation for states of 'contemplation' in early Christian mystical traditions. He explains how in Greek Orthodox contemplative traditions specifically, there are "two means of sensory control: one involves creating an environment or an object of contemplation that presents minimal sensory input; the other involves withdrawing one's consciousness from the senses, regardless of the sensory environment" (208). He explains how "control and even deprivation of the sensory faculties is a necessary preliminary to the advanced stages of contemplation that are oriented towards the cultivation of luminous awareness" in this tradition (208). In some cases, physical seclusion and sensory deprivation are recommended for achieving the stilling and calming of the mind, as Callistus and Ignatius of Xanthopoulos (14th-15th CE) write,

> For sight, seeing with the eyes, usually distracts and disperses thoughts; but if a man be shut up in a quiet and dimly lit room, as is said, thoughts cease to dart about and multiply, and thus the mind, whether it likes it or not, little by little grows more still and collected within itself; as St. Basil says: 'A mind undistracted by external things and not dispersed through the senses among worldly things, returns to itself. (quoted in Lindahl 2010, 219)

While a sensory deprivation environment is advised in the above example, in other cases sensory withdrawal is prioritized regardless of the environment, as Gregory Palamas (13th-14th) writes:

> enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret" (Matt. 6:6). The closet of the soul is the body, the doors are the five bodily senses. The soul enters its closet when the mind does not wander hither and thither over worldly things, but remains within our heart. Our senses are closed and remain so, when we do not allow them to cling to outward and visible things; and in this way our mind remains free from all worldly attachment, and by its secret and inward prayer is united with God our Father. (quoted in Lindahl 2010, 222)

Here we see a strikingly clear interpretation in which "shut thy door" is directly read as a sensory withdrawal (or perceptual decoupling) that is preliminary to the practice of "secret" prayer. Lindahl clarifies that, "Unlike the passage from Callistus and Ignatius cited above, in which the act of placing oneself in an environment of minimal sensory stimulus was itself sufficient for calming the fluctuations of the mind, in this passage, the emphasis is placed more on an act of mental volition that withdraws attention from the senses" (222). He goes on to show how the foundations of sensory deprivation and sensory withdrawal directly lead to the goals of Greek Orthodox tradition such as "pure prayer" and "contemplation" (*theoria*). For example, Maximus the Confessor (6th-7th CE) explains that there are two signs by which the practitioner knows that he or she has attained the state of pure prayer:

> The sign of the first is that the intellect, abandoning all conceptual images of the world, concentrates itself and prays without distraction or disturbance as if God Himself were present, as indeed He is. The sign of the second is that at the very onset of prayer the intellect is so ravished by the divine and infinite light that it is aware neither of itself

> nor of any other created thing, but only of Him who through love has activated such radiance in it. (quoted in Lindahl 2010, 332)

Lindahl explains that while the "first state of pure prayer is the culmination of the active efforts of watchfulness and continual prayer, which result in a self-concentrated and undistracted intellect that continues to pray to God," the second state "sounds as if it is a more passive state, a fruition of the previous active states of prayer. From the concentrated stillness of pure prayer, the intellect becomes absorbed with the divine light of God, and remains in that way so long as it is unaware of any other objects, thoughts, or images" (332). More recently, Theophan the Recluse, (19th CE), an important modern saint of the Greek Hesychastic tradition, demonstrates how sensory withdrawal continues to be understood as leading directly into absorptive states of "contemplation":

> The principal condition for success in prayer is the purification of the heart from passions and from every attachment to things sensual. [...] The more the heart is purified, the more oral prayer will become prayer of the mind in the heart, and when the heart becomes quite pure, then unceasing prayer will be established. [...] Later on, when the state of the soul under the influence of this attraction becomes constant, mind-in-heart prayer will be active unceasingly. All earlier temporary attractions now become transformed into states of contemplation; and it is at this point that contemplative prayer begins. The state of contemplation is a captivity of the mind and of the entire vision by a spiritual object so overpowering that all outward things are forgotten, and wholly absent from the consciousness. The mind and consciousness become so completely immersed in the object contemplated that it is as though we no longer possess them. (333)

Here we see quite clearly that the state of contemplative prayer is one in which complete perceptual decoupling has been achieved, with perhaps an allusion to a reduction or absence in meta-awareness resulting in no longer 'possessing' one's mind. In summary though, we can appreciate the basic trajectory of Hesychastic contemplative practice: one must learn to first re-collect one's attention and mind from being diffused through the senses and then, once

collected, still it from movements of any thoughts, images, and passions. Only then, once the heart/mind is still, will it naturally reflect the light of the divine that is (at all times) emanating to and through it—given the Neoplatonic emanative scheme adopted and adapted by this tradition.[68]

RECOGIMIENTO AND ST TERESA

In the western Catholic tradition of the early modern period, we find St Teresa of Avila (16th CE) and St John of the Cross (16th CE) continuing to describe and develop this connection (and perhaps continuum) from sensory deprivation and withdrawal to states of (absorptive) contemplation. Their contemplative practice did not arise out a vacuum however, and their immediate context was significantly shaped by the *Recogimiento* movement, usually translated as "recollection," a word "used both in the broad sense of a spiritual way of life based on withdrawal, interiorization, and silence and in the more restricted sense of a method of interior mystical prayer at the center of such a way of life" (McGinn 2017, 24). More specifically, the "Spanish word *recoger* implies not simply a withdrawal or retiring, but also a collecting together, which also includes a reformation" and is multivalent, such that it means "a physical withdrawal of the individual to a quiet and secret place, but at the same time it is a gathering within of the powers of the soul as well as holding (possession) or a contemplation

[68] For the role of Neoplatonism in Eastern Christian traditions, see Dimitrov (2014). Boon (2012, 8) explains further, "In a neo-Platonic Eastern text that had marked influence on the development of scholastic and mystical theology in the West after its ninth-century translation into Latin, the sixth-century Syrian monk Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite advised his readers to '[l]eave behind everything that is perceived and understood' and furthermore, lauded Moses, who 'breaks ... away from what sees and is seen ... renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything."

of God in this profoundest and most intimate part of the soul"[69] (McGinn 2017, 25). In other words, the word has connotations of both a physical withdrawal (as in retreat) as well as the re-collecting of attention in order to focus singularly upon the divine. As we will see below, the practice(s) associated with the word and movement explicitly seek to withdraw the attention from the senses to accomplish this goal, as one influential *Recogimiento* author Bernardo Laredo explained, "'Those who contemplate God attain the greatest perfection by carefully closing the gates of the five senses and getting rid of all that is not God from the heart" (quoted in Boon 2012, 165).

St Teresa herself was influenced by several important texts from the *Recogimiento* movement—in fact, it was from these texts and not from any teacher that she first learned to practice recollection leading to contemplative prayer —and her "actual "method for recollecting the thoughts" (*el modo para recoger el pensamiento*) was otherwise exceedingly simple" and "consisted of nothing more than having the nun try to imagine as vividly as possible that her most Beloved Spouse and dearest Friend, Jesus Christ Himself, is actually present by her side while she vocally prays to Him" (Hollenback 2000, 539). Here we see that, as in the *recogimiento* movement more broadly, the positive affect and imagination are used as concentrative tools, even though the latter will eventually be dropped in more advanced stages of prayer. Teresa describes recollection in slightly different ways in her earlier and later writings, but consistent throughout is that there is some effort that is necessary to focus one's attention, and then a stronger focus and concentration is granted by God as a gift of grace. In

[69] One thing to note here is the similarity to both the Hebrew word *hitbodedut* and *khalwa* in Arabic that we saw above, in that all three mean both the physical act of seclusion as well as the rarefied states that can be cultivated (most easily) in those settings.

her earlier *Camino de Perfeccion* (The Way of Perfection, published 1566) where she emphasizes more the active and effortful dimension of this this kind of prayer, she writes,

> Those who by such a method can enclose themselves within the little heaven of our soul, where the Maker of heaven and earth is present, and grow accustomed to refusing to be where the exterior senses in their distraction have gone or look in that direction should believe they are following an excellent path and that they will not fail to drink water from the fount; for they will journey far in a short time…There is a withdrawing of the senses from exterior things and a renunciation of them in such a way that, without one's realizing it, the eyes close so as to avoid seeing them and so that the sight might be more awake to things of the soul…And even though it isn't aware of this at the beginning, since the recollection is not so deep—for there are greater and lesser degrees of recollection—the soul should get used to this recollection…If we make the effort, practice this recollection for some days, and get used to it, the fain will be clearly seen; we will understand, when beginning to pray, that the bees are approaching and entering the beehive to make honey…When the soul does no more than give a sign that it wishes to be recollected, the senses obey it and become recollected. (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 2017, 142-143)

Here we see that recollecting the senses is an active 'withdrawing' of them—or we might say, disengaging the attention from sensory input. She describes why this prayer is called "recollection" as follows:

> This prayer is called "recollection," because the soul collects its faculties together and enters within itself to be with its God. And its divine Master comes more quickly to teach it and give it the prayer of quiet than He would through any other method it might use. For centered there within itself, it can think about the Passion and represent the Son and offer Him to the Father and not tire the intellect by going to look for Him on Mount Calvary or in the garden or at the pillar. (141)

These passages are extremely interesting for a few reasons. For one, they underscore the point that active recollection takes place in the context of vocal and imaginative prayer, as Teresa suggests the aspirant "Beseech Him as you would a father; tell Him about your trials; ask him for a remedy against them, realizing that you are not worthy to be His daughter" and "speak to Him as a father, or a brother, or a lord, or as with a spouse; sometimes in one way, at other times in another" (141). With this kind of prayer, Teresa remarks, "The intellect is recollected much more quickly … even though it may be vocal" (141). Boon (2012) also calls our

attention to the fact that this type of prayer also engages the imagination in a meditation on Jesus when Teresa writes, "centered there within itself, it can think about the Passion and represent the Son." In pointing out this much more cataphatic version of recollection, she explains that "Teresa describes *recogimiento* as an interiorization of the Passion," and we should "Note her use of the term 'represent' *(representar*), which according to the dictionary of Spanish language released shortly after her death was defined as 'making something present with words or an image that is fixed in our imagination.' She therefore…portrays Jesus's Crucifixion as an image fixed in the inner sense of the imagination" (Boon 2012, 174).

In this vocal and imaginative prayer, one actively recollects the senses (and attention) to become more drawn into and absorbed in the meditation. While we can understand this practice as 'active' recollection, later in *El Castillo Interior* (The Interior Castle, published 1588*)*, she contrasts it with a form of recollection, later clarified as "infused recollection" that "doesn't involve being in the dark or closing the eyes, nor does it consist in any exterior thing, since without first wanting to do so, one does close ones eyes and desire solitude…The senses and exterior things seem to be losing their hold because the soul is recovering what it had lost" (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 2017, 327). Here the absorption seems to be happening more passively or effortlessly and "is a less intense form of initial contemplation, or, as called by Teresa, the prayer of quiet. While the will finds rest in the prayer of quiet in the peace of God's presence, the intellect (in Teresa's terminology) continues to move about…[causing] distractions, the wandering mind"[70] (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 2017, 273). While earlier one

[70] McGinn remarks that "Teresa was not a trained theologian, or a systematic thinker, so what she ultimately meant by the "prayer of quiet"…and its relation to the "prayer of recollection"…seems to have undergone a development that she does not advert to and that has led to some confusion among her readers" (2017, 189).

went to lengths to continually withdraw one's attention even though it will keep being drawn out of them again (like bees coming to but then leaving the hive), here[71] it is as if one's attention is magnetized and rests with more stability upon its object:

> One noticeably senses a gentle drawing inward, as anyone who goes through this will observe, for I don't know how to make it clearer. It seems to me that I have read where it was compared to a hedgehog curling up or a turtle drawing into its shell. (The one who wrote this example must have understood the experience well.) But these creatures draw inward whenever they want. In the case of recollection, it doesn't come when we want it but when God wants to grant us the favor…If His Majesty has not begun to absorb us, I cannot understand how the mind can be stopped. (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 2017, 328-329)

Here we see Teresa use the word "absorb" (*absorto*), which she does several times in her writings, as well as well as synonyms like "*embelesamiento"* which means *"*to remain without senses or movement" and *"embebecimiento*" which means "to be totally immersed" (Gil 2019, 19, n167-8). The next stage of prayer, the "prayer of quiet" is even more absorptive, as she writes, "the faculties are not united but absorbed and looking as though in wonder at what they see" and "This quietude and recollection is something that is clearly felt through the satisfaction and peace bestowed on the soul, along with great contentment and calm and a very gentle delight in the faculties" (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 2017, 325).

As one deepens and grows in the practice of recollective prayer, one experiences deeper and more absorptive states. One category of deeper states is what she calls, "raptures" (*arrobamientos*), which she argues are necessary because the soul might die if its powers were still functioning as it approaches the Divine majesty (McGinn 2017, 196). The first kind of *arrobamiento*, which can occur even outside of the practice of prayer in daily life (and in the

[71] McGinn notes that there is often some confusion about the relationship between the prayer of quiet and the prayer(s) of recollection, but clarifies the practices of recollection "in two ways. The first is the active form…in which the person retreats into a darkened room or some similar situation, closes her eyes, and strives to put her powers to rest and concentrate on prayer. The second kind is infused recollection, a strictly supernatural gift" (2017, 187-188).

final dwelling place too), does not involve total loss of all the senses and entails "deep enlightenment and knowledge of his majesty" (196). As McGinn explains, in "this kind of suspension the Lord shows the soul heavenly secrets, sometimes by way of imaginative visions, which can be partially described, but other times by intellectual visions that the soul cannot speak of" (196). Other forms will entail "extreme suspension" such as the "flight of the spirit" (*vuelo del Espiritu*) which happens suddenly and with such strength that it seems like "both soul and body are being carried aloft (the feeling of levitation)" like "a little boat suddenly lifted up beyond its control by powerful waves" (197). The result of such experiences are "infused knowledge, both in terms of what is revealed in imaginative visions during the flight, and especially what is conveyed in intellectual vision" and when the spirit returns to the soul benefits like "knowledge of the grandeur of God; great self-knowledge and humility; and esteems for earthly things only insofar as they can be used in the service of God" (197).

Here we can note that while the imagination has already been relinquished, sometimes it spontaneously awakens as the medium for certain visions. For one representative example of how she describes such states of absorption:

> Your Reverence will ask how it is that the rapture sometimes lasts so many hours and occurs so often. What happens in my case, as I said in speaking of the previous prayer, is that the rapture is experienced at intervals. The soul is often absorbed or, to put it better, the Lord absorbs it in Himself suspending all the faculties for a while and then, afterward, holding only the will suspended. It seems to me that the activity of these other two faculties is like that of the little pointer on the sundial that never stops. But when the Sun of Justice wants to, He makes the faculties stop. This suspension of the two faculties, I say, is brief! (quoted in Gil 2019, 30, n272)

In summary then, the works of St Teresa present states of absorption of varying depths, with the deepest involving complete perceptual decoupling, lack of meta-awareness, and some impairment of memory. These absorptive features of contemplative prayer continue to be reported by teachers and practitioners today in the Centering Prayer movement.

TODAY

Father Thomas Keating (d. 2018), perhaps the most influential teacher in the Centering Prayer movement, describes two different pathways of prayer, "the path of exuberant mysticism" of St. Teresa and the "hidden ladder" described by St John,[72] the former compared to "the front entrance of the interior castle" while the latter is like "the service entrance"[73] (Keating 2012, 108). He writes that, while "both paths lead to the goal of transforming union," individuals that find themselves taking the alternative "dark" way described by St John, "do not experience the levels of absorption described by St Teresa. At times they are aware that their will is resting in God, but their habitual experience is one of dryness accompanied by endless wanderings of the imagination"[74] (Keating 2012, 108). The absorptive stages of prayer

[72] Keating clarifies that St John actually discusses both paths in his works (2012, 108).

[73] Interestingly, he also notes that while he does not mean "to denigrate the consolations of contemplative prayer," since "some people need them, especially those that have been severely damaged in childhood. God bends over, caresses, and virtually makes love to people who have been deeply hurt, in order to convince them that it is all right to enjoy pleasures that they thought they should not enjoy, or were taught that they should not enjoy" (2012, 109). It is an interesting hypothesis, viewed from a more scientific register, that people who are more prone to dissociation due to childhood trauma might also be more prone to states of positive absorption—seemingly due to having higher trait absorption. This is an idea found in several contemporary contemplative traditions and is deserving of empirical inquiry. Interesting!

[74] Elsewhere Keating compares the difference between the two paths to "the difference between taking an express elevator to the top floor of a skyscraper and taking a local. The local elevator stops at every floor, and at every stop the vista gets better and better. The problem is that one may never get back on the elevator because one is so entranced by the view…The wisdom of taking the express elevator—the way of pure faith—to the top floor is that it avoids all the mystical phenomena that might occur as by-products of the unloading of the unconscious" (2012, 139).

of St Teresa are, according to Father Keating and his students, along a spectrum of absorption as we have seen. While the state of infused recollection, "does not absorb us in such a way that we cannot resist," the prayer of quiet is "more absorbing…the divine action seems to grasp the will in a spiritual embrace. The will could break away but does not want to. In fact, it easily becomes attached to the feeling of consolation and wants to prolong the time in prayer" (Keating 2012, 107). He continues that, "If the prayer of quiet moves to a deeper level, the imagination and memory are temporarily suspended…while they are quiet, the will enjoys the divine presence…This is the "prayer of union"" (2012, 107). Finally, he summarizes and introduces even one further stage of prayer:

> In all these states, we are aware of the presence of something real, but it is not a form, image, or concept. The divine presence may arise in various ways. It can come suddenly or overtake us gradually. It may seem to descend from above or arise from below. It may envelop us like a luminous cloud or well up from within. In any case, there is a sense of deep quiet as the imagination and memory grow still. When they are completely still and the will is totally absorbed in God, there is no self-reflection. This is the experience of the "prayer of full union"[75] in which all the faculties are motionless and rest in God. (Keating 2012, 107-108)

In another work he describes what happens in full union as, "This grace takes away all self-reflection. One is not even aware that one is in this state until it is over. Afterwards, one knows that one has been in a spiritual place that was marvelous. Not only does the Spirit suspend the ordinary reflective faculties, but even suspends the sense of an individual sense of self" (quoted in Frenette 2017, 96). In other words, Keating distinguishes the absorptive states of full union by the fact that there is absolutely no meta-awareness present during them.

[75] Later Keating writes that, "Teresa of Avila suggested once in her writings that the prayer of full union might be a shortcut to transforming union. That may indeed be its purpose. It may be a special way of hastening the ordinary process of dismantling the false self" (2012, 138).

Keating's student David Frenette elaborates on these states by drawing on a teaching from Anthony of the Desert (3rd- 4th CE) who writes, "The prayer of the monk is not perfect until he no longer realizes himself that he is praying" and then proceeds to recount his own experience on a particular retreat of beginning to enter into this stage of prayer:

> My meditation periods during the rest of the retreat were blessed by something new…I had a new sense that for the duller development of pure contemplation, it is critical to move from the awareness of deep interior silence into *pure consciousness*, in which there is not even an indirect sense of self that is conscious of being aware. Interior silence, stillness, spaciousness, and the absence of thoughts, valuable as they are, are experiences in consciousness, not pure consciousness itself…Recall that in the prayer of union your thoughts, thinking, and all your faculties are united with God, while you remain *fully aware of this union*…This prayer involves uniting with the ground of experience, in which awareness is freed from all thoughts. In the prayer of union, there is a subject who is aware—not the separate-self sense conditioned by thoughts and emotions, but the Christ life who is aware, through you, of his uncreated, unobjectifiable source, the Father. There may be great stillness within, with no thoughts, no things as objects to the mind. But there is a hidden subject who is aware in you, and the separate-self sense subtly identifies with it. You identify with awareness itself and silently witness the contents of awareness, or its lack of contents in a still, silent interior spaciousness…In the fullness of pure contemplation, this hidden subject, this spiritual witness, is invited to lose any kind of awareness, any point of subjectivity, as it is fully known in even greater sacred nothingness. (Frenette 2017, 91-92)

He later writes that while "At first, full union may be experienced as a form of nonconsciousness…With time, this complete non-self-awareness becomes integrated into the fully alert, waking state" (2017, 95-96). And later he adds that, "As the prayer of full union moves from being a state in centering prayer to a more stable condition in activity, you become more transparent to the Trinity in more and more of life, empty to God's presence acting through your ordinary activities, more compassionate in your presence to others, more accepting of your own humanity" (94). This goal, once actualized not just while one is in prayer but also active in the world, is one that Frenette calls the realization of "nondual love" (97).

From Keating and Frenette's writings we see that in the Centering prayer tradition they continue to practice the stages of prayer delineated by St Teresa but emphasize the goal of full union as a state of absorption so total that, according to Keating, there is no meta-awareness such that one "is not even aware that one is in this state until it is over"(Frenette 2017, 96). Frenette also agrees with this characterization of the state as "nonconsciousness" but adds that later it can be "integrated in the fully alert, waking state"—seemingly implying that some kind of cognition and meta-awareness can return even as the sense separate-self does not.

In a recent qualitative study that made use of the micro-phenomenological interview technique of carefully probing experiences and making them amenable to finer grained phenomenological analysis, Blaschke (2017) interviewed practitioners of Centering prayer and explored specifically the different and "increasing levels of absorption during prayer" which are "infused recollection; prayer of quiet; prayer of union; and prayer of full union" which they conceive of as "the classic stages of prayer delineated by Teresa of Avila" (166). Based on his interviews, Blaschke describes how in the states of the prayer of union, "Practitioners are so absorbed that they lose cognitive access to ordinary consciousness. This renders them unaware of any internal or external coarse-level content so that the union state is world- excluding" (178). He notes that a "subtle" level of meta-awareness is still present in this state, but that in the prayer of *full* union however, as it is reported by one of the practitioners from his study, "The realisation of nothingness is not when I am in it. It's when I come out of it" (197). In other words, there is no awareness or meta-awareness such that there is no phenomenal content to report from it, reports can only be offered immediately upon coming out of the state. This practitioner describes the first time he had this experience:

> The first time it happened it was very distinct, probably three to five years ago. I started the session with a strike (a gong) and a reading. It was very similar to today. I was

> gone. I was just gone. And all of a sudden just "boom" I was present again. And I wasn't asleep! Maybe I was asleep, I don't know. [laugh] But it was that feeling again of being just in the right place. I became aware with a bit of a shock like, "Ugh, where was I?" The shock is like somebody sneezing and me coming back to thoughts. Maybe "shock" is not the right word: it's the sudden end or the sudden realisation that I was someplace else. (Blaschke 2017, 200)

Blaschke compares this experience with another of his subjects who similarly experience a "non-lucid" version of this prayer of full union—in his words, "marked by phenomenological paucity"—with an account of "lucid" full union, which Frenette believes is possible, as mentioned above (201; 198).

SUMMARY

As described in the introduction, while the trait of absorption has received a considerable amount of scientific research, *states* of absorption have been comparatively understudied, and even less scholarly or scientific attention has been paid to those that arise or are cultivated within the contemplative traditions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. While surely inexhaustive and meant only as an opening of this topic for future investigation, our review sought to highlight important and canonical descriptions of these states that are still authoritative and used widely in contemporary traditions, seen from the lens of absorption as understood in clinical and cognitive science.

We saw how such states can be cultivated using sensory deprivation and sensory withdrawal to facilitate perceptual decoupling. In all three traditions, retreats in (more or less complete) sensory deprivation environments were utilized in this manner given their utility in inducing sensory withdrawal. We also saw a spectrum of perceptual decoupling involved in absorptive experiences, from states where the senses are active but sensory data are not salient

or being registered—like during mind wandering or daydreaming—to states of complete sensory withdrawal where there appear to be no sense data presenting themselves to one's awareness—as when asleep.[76] Absorptive states can also have both a positive or a negative valence, and the valence does not determine whether the experience is appraised as normative or not since in some contexts distressing experiences are appraised as of divine origin[77] and in others euphoric ones are a result of going 'off the path.' They also sometimes entail cognitive or functional impairment, particularly when absorption is pronounced enough to entail strong perceptual decoupling or complete sensory withdrawal, which, once again, may or may not be normative depending on the context. Finally, some absorption experiences are also set apart as the goals of particular contemplative paths, often involving acute changes to one's sense of self and reduced (or no) meta-awareness. Some of these absorptive states are also thought to catalyze baseline 'trait' changes to one's sense of self that are embodied in a transformed life after the state comes to an end. In the Hasidic traditions which promote the cultivation of states of *bittul* as the goal of contemplative prayer, it is valued both for its personally and theurgically potent effects, though the state itself may be absorptive to different degrees in different formulations or seemingly not at all, as we saw in the ultimate conception of R. Morgenstern. In Sufi traditions, *fana* is usually understood to be a completely absorptive and impairing state which then leads to trait changes to one's sense of self in *baqa*, though the

[76] In fact, in Jewish traditions various terms for such states evoke the comparison with sleep, such as *tardemah* (slumber), *nim lo nim* (sleep that isn't sleep) and *tardemat nevuah* (the slumber of prophecy) (Garb 2011, 81, 55; Idel 1988b, 105).

[77] Although examples of distressing absorptive states interpreted as normative were not included in our survey of Jewish traditions, they are reported by authors and texts included in the study, such as Abraham Abulafia, *Shaarei Tzedek*, and Rabbi Hayyim Vital (Idel 1988b, 75–76; Fine 1987, 90).

modern Turkish example complicates this simple dichotomy as well. In the Centering prayer tradition, the prayer of full union is presented by Keating as necessarily involving a lack of meta-awareness while Frenette and Blaschke describe how it may transform into more "lucid" forms where meta-awareness is present.

Though the shared Neoplatonic influences that fed into and helped shape Islam, Judaism, and Christianity no doubt account for many of the similarities observed regarding these states of contemplative absorption, some have argued that these similarities extend beyond even the Abrahamic religions. In his book, Mysticism: Experience, Response, Empowerment (1996), Jess Hollenback describes a "universal technique for inducing mystical experiences" which he, following Christian mystical traditions, terms "recollection" and defines it as follows:

> Recollection refers to that procedure wherein the mystic learns to focus one-pointedly his or her mind, will, imagination, and emotions on some object or goal. This focused total mobilization of the mystic's affective and intellectual powers, if successfully carried out, eventually shuts down the incessant mental chattering that is normally present as a kind of background noise behind all our activities in the waking state. Once mystics stop this process of silently talking to themselves, they transform their mode of consciousness and begin to have their first tangible encounters with that spiritual world that otherwise remains imperceptible to the five senses. (Hollenback 1996, 94)

Hollenback describes the fruits of recollective techniques in ways reminiscent of Tellegen and Atkinson's original "total attention" though with the added component or emphasis on emotional and cognitive processes. He later describes how "one of the most important recollective methods" is "abstracting oneself from sensory inputs and distractions" and that this "kind of mentally induced anesthesia of the corporeal senses eventually brings about a transformation in the individual's mode of consciousness just as it does every night when we cut off awareness of sensory inputs as we go to sleep and then shortly afterward begin to go

into the mode of consciousness known as dreaming" (170). According to his account, recollection is a crucial mechanism of—and in fact the doorway into—many kinds of higher states of consciousness, both soteriological and paranormal, not just in Christian traditions, but also those found in classical Yogic traditions such as states of *samadhi*, the related Buddhist states of *jhana* as well as those found in Islamic mystical traditions and even indigenous traditions such as Eskimo shamanism (96–111). Importantly though, this doesn't lead him to see all recollection methods as the same—even if they produce similar attentional enhancement by quieting mental chatter—and he highlights differences in the use of the imagination or affect to show how the different practices reflect different goals that the resulting states are mobilized towards. For example, he describes how, "despite a common psychological function of focusing the attention and quieting the mind and "heart," recollective techniques exhibit a considerable structural diversity" and "these observed differences of form have more than just an incidental significance" (525–526). Instead, "these different recollective techniques are not just different paths leading to the same goal. They do considerably more than just concentrate the subject's attention. They also prepare the individual who employs them to fulfill the ultimate spiritual goals of his particular religious tradition" (526).

I am sympathetic to Hollenback's characterization of all these states under one umbrella, suggesting that a similar mechanism or set of mechanisms contribute to the attentional enhancement and amplification reported across different traditions. Even if, as Garb notes, his "emphasis on the role of recollective techniques in inducing mystical experience" is a bit "exaggerated"—since this family of practices is only one type of meditation and there are many other (non-meditative) means of accessing altered states of

consciousness employed in different traditions—still it is an important cross-cultural phenomenon to highlight (Garb 1998, 598). While Hollenback uses the term "recollection", drawn from Christianity, I think a more generic framing is more appropriate and believe that we are justified in calling them *states of absorption* cultivated through *intentional perceptual decoupling*. Indeed, Hollenbeck suggests as much (without using the term) when he concludes that in his book he has attempted to demonstrate that "there is no radical discontinuity" between mystical states of recollection "and those ordinary mental processes that take place while one dreams or engages in idle imaginings" (Hollenback 1996, 180). In other words, mind wandering and contemplative states of absorption exist on a spectrum—or are at least importantly related to each other—as the studies on perceptual decoupling and absorption that we surveyed above similarly contend. Intentional perceptual decoupling is indeed a critical process in the cultivation of contemplative states of absorption cross-culturally and one that has been overlooked particularly in scholarship on Islamic, Christian, and Jewish traditions.

…ARE PIVOTAL STATES

In this section, I argue that a recently developed complex systems approach to understanding ascetic practices and psychedelic experiences, the Pivotal Mental States model (PiMS), can help with our culturally sensitive etic understanding of meditation related difficulties.

As described in the introduction, complex systems theory is a species of dynamical systems theory, which in the last thirty or so years has served as the foundation for a particular

approach to cognitive science. Thompson (2007) explains that the central idea of this approach "is that cognition is an intrinsically temporal phenomenon and accordingly needs to be understood from the perspective of dynamic systems theory" which he describes as follows,

> A dynamic systems model takes the form of a set of evolution equations that describe how the state of the system changes over time. The collection of all possible states of the system corresponds to the system's "state space" or "phase space," and the ways that the system changes state correspond to trajectories in this space. Dynamic-system explanations focus on the internal and external forces that shape such trajectories as they unfold in time. Inputs are described as perturbations to the system's intrinsic dynamics, rather than as instructions to be followed, and internal states are described as self organized compensations triggered by perturbations, rather than as representations of external states of affairs. (11)

This approach is based on the "qualitative" study of differential equations, where "One thinks of the space of all possible states of the system as a geometric space… and the way that the system changes or behaves over time as curves or trajectories in this space" and it is "said to be qualitative because it uses topological and geometrical techniques to study the general or global character of the system's long-term behavior (its behavior in phase space) instead of seeking to predict the system's exact future state (the specific values of its variables at a future time " (Thompson 2007, 40). What specifies a system as *complex* is that it exhibits "behavior that is neither random nor or ordered and predictable; rather, it is in between, exhibiting changing and unstable patterns" and a wealth of recent scientific evidence "indicates that complexity of this sort can be found at numerous scales and levels, from the molecular and organismic to the ecological and evolutionary, as well as the neural and behavioral" (40). These patterns are known as "attractors" and can be of various kinds—fixed point, cycle, toroidal, or chaotic—and in the complex dynamical approach to mind science, cognitive states and change processes can be modeled as different attractor states and trajectories in this geometric phase space (Thompson 2007, 378-379; Hipolito et al. 2023, 10).

Building on this generic complex systems framework in order to model cognitive changes in the chaotic attractors known as "bifurcations," Brouwer and Carhart-Harris (2021) recently introduced the new construct, "pivotal mental states" (PiMS) to describe "transient, intense hyper-plastic mind and brain states, with exceptional potential for mediating psychological transformation aiding rapid and deep learning that can mediate psychological transformation" in either adaptive or maladaptive directions (320). They argue that ascetic practices (through inducing stress) and psychedelics cause an upregulation of the serotonin 2A receptor system and that this system has been demonstrated to "induce a state of cortical hyper-plasticity conducive to major adaptive change" (326). They explain that "certain natural inducers of stress such as social isolation, starvation, atypical breathing, sleep deprivation, extreme body temperature and pain can be intentionally manipulated for the purposes of personal and/or spiritual development, presumably by promoting endogenous psychedelic-like signaling" (322), and believe "humans have intuited how to hijack or 'hack' their own physiology for the purpose of self-development" (329). They also note that meditation practices that are clearly "cognitive stressors," such as "meditation on sin, guilt, death and suffering," would also engage this mechanism, but also add that combining "multiple ascetic practices with meditation, prayer or ritual and a background of stress may (perhaps inadvertently) create ideal synergistic conditions for the natural upregulation of 5-HT2AR[78] signaling…and thus, the emergence of a PiMS"[79] (330).

[78] Even more relevant for our examination, they note that, "the 5-HT2AR rs6313 TT genotype is associated with trait absorption"—though again, the empirical connection between training, states of absorption, and trait absorption have yet to be firmly established.

[79] They note that, "it is natural to surmise that cognitive-stress-induced upregulation of 5-HT2AR expression may be an important biology x environment interaction through which both spiritual and psychotic experiences manifest via a subsequent increase in 5-HT2AR activation" (327)

The PiMS model is built on the complex systems phenomenon of "bifurcation," which they use to describe how these hyperplastic states "are pivotable either towards illness or wellness" (319). In complex systems theory, bifurcations are a species of "chaotic attractors," which are similar to other attractors in that they are "points that are pulled into and stay within the space," however in these cases "they are allowed to move within the space" as well (Guastello and Liebovitch 2009, 12). As such, the "internal motion within the attractor space is more complex than is the case with the other attractors," such as fixed point, limit cycle, and toroidal attractors, since chaotic attractors[80] exhibit the three primary features of "unpredictability, boundedness, and sensitivity to initial conditions" (12). Brouwer and Carhart-Harris discuss how bifurcation attractors are understood to apply in their model:

> A fork in the road or river analogy is often used to reflect a bifurcation process, namely a 'cross-roads', where the trajectory of a system can rapidly destabilise and complexify at a point of bifurcation…Contextual factors can be viewed as biasing currents in the river influencing particular outcomes, in the same way that cambers or slopes bias outcomes along a solid path. Briefly, bifurcation theory describes the occurrence of sudden changes in the trajectory of a system. Typically, energy introduced into a system causes the destabilization of a previously dominant trajectory or state (e.g., represented by the single path that precedes the fork). The critical destabilization creates new potential states or trajectories that the system can enter or follow. For simplicity, 'wellness' and 'illness' are presented here as discrete binary states but we recognize that this is an oversimplification and that mixed features are also possible, for example symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress and growth can co-exist or 'flip-flop' after a traumatic episode, and similarly, mixed euphoric and dysphoric

[80] Chaotic attractors can also differ in "complexity" on a spectrum from adaptability to rigidity, and bifurcation attractors in particular can be either "subtle," "catastrophic" or "annihilation" (16). Guastello and Liebovitch (2009) describe the difference between subtle bifurcations, like pitchfork bifurcations, and catastrophic or annihilation bifurcations. As they write, "In catastrophic bifurcations, new attractor regimes pop in and out of the dynamical field as a control parameter changes. In *annihilation bifurcations*, a control parameter induces two or more dynamical structures to collide, producing a dynamical field that did not exist previously" (16). While they note that, "Neither of these types of bifurcations has surfaced in psychological applications" (16), it remains an question (discussed in chapter 4) as to which form of bifurcation is most appropriate to describe the ability of absorptive states to result in both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes since Brouwer and Carhart-Harris (2021) don't enter into that level of granularity or specificity when discussing the bifurcation phenomenon, writing that "the details of this [bifurcation theory] are beyond the scope of this article" (323).

> states can occur in manic psychoses. The unifying principle, however, is that change, whatever its nature, is more likely after such pivotal events.[81] (323)

In other words, in their model, once the hyperplastic PiMS is accessed either through ascetic practices or psychedelic compounds which "destabilize" one's current state or trajectory, the psychological system can branch off on a new trajectory leading to either wellness or pathology. According to this understanding, the "contextual factors" biasing the system in one direction or the other refers to "both biological (e.g., polygenic) predisposition as well as the individual's immediate and remote environmental context" where "the term 'context' is used here in an extended biopsychosocial and temporal way" (320). This range in timescales and factors would include things in ones more distant past like "an enriched versus adverse childhood or any past trauma but it can also include what is inherited (i.e. genetically encoded)" as well as more temporally proximate factors like "a recent relationship breakdown or a bereavement, ongoing cultural or social crisis, or recent success or cause for celebration" (320). Elsewhere they highlight that a "wealth of evidence from psychedelic drug, child psychology and mental health research can be cited to highlight the importance of contextual factors, such as: (a) preparedness, (b) intentions and expectations, (c) inter-personal trust/therapeutic alliance, (d) community support and (e) other forms of psychological integration, for safe guarding against harm and enhancing positive therapeutic outcomes" (323).

[81] Another dimension of this model "consistent with bifurcation theory" is that "the relationship between stress and upregulated 5-HT2AR signaling is non-linear, in the sense that once stress crosses a critical threshold (the specifics of which are presently not clear) – in terms of its severity or chronicity – there is an abrupt shift in a system's functioning (e.g. global brain function) into a radically different mode" (334).

While they don't specify how these or other biological, psychological, and social factors might relate to each other in determining one trajectory over the other[82] due to the PiMS model's "outcome agnosticism," the authors argue that it has an important bearing on "a classic controversy in psychology and psychiatry: namely, the relationship between spiritual experiences and psychosis" (334). They argue, "According to the model presented here, the framing of psychosis as pathological and spiritual experience as psychologically beneficial, obscures their common relationship to the PiMS" and this connection is "often overlooked because of a tendency to selectively focus on outcomes rather than the processes that lead up to them" (334). While I would argue their claim related to differential diagnoses—namely that "a negative or positive outcome is the paramount criterion for distinguishing between mystical and psychotic experience, respectively"— obscures a much more complex landscape of appraisal processes and opinions amongst psychologists of religion (Lindahl et al. 2020), nevertheless their recognition that PiMS can lead to both salutogenic and pathogenic outcomes makes it a good fit for a culturally sensitive understanding of meditation-related difficulties, since this is a claim that the three traditions surveyed above make related to the both the fruits and dangers of contemplative states of absorption.

Now, as Brouwer and Carhart-Harris (2021) note, combining meditation with ascetic practices can trigger the 5-HT2AR upregulation—as occurs in all three traditions—but so can solitary isolation itself, a key component in the cultivation of many classical contemplative states of absorption. Therefore, I believe it is warranted to extend the applicability of the PiMS model to the contemplative practices used to cultivate the states of absorption discussed above.

[82] This, as we will see in chapter four, is one of the major critiques leveled against the biopsychosocial model from different camps and schools of psychiatry.

Furthermore, there may also be other mechanisms of hyperplasticity operative in these states that could contribute to such "bifurcation" trajectories. For example, Lindahl et al. (2013) investigated concentration "as sensory deprivation" as it is developed in Buddhist contemplative contexts and emphasizes the "largely inhibitory process" of attention in these practices (10). They note that "optimal task performance on a number of cognitive tasks, including selective and sustained attention, is determined by the extent of alpha activity in task-irrelevant areas rather than gamma in task-relevant areas" and that, similarly, "widespread increases in alpha power in meditators . . . that were initially viewed as inputs as a means of facilitating attention" (10). In their qualitative analysis, they focus on different kinds of experiences of light reported by Buddhist meditators and propose that they may be "caused by suppression of sensory input via alpha inhibition leading to compensatory disinhibition", a model which is supported "by perceptual isolation and sensory deprivation studies" (11). They found that "seven of the nine practitioners who reported lights spontaneously connected their meditation-induced light experiences with a period of increased concentration, a claim also made in Buddhist literature across traditions" and finally hypothesized that the "arising of lights may signal a period of enhanced neuroplasticity and potential for important and enduring shifts" (13). Even though this study concerned particular forms of Buddhist practice, the framing of concentration as sensory deprivation and the fact that enhanced neuroplasticity has been demonstrated in sensory deprivation studies provides the potential link with our study. While it was not discussed in our survey above, experiences of light are also widely reported in states of absorption in Islamic and Jewish traditions (Corbin 1994; Ziai 2004; Abuali 2020; Idel 1988c, 77–83; Wolfson 2004; Garb 2011, 36–45, 82–89).

While Lindahl et al. (2013) and Brouwer and Carhart-Harris (2021) propose different potential mechanisms (attenuation of sensory input and stress-induced upregulation of the serotonin 2A receptor system respectively) for hyper-plasticity, they are far from incompatible and could both be operant in cases where ascetic practices are combined with sensory deprivation and sensory withdrawal—as we find in many traditional Christian, Islamic and Jewish retreat contexts. However, regardless of the specific mechanism(s) involved, we can say with confidence that the classical texts surveyed above take for granted the fact that contemplative states of absorption are both hyper-plastic and pivotal, and therefore the complex systems[83]-based PiMS model is one that can be adapted for a culturally sensitive etic understanding of some meditation-related difficulties, namely those that would be appraised emically as non-normative.

[83] Another way in which the PiMS model is built on complex systems theory is that it draws on the "biopsychosocial" model (BPS), which is itself explicitly based on Bertalanffy's original formulation of complex systems he termed 'General Systems Theory', to account for why destabilization can result in one trajectory over another (de Haan 2020, 38; Benning 2015). They write, "We propose that the surrounding context and relational frame in which a given PiMS occurs is a vital determinant of how it manifests" (Brouwer and Carhart-Harris 2021, 322) and argue for "an essential context and relational dependency where context refers to both biological (e.g. polygenic) predisposition as well as the individual's immediate and remote environmental context. Thus, the term 'context' is used here in an extended biopsychosocial and temporal way" (320). Finally they argue, "If we are correct that context plays a key role in shaping the outcome of a PiMS, an important implication is that contextual factors need to be treated with special attention and therapeutic care (where possible) if an individual's psychological wellbeing is to be safeguarded, whenever a PiMS arises or seems imminent" (320). This practical implication (and suggested application) of the theory will be addressed and extended in chapter four.

CHAPTER THREE: NONLINEAR PATHS & NONLINEAR SYSTEMS

INTRODUCTION

While the CST based PiMS framework helps to explain how contemplative states of absorption can cause bifurcations resulting in both salutogenic and pathogenic outcomes—just as these traditions themselves claim—it does not necessarily explain the trajectories of such change processes, in other words, how these states can cause the challenging stages of contemplative paths which come before (or may somehow be necessary for) the realization of the goals of such paths. In other words, we still need an etic framework to explain how pivotal contemplative states of absorption are involved in nonlinear paths. In part one of this chapter, we will first present an overview of the place of fluctuations and oscillation before enduring contemplative goals are reached in nonlinear paths both historically and today. We will then describe how complex systems approaches to clinical and psychedelics medicine science help to explain how these *critical fluctuations* precede bifurcations and the *new attractor*

landscapes that result from them. In Part two, we will look at some of the goals of these traditions in more depth, and then argue that the complex systems-based *enactive approach to self* can help us to understand this spectrum of different goals and how they are brought to fruition in a more fine-grained manner.

PART I: NONLINEAR CHANGE PROCESSES & NONLINEAR PATHS

While in the last chapter we saw how one CST approach, namely the PiMS model, can help explain meditation-related difficulties that are appraised as adverse, we still need an etic framework to help understand how the difficult stages are appraised, in other words, how some difficulties are thought to be necessary for the attainment of traditional goals—what I called previously 'nonlinear paths' (Fisher 2019). Furthermore, our adaptation of the PiMS model may at first blush seem incompatible with nonlinear change processes or trajectories, since if we imagine the brain or nervous system to be hyperplastic like wet cement, we would expect lasting changes to take effect right after being imprinted via the state of absorption. However, once again the perspective from complex-systems theory offers a very parsimonious and plausible explanation for these kinds of trajectories, towards which we will turn after introducing these non-linear paths.

ABRAHAMIC NON-LINEAR PATHS

In chapter one we saw that in addition to appraising meditation-related difficulties as adverse or non-normative, they were also at times appraised as part of the path or normative. Again, for a complete and culturally sensitive etic framework to make sense of meditation-related difficulties sufficiently to guide care, it must be able to account for both kinds. We now turn to the second category of difficulties, those which are considered part of the path and perhaps even necessary to achieve traditional contemplative goals.

In chapter one we also explored how in all three religions there were parts of the contemplative path that were identified as difficult, challenging, or involving necessary suffering by connecting them to (or reading them through) textual traditions. We also examined how one's worldview or interpretive framework, particularly in relation to how a tradition or sub-tradition understood the goal of the contemplative path, had a bearing on whether difficulties were appraised as necessary or unnecessary relative to the attainment of that goal. We explored how in some cases the goal was understood to be a particular kind of self-transformation, a realization of nonduality, and/or new ways of being and acting in the world. In the previous chapter we also discussed how some of those goals were related to particular contemplative states of absorption. Finally, in my master's thesis, I explored in more depth some of the textual sources and themes that contemporary teachers and students draw upon to normatively appraise distressing meditation-related experiences and introduced the term "nonlinear paths" in that context. In this section, I will draw from both the interviews and the textual traditions informing contemporary interpretive frameworks to argue that the complex-system frameworks of Hayes, Hipolito and their colleagues can be adapted to help make sense of nonlinear paths in contemporary Abrahamic contemplative traditions.

JEWISH TRADITIONS

In the Jewish traditions of those interviewed, challenging stages of the path were associated with: psycho-spiritual and embodied purification frameworks, the need to learn certain lessons in this lifetime or soul transmigration, a path that is "bi-polar" and/or consists of both expanded and constricted consciousness (*mochin d'katnut*) necessary for the achievement spiritual development, the idea that the purpose of creation is to rectify one's emotional and character traits which entails some amount of suffering, and the conception that certain kinds of spiritual descent (*yeridah)* are necessary for spiritual ascent (*l'tzorech aliyah)*. In terms of texts and ideas used to guide normative appraisal processes, Jewish practitioners and teachers drew upon the purification framework of "descent for the sake of ascent" (*yeridah l'tzorech aliyah*) from the Zohar, the cosmogonic framework of 'the breaking the vessels' (*shevirat ha-kelim*) from Lurianic Kabbalah, the doctrine of expanded and constricted consciousness (*mochin d'gadlut and mochin d'katnut*) as it was adopted and adapted from Lurianic Kabbalah into Hasidism, and finally, the practice of elevating sparks and "foreign thoughts" (*machshavot zarot*) in Hasidism (Fisher 2019).

In the interviews, some of the goals of Jewish contemplative paths were conceived as a trajectory from "the transcendence of the ego" to "nondual consciousness" to an "immanent transcendence" where one "recover[s] a sense of self" and experiences a "refinement of character" and then, ultimately, to an embodiment of "self-expressive" behavior in the world, where those experiences of transcendence "inform how I act in the world" (99113). This practitioner described the goal of the contemplative path as "to feel that state of limitlessness or transcendence but within the structures of my daily life, my job, my family, my friends, in

this body" (99113). Another Jewish teacher described the goal relatedly as "sanctifying the physical [world]", to "play all the keys on the piano" such as being "social, philanthropic, sensual, intellectual, emotional, sense of self confidence and making a living" (99206). And one other (99125) described the path as one in which from a base of a "strong, healthy ego" one eventually learns to "surrender it." In the last chapter, we also saw how goals of the contemplative path in some contemporary Jewish traditions were related to the term *bittul* (also discussed in the interviews) and three different versions of it *(ha-yesh, b'metziut*, and *ha-gamur*), the latter of which refers to the paradoxical realization of both the presence of a divine Self and the absence of any separate self. Finally, in my 2019 article, we saw how one other contemporary Jewish meditation teacher and scholar described his own experience of *bittul ha-yesh* as a kind of "psychic death" where "I experienced everything I had known to be who I am and what reality was, went through a process of erasure…and dissolution" (quoted on 46). This process, for him and his reading of Jewish mystical sources, gives rise to one's "true self" or "essential self" but the ultimate goal is the further realization of "the dissolution of egocentric consciousness" and the "nondual" awareness of being co-essential with the divine" (46).

ISLAMICATE TRADITIONS

In chapter one we explored how difficult stages of the path entailing necessary suffering were appraised as also related to: psycho-emotional and subtle energetic purification frameworks, the idea that some kinds of distressing experiences are necessary for certain kinds of spiritually significant events or spiritual maturation, the classical Sufi states (*hal)* and stages (*maqamat*) understood as revelations of the two dimensions of the divine, and the idea that

some distress or discomfort is unavoidable for Jungian shadow work towards individuation. In terms of the texts and traditions[84] drawn on for these appraisals, in my MA thesis we explored in more depth how classical Sufi psychological literature describes different states (*hal*) and stations (*maqamat*) of the Sufi path (*tariqa*), particularly those related to a process of purification or "polishing the mirror of the heart," and modern interpretations of some (ex. *talwin)* of them like the "yo-yo syndrome" in one Western Sufi tradition. Other key ideas discussed were the valley of bewilderment (*hayrat)* in Farid ad-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* and some modern interpretations of it, descriptions of painful and purgative experiences in the poetry of Jallal al-din Rumi, and the dual concept of annihilation (*fana*) and subsistence (*baqa*) that is ubiquitous in classical Sufi literature (Fisher 2019).

In terms of goals referenced, the traditional goals of *fana* and *baqa* were referenced and described by several subjects, including one (99236) who reported that her tradition's understanding follows the classical teaching that there are three stages of *fana* –in one's teacher, in a prophet, and in God. The first *fana* was that "at a certain point one realizes that the teacher one thought was outside and one maybe met with a several times a year, you know, at the annual workshop or whatever, is inside one's heart. And there's no separation…one's internal boundaries dissolve and, um, there's a new ease in life." While she didn't offer a phenomenological description of the second, the third form of *fana* was described more

[84] There are (at least) two important difficult stages that I did not include in my previous exploration of the topic that were not mentioned in the interviews. One is what is called in Sufi literature *bala* or "torment" which Sells describes as "a trial or testing that each Sufi must pass through on the path to union with the Beloved" (Sells 1996, n79). In the work of the 9th century Sufi Junayd, it is particularly associated with "the painful death of the ego self" (257). The other is the state of *fatra* or "abandonment." Addas describes how "in Islamic prophetology this term is used to designate the period of 'divine silence' which separates the coming of two prophets" but "in the technical vocabulary of Sufism, *fatra* refers to a period of inescapabale 'slackening', of *acedia*, when the spiritual man feels himself somehow abandoned by his Lord and fears that this state of abandonment could be permanent: for sometimes He remains silent forever" (Addas 1993, 42-43).

experientially as not a permanent state of the loss of sense of self, but a new psychological baseline such that "one can never again put one's ego at the center of existence because the game has changed forever." Other subjects referenced some other conceptions of the goal defined less as a psychological state or shift, and more related to one's behavior or orientation. For example, one teacher (992333) described how a normative orientation in his tradition was "the ability to be present in both worlds, the inner world of the spirit and the outer world of daily responsibilities" while a practitioner (99127) similarly described how "Sufis are very big on people staying integrated in society and not becoming monks and not retreating from the world completely. You have to be able to function in the world while these transformations are taking place and you see them in the light of the way your everyday life is." Finally, one teacher (99234) shared that "my understanding" is that "it's the human mission so to speak to develop a fully formed, healthy self" and then echoed Jack Engler in his belief that "you've got to have a self to lose a self." In both the MA and chapter two we also examined the understanding of *fana* as an absorptive state which initiates trait effects on one's sense of self, described in a contemporary Turkish tradition as a kind of psychological death before the birth of a new identity in the stage of *baqa* (Toussulis 2010, 177; discussed in Fisher 2019, 27). I also discussed how many traditions understand *fana* as the annihilation of one's identification with the ego and *baqa* as the re-emergence of a "divine Self," but some other contemporary traditions believe there is goal beyond this where even the divine Self and in fact any sense of separate self is extinguished as well (Fisher 2019, 29).

CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

In Christian traditions, difficult stages of the path were understood by many subjects as related to St. John of the Cross' conception of the dark nights of the senses and spirit, St. Ignatius of Loyola's own life and contemplative trajectory, the more idiosyncratic idea of "holy disturbances," Carl Jung's conception of the shadow, Michael Washburn's model of the spiral path and "regression in the service of ego-transcendence," and Thomas Keating's conception of the path as entailing the purgative untying of emotional knots, "kenotic unloading of the unconscious," and "divine therapy." In 2019 we more deeply investigated the teachings of both Teresa of Avila discussing her own challenging and impairing experiences as well as the teachings about the dark nights of John of the Cross, and the contemplative path structure of purgation-illumination-union utilized by both of them. We also examined how purgation or purification was often translated into a psychological key and Thomas Keating's conception of "divine therapy" and this "unloading of the unconscious" in the Centering prayer tradition.

In chapter one, we saw how the goal of Christian contemplative paths was conceived of as "ego deconstruction and reintegration of a new sense of self," the enlightened life as one of incarnate personhood, the achievement of the "transpersonal personal" and shifting one's identity from "our separated and narratively constructed selfhood" to a "no-self selfhood" or permanent "witnessing selfhood" (99222). This same teacher also discussed the idea that "we gradually gain enough being to be nothing" where "we learn to live without constant recourse to a narrative, referential point…whether that's no-self or simply a lighter way of being witnessing, I don't know." And finally, "nondual relationality" or relational union (99221) was also mentioned as a goal of practice, in addition to a perpetual state of "gazing at God" which is always present in the background and, while "not non-dual" was also somehow "not

separate either" (99110). In 2019, we briefly discussed a few goals outlined in the Centering Prayer tradition, namely "transforming union" and "unity consciousness." The former is described as a "restructuring of consciousness" in which "the presence of God becomes a kind of fourth dimension to the three-dimensional world in which we have been living." It is also a psychological change where "emotional swings disappear" though the emotions themselves do not, and "there is no longer a self-centered 'I'." The latter goal is preceded by what Thomas Keating and his student David Frenette call the "night of the self" and is itself described as "unity consciousness," "the experience of nonduality" or "nondual consciousness" that entails the "diminishment or loss of the sense of separateness" and the "death of the separate-self sense." (Fisher 2019, 17)

Lens on Nonlinear Changes

Hayes' Complex Systems Approach to Psychotherapy

Adele Hayes and her colleagues have been working to incorporate complex and dynamical systems frameworks into psychotherapy research for decades. In a recent paper (2020), Hayes and her colleague Andrews summarize the problem and the need for a new paradigm in the field, arguing that traditionally, "symptom change was often analyzed in snapshots of symptoms at pre- and post-treatment with the assumption of gradual and linear change," however more recently, "It has become apparent that this traditional approach does not fully capture the patterns of psychopathology and the dynamics of therapeutic change" (2). Their work is intended to, "further advance a complex systems approach to psychotherapy

research," and towards that goal, they define and employ several key complex systems technical terms, some of which we are already familiar with. For example, they sketch out how,

> a dynamic system is a set of interconnected elements that evolve over time and self-organize into higher-order functional units, called attractor states, that are preferred and govern system behavior. Self-organization is the process by which lower-order processes interact and higher-order patterns emerge and then influence the lower-order processes in a top-down manner. Attractor states constrain system behavior such that it tends to be "pulled" back to these states when perturbed. An adaptive system is flexible as conditions change, but also able to maintain functional integrity in the face of perturbation. A system that has multiple functional patterns (known as multistability) can flexibly switch between patterns to meet the demands of internal and external challenges. Attractors that are well-established have strongly interconnected elements, with reinforcing and inhibiting feedback loops that can increase or decrease the probability of activation over time and contexts. When attractor patterns are entrenched, they become rigid and relatively insensitive to challenges or new information. Significant disturbance or strong jolts are therefore required to disrupt these patterns. Less developed or destabilized attractors have a weaker hold, allowing the system to more easily switch to alternative states. (2)

They then explain how, "To maintain coherence, complex systems can adapt to, incorporate, or defend against challenges" and both "deterministic (purposeful or causal) and stochastic (naturally occurring random events, fluctuations, noise) forces influence the maintenance and disruption of complex systems" (2). Both kinds of forces can result in two different kinds of change processes, either "incremental and gradual, with minor fluctuations and adjustments within the dominant pattern of functioning" or change can be "abrupt and discontinuous" accompanied by "periods of turbulence as attractors destabilize and create the potential for *phase or order transitions*. During these transitions, systems can reorganize into qualitative new patterns of functioning, such as from a healthy state to a diseased state" or vice versa (2-3).

Hayes and Andrews call attention to two "generic early warning signs that occur consistently and herald transition across a wide range of systems," critical fluctuations and critical slowing. The former is defined as "rising variability in system behavior that indicates that the system dynamics are breaking down" and the latter is defined as "a slower return to baseline or recovery after perturbation" (3). Within the context of depression research they developed what they call the "network destabilization and transition model (NDT) as an organizing framework to import concepts and principles from complexity sciences (dynamical systems theory, synergetics, and network science) to psychotherapy research," but in this paper they "broaden the perspective to apply to psychopathology in general" (2). Within this particular model, they "conceptualize psychopathology as an attractor state with interacting elements of cognitions, emotions, behavior, and physiology" and sketch out several forms of psychotherapeutic change (3). The first "involves making minor adjustments to maladaptive patterns" that "do not induce fundamental attractor changes"[85] whereas another "involves switching from a pathological to a healthier attractor," assuming "there is an alternative to switch to," but also does "not change the pathological attractor directly" (5). The third type of change they discuss, "*destabilizing* the pathological attractor and developing new, more healthy patterns of functioning" which can be initiated by interventions which "activate and challenge" the pathological attractor through a "destabilizing jolt…needed to break the stasis

[85] Examples of this kind of change are, "Distress tolerance, mindfulness, and positive emotion activation approaches" which can "change the threshold of activation (or the sensitivity) and automaticity of both pathological and more functional patterns" (5). In addition, "Behavioral, interpersonal, cognitive reappraisal, emotion regulation, or parenting skills can be used to: (1) reduce feedback loops that block new information and interfere with new learning (spiral in panel 1, right), (2) deactivate or unhook from the pathological patterns of the attractor, or (3) compensate for or override these patterns" (5).

and facilitate transition"[86](5). Importantly for our purposes, during the period of destabilization, "indicators of critical fluctuations (increased variance)" are likely to be apparent and this period "can be characterized by system-wide disturbance and symptom exacerbation, but this turbulence can also increase the flexibility needed for attractor change" (5).

They then discuss how a "complex systems approach views periods of increased variability and turbulence in psychotherapy as potential opportunities for change rather than as noise or disturbances to quell." While too "few studies have been conducted on early warning signals in psychotherapy to draw firm conclusions," nevertheless "the findings thus far suggest that nonlinear and discontinuous changes and periods of rising variability in symptoms and patterns of pathology occur in psychotherapy, and that these fluctuations predict symptom reduction and the development of more healthy patterns of functioning" (7). However, they also note that, "It is not clear whether the signatures of early warning signals differ when predicting the onset of clinical disorders, improvement or worsening in psychotherapy, or relapse" (8). While "It is clinically important to differentiate turbulence that precedes the degradation or worsening of a system from turbulence that heralds change to a more functional state," there is not currently enough research or empirical data to do so (8).

HIPOLITO'S COMPLEX SYSTEMS APPROACH TO PSYCHEDELIC MEDICINE

[86] Examples of interventions which aim for this kind of change are "Exposure therapy, insight-oriented therapy, and emotion-focused and cognitive re- structuring technique" which can "introduce corrective information and skills to induce dissonance and perturb maladaptive networks" (5).

Hayes and Andrews model is important for our purposes particularly in their conception of psychopathological and adaptive networks as consisting of cognitions or **thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and physiological responses** and for their highlighting that **critical fluctuations** often precede phase transitions and "herald transition across a number of systems in nature" (7). However, another complex systems approach from Ines Hipolito, Robin Carhart-Harris and their colleagues (2023) helps us understand how contemplative practices leading to states of absorption can destabilize cognitive systems (like the psychotherapeutic methods Hayes and Andrews highlight) and also cause critical fluctuations.

Because Carhart-Harris is also the co-author of the PiMS framework, he provides a helpful bridge that allows us to understand how contemplative states of absorption interact with the nonlinear change processes that define nonlinear paths. They argue that "psychedelics destabilize fixed points or attractors, breaking reinforced patterns of thinking and behaving" and explain "how psychedelic-induced increases in brain entropy destabilize neurophysiological set-points and leads to new conceptualizations of psychedelic psychotherapy" (2023, 2). They also, like Hayes and Andrews, posit "destabilization" as key to the clinical efficacy of psychedelics, since in their understanding, hyper-plastic psychedelic states have the power to destabilize "stuck" pathological attractor states. In their view, destabilization is actually marked by critical fluctuations. For example, they write that, "Evidence shows that psychological destabilization, measured as increased fluctuations in psychological states, is a predictor of clinical change in both coded observational data of therapy sessions and repeated self-ratings...Such psychological destabilization can be interpreted as early indicators for upcoming clinical transitions" (9). They specify how the "process of destabilization may cause the enhancement of features of criticality…as the global

system moves out of a subcritical regime associated with ill health. Such features might include critical fluctuations, cascading, long-range correlations, scale-free or fractal dynamics and critical slowing down" (8). They also build on Hayes work to sketch out the therapeutic trajectory involved with psychedelic therapies, explaining that once such attractors are destabilized, "subsequent treatments targeted at supporting an alternative, healthier state space are promoted — a process also known as integration (Hayes et al. 2015)" (9). In fact, in addition to the importance of the continuation of the therapeutic intervention after the psychedelic experience itself in such integration processes, they also mark the importance of both "set and setting" in shaping such states and (like Brouwer and Carhart-Harris) the importance of both for guiding system change in more adaptive directions (10).[87]

Finally, they bridge to another complex-systems framework, this time the enactive approach to cognitive science, to clarify their perspective on psychopathology:

> This dynamical view of psychopathology can be further developed following an enactive approach operationalized via tools from dynamical systems theory. In this framework individuals are seen as evolving coupled with their sociocultural environment, viz. enacting their environment, which can be interpreted as a dynamical process whereby a system traverses a given "phase space" — i.e. the set of possible states or configurations available to the individual. In enacting their environments, the specific properties of how the individual is presently coupled with their environment result in the dynamical trajectory being more or less attracted to certain behaviours, represented by the system persisting on different regions of the phase space. Dynamical systems theory then tells us that such attractor sets can be of different types: single stable points, periodic cycles, or so-called "strange" attractors of complicated geometries. Moreover, a given system can have multiple attractors and dynamically switch between them, which gives rise to metastable behaviour — which has been shown to be important for biological and social systems (6)

[87] As we will see in the next chapter, Studstill (2005) will argue that both philosophical training and analytical meditative practices are important parts of such "set and setting" for destabilizing contemplative practices to lead the cognitive system in generative and adaptive directions.

This leads them to conclude that, "psychopathology is seen as an emergent phenomenon, in the sense that it depends on the coupling between the individual and his/her environment, and hence it cannot be reduced to the sum of the parts in isolation" (5).

Thus, in summary, the basic idea of complex systems approaches to both psychotherapy and psychedelic medicine is that human cognitive systems behave like other systems in nature, and therefore can be understood in similar terms and using similar methods and conceptual tools. My claim is that, through contemplative states of absorption, states of hyperplasticity are cultivated which similarly destabilize existing attractors (which we can think of as looping or non-linearly related clusters of thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and physiological states) that can bifurcate into either salutogenic or pathogenic new attractors or multistable attractor landscapes…but, like other complex systems, will demonstrate critical fluctuations before doing so. In addition, while these new attractor landscapes do qualitatively describe psychological changes, the enactive approach (which we will examine in more depth in part IV) heightens our awareness that those "cognitive" changes and evolutions co-arise with new actions, behaviors, and couplings with one's physical and sociocultural environment.

CST Lens on Nonlinear Paths

There are many different contemplative paths found within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Despite the variability, I believe there are certain patterns that hold true across many of them. For one, we have seen how goals of these contemplative paths are understood to be lasting trait changes (as opposed to state changes), some of which may involve baseline sense

of self changes— as in some stages of *bittul*, some stages of *fana,* and some stages of union. We have also seen how for all those traditions which posit such goals as possible, they also report difficult or challenging stages of practice which come before such changes (on different time scales), some of which are explicitly identified as oscillations or fluctuations—between *mochin d'gadlut* and *mochin d'katnut*, *contentos and discontentos*, and the "variegation" (*talwin)* between states of *bast* and *qabd.* For those paths that include various states of contemplative absorption and conceive of their goal as some kind of lasting psychological shift and/or mode of being in the world, I argue that complex-systems theory based models can illumine these nonlinear change trajectories

The basic account I am proposing is that because contemplative states of absorption are hyperplastic, they have the capacity to induce more lasting psychological changes. From the frameworks we examined above, I argue that one route to such change is the destabilization of attractors that cause bifurcations and phase shifts to new attractor landscapes. The key point is that destabilization, here as in other complex systems in nature, can cause "critical fluctuations" of the system before those new attractors or attractor landscapes are settled in or stabilized. These critical fluctuations don't necessarily or always lead to the goals of the tradition, as they merely indicate that the current attractor is being destabilized, but they will be reliably observed before such bifurcations occur. While this framework, like that of both Hayes and Hipolito, lacks detail it nonetheless breaks new theoretical ground[88] and allows us to make sense of a broad swath of contemplative traditions

[88] Both Hayes and Andrews and Hipolito et al. that their models are preliminary and merely sketches. For example, Hipolito and her colleagues qualify their contribution, that "The presented model is admittedly lacking in detailed explanations," however "it is believed to hold considerable intuitive appeal and may aid in understanding the unitive or non-dual experiences associated with psychedelics and certain meditative states experiences associated with psychedelics and certain meditative states" (2023, 10). And Hayes and colleagues in an earlier study (2015) write that, "Some might argue that one aspect or another of the framework is too

and trajectories both historically and today. Moreover, I believe it is sufficient to help guide care for those suffering from meditation-related difficulties, the implications of which we will examine in more depth in chapter four.

This trajectory, of states of absorption catalyzing critical fluctuations which then phase shift into new attractor landscapes is not always fully visible in the interviews I conducted, due, I would argue (echoing Hayes), to the cross-sectional nature of the study. To gain a longitudinal perspective, I rely here on the published diary of a contemporary Sufi practitioner in which each of these dynamics is more clearly visible. Her diary records her experiences during an intensive retreat in a sensory withdrawal environment—likely amplified the hyperplasticity and thus the scale of the psychological changes she reports.

CASE STUDY: MICHAELA OZELSEL

In 1991, Dr. Michaela Ozelsel, a German-born clinical psychologist underwent a traditional 40-day Sufi retreat (*halvet* in Turkish) in Istanbul. She was encouraged by the Sufi Sheikh overseeing her retreat to take notes and ultimately to publish the diary of her experience, which, along with her own commentary, appeared as *Forty Days: The Diary of a*

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crude, does not meet the exact specifications of dynamic systems modeling, or does not include important details." (28) In response though, they argue that,

> Our intent here is to suggest an organizing framework to integrate disparate findings, facilitate comparisons of processes and mechanisms across studies, and suggest methodological innovations. Such a framework can provide new ways of thinking about treatment research and development, although at this point applications of dynamic systems theory to psychotherapy research might represent successive approximations. To realize the full potential of dynamic systems modeling, clinical research will likely involve new types of data collection, new analytic tools, and interdisciplinary collaborations with scientists in other fields such as physics, computational modeling, mathematics, and computer science. (28)

Traditional Solitary Sufi Retreat. The introduction by the eminent scholar of Sufism Annemarie Schimmel is a glowing approbation establishing not only the psychological import of the work but also its traditional scholarly continuity and credibility as well. Ozelsel divides her book into two parts, her diary and then her commentary on her experiences, and even though her diary entries themselves already freely combine her experiences with her appraisals (as would be expected), I will separate them in my presentation of her case study. We will first examine her descriptions of the phenomenology and trajectory of experiences she reports over the course of the retreat, then consider the appraisals she invoked, and only then apply the lens we have been developing in the past two chapters. This resonance between some modern emic CST based appraisals and our own CST based etic lens—which we will examine more next chapter—is what makes this approach such a potentially good fit for culturally-sensitive clinical care.

PHENOMENOLOGY & TRAJECTORY

Ozelsel arrived in Istanbul during the buildup towards the Gulf war and on the heels of a newly minted divorce from her husband. The retreat takes place in a tiny room in an abandoned apartment but before being "sealed" into it she describes going with the Sheikh and his attendants to sacrifice a sheep and making a mark with its blood upon her forehead (4). During the retreat she observed an "Islamic fast"—no food or water from before sunrise to sunset—and no reading matter apart from a copy of the Quran and some works by the medieval Sufi masters Jellaludin Rumi and Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi. Her daily routine consisted of the traditional Islamic prayers and the contemplative practice of *dhikr* consisting of a

rhythmic repetition of verses from the Quran prescribed specifically for her for this retreat by her Sheikh (10).

The first few days she reports crying a lot during *dhikr* practice (11) as she adjusts to her new environment and living conditions. In those entries she reflected on her intentions for engaging in such an intense period of spiritual training—it was in response to a period of "unearthly" psychological pain such that "it became so strong that I feared or hoped it would literally tear me apart in a moment, that I would maybe become psychotic" (13). In her diary she writes that she understood this period of severe depression, de-realization, and despair about six months after meeting her teacher in light of her teacher's casual comment, "On this path you will lose whatever is dearest to you" (12). She notes, upon recalling this comment, the pain ultimately lessened, her suicidality diminished, but instead of vanishing completely it transmuted into a "desperate desire to be in touch with her teacher" who had mysteriously vanished soon thereafter (14). This "obsession" manifested (before the retreat) as "feverishly" waiting for the mail each day and compulsively wondering if or when her teacher might get in touch with her (14). On the fourth day of the retreat she reports a "breakthrough" related to this obsessive ideation and behavior, realizing the past year of being consumed by the absence of the teacher was really sent by God to help her cultivate patience and trust (17). On this day during her *dhikr* practice she reports involuntary movements for the first time: "my head, all by itself with no voluntary action on my part starts to execute the traditional movements. Stronger and stronger, faster and faster, at first from right to left, sliding smoothly, then simply up and down, up and down" until a "trance-like feeling sets in" (18).

On day 5 she reports despair and guilt over her perceived laziness—and the sheep that gave its life for it—until at some point during her *dhikr* practice "a state of deep well-being

envelops me…and there is a noticeable physical component besides the spiritual-psychic one" (20). She comments on the reversal, from feelings of despair to well-being, and reflects on this pattern in her life until "All at once, in this soft, floating state, there on my cotton mattress, I see the 'big picture', see the consistency in everything that happened, yes, and it all *had* to happen the way it did" (23). The next day she reports another period of frustration related to her spiritual practice leading to helplessness until eventually noting "changes to my bodily awareness" that were similar to synesthetic and kinesthetic experiences she had begun to notice beginning the previous summer (28). In addition, she describes "an intense trembling arose in my whole body" sometimes becoming "so intense that real-live twitches and jerks occurred" prompting her friends to tease her about them (28-29). Over several months the "trembling had become progressively more delicate" and finally became a feeling of "vibration that sometimes pulsed through my body like a current" which was sometimes attended by "pressure against the top of my skull, or sometimes a feeling as if my lower pelvic cavity was filled with a bubbly, champagne-like liquid" (29). Now during the periods of *dhikr* practice on the retreat these perceptions came back even stronger, "as if my body was surrounded by a kind of bubble filled with some substance of slightly greater density than air" which she ultimately began referring to as her "air body" (29).

On day 7 she reports "noticeable alteration in bodily feeling" again during *dhikr* as well as vivid images such as "gentle mountain ranges," "a simple little mosque by starlight" and "a still night in the vastness of Anatolia" (33). The next day she reports "crying a lot again" and "I have suffered a major relapse: my obsession makes itself conspicuous again, overshadowing everything else"(34). Later she reports more involuntary movements that give way to "the deepest tranquility, inner peace" as well as more vivid imagery such as various

colored patterns and a "huge eye with long, thick lashes appears, looking at me motionlessly" (35). On day 9 she notes that her obsession mysteriously vanishes and then she noticed a pattern among her days so far, that "days that begin in banality often end with important insights" but days "that start promisingly mostly end up quite the opposite!" (36). On day 10 she describes becoming "suddenly stricken with love for Mohammad…the love I feel is so deep it hurts…an immense joy pulses through me, making me cry more and more" (37). On Day 11 she describes a vision that occurs during *dhikr* practice, "my whole body is in flames, every single cell burns clean with holy fire" and an acute experience of love arises until "the tears of joy that come from this painfully intense experience of love turn to sadness, indeed despair. It stays that way" (40). Day 12 she awakens with the Quranic verse, "Verily, whenever kings enter a country they corrupt it," which on that day she interprets to mean when "the 'exact knowledge' begins to supplant the 'relative knowledge,' then a person's existing structures are simply too narrow, they must break apart to make room for the new realization. Just as a snake must molt to grow…" (40). She describes pretty severe memory impairment such that she doesn't remember if she just completed her prayers or not and wonders, "Am I still 'all there' mentally?...Maybe I really will have to break off the *halvet*" (42). On day 14 she reports feeling "somewhat dull today, numb, uncaring" which eventually shifts to "an intense pain of greater and greater severity" and "a violent trembling of the whole body" (46-47).

On day 15 she begins to notice the "erotic component" of the feelings of well-being generated during the *dhikr* practice, and that "the more exclusively I concentrate on the object of meditation, the ancient holy formulas, the pleasanter the sensations are and the pleasanter the sensations, the more exclusive my concentration on the *dhikr*" (49-50). Her obsessive

ideation returns but the next day she notes that "the erotic sensations streaming through my whole body become more and more intense" (53). On day 17 she reports "a noticeable tugging sensation somewhere around the heart" and on day 18 describes experiences of "inner peace" and "tranquility of the heart" felt physically "above the heart region" (54). She attempts to "sacrifice" her obsessive ideation and "despairing wish to see my Teacher again" which co-arises with burning pain like she experienced during her severe depression but then at "some point, much later, the terrible pain ceases all at once just for a second, and I experience the deepest and richest tranquility of the heart that I have ever felt" (56). On Day 19 she records a very short entry: "I feel only emptiness, burned-out, endless emptiness. No traces of this indescribable inner peace…that had come in the night for a few seconds like a beam of light through the cloud-cover of pain" (56). On day 20 similarly, she describes how she "can't go on" given her "abyss-like helplessness" (57) and on day 21 writes, "I don't understand anything anymore. There's nothing more for me to do but what was assigned to me…So pain is healed by pain" (61).

On day 22 she reports expansive states of "peace" and the next day she reports that while being "deep in absorption" during *dhikr* she has a cascade of insights related to her upbringing and psychological/emotional defense mechanisms in the greater context of Sufi spiritual practice where pain and "sweetness" co-arise (67-68). On day 24 she describes, "an extremely pleasant floating state embraces me…of inner vastness and expansion" (73). The following day she reports sadness, doubt, and despair as well as a recurrence of her obsessive ideation about her Sheikh ultimately culminating the next day in a deeper despair where she can't concentrate on the *dhikr* and feels that "I've hit rock bottom" (74). Day 27 there is an actual earthquake in Istanbul and (unrelatedly) she reports a reprieve in her despair but the

next day she has "intermittent relapses of my obsession" and "I don't know what to do with myself, nothing seems to do anything for me" (77). On day 29 she reports feeling a vibration throughout her whole body as well as a vision—though she's not sure if she was asleep or awake—of being a "majestic stream" flowing into the ocean which evokes feelings of love and tranquility until the "feeling of becoming-one/being-one is all-embracing, orgasmic" though ultimately doesn't last (78-79). The next day she reports a series of significant dreams:

> An old man shows me certain practices that will lead every cell of my body to start glowing, that will cause a little flame to burn in each cell, burning me all bright and clean. "Oil" he says without using words, so bright that it gleams before its even lighted."…I drift into the next dream: someone I can't see explains the previous dream sequence to me: This old man is Muhammad (peace be upon him). By his light the other lights are lighted. That's why your body has been vibrating. (79)

On day 31 she is "confronted again with the full extent of my helplessness" and her "whole body is aglow with inner vibration, each cell with a life of its own, burning" until she eventually feels "burned out" and mentally "depleted" (81). The next day she reports vivid imagery of her heart "as a crystalline structure" with "the network of veins like glass" with her anxieties "sticking on top like fragments of black olives stuck between one's teeth" but the *dhikr* ultimately scrubs everything clean[89] (83). On day 33 she reports another significant vision or series of images:

> I see Muhammad (Peace be upon him) sitting in a white Arabian gown…He has me on his lap and presses me to his bosom, like my grandpa did when I was still a little girl…I ask him to show me his heart, to teach me the way of heart, the way of poverty. He opens his garment to show his chest, and his heart is like a gleaming, reflecting mirror, like an indescribably powerful silvery-white sun that burns up and destroys everything in its cool fire…I stay there for a long time, right in front of this glittering, all-penetrating light source, secure in his strong arms, kept safe…infinite love, pain, consolation. At the same time I sense my body in the here and now: then, empty, hungry, twitching, shaking, vibrating in every single cell of my being—burning clean, glowing. (84-85)

[89] On this day she also the constructed nature of many of her experiences, that Ibn Arabi says God comes in the form you have of him and that "constructivism" ultimately rings true (160).

On day 35 she describes sensing the blessing *(baraka)* from the chain of transmission of the departed Sufi masters in her lineage (*silisila)* and the following day reports: "I have practically no trouble anymore keeping my thoughts on the matter at hand" (86). During prayer on day 37 she relates a new state or experience of "indescribably vastness, so great as to encompass the whole of creation" and the "afterglow of this experience stays with me afterwards for a while longer," such that despite "my physical weakness, I feel inexpressibly good" (87-88). But on day 37 she reports another challenging day, another "day where nothing fits! I'm slowly getting used to this regular back-and-forth" (90). She alludes to experiencing more pain the next day and on day 39 reports more despair and distress as her "touch of desperation makes me impatient, and my impatience heightens my desperation. A bad cycle" (91-92). And then unexpectedly another vision of Muhammad occurs to her, though this time not in "human form. He's like a great endless cloudbank" (93). At first she is seeing herself from behind, flying toward this cloud bank,

> Then "I" stop seeing "myself." Now there is only one perceiving. Inside this cloud bank I spread out farther and farther. My outstretched arms and legs at first get longer and longer, I am pulled in all directions at once. Then I come apart and dissolve completely in this fog that is purest love and mercy. As if a glass of tea were tossed into the great see. The tea gets thinner and thinner till finally it's "tea-being" is lost in the "water being", leaving only on sea water. Having now become one, "we" spread out immeasurably, endlessly, farther and farther. "We-I-he" are so dissolved, so spread out, that we embrace the whole universe…It is one single Being of immeasurable love and mercy. (93-94)

She spends more time than usual reflecting on this experience in the journal and ultimately quotes the 11th century Sufi al-Ghazzali who describes this state as "extinction" (*fana)*, the culmination of the traditional Sufi path as she understands it and the very state she has been longing for and intending towards throughout her retreat (95). On the 40th day she changes her schedule to read the notes she has written so far and prays that she can bring the fruits of her

retreat into her life and into the world (98). In the evening the Sheikh comes to "unseal" her and takes her to his home where she at first has difficulty comprehending the words of others and speaking but "gradually it gets easier for me to express myself" and she reports some of her experiences to the Sheikh and his family (99). After two hours the Sheikh reports to others that "She has met her heart" and she returns to her cell to sleep to ease her transition back into the world the following day (99).

CST Lens & Appraisals

At the beginning of her self-proclaimed commentary, Ozelsel relates that she will need to draw from a "mosaic of the most various disciplines" to "illuminate the *halvet* experience from a Western scientific point of view (109). These include transpersonal psychology, anthropology, comparative religion, neuroscience, developmental psychology, and clinical psychology among others. She begins by explaining how she navigates between Sufi psychological and western psychological frameworks, namely that "Western psychologies, in their stage models of human development, stop where the process of "becoming human" in the Sufi view is just starting" (109; 111). In other words, both frameworks are valid but the goals for western psychological frameworks are the beginnings of Sufi psychological frameworks. This hierarchy—which she acknowledges is informed by the work of Ken Wilber—allows her to combine traditional (emic) and scientific (etic) perspectives in her appraisal of her experiences. In addition, the idea that God is the "first cause" or the ultimate cause but there may be secondary or more proximate causes (such as psychological or

biological ones) for particular experiences allows her to explore this "full mosaic" of methodologies and causal explanatory frameworks.

While each chapter of her commentary dealing with a different theme and sometimes a different disciplinary lens is quite interesting, we will restrict ourselves to just a few of them. The first thematic chapter worth mentioning for our purposes is entitled "Accompanying Physiological Phenomena" and in it she compares her somatic experiences (which began 6 months before retreat) to literature on "kundalini" (from the work of Lee Sannella) since these experiences "were not familiar to me either from traditional Sufi literature nor from conversations with friends on the Sufi path" (131). It is with regard to these phenomena (namely involuntary movements and experiences of somatic energy) that Ozelsel's "interpretive drift" is apparent, since she acknowledges not understanding these experiences as they were happening and only being able to find a personally meaningful appraisal of them after friends referred her to Sannella's work (Luhrmann 1989). When these experiences first began prior to the retreat, Ozelsel writes that she did ask her Sheikh at the time about them and he didn't explain them overtly but did normalize them by "recommending attaching importance to such phenomena and awaiting further developments" (28).

She remarks that the descriptions of "kriyas" in the kundalini literature are particularly resonant with her experience and that the fasting and physical immobility may have amplified such effects in her experience given that physical exercise and eating heavy foods are recommended in this literature to ameliorate such symptoms (134, 135). She explores "various attempts to find explanations in the natural sciences for the Kundalini symptomology" such as the idea that "the constant repetition of the same sound that occurs in mantra meditation can produce a resonance effect in a person's limbic system" that can lead to "sensations of an

electric nature that spread through the head and can become rhythmic and sometimes almost convulsive or orgasmic" (136). She then posits that "recent discoveries in endocrinology" may also be relevant for her experiences, particularly the pituitary hormones which have been theorized to be affected by "psychological modulation and hypnotherapeutic intervention." She continues, "In my opinion, what goes for hypnotically induced trances can also be assumed for trance states resulting from the practices of various spiritual traditions" (137). She later adds that while the "illusions and hallucinations of the hypnotic trance, in my opinion, could have a correlation—on another level, to be sure—in the visions occurring in trance induced by spiritual practices, that is, they might be related to the same physiological processes" she admits that "such considerations are purely speculative"[90] (139). While clearly speaking with her social scientific hat on here, she is also still careful to be measured and not to exceed connections that have been empirically demonstrated so far. Nevertheless, hopefully we can now see that her intuitions regarding the connection between hypnosis, trance, and meditation may still be a fruitful line of inquiry more than 20 years later.[91]

The other chapter and theme of her appraisal that we shall highlight is called "Methods of Sufi Schooling: Do they make you Well or Make you sick?" (156). She begins by noting

[90] She continued that, "Interdisciplinary investigations in such traditionally widely-separated areas as neurology, molecular genetics, biology, psychology, religion, energetic medicine and cultural anthropology are requisite before any more concrete statements can be made" (140).

[91] In the related chapter, "The Physiological Dimension" she discusses some research on ascetic practices and sensory deprivation and summarizes as follows:

> Both of the consciousness-altering techniques depicted above as being poles apart, namely sensory deprivation (absolute isolation) and vestibular overstimulation (dhikr, namaz) apply to the conditions of a *halvet* at the same time. The combination of these with the further requirements (heavy fasting, extensive motionlessness, daylight deprivation and indoctrination with selected Islamic reading materials) causes the *halvet* conditions in their totality to be an extraordinarily powerful method of physic-psycho-spiritual transformation." (154)

that “western psychosomatic research shows that the functioning of the immune system is weakened by acute and chronic stress” and then that the process of spiritual training involved in a retreat like the one she did “would have to be classified, from the western point of view, as an absolutely classic example of stress of the most massive kind” (156). She continues,

> It might be asked how it is that a way of proceeding that according to one kind of judgment “makes a person sick” can be understood according to another kind of judgment as “leading to recovery”. In my opinion, the difference (that is, as to whether the result will be physical health or sickness, psychosis or expanded consciousness) lies in being embedded in a clearly delineated (spiritual) system of teaching. In the various extremely difficult transition phases on the “way”, during which the student is psychologically and physically very vulnerable, this embedding provides the necessary protective structure. (157)

She describes how “the self-transcendence that is the aim of spiritual schooling requires the student to make ‘quantum leaps’ in his or her world picture, that is to say, mental processes” and that the “most persuasive models of the mechanism underlying any such radical mental re-organization are in my opinion those that have been fashioned from considerations of systems theory” (160). Ozelsel invokes chemist and Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine on how systems evolve “in quantum leaps, that is, in a discontinuous and self-transcendent way” (160). The quote continues, “The energy that the systems need for the purpose is drawn from outside; but the conditions sufficient for such a qualitative transformation come from fluctuations within their structure. By this process of evolutionary feedback, the systems achieve their new organization” (161). She then quotes German psychotherapist and Zen teacher Karlfried Grad Durckheim who describes how once a previous construction is “annihilated and its previous structure destroyed, so that the chaos seems complete and the student lies shattered on the floor, before he or she begins to sense that something new is forming, a new order is putting itself together, a new shape is emerging” (161). This is quite commensurate with her insight early on in the retreat that when the

knowledge born of contemplative insight "begins to supplant the 'relative knowledge,' then a person's existing structures are simply too narrow, they must break apart to make room for the new realization. Just as a snake must molt to grow…" (40).

While Ozelsel was not familiar with psychological models that draw directly on complex systems theory and so can only gesture towards what such a model would entail, I hope the resonance between the CST-based nonlinear change framework we have outlined and the incipient one pointed towards by Ozelsel is apparent. Both Hayes and Ozelsel cite the work of Ilya Priogine (Hayes et al. 2007, 1; Ozelsel 1991, 160) but Ozelsel provides an account of what such "critical fluctuations" or "variegation" (*talwin)* looks like in relatively fine-grained detail. Indeed, Ozelsel's diary is the functional equivalent of the methodology Hayes argues is necessary to capture nonlinear change, namely "multiple assessments over time and the examination of individual trajectories" constituting the "revival of the single subject design" in psychotherapy research (Hayes et al. 2007, 74). Ozelsel repeatedly refers to states of contemplative absorption and perceptual decoupling as well as an oscillation between states of well-being, joy, and love with states of despair, helplessness, and cognitive impairment. She notices this oscillation pattern first explicitly on day 5 (as mentioned above) but then repeatedly describes it in real time throughout the rest of the retreat—for example, on days 8, 9, 11, 18, 19-21 vs. 22, 24 vs. 25, and finally, 36 vs. day 37.

She then also points to her attainment of the goal of classical Sufi paths which would be understood as a new baseline sense of self in Sufism and a new attractor landscape for her embodied cognitive system by Ozelsel herself. While her diary ends after the retreat ends and we don't have any "follow-up" data to assess if this was in fact the case, the fact that she chose to publish her explicit appraisal identifying it as *fana* suggests there were enduring changes

afterward that were likely verified by her Sheikh.

PART II: A CLOSER LOOK AT GOALS AS TRANSFORMED ATTRACTOR LANDSCAPES

While we now have some neutral etic language for conceptualizing the goals of contemplative paths—as new attractor landscapes consisting of new attractors, depths of attractor basins or multistable networks of attractors[92]—we now need to take a deeper look at how various Abrahamic traditions and sub-traditions actually understand, interpret, and thereby seek to 'realize' these goals. In the interviews from chapter one, we have seen how the goals of contemplative paths are conceived of as particular states with trait effects related to one's sense of self and/or new ways of being and acting in the world. We have also seen that Hayes and Andrews include behaviors in their conception of cognitive systems and that Hipolito et al. understand enduring changes in the system as new dynamical "couplings" between cognitive systems and their environments. In this section, we will explore how

[92] Hipolito et al. (2023) explains in more depth:

> Rather, the key to avoiding psychopathology is achieving multistability. More precisely, systems must engage with the environment to avoid becoming isolated, as this creates a network of multistability that enables them to rebound from environmental stressors. Multistability refers to the ability of an individual's psychological system to attain multiple stable states or attractors in response to changing environmental conditions. These attractors can correspond to various patterns of thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and beliefs. The ability to transition between these states is considered indicative of psychological flexibility and resilience. Thus, mental health is defined by the capacity to achieve and sustain a variety of stable states or attractors, as opposed to being confined to a rigid, single state. This capability permits individuals to adjust to fluctuating circumstances, cope with stressors, and interact with the world in an adaptable and effective manner. Conversely, mental illness or psychopathology is the result of being ensnared in a too-flat attractor landscape or being unable to transition between states, leading to maladaptive thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. (7)

historically and today, the goals of contemplative paths are defined in relation to psychological and behavioral trait changes, specifically, baseline sense of self transformations and new ways of acting in the world.

ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

HISTORICALLY - IBN ARABI AND THE AKBARIAN TRADITION

Ibn Arabi in some places describes the "station of servitude" (*ubudiyya*) as the goal of the Sufi path. As Addas (1993) writes, "in Ibn Arabi's eyes the state of the *ubudiyya* surpasses all others. It is the state every disciple must aspire to and the goal of spiritual realization because it represents the return to the original state: to the ontological nothingness of the creature or created being" (61-62). He continues,

> Whoever has realized *ubudiyya* or servitude has stripped himself of *rububiyya*, of the 'Lordship' which really belongs to God alone but which ordinary men in their arrogance claim for themselves. According to Ibn Arabi the state of such a person is comparable to a stone that falls where it is thrown: he is literally '*abd Allah,* the slave of God. In a sense it can be said that Ibn Arabi's entire teaching as embodied in his writings has as its sole aim to guide his spiritual children…towards the state of servitude to which Uryabi had guided him. (62)

The first thing to note here is that the goal is defined in relation to both a trait change related to the diminishment or even total loss of a sense of self-agency, as well as a certain kind of action in the world. Addas clarifies this further as he identifies that, ""the only people who realise the state of *ubudiyya* fully are the *malamiyya*, the 'People of Blame'" (62). These attained Sufis were described by Ibn Arabi as follows:

> The *malamiyya* are spiritual men (al-rijal) who have assumed the highest degree of sainthood (walaya). There is nothing higher than them except the station of prophecy. [Their station] is the one referred to as the Station of Proximity (maqam al-qurba)…No miracles (kharq adat) are ascribed to them. They are not admired, because in the eyes

> of men they are not distinguished by behaviour which is ostensibly virtuous…They are the hidden ones, the pure ones, the ones in this world who are sure and sound, concealed among men…They are the solitary ones (al-afrad). (quoted in Addas 1993, 71)

Here we see that even though their behavior has changed, such behavioral changes are not loud or very apparent to others. Addas specifies that there are actually two different categories of "solitary ones"—those that have achieved the highest level of sainthood equated with "general prophecy" (*nubuwwa amma*) instead of the legislative prophecy "sealed" by the Prophet Muhammad—both of which "have fully and totally realized *ubudiyya*, the service of God" (77; 72). There are "those who use their spiritual energy (*rukkab al-himmam*) as their 'mount', and those who use their acts (*rukkab al-a'mal*)," in other words, those whose service consists in spiritual intentional engagement in the spiritual worlds, and those whose service entails physical engagement in the physical world (72). Those of the second category are "superior to those in the first category because, following the example of the prophets, they have returned from God to created beings—without, however, leaving God, for in every single thing at every instant they perceive the *wajhullah*, the Face of God" (72).

Another important facet of Ibn Arabi's thought for our purpose is his distinction between "the person who only sees God in things and the person who sees things and God in them" (139). Addas explains that these "two standpoints correspond respectively to the perspective of the *waqif*, the person who comes to a halt in the Divine Presence and from that time onwards knows and sees nothing but God and the *raji*, the person who has returned from God because he sees the Face of God in everything." Addas notes that the first standpoint is exemplified by the "*laysiyya,*[93] those who deny the reality of the world" but for Ibn Arabi,

[93] Casewit (2020) translates the school or *madhab* of the *laysiyya as the "school of non-dualism"(17)* and describes how in his student Shushtari's understanding, it is "deeply influenced by Ibn Sab'in's

"the second case is superior to the first" (139, n31). Ibn Arabi writes that, "To be attentive to God and [simultaneously] to the created object forms part of the perfect acquisition [obtained by the man] of the Divine Names" but also notes that there is an even higher stage or perspective. This stage is, according to Addas, "the stage where the vision of God is the very vision of the world" where the "being who attains to this stage never ceases contemplating the multiple in the One and the One in the multiple" (140).

Ibn Arabi also described two categories of *raji'un* or "those who return": "On the one hand there is the person who is sent back for himself…him we call the gnostic (*al-arif*): he returns so as to perfect himself by following a different route from the one he had taken" whereas on "the other hand there is the person who is sent back to created beings for the sake of directing and guiding them by his word. He is the knowing heir *(al-alim al-warith*)" (153-154). Addas notes that "Ibn Arabi plainly belonged to this second category" (154) and Morris (2005) similarly notes that throughout his works Ibn Arabi repeatedly emphasized "the fundamental importance of the concluding phase of the saints "return" to a transformed awareness of the physical and social world (in its immediate relation with God) and to the particular responsibilities and activities—whether teaching and spiritual guidance, or the less visible tasks of the representatives of the spiritual hierarchy—flowing from that realization" (204). So while some behavioral changes may not be very readily apparent, especially for

uncompromising monism" expressed in the phrase he used often, "God alone" (Allah faqat). He notes that Ibn Khaldun, "cites Shushtari and Ibn Sab'in as being among those who believe in Oneness (wahda); in contrast to those who believe in disclosures (tajalliyat)" (18, n32). Chittick however, notes that he doesn't believe the leitmotiv Allah faqat is "a statement of a philosophical position, but an incitement to his reader to follow the Koranic injunction "Say 'Allah' then leave them to themselves, playing their game of plunging" (Sura 6:91)" (1994, 82). Chittick goes on to note that Awhad al-Din Balyani's, connected to Ibn Sab'in through Shushtari, expresses a different understanding of wahdat al-wujud than Ibn Arabi, "who always took care to offset expressions of God's similarity with descriptions of his incomparability. Where Balyani and others say like he say "He," Ibn al-Arabi and his followers say He/not He" (83).

those whose service is more oriented towards the spiritual worlds, for others, teaching and spiritual guidance is what they are propelled towards or the kind of action in the world which arises spontaneously without a sense of personal intention and personal agency.

In *The Meccan Revelations*, we are provided an intriguing anecdote and visionary conversation that occurs between Ibn Arabi and the prophet Aaron who criticizes those (Sufis) who think that the goal of the path is to experience the undifferentiated unity of the divine:

> I said: "O Aaron, some people among the true Knowers have claimed that the existence [of the external world] disappeared with regard to them, so that they see nothing but God, and so that nothing of the world remains with them that might distract them, in comparison to God…Then he replied: "They spoke sincerely [about their experience]. However, they did not have any more than what was given them by their immediate experience (dhawq). But look and see—did what disappeared from them [in that state actually] disappear from the world?" "No," I answered. He said: "Then they were lacking in the knowledge of the way things are, to the extent of what they missed, since the world was nonexistent for them, So they were lacking the True Reality (al-Haqq) to the extent of that [aspect] if the world which was veiled from them. Because the whole world is precisely the Self-manifestation (tajalli) of the Truly Real, for whoever really knows the Truly Real. (Morris 2005, 224)

It is not that the experience of seeing 'nothing but God' is wrong in this account, it is just not the perfected vision which can behold both God and the world, indeed, the world as a revelation of the Divine. Morris emphasizes that this privileging of *baqa*, which he translates as "enlightened abiding"—over "taking the ecstatic experience of "extinction" (fana) of the self in contemplation of God as the ultimate goal and highest stage of the spiritual path…is a constantly repeated theme in Ibn Arabi's writing" and, in fact, was "likewise stressed almost unanimously in earlier Sufi literature and practice" (Morris 2005, 341 n142). He continues by calling attention to the "intensity and centrality of Ibn Arabi's insistence on the realization of the nature and importance of this "world" as an aspect of human perfection (kamal)—and

indeed as the essential grounds of man's superiority to the angels and purely spiritual beings"[94] which can "best be measured by comparing his writings to the familiar currents of "monistic mysticism", such as the Sufism of Ibn Arabi's Andalusian contemporary, Ibn Sab'in"[95] (341 n142).

Ibn Arabi's commentator Haydar Amuli (14th CE) writes in a similar vein when he proposes a tripartite division of religious practitioners: (1) the common people (*awamm)* or men of reason (*dhawu al-'aql),* (2) the privileged people *(khawass*) or men of intuition (*dhawu al-'ayn*), and (3) the privileged of all privileged people (*khawass al-khawass*) or men of reason and intuition (*dhawu al-'aql wa-al-'ayn)* (Izutsu 1994, 21). The first category includes both those who only recognize the reality of their senses as well as "those who recognize something beyond the phenomenal," this "something-beyond is the Absolute—or in popular terminology God—which is conceived as the Transcendent. God is here represented as an absolute Other which is essentially cut off from the phenomenal world" (23). The second category of people, "are those who have attained to an immediate vision of absolute Reality in the experience of *fana*…the total annihilation of the ego and correspondingly of all the phenomenal things that

[94] Sells (1994) elaborates on Ibn Arabi's teachings about the superiority of humans, or more particularly the complete person:

> The strongly ascetic tendency of much of early Sufism was spiritualist in character. The goal of the Sufi path was to shed one's humanity and to become as like the angels as possible. The goal was to become as "perfect" (kamil) as possible. Although Ibn Arabi maintained the ethical seriousness of the early Sufis, he placed the Sufi life, both in its attempt to adhere as loyally as possible to the shari'a and in its own ascetic, devotional, and meditative practices, in a new context. Adam's central place in the cosmos is due to his being kamil, not "perfect" in the sense of having shed human imperfections, but rather "complete" in the sense of embracing all realities. The statement takes on a dramatic edge, given the propensity of those who seek the perfection of the angels rather than the deepening of the human to read kamil as "perfect" rather than "complete." (79)

[95] Morris adds that the two perspectives of Ibn Arabi's and Ibn Sab'in's "have their parallels in many other mystical traditions" (341, n142). In the discussion, I will explore and extend this insight as well.

constitute the external, objective world" (24). However, "the people of this class just stop at this stage and do not go any further…these people are aware only of absolute unity. They see everywhere unity, nothing else" (24). A person who stops at this stage would be the *waqif*, as described above. Izutsu continues,

> The whole world in their view has turned into absolute unity with no articulation and determination. Certainly, when these people come back immediately from the experience of *fana* to their normal consciousness, multiplicity does again become visible. But the phenomenal world is simply discarded as an illusion. In their view, the world of multiplicity has no metaphysical or ontological value because it is essentially unreal. The external objects are not "existent" in the real sense of the word. They are just floating gossamers, sheer illusions backed by no corresponding realities. Such a view is in its fundamental structure identical with the Vedantic view of the phenomenal world in its popular understanding, in which the notorious word *mâyâ* is taken to mean sheer illusion or illusion-producing principle. (1994, 24)

While this category of realization could be described as a kind of nondual awareness or attainment, it is only amongst those in the third category that have realized a deeper level of nonduality:

> It is at the third stage, that is, at the stage of the "privileged of all privileged people" that the relation between the Absolute and the phénoménal world is correctly grasped as the *coincidentia oppositorum* of unity and multiplicity. It is, moreover, in this région that the cognitive value of metaphorical thinking to which reference has been made earlier is most profusely displayed. Those whose consciousness has been raised to the height of *baqa'* after the experience of *fana',* experience the relation 'between the Absolute and the phénoménal as the *coincidentia oppositorum* of unity and multiplicity. (25)

One who has reached this goal is called by a "man of two eyes" *(dhu al-'aynayn)"* meaning one who, "with his right eye, sees unity, i.e. absolute Reality, and nothing but unity, while with his left eye he sees multiplicity, i.e. the world of phenomenal things" and, furthermore, "in addition to his simultaneous vision of unity and multiplicity, he knows that these two are ultimately one and the same thing" (19). He describes how,

> Subjectively, this is the stage at which man regains his phenomenal consciousness after having experienced the existential annihilation of its own self. The mind that has completely stopped working at the previous stage resumes its normal cognitive activity. Corresponding to this subjective rebirth, the phenomenal world also takes its rise again. The world once more unfolds itself before the man's eyes in the form of the surging waves of multiplicity. The things that have been "gathered up" into unity are again separated from one another as so many different entities. This is why the stage is called "separation after unification" or the 'second separation' […] And this stage is called "gathering of gathering" *(jam' al-jam')* for the very reason that the phenomenal things that have all been once reduced to the absolute unity of total annihilation at the stage of *fana,* i.e. the primary "gathering," are again "separated" and then again "gathered" together in this new vision of unity. (17-18)

Finally, Izutsu clarifies that this position and worldview does not fit into traditional philosophical categories:

> It will be clear by now that it is a serious mistake to consider—as it has often been done—this position as pure monism or even as "existential monism." For it has evidently an element of dualism in the sense that it recognizes two different dimensions of reality in the metaphysical structure of the Absolute. Nor is it of course right to regard it as dualism, for the two different dimensions of reality are *ultimately,* i.e., in the form of *coincidentia oppositorum,* one and the same thing. The "oneness of existence" is neither monism nor dualism. As a metaphysical vision of Reality based on a peculiar existential experience, which consists in seeing unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity, it is something far more subtle and dynamic than philosophical monism or dualism. (34)

In summary then, the goal is not a complete eradication of all distinction and sense of self, even if there are moments of this that are instrumental, but rather the ultimate goal is the re-emergence of the perception of both the world and the (enlightened) self in such a way that spontaneous virtuous action emerges from the new coupling of the two. This, again, is what it means to be the "possessor of both eyes" (*dhu'l aynayn*) with which one can see the phenomenal world with one eye and its divine core with the other so to speak, which is to say,

to simultaneously see the world as an expression of the divine in a way that transforms both but effaces neither (see also Chittick 1989, 362-364).[96]

TODAY - THE NURIYYA-MALAMIYYA

As described in the last chapter, the contemporary Turkish Sufi path of the Nuriyya-Malamiyya culminates in the realization of *fana*, which is understood as "a condition of self-effacement in the reality of God's Omnipresence" and "a gradual effacement of the false sense of a separative self (or ego)," while *baqa* is understood as the subsequent "reintegration into an authentic selfhood, which, following Ibn Arabi,[97] is also the condition of intrinsic servitude (ubuda)" (Toussulis 2010, 172). The Nuriyya also break up the transformation of *baqa* into three stages, the first of which is *jam* (gathering), where,

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[96] Despite the apparent differences between Ibn Arabi and Ahmad Sirhindi, the Naqshbandiyya-Mujadidiyya tradition continued to emphasize this trajectory of return as well. In this tradition, as described by Buehler, the experiences of *fana* and *baqa* bring to fruition what is called the path of lesser intimacy with God" (*walayat-I sughra),* however at this point "the prophetic path begins" (Buehler 2011, 319). The next path (of greater intimacy) or part of the total path,

> involves a descent "returning to the world of creation for God and by means of God (sayr 'an Allah billah); this is the beginning of greater intimacy with God (walayat-I kubra). This is where one begins to purify the spirit from the ego-self (nafs), associated with the station of separation after synthesis (maqam al-farq ba'd al-jami). This is when a person is once again able to recognize multiplicity (farq, or separaton of conventional objects) in conventional reality after having the perception that "all is God" (jam; jam-I jam). The journey culminates in the fourth and last cycle to live as an extraordinarily ordinary person in the created world (sayr fi'l-ashya). Although one experiences the multiplicity of the world, it is experienced as a mirror of the One. Here unity is experiences in the multiplicity, and multiplicity is experienced as a unity. This is the place where one is with God in the inside and with the world on the outside…where one can see with two eyes, the right eye of unity and the left eye of multiplicity. It is following the prophetic path of inviting others to God. (Buehler 2011, 319)

[97] The Nuriyya trace themselves back to the teachings of Nur al-Arabi (19th) who was initiated into the Naqshbandi *tariqa*, a tradition that based itself firmly on the teachings of Ibn Arabi.

> all the former realizations in the phase of fana—the effacement of actions, attributes, and essence—are powerfully "gathered" (jam) together. As a matter of fact, they are synthesized so intensely that the servant temporarily ceases to be, often falling into a state of total intoxication in which the apparent world disappears…This condition completely alters one's sense of self-identity in a way Attar has expressed as follows: "I have no news of my coming or passing away—the whole thing happened quicker than a breath; ask no questions of the moth. In the candle flame of his face I have forgotten all the answers."…one cannot remain in this state for too long for to do so would be to risk becoming "mad in allah" (mualla). Because of this, the malamati guide immediately coaxes his student into the next stage of baqa. (Toussulis 2010, 177)

While many states can be absorptive such that one 'temporarily ceases to be' and 'the apparent world disappears', as well as being comparable to madness, not all of them alter one's sense of identity at baseline in an enduring way. Whereas in the earlier states of ecstasy, one is like one who is *mualla*, here there is actually a risk of inhabiting this emically pathological state from that point forward.

In the second stage of *baqa*, called both the "second separation" (*farq al thani*) and "the presence of gathering" (*hadhrat al-jam*), "the student returns to sobriety, yet the one who returns or who is reborn in this way is radically divested of the myth of separate selfhood" though "there is still, however, a vestige of separation" that remains and marks it as an incomplete realization (178). The third and final stage of *baqa*, described and translated as the "integration of gathering" (*jam al-jam*) consists in the realization "that creation is truly the locus for God to manifest the fullness of His own nature" which results in a condition where "sobriety (*sahw*), induced through perception of the forms, and intoxication (*sukr*), induced through the perception of God, alternate in such a way that the integrative state of human being as a servant and deputy gradually ripens" (180). In response to the question of whether the experience of union with God requires "a complete transcendence of one's individual "I", a contemporary Shaykh of this tradition (and Toussulis' teacher) Mehmet Selim Ozic answers:

"Yes, a total effacement is required in order to transform individual "I-ness" into "We-ness"" but that "the essential uniqueness of a person is not lost in this form of relatedness" (154). In fact, "your uniqueness is *enhanced* through that greater relatedness. After effacement, there is an effacement of the effacement, and one returns to being an individuated human being—but with a critical difference in one's perception and discernment" (154-55). Toussulis then summarizes that,

> Continuance (*baqa*) was thought to be a fundamental reorientation of the separateness of the human being and God, which does not constitute the permanent dissolution of the individual. Instead, according to the Pir, human maturity, "completion" requires the comprehension of a fundamental paradox: that one is (figuratively) "one" with God and yet quite separate. This conviction was…exemplified by Bahauddin Naqshband who said, "The existence of the lover who has found baqa with the Beloved does not become overwhelmed in the Awesome Lights of the theophanies [tajalliyat] and does not become nonexistent—on the contrary, it is strengthened…In the first separation, the ego-bound identity is convinced of its separateness from the interrelatedness of Being. At the apex of the Sufi path, this divisive delusion is dispelled by the experience of momentary union (jam). The second separation that follows jam consists of a reintegration of the personality after the dissolution of the separative ego; and this stage is grounded in an ongoing perception of the inseparability of all beings. In short, individual existents are viewed as manifold expressions of Being itself, and the human entity is perceived to be the primary vehicle *through which* Being realizes its inherent unity. (183-84)

Ozic clarifies that even in this perfected realization, "Human beings can never be truly perfected as human. Perfection—or as we prefer to call it, "wholeness"—can only be realized through the recognition of our own imperfectability. In our tradition, "perfection" should be viewed as relative…Insan al-kamil, the "mature human being", is one who has achieved greater wholeness through a greater awareness of both perfection and imperfection. Our aim is not static—and therefore we cannot subscribe to any notion of self-perfection that is fixed" (153-154). Toussulis concludes the presentation of this final stage by quoting Abi'l-Khayr (10^{th}-11^{th} CE) who writes, "The perfect mystic is not an ecstatic devotee lost in contemplation of Oneness, nor a saintly recluse shunning all commerce with mankind, but 'the true saint'

goes in and out amongst the people and eats and sleeps with them and buys and sells in the market and marries and takes part in social intercourse, and never forgets God for a single moment" (198). In other words, here we see the marker of sainthood is based on action in the world and not only the realization of some kind of transformative experience.

CHRISTIANITY

HISTORICALLY - MEISTER ECKHART

Bernard McGinn (2001) discusses Eckhart's teachings on union—the third stage in the traditional purgation-illumination-union trajectory—and what is novel or unique about them, since "the language found in these texts shows how the mysticism of the ground challenged traditional Christian understandings of union with God" since "he clearly had a new conception of union" (46-47). He writes,

> For the Dominican, as well as some of the anonymous sermons and treatises written under his influence, the goal of the Christian life was union of identity or indistinction" (*unitas indistinctionis)* in which there was no difference at all between God and human "God's ground and the soul's ground is one ground...although Eckhart and his followers made use of Neoplatonic concepts of union drawn from Christians such as Dionysius, and even from pagans such as Proclus, what was happening in Germany around 1300 was not merely a case of reviving something from the past…What emerged in Eckhart's mysticism of the ground is something new, a creation designed to express the spiritual needs of a specifically late medieval audience avid for total transformation into God. (47)

Later he notes that, "Eckhart did not invent indistinct union" since it "had deep roots in Neoplatonism, both pagan and Christian" like Proclus and Dionysius as mentioned above, but also "similar views had already advanced by some of the female mystics of the thirteenth century, notably Marguerite Porete" (148). Still though, "no mystic in the history of

Christianity was more daring and more detailed than Eckhart in the way in which he explored how true union with God must go beyond the mere uniting of two substance that remain potentially separable in order to attain total indistinction and substantial, or essential, identity" (148).

He then endeavors to "summarize how Eckhart understood union," writing that "Indistinct union, for Eckhart, is a mutual and continuous state of nonabsorptive "awareness" of identity in the *grunt*. Ecstatic states play at best a preparatory and nonessential role.[98] Union is also a form of deification, which, in the ultimate analysis, goes beyond knowing and loving" (148). He also emphasizes that the "language of dual breaking-through" shows that Eckhart, "like the beguine mystic Hadewijch, stressed the mutuality of indistinct union. Of course, from the perspective of the soul's created being there is no mutuality at all—pure existence has nothing in common with nothing. But from the perspective of the *grunt del sele*, there is a meeting of equals" (149). McGinn then notes importantly that "this continuous union with God is not an "experience" in any ordinary sense of the term—it is coming to realize and live out of the ground of experience, or better, of consciousness. It is a new way of knowing and acting, not any *particular* experience or act of knowing *something*" (149).

[98] I would argue with McGinn's position that absorption plays a nonessential role, since even he later notes that "the not-knowing" (*unwizzen*) necessary for this kind of realization of union "is reached through the practice of states of interiority" (149). He argues there that even though they are reached through such states, this realization "is not dependent on them" because "it depends on God's gift, as Eckhart made abundantly clear over and over" (149). While I agree the importance of grace needs to be acknowledged, the one does not mean the realization isn't dependent on them. My argument is that such states are necessary but not sufficient, a possibility McGinn doesn't seem to entertain. He does later discuss how "the Dominican's attitude toward states of mystical absorption, rapture, ecstasy, as well as visions and the like" was one that "recognized that these forms of special mystical consciousness did exist, and that they might even be useful if understood in the proper way. But they did not pertain to the essence of union" (150). That may be true, but once again, I think McGinn downplays the preparatory role, utility, and just how "useful" Eckhart considered them for this fuller realization. Later again, McGinn while qualifying that they can also be dangerous, he is still forced to acknowledge that "experiences of "enjoyment of God," which he spoke of as *gebruchenne*, had their place" (150).

Here it is just important to note this attention to McGinn's characterization of this kind of union as a 'realization' that is also a new way of living—knowing and acting. He then extends this focus on action—particularly as a fruit of his most mature understanding—when he emphasizes that most of "Eckhart's late preaching emphasizes that the capacity to become "unknowingly aware" of the *grunt* is…fully compatible with a life of activity and service" (149-150). He continues to emphasize this point, that if "the highest form of union is meant to be in some way constant, Eckhart hold that it is realized in activity, at least the kind of transcendent activity that is the welling up, or *bullitio,* of life within the Trinity"[99] (151).

Finally, McGinn notes that "Eckhart's understanding of union, finally, is divinizing: God became man that man might become God. He does not use the term *divinization/deificatio*, preferring *transformation* (see 1 Cor. 13:12), *transfiguratio* and other words taken from scripture" (153). He then poses the question, "How does the person live who has attained this constant, non-absorptive, indistinct union in the one ground? How does she conduct herself in the world, or, as one of Eckhart's expressions about leaving behind the body and matter might suggest, out of the world?" (153). "The answer," he writes, "revolves around his teaching concerning "living without a why"" in which he bizarrely compares "God and by extension the person who lives without a why to a frisky horse, gamboling about in a field" (155). Ultimately McGinn argues that "despite his emphasis on inwardness and even on fleeing materiality and the body," his mysticism is a mysticism of everyday life." To realize this vision, "Eckhart broke through the traditional distinction between the active life and

[99] Sells (1994) makes a similar point: "Eckhart is most explicit in countering the notion of mysticism as something extraordinary and removed from everyday reality. In a distinctive version of the dialectic of transcendence and immanence, he states that the most noble, the most extraordinary of all events (the birth of the divine son in the soul), is the most common (any act of justice, insofar as it is just)" (8).

contemplative life, traditionally represented by Martha and Mary" and thereby created "a new model of sanctity" (156). He contextualizes the novelty of Eckhart here when he describes how the "contrast between the active and the contemplative lives in the history of Christian mysticism is part of its inheritance from classical antiquity ad mediated through the patristic period and taken up by medieval mystics" (157). Since Origen, not only "the sisters Mary and Martha of Luke 11 but also Rachel and Leah (Gen 29-30) and Peter and John (John 20:1-10), had been employed as allegorical illustrations of the difference between the contemplative life devoted solely to love of God and the active life of charitable service to neighbor" (157). While both "were seen as necessary to Christian perfection," starting with Augustine there developed a "preeminence of the *vita contemplativa*" and "in general the mystics taught that in this fallen world there was always bound to be a tension between action and contemplation and that the best one could hope for was to oscillate between them, recognizing that the duty of Christian charity would often call the mystic away from the higher delights of contemplation" (158). And then, "Eckhart broke with this model" when he "not only abandoned the notion of tension-filled oscillation between action and contemplation but daringly asserted that a new kind of action performed out of a 'well-exercised ground' was superior to contemplation, at least ordinarily conceived" (158). This is how "here for the first time, a spirituality of the active life becomes visible" which contrasts with the "other-worldliness" of previous Christian mystics, "especially those deeply influenced by certain forms of Platonism" (158). While at times it is necessary to separate from "multiplicity" and "corporality," in actual fact, this "detachment…was required because it was the only way to find all these things in God's distinct-indistinction that is the created world" and thus for virtuous action to arise spontaneously in response (158).

Eckhart describes how "we have only to be rooted in the same ground of contemplation and make it fruitful in works, and thus the purpose of contemplation is achieved…The one rests in the other and brings it to fulfillment" (156). This demonstrates for McGinn that, "Eckhart's mysticism taught that true contemplation of God is realized in fruitful action" even as "the only way to proper engagement with the temporal world is through total detachment from it" (157). The goal, however, is ultimately proper engagement with the world through such "fruitful" action and in this way is his system considered a form of "this-worldly mysticism" (159). Ultimately it's not just Martha but "Christ himself" who is the model and normative paradigm for "the necessity of constant activity without a why…As daring, as profound, and sometimes even as obscure as his preaching of the *rara et subtilia* were, Eckhart basically wanted his audience…to do the same thing…to be so dedicated to fulfilling the will of God, so unconcerned with self, that their every action proceeds from the "well-exercised ground" in which God and Human are one." (161) I believe it is warranted to go even further than this and argue that the intentionality or chronology is actually reversed: one becomes unconcerned with self so as to act from the well-exercised ground and thereby fulfill the will of God in fruitful action like Martha and Jesus.

TODAY – CENTERING PRAYER

THOMAS KEATING

As mentioned in Fisher (2019), the Centering Prayer tradition (led by Father Thomas Keating) pioneered the contemporary exploration and elucidation of the goals of the Christian

contemplative path, in some cases moving into quite daring theological territory to do so. The traditional view of the goal of the Catholic contemplative path—beyond the states of contemplation themselves—is what Centering prayer discusses as 'Transforming Union'. As I wrote there, this goal is conceived of by Keating as,

> a "restructuring of consciousness, not an experience or set of experiences" in which "the presence of God becomes a kind of fourth dimension to the three-dimensional world in which we have been living." In this abiding stage of the path "emotional swings disappear," though the emotions themselves do not, and "there is no longer a self-centered 'I'." He concludes that transforming union "is the goal of the first part of the spiritual journey," intriguingly implying there is a second part to the journey. In the forward to a reprinting of another of his books, he describes this more advanced terrain as "the experience of non-duality" and "an abiding sense of the unity with Ultimate Reality" which entails the "diminishment or loss of the sense of separateness." In an even more recent book, he describes this ultimate goal as "non-dual consciousness," "unity consciousness," and the "death of the separate-self sense" and adds that the "sense of a separate self is the ultimate cause of all our problems in the first place, even more fundamental than the false self." (Fisher 2019, 16-17)

While using terms like "nondual" and the loss of "separate-self sense," it is still quite difficult to ascertain the precise phenomenological states that this refers to. Luckily, we have a recent qualitative study by Benno Blaschke (2015) investigating Centering Prayer practice that explicitly engaged some of these questions in related terms.

In the study, Blaschke made use of the elicitation interview that many have suggested is one of the most promising methods for gathering the fine-grained phenomenological data to explore this terrain most robustly (Milliere 2017). He specifically focuses on reported changes to senses of self, both in the states of absorption known as Prayer of Union as well as those related to the goals of this path called "Transforming Union" and "Unity Consciousness." Unfortunately, in his dissertation he did not include any of the qualitative data related to the latter two stages—in a private correspondence he mentioned that he was

saving it for future publication—but he does discuss what such changes would look like by putting the textual sources of the central teachers in the tradition(s) (Keating, Frenette, Bourgeault) in conversation with the theoretical outline of Philosopher Miri Albahari. He first notes that Albahari's "perspectival witnessing" is the equivalent of Zahavi's "for-me-ness" associated with the basic self—and which is not actually altered or attenuated in the higher reaches of the Centering Prayer path. What is attenuated is what Albahari calls "perspectival ownership"—what she also believes is diminished or dispensed with in the Buddhist attainment of enlightenment (43). He describes the goal of transforming union in Centering Prayer as follows:

> Transforming union is conceived as a "restructuring of consciousness" effected by regular creative practice not restricted to seated prayer and a willingness to endure the night of spirit. The goal of the Christian journey, as outlined by the Keating School of Centering Prayer, is therefore not conceived as a temporary experience afforded by contemplative prayer, but a "contemplative state", which is thought of as a permanent transformation of consciousness that frames all experience. The transformation discussed entails an apparent stabilisation of a multi-mode awareness as the new structure of consciousness with three levels of awareness that run in tandem: divine, spiritual, and ordinary. Specifically, the divine level of awareness is meant to be experienced by way of a dualistically structured awareness of God's presence-absence. Like prayer of union, the "sense of presence" is divided into an objective sense of presence that is phenomenally apprehended as "outside" and "other" and a subjective sense of presence that is the reflective reference point of the experience. The latter is also called the spiritual witness and it is the subject who is aware. Unlike prayer of union, the abiding dualistic awareness of God's presence-absence does not compromise cognitive access to ordinary consciousness. Thus psychological experience of everyday life should continue unimpaired. (110)

Blaschke then describes the further goal of "unity consciousness" which is a "a Christian soteriological vision that Centering Prayer has explicated with full understanding that it does not conform to traditional Christian theology", except perhaps Eckhart, and is marked by four characteristics: 1) disappearance of difference, 2) an acquisition of God's impersonal nature 3) nonduality and 4) "no self" (112). The last marker is described as "the separate-self sense"

also known as "*the phenomenal fact of the sense of "I" as a structure of consciousness* and not the psychological content associated with the self, be it authentic (true self) or inauthentic (false self)" which Blaschke equates with Albahari's 'perspectival ownership' (118). The third marker of "nonduality" is "is only used to refer to the soteriological goal and never to the type of unity encountered in full union. Hence nonduality appears to be a unique marker of unity consciousness and it demarcates this abiding state from the temporary type of unity encountered in seated prayer (full union)" (117).

CYNTHIA BOURGEAULT

Blaschke also delineates between two major sub traditions of Centering Prayer, what he calls the "Keating School" and the "Bourgeault school" (13). Bourgeault herself (2016) distinguishes the "Keating school of Centering Prayer," in which she was "formed," from the tradition of practice and interpretation of Father Basil Pennington (161),[100] but also distinguishes her own approach and understanding of the practice from Keating's. The differences lie specifically "around the understanding of the sacred word, *kenosis* as key to everything,[101] and attention of the heart" and also adds that in "general, my approach is

[100] She describes there being "distinct differences between the two "schools of interpretation" in reading the instructions from the Cloud of Unknowing which "whether the sacred word should be personally meaningful" where Father Pennington "placed great importance on the fact that the word is a "love word," as he called it, filled with both cognitive and emotional intent" (2016, 161). This places him and this tradition of practice and interpretation "clearly in line with the classic pedagogy of monastic love mysticism" whereas in Keating's school the word is simply a "placeholder for intention" without any "additional cognitive or emotional baggage" (161).

[101] She describes how it was "ten years into my practice before I realized that the theological basis for Centering Prayer lies in the principle of kenosis, Jesus's self-emptying love that forms the core of his own self-understanding and life practice" (33). And explains that in Philippians 2:6-11, the Greek verb *kenosein*, translated as "emptied himself," is the opposite of the word "cling" in the line before it, to conclude, "Jesus is practicing gentle release…And it's this same core gesture we practice in Centering Prayer: thought by thought by thought" (34).

probably more phenomenological than you're used to (tied to what is actually happening in the moment rather than theological constructs) and more interspiritually oriented…as I'm seeking specifically to dialogue with an audience larger than just practicing Christians"[102] (12).

Bourgeault begins her book, *The Heart of Centering Prayer – Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice,* with an exploration of what she means by "nondual," anticipating or knowing her use of this designation will raise eyebrows both amongst Christians and practitioners of eastern forms of meditation. She indicates that word "nondual" is "one of the most eagerly sought-after titles in the spiritual marketplace today, and [that] to label anything "nondual" is to reinforce the powerful connotation that it is "good," "advanced," and "enlightened" (43). However, "Over the past few decades during which the term has snowballed its way to its current rock star status, it has accumulated such a retinue of overlapping and even competing meanings that it actually creates more confusion than enlightenment" and "has become so vague and idiosyncratic that it might be better to declare a moratorium on its use until everyone can agree to at least a baseline definition" (43). Amidst all this confusion, she offers her own definition is as follows:

> Whatever nondual may look like when approached through the metaphysical and spiritual filters classically used to describe it, neurologically, the capacity to perceive reality in this way depends on a new way of organizing the perceptual field—an upgrade of the operating system, if you will. Basically, the essence of the nondual is a quantitative change not in the object of perception but in the *mechanics* of perception. Rather than "perception through differentiation" (the programming used by the cognitive mind), one begins to perceive through *holographic resonance*—the capacity to sense the whole pattern as a single unified field. (2016, 5)

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[102] Blaschke (2015) largely affirms these reflexive observations (214-217).

She clarifies this definition and opposes it to three other meaningful uses of the term, the first by her colleague Richard Rohr who uses the term "to designate one's personal capacity to bear paradox and ambiguity," the second which equates it with a temporary mystical experience, and the third which understands it as a permanent "unitive attainment" (44-47). Instead, her "nonduality as a shift in the structure of perception" pays more attention to "what the structures of perception are actually doing beneath all the metaphysics and devotion" (48). Finally, she opposes her definition with two confused meanings of the term, the first of which is that "nondual does *not* mean renouncing the capacity for critical thinking," a form of spirituality she humorously describes as "boomeritis nondualism" where "enlightenment is equated with abdication of all intellectual responsibility" (51). Instead, "nondual perception can and does express itself through the best of our human cognitive faculties, provided they are grounded in something deeper than mere abstraction and intellectualism" (51). And secondly, she is adamant that "nondual is not the same as philosophical monism" which she understands as "the impression of complexity and differentiation is simply part of the illusion of this world" (51). While one who has attained nondual consciousness can indeed "ascribe to this philosophical position and flourish within it", it is just as possible "to look upon the world from a nondual vantage point and still affirm the reality of change, movement, and the structures in which the formless so marvelously drapes itself; one simply sees them from the perspective of oneness" (52).

She later goes on to explore how, in her reading, both the Hesychast Symeon the New Theologian (10^{th}-11^{th} CE) and the anonymous Cloud of Unknowing (14^{th} CE) are advocating a path of nondual Christianity. In the latter, she proposes that, "rather than being a traditional specimen of Christian love mysticism, it is actually a groundbreaking phenomenological

study, the first treatise ever written in the West that attempts to describe the transition to nondual consciousness understood *as a mode of perception, not a state of mystical union*" (126). In her discussion and contemporary commentary on the Cloud she writes how,

> Even our highest vision of spiritual attainment—the unitive state—is typically described in affective metaphors (such as mystical marriage), leading one to believe that what goes on there is an ecstatic consummation of "my" soul in God, the highest possible state of beatific splendor and grace. But nondual consciousness is not a state. It's not a mystical experience. It is not necessarily blissful. You can't attain it. You can't come back from it transformed because there is no "you" left to be transformed. It is not an intensification of union. It is simply a quiet erasing of the line that divided the field in the first place. (2016, 136)

She then adds that, "we don't hear a lot of people talking about it in Christianity. Meister Eckhart is clearly talking about it. In our own times, Bernadette Roberts is talking about it. And I believe *The Cloud of Unknowing* is also talking about it, but in ways we have barely begun to appreciate" (136). Earlier in the book she expressed a similar sentiment, that, "it must be said, quite frankly…that not all those whom Christianity would identify as having attained the unitive state thereby display the qualities of nondual consciousness" though "there are some who do" like Eckhart, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Marguerite Porete, and Bernadette Roberts (47). She insists upon the distinction between the "more affective and personal stance in which union with the divine beloved remains uppermost—rather than a transcendence of the subject/object polarity that creates lover and beloved in the first place." While I don't think there is consensus that this is what divine union means for all Christian writers and mystics, nevertheless she goes on to reference Roberts who "points out that even John of the Cross, the Carmelite master who "wrote the book," so to speak, on Christian unitive attainment, does not fully traverse the unitive terrain to access what lies at the its endpoint in the dissolution of that

subject/object polarity"[103] (47). She does note that Bernadette herself "adamantly resists the term nondual as meaningless within Christianity" and yet still believes that the experience she describes in her books "corresponds much more closely to the threshold of what the East would call the authentic nondual than to anything commonly encountered in Western typologies of the unitive" (48). She also notes that Roberts own journey to "no-self" is "almost always interpreted as a dropping of the ego-self, not a piercing of the veil of self-reflexive consciousness itself," the latter being her own interpretation.

In a more recent work, *The Corner of Fourth and Nondual*, Bourgeault continues to develop and synthesize her understanding on nonduality and the kind of self-transformation that is the goal of her path. She restates her understanding of the Cloud as "the earliest treatise on the phenomenology of consciousness in the Christian West" and that the author was "already onto the symbiotic feedback loop between the 'objectification' of attention and the illusion of phenomenal selfhood or 'I'" (2022, 19). Furthermore, "he senses with precocious clarity that what the West calls contemplation and what the East calls 'nondual realization' has everything to do *with the stabilization of consciousness beyond the subject/object split*" (19). Here it is worth noting that she believes phenomenal selfhood, likely the "self-reflexive consciousness" she mentioned above, to be an illusion. Later though, she complicates what, from the above, we might characterize as a no-self position. One of the "cosmogonic premises on which my theology is built" is that,

> Unitive or nondual oneness does not cancel out, melt, or override particularity, but rather *transfigures* it—in a 'paroxysm of harmonized complexity,' to quote Teilhard de Chardin—like sunlight shining through a stained-glass window which draws the

[103] Path to No Self, 141; As mentioned above, several of the practitioners interviewed by Blaschke at Snowmass would disagree with this assertion. One in particular mentioned that it was especially within John of the Cross' *The Flame* that he does, in fact, discuss or allude to this "unity consciousness" territory (Blaschke 89?)

> whole complex assemblage into a single radiance. In a Western and Christian vision of unitive attainment, both the One and the particular are to be preserved, for these are the conditions through which love—the ultimate unity—is made manifest. (41)

Later she recaps her understanding that the term "nondual" has recently come to displace the term "unitive" in contemporary Christian mysticism "to describe the highest states of spiritual realization, but there is still no consensus as to what the term actually means." Again, she summarizes that "Options range from a garden variety paradox-tolerance to a complete overhaul of the operating system of perception enabling one to see consistently form oneness—i.e., without intervention of the subject/object dichotomy" and that "I myself prefer this more hard-edged end of the spectrum." After being perhaps more dismissive of her colleague Richard Rohr here than in her last work, she goes on to summarize how in the contemporary spiritual climate, the "nondual realms of consciousness are overwhelmingly presumed to be impersonal, and to the extent that Christianity is perceived to be 'stuck in the personal' it is often dismissed as lacking an authentic tradition of nondual attainment" (67). However, in contrast to this assumption, she cites her "monastic mentor Bruno Barnhart" and celebrates him "for holding the line with his stubborn insistence that the Christian nondual path had its own intrinsic *gestalt*" and "the Christian experience of the unitive has a fundamentally different character from even its closest nondual analogues" such that "not all nondual attainment is alike" (69). Instead, it is,

> shaped by the metaphysical and cultural vessel in which it is received, and attempts to merge the streams too quickly simply result in muddied waters. A much more nuanced and respectful listening will be necessary before the terms can be accurately synchronized and the extraordinary tools coming to us from the east can be used to more fully excavate Christianity's own hidden treasure. (69-70)

"Where does this leave me?" she then asks rhetorically, answering that "in the end, when all the adjustments have been made, when the terms 'nondual' and 'unitive' have been fully

calibrated and levels of consciousness have been teased apart from *metaphysical assumptions* about levels of consciousness, I agree with my mentor Bruno that we will still see two qualitatively different expressions of the same nondual animal" (70-71). Ultimately, she believes that even "at the highest levels of spiritual attainment…Christian nonduality will still hold fast to three core affirmations" two of which are more directly relevant for our purposes, "the endurance of the personal" and "the 'scandal' of particularity" (71). She describes the first as follows:

> The **personal** is no longer confined to the anthropomorphized versions of itself. God is no longer an old man with a beard, and personal prayer does not mean simply plowing through the punch list of individual petitions. But the personal itself remains. Both Teilhard and Merton draw an identical distinction between an individual and a person. An individual lives for himself alone; a person knows himself or herself as belonging to a greater relational whole. An individual is what Merton was before his epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut; a person is what he became in the wake of it. Teilhard, the paleontologist, takes this insight still a step further. Because of this cognizance of a greater relational whole, personhood reflects a greater degree of *symbiotic unity* and hence occupies a higher rung on the evolutionary ladder. The personal is for Teilhard the measure of relationality, and relationality is in turn the measure of *manifest consciousness within a system*. Therefore, he argues, the highest levels of consciousness must necessarily be *more* personal, not less so, for 'higher' by definition means 'more relational,' and 'more relational' means more personal. This same wisdom—that the highest manifestation of the divine nature unfolds within a relational (i.e., personal) field—is the mystery at the heart of the Trinity, which now re-emerges as the quintessential mandala of the Christian nondual. (72-73, emphasis original).

The emphasis on both the reality of the "person" over the individual and the relational nature of Christian nonduality will be ideas we'll engage with later.[104] However, noteworthy for our

[104] In an interview (2017) she summarized that, "His basic starting point was he differentiated between an individual and a person. An individual is an autonomous unit bounded by his or her own skin who thinks of himself or herself as an autonomous unit. A person for Teilhard is one who knows that he or she belongs indisputably, irreducibly to a relational field." (https://www.scienceandnonduality.com/article/sand-emergence-series-with-cynthia-bourgeault) We will see later that Thompson characterizes his enactive self argument from a Buddhist perspective as using the "terminological and conceptual distinction between "self" (atman) and "person" (pudgala)" (2020, 113). He explains,

purposes is when Bourgeault invokes the conception "symbiotic unity" from another one her mentors, Beatrice Bruteau, which seems almost identical to the idea of emergence, as she describes it as "differentiation of function within an overall structural unity" which one can see "quintessentially in a cell, where individual components perform different but complementary functions, creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts" or when "two hydrogen molecules come together with one oxygen, and a whole new substance—water—appears (46). She then moves on to describe "particularity" as the, "intuitive Christian (and in fact Western) predilection for the bits and pieces over the undifferentiated whole" (74). She continues,

> If Eastern versions of nonduality have traditionally tended toward the drop dissolving in the ocean, Western versions have traditionally tended more toward the ocean pouring itself into the drop. But even here the metaphor falls short, for it fails to take

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> If we restrict "self" to mean a personal essence that is the independent owner of experience and agent of action, and we use "person" to refer to the multifaceted construction that includes modes of self-awareness, then we can say that whereas the self is an illusion or nonexistent fiction, the person exists. In other words, from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, my argument that the self is a construction can be taken as an argument for the claim that the person is a construction. (113)

In his recent (2022) review of Garfield (2022), Thompson addresses Garfield's argument "that my view amounts to redefining "self" as "person"" based on passages like the one just cited (9). He responds that

> Garfield is free to use "self" however he likes, but his usage does not fit the concept as it figures in large swathes of philosophy (Taylor 1989), including phenomenology and parts of cognitive science, which are the perspectives from which I am writing. He thinks "self" must be restrictively defined as a single thing that is a separate bearer of the mind and body, because "this is the way we instinctively take ourselves to exist. But his argument for this claim is invalid… So to keep insisting on his usage when discussing other authors who conceptualize the self differently is blinkered and tendentious, and is to argue against a strawman. (9-10)

Later he discusses this distinction again, in responding to Garfield's treatment of "the idea that the self is a narrative construction" (10). He posits that Garfield's discussion "amounts just to the assertion that these theorists are really talking about the person, not the self, and does not take account of the various reasons why narrative theorists—Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, Marya Schechtman, and Daniel Hutto—use the term "self" and not just "person."" (10). Thompson then summarizes the positions of MacIntyre, Taylor, and Ricoeur to show how, ""self" is typically used not to stand for an entity, but for "selfhood," understood as individual subjectivity in its reflexivity, such that it inquires into itself, whereas "person" designates a concrete, named individual in a time, place, and culture" (2022, 10).

> into account the wider relational field. Picture not just a single drop, but a vast ocean of drops, each one of them holographically containing the entire ocean. And now picture this ocean not as the Sargasso Sea but as the Gulf Stream, surging powerfully forward, destination unknown, propelled by its own mysterious inner current. That would be at least a beginning approximation of nonduality in Western mode. In the end, it's a different taste more than anything else: simply the sense of a different kind of energy, flowing in a different direction. (74)

JEWISH TRADITIONS

HISTORICALLY – EARLY HASIDISM

Daniel Matt, in his study, "Ayin – Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism" describes how the sense of self is altered in the experience of *bittul* in early Hasidism. He describes how, "Dov Baer, the Maggid (Preacher) of Mezritch, encourages his followers to permute *aniy* (I) into *ayin*, to dissolve the separate ego in nothingness" though he argues that "this is not a destructive but a dialectical and ultimately creative process" (1990, 139). He explains,

> World, mind and self dissolve momentarily in *ayin* and then reemerge. Every object, every thought is revealed as an epiphany of *ayin*. Yet *ayin* is not the goal in itself; it is the moment of transformation from being through nonbeing to new being. The Maggid conveys this thought with the image of the seed that disintegrates before sprouting. Annihilation is a natural process engendering new life… Every birth must navigate the depths of ayin, as when a chick emerges from an egg: for a moment "it is neither chick nor egg." Human rebirth is also engendered in ayin …When this apparently separate self is ayinized, the effect is not total extinction but the emergence of a new form, a more perfectly human image of the divine. (144-145)

Goldstein (1996) agrees with this reading of the Maggid's teachings and asks what "follows the brush with infinity and destruction of identity…what occurs in the aftermath of the death of self-consciousness?" (105). In a similar vein he answers that "though the mystical encounter leads to "death," it also leads to new life, new being, and spiritual transformation" (105). Similarly, Brody (1998) remarks on these teachings in the Maggid (and his student and

students' students) but introduces the term "non-dual"[105] in his exploration of Hasidism in his article, "Open to me the Gates of Righteousness: The Pursuit of Holiness and Non-Duality in Early Hasidic Teaching." He defines "non-duality" as "the dissolution of a subject-object dichotomy and the absorption of self and phenomena in an overarching, transcendent consciousness" and associates non-duality with acosmism in the previous scholarship on Hasidism[106] (5 n4). In contrast, he describes his thesis as suggesting "that the hasidic teaching originating in Miedzyrzec evolves…into a subtle non-dualistic spirituality and praxis affirming the ongoing symbiotic relationship of the One and the Many" (5-6). Here we can note that "non-duality" is not identical to acosmism as the 'many' are not effaced in this version on nonduality. Brody refers to Izutsu's study (1994) referenced above and explains that,

> non-dual epistemologies force their practitioners to grapple with the issue of the ontological status and value of differentiated phenomena. While the vision of the oneness of existence can lead to the deprecation and even denial of the reality of the physical world, it can just as readily produce a spirituality which affirms the unity of the One with the Many, in which material entities prove to possess a spiritual core and dimension. The illuminate cultivates a two-tiered perception of the world in which he or she learns to perceive the manifold phenomena within the light of their cosmic ground…the contemplative absorption of soul and reality in its divine source paradoxically sparks their ontological renewal and rebirth. Indeed, the creative reintegration and renewal of the cosmos proves to be one of the fundamental duties of the religious virtuoso when engaging in the life of holiness. Consequently, Hasidic teachings concerning the pursuit of holiness convey a rich evaluation of the relationship between material reality and its divine ground, culminating in a vision of

[105] He clarifies his terms: "By duality, I refer to consciousness' normal vision of a world constituted of discrete and independent phenomena, the perceptual field of subjects and objects encompassing what Buber labels the experiential realm of I-It and the relational realm of I-Thou. By non-duality, I will generally be referring to the dissolution of a subject-object dichotomy and the absorption of self and phenomena in an overarching, transcendent consciousness" (5, n4).

[106] At least in his reading of Scholem's interpretation of Hasidism, and he argues that Schatz follows Scholem in presenting the teachings of the circle of the Maggid on "mystical experience as a merger of human consciousness with its divine counterpart in which the ego's sense of distinct and separate existence is annulled" (5).

> the cosmic responsibility of the holy individual, who is charged with the task of sustaining the life and well-being of creation. In the Hasidic version of non-duality, the integration of the Many into the One ultimately serves to effect its recreation and to suffuse it with blessing. (6-7)

Brody then goes on to explore this "hasidic version non-duality" after addressing the 'acosmic' reading of Hasidism offered by Scholem and Schatz Uffenheimer. While he agrees that "a definite acosmic tendency, the experience of the natural world permeated and even absorbed in its divine ground, plays a significant role in at least one modality of mystical illumination within hasidic circles, as Scholem and Schatz amply demonstrate" (15), he also believes that "that when we focus only upon the powerful depictions of individual and cosmic absorption and annihilation in the divine, we receive an incomplete picture of the teloi of hasidic spiritual practice and the extraordinary richness of its spirituality" (17). He goes on to explain that,

> When dealing with the goals of contemplative prayer, classical kabbalistic sources differentiate between the activities of *yihud* and *berakhah,* unification and the bestowal of blessing upon the cosmos. Classical kabbalah is, in essence, a spirituality and a mystical praxis of cosmic blessing. The mystical adept enters into the divine realm in order to draw its light in a purer and more refined form back into the cosmos, becoming an active partner in the work of creation. So too, hasidic homiletic literature argues that the discovery of the divine vitality animating all material desires and aspects of reality and their unification within their transcendent roots ultimately culminates in their regeneration in an enhanced form via the contemplative intentionality of the hasidic adept. (17-18)

Later Brody makes a more general statement reflecting on what he sees in the late 1990s, that, "In the popular and even in the academic literature exploring the nature of mystical consciousness and language, one often encounters insufficient rigor when exploring the conceptual apparatus and experience of non-dual modes of consciousness" (23). He continues,

> Non-dual perception is generally depicted as the dissolution of egocentric consciousness and the differentiated world within a greater framework of transcendent

> being. Such indeed is the definition with which we have been working until now, for it represents a reasonable verbal representation of the acosmic aspects of hasidic mystical perception. Yet, this definition of non-duality as merger of self and world within a greater whole hardly exhausts the richness and variability of this rare modality of consciousness. (23)

He then draws upon the work of David Loy and his argument that "non-dual forms of consciousness arising in Asian traditions take on varied forms such as 'the negation of dualistic thinking, the non-plurality of the world, and the nondifference of subject and object' but that "These non-dual modes of perception can often coincide. The perception of the non-plurality of the world is often accompanied by the dissolution of subject/object differentiation" (24). Finally, he claims that "in reality, these modalities of non-dual being can be lived in significantly distinctive ways" and compares the difference in orientation between a Zen Buddhist and Advaita Ventantan practitioner in whom "we encounter significantly different models of non-dual awareness, which are shaped by prior philosophical preconceptions informing each tradition's specific meditative praxes" (24). He then argues that the Hasidic practitioners experience and walk out their unique nondual practice as one that is a "merged vita contemplative et activa":

> Similarly, arising in a tradition affirming the reality of divinity and soul and functioning within a framework of cosmic blessing, the hasidic teachers in the circle of the Maggid develop their own distinctive modalities of non-dual perception. In the Maggid's circle, the non-dual experience is predicated upon egoless entrance into the foundational structures of consciousness and cosmos. These are discovered to originate in a common transcendental source, divine Wisdom. Such illumination serves for the benefit of the entire cosmos, for the devotee is transformed into a living conduit for the manifestation of creative energy into a world which is renewed rather than annihilated. Within this framework non-dual action is activity pursued in harmony with the underlying vision of divine Wisdom, in order to imbue all things with blessing. (25)

Brody goes on to describe teachings from second and third generation Hasidic masters to argue that the perception of sparks of divinity in the physical world "reintegrates the immanent

light of the divine into its transcendent roots, revitalizing the entire emanative process" and thereby "transforms mystical perception into a process of world-renewal" which taken all together constitutes in his mind "A model of non-dual experience and praxis distinct from that of Asian traditions"[107] (32-33). The basic point he argues is that Scholem and Schatz were right in emphasizing the movement towards an undifferentiated vision of God which effaces the world and self, it is only half the story and the first half of a process which culminates in renewal of holy differentiation. For example,

> When God proves to be all in all, all conceptual and linguistic categories are shattered on the shoals of the undifferentiated One. Yet, precisely at the moment where one would expect ego and cosmos to be annihilated by the devotee in an apophatic vision of the ineffable One, Ze'ev Wolf [a Hasidic master] reveals God's true greatness in Zion to consist precisely of a renewed and regenerative infusion of holiness within individuated human consciousness and a reaffirmation of creative activity within the realm of the particular. It is only pursuant to the annihilation of our normal linguistic and conceptual categories that the animating light of the infinite can be perceived. Yet paradoxically, this annihilation of self, cosmos and corporeality must itself be annulled if the true goal of creation is to be fulfilled- the active and creative indwelling of the Infinite within the demarcated boundaries of the material universe. (34)

Here we see an allusion (probably intended) to the "annihilation of annihilation," the technical locution in Sufi mystical traditions (*fana al fana*) that we encountered above, and a claim about its relevance to Jewish traditions. However, once again we see the point Brody wishes to make, that "the ultimate goal of such a psycho-contemplative praxis is the transfiguration rather than the annihilation of his vision of a differentiated world" (37) and furthermore that

[107] Idel (1995) makes a similar point in slightly different term: "in many instances the Hasidic righteous men," the *zaddiqim,* did not conceive of ecstasy as their ultimate goal; rather, they had an additional spiritual aim: the drawing down of the divine effluence for the benefit of the community" (1).

when “the cosmos is perceived from the perspective of its divine ground, both the illuminate and the universe undergo rebirth” (38).

Brody then argues that this flavor of Hasidic nondual teachings “reaches its apogee in the metaphysical system constructed out of the Preacher of Miedzyrzec's teachings by two of Hasidism's most subtle thinkers, R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1813) and his disciple, R. Aaron b. Moses ha-Levi of Staroselye” (39). He presents several homilies and teachings of Rabbi Aaron, and concludes in a similar vein (though with a different vocabulary) that “Rather than annihilation, the goal of spiritual praxis is the manifestation within the material world of the indwelling yet infinite light of the “Ancient One” (43). He concludes that,

> R. Aaron of Staroselye's metaphysics is thus animated by a powerful vision of unity within differentiation. Reality, in all of its complexity, arises from and is animated by a changeless divine core which undergoes no substantive change throughout all of its permutations. The cosmos is the product of this infinite being's "desire" to "dwelling the lower worlds," to undergo finite manifestation... one's goal is to permit the light to dwell within the world rather than sublimate it within the divine Nought. Or better put: the hasidic vision is to view the One within the Many as an interpenetrating and interactive totality... The Hasid's final goal is neither the world's annihilation in the vision of the One nor an existential affirmation of concrete reality as it stands in itself. Rather, he is to integrate the perception of the material realm in a spiritualized form into a greater vision of its transcendent source while reaffirming the continued value of differentiated phenomena as the terrestrial dwelling place of the Infinite One. (43)

Elliot Wolfson, in his own path-breaking exploration of the Habad tradition (2009) also makes use of the construct of ‘nonduality’ in his formulation and presentation of the goals of this particular Hasidic contemplative path, but extends and pushes beyond Brody’s analysis. Last chapter, we saw Brody’s description of *bittul ha-yesh* in the teachings of the Maggid as “the mind’s perception of the material world as permeated with and animated by [the] creative vitality of the divine” and his qualification that it is only “the first stage in the mystical transformation of human consciousness” (11). The next stage is *ayin,* where “human

consciousness loses its sense of individuated existence as a distinct self and merges with its transcendent source" in "non-dual consciousness" (Brody 11), and we noted there that Wolfson also distinguishes between two forms of *bittul,* the latter of which (*bittul b'metziut*) he refers to as "nondual mindfulness" (2009, 76). The final movement for Brody, however, is the "annihilation of the annihilation" or the cessation of the state of non-dual consciousness which is the "transfiguration" (rather than the annihilation) of the "differentiated world" and the ""vision of unity within differentiation" which is also the vision of "differentiated phenomena as the terrestrial dwelling place of the Infinite One."

Wolfson, however, reads the two forms of *bittul* in a way that changes his conception of what the realization of "nondual mindfulness" consists of, and while agreeing with Brody's overall interpretation of the goal of early Hasidism as a "merged vita contemplative et activa", Wolfson's writings offer us a different vision of the actual mechanics of such a path and its fruition. For example, he introduces his reading of these two forms of *bittul* as discussed in the works of the second Rebbe of Habad:

> In the formulation of the Mitteler rebbe, the essence of the soul's self-sacrifice consists of "the nullification and integration into the aspect of the nothing of the Infinite itself in an essential nullification (*ha-biṭṭul we-hitkallelut bi-veḥinat ayin de-ein sof aṣmo be-viṭṭul aṣm*) . . . and not merely the aspect of the nullification of something to nothing (*beḥinat biṭṭul ha-yesh le- ayin*)." Implicit here are the two forms of annihilation distinguished by Ḥabad masters, the "nullification of existence" (*biṭṭul bi-meṣi'ut*) and the "nullification of something" (*biṭṭul ha-yesh*), which correspond to the "essential nothing" (*ha- ayin ha-aṣmi*) and the "nothing of the something" (*ayin shel ha-yesh*), that is, the nothing that is not in relation to anything but to its own nothingness, the nothing that is not even and therefore more than nothing, and the nothing that is nothing only in relation to something other that comes forth from the nothing, though that other itself can be nothing other than nothing, the more that is less than the less that is more. The nullification of existence, which is also marked semantically as the "essential nullification" (*biṭṭul aṣmi*), that is, the nullification of essence, completely obliterates all differentiation in the divine nothing (*biṭṭul ha-yesh le- ayin ha-elohi be-takhlit*). The semblance of individuality is undone, as the one assimilated into the

> essential nothing, the true worshipper of god (*oved yhwh be-emet*), has no sense of self at all (*eino margish et aṣmo kelal*). elsewhere dov Baer describes what we might call the dissolution of the egocentric consciousness: "This is the aspect of the actual nothing (*ayin mammash*) and this is the aspect of humiliation and modesty (*ha-shiflut we-ha-anawah*), which is called the essential annihilation (*biṭṭul aṣmi*), for his soul is essentially like dust in relation to everything. (2009, 75-76)

Up to here it may sound as if *bittul b'metziut* is identical with Brody's "non-dual consciousness," however, in his presentation of some of the teachings of the seventh Rebbe of Habad, Menachem, Mendel Schneerson, particularly related to his "somatic understanding of…annihilation (*bittul),*" the differences become more apparent (2009, 146). Wolfson explores "an extraordinarily rich discourse" on contemplative prayer that Rabbi Schneerson delivered in 1954, where he explains,

> The line of worship (*qaw ha-avodah*), which comprises both sacrifices and prayer, given the rabbinic tradition that the latter was instituted in place of the former, involves the "elevation from below to above." The structure of the morning liturgical service is explicated as a roadmap of the soul's ascent: the beginning of prayer, which precedes the gesture of blessing (*berakhah*), is a verbal act of thanksgiving (*hoda'ah*), which signifies the assent of faith in the truth without comprehension, an acquiescence that functions as the prayer before prayer, the prayer, that is, that makes prayer possible in the face of what reason deems impossible, and then there is a gradual advance to the nullification of self connected to the declaration of the oneness of God (*qeri'at shema*) and the silent prayer of the eighteen benedictions (*shemoneh esreh*). (146)

Wolfson remarks that the stage of nullification of self, "one might think of this as a spiritual climax," however, instead,

> it is followed by the supplication prayer (*nefilat appayim*), which marks the need for the mind to be engaged again with corporality (*gashmiyyut*) and materiality (*ḥomriyyut*). Although there is a danger of falling from the heightened state of consciousness, the paradox must nonetheless be embraced: it is precisely when one reenters the physical world that one is most fully conjoined to the divinity that transcends the world. Schneerson marks the difference in the levels of attainment by noting that the conjunction connected to prayer is such that the worshipper becomes a vessel to receive the light, but he is still an independent entity; by contrast, the conjunction that is connected to the supplication is an act of incorporation (*hitkallelut*) whereby the worshipper and the worshipped are one thing in actuality. Alternatively

> expressed, the nullification of the former (*biṭṭul di-shemoneh esreh*) provokes the "sacrifice of the self in potential, the sacrifice of self from the perspective of the soul, and it does not relate to the body," whereas the nullification of the latter (*biṭṭul di-nefilat appayim*) induces the "sacrifice of the self in actuality, and from the perspective of the body." It is precisely by returning to the corporeal that one can claim to be wholly incorporated into the incorporeal and, as a consequence, to have the capacity to draw down the effluence of light into the world. (146-147)

These two modes of worship are elsewhere described by Wolfson as "*itkafya*, the subjugation of something by nothing" which is needed in order to realize the more elevated "state of *ithapkha*, of transforming something into nothing" (96). He then explains how the difference between the two is related to two kinds of knowledge, supernal knowledge and lower knowledge, where "The lower knowledge brings about nullification of something (*biṭṭul ha-yesh*), the supernal knowledge nullification of existence (*biṭṭul bi-meṣi'ut*)" and furthermore, that the "former is an illustration of *itkafya*, the subduing of one thing by its opposite, the latter an example of *ithapkha*, the transmutation of one thing into its opposite" (96). Finally, we can begin to appreciate the difference between the two modes of divine service as they correspond to the two forms of *bittul* and moreover, what kind of "nondual mindfulness" the realization of the latter entails*:*

> The denegation associated with the former clears away the extreme of existence and the extreme of nonexistence, whereas the denegation of the latter clears away the extreme of existence but not the extreme of nonexistence. To occupy the space of the middle, the verbal and logical correlate to what is conceived meontologically as the void, one must pass beyond the ayin of *biṭṭul ha-yesh*, the nothing of the nullification of existence, to the *efes* of *biṭṭul bi-meṣi'ut* , the naught of the nullification in existence, the "actual integration" (*hitkallelut mammash*), which entails the annihilation of both existence and nonexistence, as "there is no existence at all but only essence" (*she-lo yesh shum meṣi'ut kelal raq ha-aṣmut*).The second nullification, therefore, yields the not-nothing, the positivity of the double negative, a voiding of the distinction between being and not-being in an absolutely relative way. When the truth that the essence is neither existent nor nonexistent—in the infinite power, *yesh* and *ayin,* something and nothing, "are identical with no distinction at all" (*shawwin beli hevdel kelal*)—is coupled with the traditional notion of creation of something from nothing, we are faced with another insurmountable paradox. The annihilation of all beings in the nothing

> makes possible the bringing forth of each discrete being as something from nothing, and yet, insofar as all beings persist in that nothing, to the extent that they are annihilated therein, every innovation cannot but be a renewal of that annihilation. If one were to disavow either of these claims, one would be guilty of concealing the concealment that is the world. (112-113)

Here, the crucial point is that the ultimate "objective, then, is not to negate the negation, to discard the veil of nature, but to see through it and thereby discover that there is no seeing without a veil" (113). This leads Wolfson to posit that "the more effective nomenclature to capture the acosmic naturalism of Ḥabad in all its subtleties and ramifications is the supposedly incongruous apophatic panentheism"[108] (96). He continues,

> This term implies that the world is not thought to be an illusion vis-à-vis the hidden essence as much as it is conceived to be a veil through which the illusion can be apprehended and thereby unveiled for the illusion it appears to be, an unveiling in which the hidden essentiality is (un)veiled. nature, accordingly, is not denied real existence, as if it was the "veil of Maya," but rather it is the veil that reveals the unveiling of the veil. The one who acquires this gnosis perceives that the world is suffused with divine reality, that there is, paraphrasing the zoharic locution favored by many Ḥasidic masters, no place devoid of the divine. It follows that enlightened consciousness, which is a prolepsis of redemption, consists not in thinking that spirituality can overcome materiality, that the infinite essence is a noumenal negation of the phenomenal, but in the realization that the distinction between the two collapses in the identity of their difference. (96)

Here we can see that in Wolfson's reading of Habad, the "nondual mindfulness" of *bittul b'metziut* is not Brody's "annihilation of the self" or where "human consciousness loses its

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[108] He describes earlier how he is borrowing this "fecund neologism" from Catherine Keller to mean "the one is affirmed in everything to the extent that everything is negated in relation to the one, but the one is negated in relation to everything to the extent that everything is affirmed in the One" (90). He continues,

> "Negated" is a careful rendering of *biṭṭul*, the technical terminology of Ḥabad's contemplative praxis, which we can translate into the contemporary jargon of *denegation*. By *denegate* I mean to eradicate, to uproot by clutching the root, or to efface, as effacing is always also a facing of what can- not be faced. The double gesture of the one denegated in relation to the totality of all things and the totality of all things denegated in relation to the one, issues from the void of the Infinite, the chasm in which everything is nothing in virtue of being everything, and nothing is everything in virtue of being nothing. (90-91)

sense of individuated existence as a distinct self." Instead, we might borrow a locution that David Loy added in the revised introduction to his classic study of nonduality, "the nonduality of phenomena and Absolute or, better, the nonduality of duality and nonduality" to characterize the kind of nondual mindfulness Wolfson has in mind here (2019, xxxvi). I suggest then that we can understand Wolfson's reading of *bittul ha-yesh* as the experience of the "annihilation of self" and (in Brody's terms) "non-dual consciousness" and then the annihilation of this kind of annihilation—a locution used by both Brody and Wolfson—is what Wolfson refers to as "nondual mindfulness" and correlates with *bittul ha-metziut* (96; 126). As Wolfson emphasizes again in relation to this form of *bittul,* "In the annihilation of annihilations, the difference between time and eternity collapses, not, however, through the demolition of the world, the sublation of finitude, and the annulment of time in the face of a timeless infinity, but through an opening that allows one to see the world as the manifestation of the essence that is concealed, a revealing of the veil as veil" (126). He then makes the connection to Brody's third phase explicit when he explains that "the seeing of the veil through the veil is expressed in the rabbinic language of the divine presence making its habitation below" (126), a reference to the doctrine known as *dirah ba-tahtonim* ("habitation in the lower beings"), which Wolfson illustrates is correlated with the effort "to transfigure materiality immaterially" (75) or "the mandate to transmute the corporeal body into the textual body by augmenting the effluence of the infinite light in the cosmos, the paradoxical ideal of delimiting the limitless, of determining the indeterminate, of creating a temporal-spatial habitation (*dirah*) for the divinity that is beyond time and space" (160).

Zvi Ish-Shalom, in his 'Kedumah' or "Primordial" Torah teachings, is strongly rooted in Kabbalistic and Hasidic sources—particularly Habad—while also weaving together teachings from Vajrayana Buddhism, Kashmiri Shaivism, and the contemporary tradition of the 'Diamond' Teachings of A. Hameed Ali, whose pen name is AH Almaas. He expresses his rootedness in Habad teachings when he conceives the goal of his Kedumah path as follows,

> The usual view is that physicality with its limitation, finitude, and materiality is a barrier to spirituality. Many religions see these things as barriers, and practices are therefore designed to transcend them. From the Kedumah point of view, in contrast, the whole purpose of creation is to be embodied and to experience finitude. The whole point is for the infinite to experience itself as finite, which is the original intention and fulfillment of the act of creation. Instead of transcending into the infinite, we have to learn how to become more finite, Or we should say, to experience the material of finitude completely and thoroughly, through and through. (Ish-Shalom 2017, 37)

In the notes he describes how "this is the classical view of Chabad Hasidism" and elaborates that the "narrative of Kedumah is that the infinite, in order for it to truly be endless, must include all possibilities…it must by its very nature also be able to be limited and finite. In other words, an infinite that cannot manifest as finite is really not infinite. The infinite must at least have some expression of finitude in order to complete its infinite possibilities" (18). In the note he clarifies again that the "narrative that the infinite requires the finite to realize its potential is the central metaphysical view of Chabad Hasidism" quoting the Tanya, Aharon haLevi and the academic work of Rachel Elior (298, n10). He continues in a creative way to draw on traditional sources of this idea but interpret it anew when he discusses the difference between 'waking up' and 'waking down":

> Waking up is seeing things as they are, without anything filtering our perception. Waking Down involves living our realization in the world. It is one thing to wake up,

> but it is a whole other thing to Wake Down. In some sense, waking up is the easy part. Waking Down is usually very messy. Perhaps you can relate to the experience of going on retreat and struggling to integrate newfound expansiveness upon returning to ordinary life, especially in an intimate relationship. I call this the "bungee cord effect". I used to call it the "boomerang effect" but the boomerang moves far too smoothly to really do justice to the intensity of the snap-back that typically follows expanded states. (145)

In a creative combined translation and interpretation, he once again refers (in the notes) to Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (as based on the Zohar) when he describes how the "Aramaic phrase that is used to refer to this process is *Itaruta De-litata* which literally means "awakening of below" or more poetically "waking down"" meaning "reentry and integration, the digestion and metabolism of our experience of expansion…into the world of human relationship and activity, culminating in wholeness" (152).

While this emphasis on embodying or making a dwelling place below for the Infinite is faithful to Zoharic and these Hasidic sources, Ish-Shalom's presentation is also flavored by his involvement in the Diamond Approach,[109] as he cites AH Almaas as offering feedback on the manuscript (xiii) and has even published on that tradition himself separately (352; Davis et al. 2013). The Diamond Approach, as described astutely by Ann Gleig, is part of a "new postmodern stage in the history of mysticism: one that is marked by an emphasis on the *embodiment* of mystical experiences" as recently "the rhetoric of integration and embodiment has replaced an earlier modernist emphasis on mystical experience and attainment" (2018, 122). This postmodern mystical turn, and those like Almaas who are integral to it, also

[109] He writes later, "Kedumah is in one sense an extension of the psychodynamic tradition, as we explicitly integrate knowledge of psychology with mystical perception. Other contemporary systems that utilize knowledge of Western psychology on the path of spiritual realization and development—most notably the Diamond Approach—also inform our teachings and influence some of the ways that we practice inquiry in Kedumah." (288)

"recognizes fundamental distinctions between different models of nonduality" such as "between forms of nonduality that emphasize the unconditioned or absolute over the conditioned or relative realms of reality as found within Advaita Vedanta, and between forms of nonduality that embrace both the unconditioned and the conditioned as expressed by Dzogchen and Zen Buddhism and Kashmir Saivism" (Gleig 2018, 116). These folks,

> favor models of nonduality that embrace both the relative and absolute dimensions of reality. They reframe these models as forms of "mature nondual embodiment" in which the "transcendent" or "vertical" unconditioned realm of being becomes embodied in the "immanent" or "horizontal" conditioned realm of human experience. The process of individuation is seen as a crucial aspect of this embodiment process. (116)

Almaas describes how "a fundamental part of the soul's individuation process is the realization of a unique essential aspect called the "personal essence" or the "pearl," which is the only essential aspect that is personal rather than impersonal in nature" and "reconciles the poles of impersonal being and the individual ego" (quoted in Gleig 2018, 114). Ish-Shalom notes that his own use of the term "Pearl" in his teachings is based partly on "A.H. Almaas's use of the same term in his book *The Pearl Beyond Price*…and my experience of this aspect through my personal work in the Diamond approach" since "the use of this term to specifically denote the maturation of the individual consciousness, including its functional and relational capacities, seems to be unique to the Diamond Approach" (2017, 329 n17).

Finally, in his own scholarship on the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria (2021), Ish-Shalom has borrowed the term "integral monism" from studies of particular Hindu traditions to describe the paradoxical worldview and perspective of Lurianic Kabbalah and, I would suggest, his own system. He writes how,

> The term "nondualism" is applied in the academic study of religion to metaphysical systems that posit that there is no ontological duality inherent to the nature of

> existence. The prototype for this perspective is the Hindu path of Advaita Vedanta (the Sanskrit word "Advaita" literally means "Nondual"), that claims that the only true existence is the nondual ground of reality, generally referred to with the term "Brahman." In this system, there is no ontological truth to dualism; it is simply an epistemological error and fundamentally illusory (this error is referred to by the term *avidya*, "ignorance")… However, Lurianic Kabbalah is not a nondual system in this classic usage of the term, since it does not claim that dualistic ways of perceiving are fundamentally erroneous. Its acceptance of the reality of dualism is expressed through the multiple soul-parts that live and function independently of the others in different loci. This perspective allows Luria to posit his doctrine of multiple soul-parts inhabiting several bodies simultaneously as well as the possibilities of one body housing up to four soul-parts of different individuals. All this can happen in this view without the individual soul ever losing its fundamental integrity as an ontological unity. Thus, Luria views reality and the soul to be simultaneously dual and nondual in nature. This view is closer to the particular form of monism found in the teachings on nondual Shaivite Tantra, or Kashmir Shaivism. Mark S. G. Dyczkowski calls this approach "Integral Monism," and I have adopted his term to describe Lurianic Kabbalah. (Ish-Shalon 2021, 119 n58)

He explains that in the "nondual Hindu tradition of Kashmir Shaivism, particularly as it is expressed in the writings of one of its most celebrated masters, the tenth-century mystic, Abhinavagupta" one can find "a radical kind of inclusive monism that includes within its purview an integral relationship between dual and nondual elements" (145). While "monism holds that only one reality exists, and that all distinct forms that appear to our perceptual senses (individual persons, objects, etc.) are aspects of this one reality," what is found in Abhinavagupta's teachings is an emphasis on "the absolute reality of the relative forms of existence" (145). In particular, "all the dualistic details that undergo a process of change within the dimensions of time and space are seen to be as fundamentally real as the nondual ground of existence. Indeed, it is the simultaneous inclusion of both the dual and the nondual that accounts for the true mystical realization of unity" (145-146). He concludes then that, "This approach parallels the Lurianic acceptance of both absolute and relative dimensions of reality as fundamentally coexistent and equally real." Interestingly, contra Brody (1998) and Wolfson (2009), he believes that "unlike later formulations of acosmism such as found in the

Lurianic-inspired school of Habad Hasidism, we do not have an explicit indication from Luria that the variegated and distinct expressions of form that appear to the senses lack ontological existence" (147).

Enactive Self Lens on Goals

Thompson's Current view

In his most recent book (2020), *Why I am Not a Buddhist* (2020), Evan Thompson argues that, "cognitive science doesn't show that the self is an illusion…Rather, it indicates that the self is a construction" (88).[110] He clarifies that there are "illusions and delusions of selfhood, both ordinary and clinical ones, but it doesn't follow that the self as such, as a structure of experience is an illusion. Although illusions are mental constructions, not all mental constructions are illusions."[111] Crucially for our purposes in this chapter, he argues that, "To say that the self is a construction allows for the possibility of selfless states, experiential states in which the sense of self is highly attenuated or absent" (114).[112] He

[110] Later he clarifies further, that "I prefer to speak of the self as being a construction, and the part of the sense of self that involves the impression of an unchanging and independent personal essence as being an illusion" (114). See also Bourgeault (2020) who describes how reading this idea from Thompson had a major impact on her own life and vision of contemplative practice in relation to her teacher.

[111] He adds, "To say that the sense of self is a construction—or rather that it's a process that's under constant construction—doesn't logically imply that there is no self or that the sense of self is the presentation of an illusion" (113). In his previous book (2015), he stated this slightly differently: "Although some illusions are constructions, not all constructions are illusions. The self is a case in point. To say that the sense of self is a mental construction—or rather that it's a process under constant mental and bodily construction—doesn't logically imply that there is no self or that the sense of self presents an illusion" (359).

[112] Importantly he writes, "But how to conceptualize such states tricky" since "Phenomenologists think of them as ones in which reflection or meta-awareness is absent, because they deny that there can be experiential states that lack pre-reflective self-awareness. But this is controversial outside of phenomenology." And, "Similarly, some Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophers maintain that all awareness is "reflexive" (self-aware) and hence that there can be no experiential states that lack "reflexive awareness" (114). He goes on to

continues, "If the self is a construction, as I've argued, it stands to reason that it can be dismantled—perhaps through certain kinds of meditation—while some of its constituents, such as bodily life or sentience, remain present. Whether such selfless states are beneficial or detrimental, according to normative or soteriological criteria, is a further question" (115).

In his previous book (2017), Thompson describes this possibility in more depth, specifically in regards to the sense of "mineness" of experience,[113] what Dan Zahavi designates as the "for-me-ness" of experience and what he identifies as what phenomenologists term "pre-reflective self-awareness." He writes,

> Of course, if there are experiences in which any pre-attentive sense of "mineness" completely disappears—as happens perhaps in certain meditative states—then these experiences can't properly be characterized as experientially "mine" or "yours," except perhaps retrospectively or prospectively. (One might be able to know retrospectively that the stream of consciousness that presently feels "mine" was for a time in such a state—maybe by remembering the outer edges of entering and exiting the state—or be able to know prospectively that the stream of consciousness that presently feels "mine" is going to enter such a state.) Such truly selfless states wouldn't be able to support even the minimal form of "I-Me-Mine" thinking just described (in which one thinks of oneself as a subject of experience but not as a substantial ego). (2015, 361-362)

The state he describes here is one in which autobiographical memory is suspended and no meta-awareness is present, as can occur in the hypnotic and meditative states that he and Markovic discuss and that we examined in the last chapter. He then specifies that while, "I see no reason to deny the possibility of such states," at the same time "I do see reason to deny that they show that there is no self or that "I-Me- Mine" thoughts are intrinsically mistaken" and instead all they demonstrate is that "there can be experiences in which no sense of self is

say, though, that "For the purposes of my point about the self being a construction, however, we can set these debates aside" (115).

[113] Which he clarifies he does not think is a "delusion" (2017, 359).

present." He then summarizes that, "given that the self is a process and not a substantial thing, it may be possible to shut down this process under certain conditions and then start it up again" (362).

He then goes on to, building on the work of Ulrich Neisner, to outline five different kinds of self-knowledge and "five corresponding concepts of the self."

> The "ecological self" is the experience of being an active bodily agent geared into the immediate physical environment. This concept of self connects to the phenomenological idea of bodily self-awareness. The "interpersonal self" is the experience of being a self in relation to others. This concept of self connects to the phenomenological idea of intersubjective self-awareness. The "extended self" is the experience of having a recollected past and an anticipated future. This concept of self connects to the phenomenological idea of autobiographical and narrative self-awareness. The "private self" is the experience of having one's own inner experiences. This concept of self connects to the phenomenological idea of subjectivity, which in its basic form is prereflective self-awareness but also includes reflective self-awareness. Finally, the "conceptual self" is the experience of having a mental representation of the self that one uses when one thinks about oneself. This concept of self connects to the phenomenological idea of reflective self-awareness. (2020, 115-116)

He explains that none of these concepts of self or ways of using the word "entails the concept of the self as a personal essence or an independent thing" (116). He then draws on Sean Gallagher's work on the 'Pattern theory of self'[114] to argue that these aspects of selfhood are "organized into certain patterns" a particular variation of which "constitutes what we call a self" (Gallagher 2013 cited in Thompson 2020, 116). While he doesn't mention it, for our purposes it is relevant to note that Gallagher specifies that according to "this view selves operate as complex systems that emerge from dynamic interactions of constituent aspects" (2013, 3).

[114] Gallagher specifies in that article that "selves operate as complex systems that emerge from dynamic interactions of constituent aspects." (2013, 3).

Thompson then goes on to explain that, "a self is an ongoing process that enacts an "I" and in which the "I" is no different from the process itself, rather like the way dancing is a process that enacts a dance and in which the dance is no different than the dancing."[115] He concludes that like "a dance, a self is an emergent process, constructed through bodily and mental activities at many scales of space and time. A self supervenes on the enculturated, living body in a rich social setting. Although it's a mistake to think that a self has an independent and nonrelational existence, being dependent and relational doesn't make it unreal" (2020, 117).

While perhaps not abundantly clear in this work, Thompson's view is fundamentally built on complex systems theory (CST). We will now turn to some of his earlier work where this is more evident, before using this lens to examine goals from an Abrahamic perspective.

COMPLEX SYSTEMS FOUNDATION

In his earlier work, *Waking, Dreaming, Being* (2017), Thompson fleshes out this "emergent" and "enactive" cognitive scientific view of the self, describing how the self is not a thing but a process, but nevertheless one with real causal efficacy as a "self-organizing" and "self-specifying system." He explains that "A self-specifying system is a collection of processes that mutually specify each other so that they constitute the system as a self-perpetuating whole in relation to the environment." A living cell is an example of this, since

[115] An additional consequence that follows from this analogy is that just as it is very difficult and disruptive to be thinking of the moves of a dance while one is dancing, so too it can be very disruptive to being cognizant of the different processes constructing the self as one is simultaneously enacting it—and this is one of the areas where considerable distress is reported by those who experience ongoing impairment from certain mindfulness practices oriented towards. It's also perhaps one way that retreat periods have been (and continue to be) fruitful for people trying to engineer alternative sense of self enactments, since otherwise if one is engaging in such contemplative practice in daily life, one is trying to, so to speak, rebuild the bicycle while one is riding it.

it "is a collection of chemical processes that mutually produce each other so that they constitute the cell as a self-perpetuating whole in relation to its environment" (325). In other words, "the chemical processes that make up a cell enact or bring forth a relational self/nonself distinction, whereby the cell has a unique identity or "self" in relation to the environment or what is "not-self" (325). Thompson then looks at several analogies for such an "emergent" self, such as a tornado or a flame,[116] but concludes that

> neither the tornado nor the flame has any internal chemical reaction network that synthesizes its own molecular components. Nor does either system control how matter and energy flow through it and around it in the way a cell does, thanks to its metabolism. Unlike the tornado or the flame, the cell creates its own molecular being as an individual whole. This kind of self-specification makes the cell *strongly emergent*: its parts reciprocally produce each other while the cell as a whole provides the necessary setting for these chemical reactions. Since this kind of self-specification is absent from the tornado and the flame, these systems aren't full-fledged individuals but simply macrostates of underlying microprocesses. For these reasons, the living cell works better as an analogy for the emergent and dependently arisen self than either the tornado or the flame does. (2015, 327-8; emphasis mine)

We can also go back to Thompson's even earlier work, *Mind in Life* (2007), to unpack his understanding of 'emergence' and to appreciate his indebtedness to complex systems theory (CST) for this account of the self. He writes, "In complex systems theory, an emergent process is one that results from collective self-organization. An emergent process belongs to an ensemble or network of elements, arises spontaneously or self-organizes from the locally defined and globally constrained or controlled interactions of those elements, and does not belong to any single element" (2007, 60-62). In other words, an emergent process cannot be found in any one of the parts of the network or system but only 'emerges' or is found in the

[116] Indeed these are the examples Jonathan Ganeri uses and that he cites in 2017, but seems to have revised his position in the latest (2020) book.

gathering of the parts of the system. The term 'global' refers to the system as a whole whereas 'local' refers to the parts of the system. He continues:

> Coherent and ordered global behaviors, which are described by collective variables or order parameters, constrain or govern the behavior of the individual components, entraining them so that they no longer have the same behavioral alternatives open to them as they would if they were not interdependently woven into the coherent and ordered global pattern. At the same time, the behavior of the components generates and sustains the global order. This two-sided or double determination is known as circular causality. (62)

Thompson clarifies that 'emergence' consists of both "local-to-global determination, as a result of which novel macrolevel structures and processes emerge" and "global-to-local determination whereby global structures and processes constrain local interactions," the latter of which is often designated by the term "downward causation*"* although he prefers the term "circular causality" or "system causation" from philosopher John Searle (62; 426). Furthermore, complex systems which have emergent processes in the way just described can also be said to have "nonlinear interactions" among their component parts which are responsible for these processes, and this "nonlinearity results from positive and negative feedback relationships," otherwise known as 'feedback loops' (15).

Autonomy is another key idea within complex systems theory that Thompson draws upon in his understanding of an emergent self process.[117] Thompson explains that an autonomous system "is defined by its endogenous, self-organizing and self-controlling dynamics" and that the term 'autonomous' in complex systems theory refers to "a generic type of organization" of a system consisting of "processes…rather than static entities" (2007, 43;

[117] He notes that, "the main explanatory tool of the enactive approach is the theory of self-organizing and autonomous dynamic systems. Such systems bring forth or enact meaning in continuous reciprocal interaction with their environments" (2007, 26). He quotes Dupuy who describes how for autonomous systems "usually possess a multiplicity of self-behaviors" which are "also sometimes called attractors" (26.).

44). Thompson then explains that the constituent processes making up autonomous systems "recursively depend on each other for their generation and their realization as a network" and "constitute the system as a unity in whatever domain they exist," the paradigm of which is "a living cell" even though "a system can be autonomous without having this sort of material boundary. The members of an insect colony, for example, form an autonomous social network, but the boundary is social and territorial, not material" (44). Thompson then elaborates as follows:

> An autonomous system, such as a cell or multicellular organism, is not merely self-maintaining, like a candle-flame; it is also self-producing and thus produces its own self-maintaining processes, including an active topological boundary that demarcates inside from outside and actively regulates interaction with the environment. In the single-cell, autopoietic form of autonomy, a membrane-bounded, metabolic network produces the metabolites that constitute both the network itself and the membrane that permits the network's bounded dynamics. Other autonomous systems have different sorts of self-constructing processes and network typologies. Whether the system is a cell, immune network, nervous system, insect colony, or animal society, what emerges is a unity with its own self-producing identity and domain of interactions or milieu, be it cellular (autopoiesis), somatic (immune networks), sensorimotor and neurocognitive (the nervous system), or social (animal societies*).* (65)

Finally he adds one more key term (or family of terms) related to autonomy when he explains that, "another way to characterize autonomous systems is in relation to the contrast between "decomposable" and "nondecomposable systems" (2007, 420). He explains,

> Decomposable systems have a clear hierarchical organization. Each component or subsystem operates according to its own intrinsic principles independent of the others, making the system strongly modular. In a "nearly decomposable" system, higher levels interact with lower levels through top-down or feedback relations. The nature of these interactions determines the extent to which the system is nearly decomposable: "A system will be nearly decomposable to the extent that the causal interactions within subsystems are more important in determining component properties than are the causal interactions between subsystems" (Bechtel and Richardson 1993, 27). As the components of the system become less governed by intrinsic factors and more by the system's organization, then the system is "minimally decomposable." A nondecomposable system is one in which the connectivity and interrelatedness of the components give rise to global processes that subsume the components so that they

> are no longer clearly separable. In such a system, the distinction between preexisting parts and supervening whole becomes problematic. Not only does the whole emerge from the components, but also the components emerge from the whole…An autonomous system is at least minimally decomposable, if not non- decomposable" since "when one adopts an autonomy perspective, one ipso facto characterizes the system as at least minimally decomposable.[118] (2007, 420)

We are now in a position to appreciate his claim that "a self is an emergent process, constructed through bodily and mental activities at many scales of space and time." By specifying that the self is "strongly emergent" he is clarifying that his understanding is that it is ontologically and not just epistemologically emergent. In comparing the emergence of the self to a living cell, he is positing that a self is also autonomous and self-producing, and thereby "at least minimally decomposable, if not nondecomposable." The rubber meets the road, and for our purposes it is important to note this distinction—between nearly decomposable and minimally decomposable—because it means that components of the complex self system, the five different senses of self[119] specified by Thompson, are "governed by the system's organization" and exhibit "nonlinear interactions" among them. Because of this, in trying to understand changes in sense of self, we must always look at the whole complex system and not any one of the components in isolation. In other words, changes to one's interpersonal self or narrative self will have a global impact on the "dance" of one's overall sense of self process.[120] While it may be important to identify how each of the

[118] This is because, "an autonomous system is an organizationally and operationally closed network; hence it is the connectivity of its constituent processes that determines its operation as a network" (Thompson 2007, 421).

[119] In a recent paper from Gallagher and colleagues (2023), 10 different sets of processes were specified: Bodily, Prereflective experiential, Affective, Behavioral/action-related, Social/intersubjective processes, Cognitive and psychological, Reflective, Narrative, Ecological and Normative (3).

[120] Gallagher et al. (2023) provide a nice example of some of these nonlinear relationships among the component part processes:

processes are being impacted, we must not forget that this will always only give us a piece of the puzzle and not the whole puzzle itself.

Enactive Enlightenment

Thompson describes how his own conception of the emergent (and thus non-substantially real) nature of the self is indebted to the Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophical tradition (2015, 324-5). But once again we must first step back to appreciate the arena of discussion and debate Thompson is writing in and for, before looking at the resonances he sees between the enactive conception of self and other philosophical and religious traditions.

Recently a group of philosophers began a spirited debate over the nature of "the self," or different senses of self, and how they may be altered in different ways and contexts including the arena of spiritual practice, particularly meditation in Indian contemplative traditions like Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. This group sought to "begin a dialogue among philosophers who are interested in problems to do with the nature of consciousness and the self but are situated in differing locations in the philosophical landscape" and so initiated this project through two conferences in 2008 and 2009, a collection of the papers presented at the

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For example, ecological factors include how my body dynamically relates to the surrounding environment. Such relations can be shaped by a particular set of my skills or habits, and in turn can constrain my actions and my intersubjective interactions, as well as my sense of agency – all of which may contribute to my self-experience and to defining who I am. These are all factors that can also get expressed in my self-narrative about my actions and my encounters with others. Accordingly, these bodily, ecological, interpersonal, agentive and narrative factors interrelate to form a pattern which is what we call self. (2)

latter becoming the volume (2011) *Self, No Self? Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, & Indian Traditions*.

The volume begins with a clarification of some of the major debates and positions within different philosophical schools about that nature of 'the self' and they introduce a threefold classification of such views—substantialist, non-substantialist, and non-self—and posit that while "non-self theorists deny the existence of a self, substantialist and non-substantialist self theorists affirm its existence but disagree about its nature" (Siderits et al. 2011, 4). The substantialist view "is one that takes the self to be a substance or property-bearer, the substrate in which different properties are all located at one time or, for substances thought to persist, at different times" and see that self "as at least minimally the subject of experience, that entity to which conscious states are given" (4). Non-substantialist self views, such as Advaita Vedanta, "hold that the self is not a substance or property-bearer standing in relation to a consciousness that is in some sense distinct from it" but instead argue that it "is something that is just of the nature of consciousness, and that we are mistaken in attributing agency, or any other property that might involve variation, to the self… The self is just 'the witness', or perhaps better, 'a witnessing'" (5). And finally, the non-self view—held most famously by Hume in the West and (some forms of) Buddhism in Asia— posits that "our ordinary sense of self is the source of a certain sort of deep-seated suffering" but "rather than say that our mistake lies in identifying with the wrong thing (e.g. the body), or the wrong kind of thing (e.g. a substance), it locates the error in identification as such." (5) They describe how while Buddhist "monastic practice is generally aimed at eradication of all identification or 'appropriation' (upadāna)," the "Buddhist philosophical practice contributes to this by

attempting to prove that there is no entity that might serve as the referent of 'I', and to explain how the belief that there is such an entity might have arisen" (5).

For non-substantialist Advaita traditions, for example, our normal and mistaken sense of self is displaced when the goal of realizing Atman is achieved, which is a non-substantialist 'witness' self (seemingly) without agency. In the case of Advaita, the problem is that we normally identify with either the body or a substantial self and the solution is to learn to identify with the witness Self. For non-self Buddhist traditions, our normal and mistaken self is exposed as an illusion when the goal of nibbana is achieved and theoretically no self or sense of self takes its place. As the authors point out, the problem isn't identifying with the wrong thing but identifying with anything at all—although technically non-substantialists would agree that the goal isn't to identify with any "thing" either. This is where the debates get more subtle and different Buddhist traditions can come down on one side or the other (no-self or non-substantial self), depending on how central texts and commentaries are interpreted, particularly in different schools of Mahayana Buddhism.

One key distinction that corresponds to this debate are the differences between the Indo-Tibetan Yogacara and Madhyamaka Buddhist traditions. To summarize the debate—or how the debate is presented by Thompson[121]—in the Yogacara view, the self is ultimately an illusion and as such would be characterized as a no-self position, such that enlightenment

[121] Buddhist scholars like John Dunne critique Thompson for playing fast and loose with some of the attributions of different sides of the debate—for example, that Nagarjuna is interpreted different ways by different commentators and one of the Buddhist authorities (Candrakirti) that Thompson cites would not espouse the position he attributes to him (Dunne 2016, 939). More specifically, he argues that the key Buddhist term that Thompson relies on and is a pivot of this debate—*ahamkara* or the "I-making process," which Thompson characterizes as real even if the self is not, is the position of some later Madhyamaka philosophers like Tsongkhapa but not Candrakirti (939).

consists of dismantling any sense of self. In contrast**,** the Madhyamaka view is presented as a non-substantialist view of the self such that enlightenment consists of experientially realizing that the self isn't a thing or substance (as we normally imagine it to be) but rather a "dependently arisen" process. In this characterization of the debate, Thompson cites Nagarjuna who uses the analogy of an image in a mirror or a dream which is likened to the self, where the image depends on both a real object in the world perceived at some time and the mirror, and while it would be incorrect to think the image was the object it was reflecting or representing, the image does indeed exist as an image dependent on the mirror's existence. So too while the self is not independently or substantially real, it still does exist, just in a dependently arisen way. He explains,

> Notice that the point of the analogy isn't that there is no self at all and that any sense of self is completely mistaken. After all, dreams exist as genuine experiential phenomena, yet they lack the independent being that we take them to have when we do not realize we're dreaming. Similarly, we habitually experience our self as if it were an independently real entity when in fact it doesn't exist in that way or have that kind of being. Instead, it exists as dependently arisen and hence as empty of any independent reality. (2017, 324)

Then, in light of this, Thompson concludes that "the deep and penetrating experiential realization of this truth is like becoming lucid in a dream or waking up from the dream—the subject of experience still exists but is no longer deluded about its nature" (2017, 324). This leads him to conclude at the end of the book:

> What I take from this perspective—and here I state my own view and make no claim that any other Indian yogic philosopher would agree—is that "enlightenment" or "liberation"—at least in any sense I would want to affirm—doesn't consist in dismantling our constructed sense of self, as may happen in certain meditative states. Rather, it consists in wisdom that includes not being taken in by the appearance of the self as having independent existence while that appearance is nonetheless still there and performing its important I-making function. Nor does "enlightenment" or "liberation" consist in somehow abandoning all I-making or "I-ing"—all self-individuating and self-appropriating activity—though it does include knowing how to inhabit that activity without being taken in by the appearance of there being an

> independent self that's performing the activity and controlling what happens. We could say that the wisdom includes a kind of awakening—a waking up to the dream of independent existence without having to wake up from the dreaming.[122] (2017, 366)

While the take home message here too is that the self is emergently real and not an illusion—even if the "independent" or unconstructed appearance of the self is—it is noteworthy that he doesn't conceive of the enduring changes associated with enlightenment as consisting of any "dismantling" of one's "constructed sense of self." We saw above that he does acknowledge that it can happen in certain (absorptive) meditative states, but the truly liberative lucidity is realized by inhabiting the dance of the self system without "being taken in by the appearance" of the independent self.

It is unclear from this, though, whether he thinks such states may in some way assist or lead to such a realization. For example, perhaps the special cases of such states where some self-processes are deconstructed makes the constructed nature of the self opaque in a way that can then lead to such a liberative and lucid insight and ongoing perception. Or, as MacKenzie (2016) suggests, "the recognition that the self is constructed can lead, in the right theoretical and practical context, to…the deconstruction of fixed views of self…and the reconstruction of a more fluid (sense of) self as a skillful means to cultivating and embodying wisdom and

[122] Here it is important to note the similarities with Wolfson's formulation and reading, especially in his (2011) monograph, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of the Imagination.* There he also explores a passage from Nagarjuna that compares reality to a dream but Wolfson clarifies that it is not a dream to be awakened *from*, as in Theravadan conceptions of Nirvana as utterly distinct from Samsara, but as something to be awakened *into* analogous to becoming lucid in the dream state (263-264). He then argues that this particular conception of soteriological insight and the philosophical worldview that grounds it is resonant with the medieval Kabbalah of Moses de Leon, several early Hasidic thinkers, and some of the writings of Ibn Arabi and Jallal ad-din Rumi (265-274). In his inimitable style, he summarizes that in these sources, to "be enlightened means to peer through —and not to abolish —the veneer of nature by perceiving that all that exists is naught but a veil by which the enframing light beyond the veil is manifestly hidden in the hidden manifestation of that veil" (270).

compassion" (106). MacKenzie, who in an earlier work also argued for a deep resonance between Madhyamika and enactive understandings of "the emergent self" (2010, 90), argues that the 8th century Madhyamika philosopher Shantideva's "deployment of the no-self doctrine to undermine egocentrism is part of a larger movement to first deconstruct our default sense of self and then reconstruct a sense of self that is consistent with the altruistic ethics of the bodhisattva" (2016, 121). The key here, of course, is the normative determination of what the "right theoretical and practical context" would be and about which even various Madhyamika Buddhist traditions might disagree. Nevertheless, for our purposes in specifying our lens on Abrahamic contemplative goals, Thompson allows us to see that because the self from the enactive perspective is emergent and constructed it can also be disrupted and deconstructed, while MacKenzie highlights the flip side in which that emergent self can be reconstructed in various ways to afford certain kinds of action, some of which may be considered normative and/or virtuous in certain contexts.

Putting it all together: Enactive Lens on Abrahamic Goals

As we saw in the last chapter, Abrahamic contemplative teachers and practitioners described the goals of their paths as certain psychological states with enduring effects, as soteriological insights sometimes related to nonduality or the nature of the self , and as new ways of being and acting in the world—or sometimes a combination of all three. Already in the last section, the enactive cognition component of Hipolito's framework highlighted that the goals of Abrahamic contemplative paths were not only soteriological insights and psychological shifts, but also new ways of being and acting in the world.

Now through the enactive perspective on self, the first thing we can see is that many of the goals surveyed above, conceived as the realization of different forms and flavors of nonduality, fell along a spectrum of no-self approaches in which the sense of self (and the subject-object division of perception) is seen as an illusion at one end of the spectrum and a non-substantialist self is transformed and transfigured but does not vanish in enlightened abiding at the other. For example, Brody defines non-duality as a version of acosmism where the self and the world are illusory but argues that isn't the goal of Hasidic paths, and Wolfson agrees that the goal isn't acosmism but defines the true nondual goal realized in Habad Hasidism (and other traditions) as a more dialectical or paradoxical variety where the dream of self and world are not dissolved but inhabited lucidly. Ish-Shalom disagrees with Wolfson and reads the Habad tradition in an acosmic key, but nonetheless sees his approach as following Rabbi Isaac Luria's "integral monism" which doesn't see "dualistic" ways of perceiving to be "erroneous" but as an "absolute reality of the relative forms of existence" like the self. Similarly, we saw that Ibn Arabi's vision of the goal (and Izutsu's reading of it) is not one where the phenomenal world and self are considered an illusion (like some other contemporary Sufi traditions), but on the contrary, a real manifestation or expression (*tajalli)* of the divine. In his writings Ibn Arabi differentiates this position from the acosmic Laysiyya perspective—which scholars of Islamic mysticism like Addas, Morris, and Casewit connect to Ibn Sab'in, Shushtari, and Balyani—that involves a non-self interpretation of *fana* or self-dissolution experiences. And the modern Nuriyya-Malamiyya Sufi order follows Ibn Arabi and his commentators in this understanding of the goal as "authentic selfhood" and the return to being an "individuated human being" after the effacement of one's identity in *fana*, which they believe to be different from some no-self Buddhist traditions. Finally, in the 'Keating

school' of Centering prayer, they read (and follow) Eckhart as being unique from all forms of Bridal mysticism in positing a genuinely nondual form of union they call "unity consciousness" that entails the death of any sense of separate self. This would seemingly put them in the no-self nondual camp and Bourgeault seems to agree in her own characterization of "phenomenal selfhood" as an "illusion" and nondual realization as the "dissolution of the subject/object polarity." However, when she critiques philosophical monism, the "endurance of the personal," emergence in the form of "symbiotic unity," and the cosmic significance of particularity, she appears to occupy at least a more intermediate position on the spectrum.

The idea that these traditions can be located on spectrum that runs from no-self *dissolution nonduality* to non-substantial self *dialectical nonduality* offers a broad strokes schema to aid in our construction of a culturally sensitive etic framework to make sense of these contemplative paths and the goals towards which they lead. While Thompson and Mackenzie's enactive self position is itself a non-substantialist position based on ontological emergentism—influenced by Buddhist formulations and which may be resonant with other non-substantialist positions in Abrahamic traditions—the key is that, however interpreted, self systems (whether strongly or weakly emergent) are constructed from multiple self-processes such that they can be disrupted, deconstructed and/or "shut down" in many different ways. Particularly for no-self traditions, this deconstruction may be considered an end in itself, whereas for non-substantial self traditions, this deconstruction is only for the sake of particular kinds of reconstruction. Importantly for both camps though, the enactive perspective also reminds and helps us to appreciate that new actions and behaviors are also (emically) understood to co-arise with such soteriological insights and psychological changes, such that with the latter but not the former, the goals would not be considered realized. For many of

these traditions, the spontaneous virtuous behavior and prosociality associated with these goals are, in fact, partially constitutive of them, and so any deconstruction or reconstruction of the complex self-system that is not geared towards such action must be considered incomplete, both emically and etically from the enactive perspective.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion then, from the CST-based enactive perspective, our experiential self is an emergent (multifaceted) construction—that can be interpreted by different emic and etic perspectives as illusory (no-self) or (relationally/dialectically) real depending on one's philosophical commitments.[123] Either way, because the global sense of self is a non- or minimally decomposable system of nonlinearly related processes, it can be disrupted by altering any one of the component self processes, including via different kinds of contemplative states of absorption. While we will explore a few of these absorption related "mechanisms" as they impact a few specific component self system processes in the next chapter, the point for now is that, if (as I suggest) states of contemplative absorption are also hyperplastic, then these changes to the processes that emerge as self can also be enduring. These enduring self changes will then be appraised as normative or non-normative depending on the context—whether contemplative, philosophical, or clinical. However, this perspective suggests that before we see either category of enduring changes in the system (in the form of

[123] For etic philosophical commitments, one's position on the ontological status of emergence and "patterns" would have a bearing on how one interprets the self system. For example, Thompson explores the range of philosophical interpretations of emergence, both ontological and epistemological (2007, 417), and Gallagher et al. (2023) note that "the notion of real pattern continues to be the subject of debates in the philosophy of science, where some have defended instrumentalist and functionalist views, and others have defended positive realist approaches" (3).

altered attractor landscapes), we would expect to observe the critical fluctuations that signal phase shifts of a range of living complex systems at multiple scales in nature.

CHAPTER FOUR: PUTTING IT ALL INTO PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

We have so far pieced together a complex systems-based etic framework that has the potential to be culturally sensitive by being able to account for distressing and challenging stages of contemplative paths as well as other kinds of (non-normative) distress and impairment that traditions understand to be pitfalls and involve unnecessary suffering. In this chapter, I will argue that in order to provide effective care for those suffering from meditation-related difficulties, one first needs an understanding of the multilevel causal processes involved in such difficulties. Only then can effective interventions be designed and carried out between a caregiver and the meditator in distress. In this first section, we will explore how the ecosocial approach to cultural psychiatry seeks to overcome the limitations of the biopsychosocial model in order to provide more ecologically valid descriptions of psychopathology that can facilitate more effective interventions and care. In the next sections, we will apply this framework to meditation-related difficulties in Abrahamic traditions and then examine some other implications and applications of the combined Ecosocial Pivotal Critical (EPiC) framework for care.

COMPLEX SYSTEMS IN CULTURAL PSYCHIATRY

In the concluding chapter to the edited volume, *Revisioning Psychiatry: Cultural Phenomenology, Critical Neuroscience, and Global Mental Health,* cultural psychiatrist (and

one of the editors) Lawrence Kirmayer argues that the "work collected in this volume encourages the hope that psychiatric theory is on the threshold of a renaissance, in which complex-systems thinking will allow us to integrate neuroscience, psychology, and the social sciences in modes of practice" that are better able to "recognize and respond to others in all their diversity" (2015, 623-624). He continues that since "Psychiatric disorders are as much psychological and social disorders as they are brain disorders, and there is simply no way to dispense with the need for multiple levels of explanation in research and clinical practice" (629). Therefore, "while we need reductive models to advance the scientific study of specific mechanisms, we need more complex, hierarchically structured, systems models to understand many aspects of psychopathology and make clinically useful predictions and interventions" (630). He continues:

> The causal pathways for psychopathology may not be simple, because they do not involve linear relationships between single factors or elements. Most causal pathways are part of dynamical systems with feedback loops in which multiple factors interact over time, both along develop- mental trajectories and over the course of the illness itself. Under certain circumstances, some systems can be decomposed into subsystems or component processes (Bechtel, 2013; Bechtel and Richardson, 2010).[124] These can

[124] While William Bechtel and his colleague Robert C. Richardson were pioneers in methodologically conceptualizing decomposition as important scientific strategy, they later came to revise their position regarding the utility of the strategy as is alluded to in this quote. In 1993, Bechtel and Richardson frame the central question of decomposition as a scientific strategy as whether ""systems encountered in biology or psychology are likely to be decomposable or nearly decomposable—and hence amenable to mechanistic explanations developed through decomposition and localization—or only minimally decomposable or not decomposable at all—and hence not amenable to explanation using these heuristics…If the degree of interaction among components when they come to form wholes does not obliterate the components as autonomous entities, the result is decomposable part-whole hierarchy" (1993/ 2010, 26-27). However, in the introduction to the 2010 version of the book, they revise their earlier position in relation to this question and the degree to which (most) living systems are decomposable:

> In referring to decomposition and localization as heuristics, we are emphasizing that they are fallible research strategies. Most simply, we may have misidentified some of the component operations in a mechanism. In other cases that we regard as both *common and significant*, the very error is in assuming the system is decomposable or even nearly decomposable—i.e., that the phenomenon of interest is due to component operations discretely localized in component parts of a mechanism. (xxx, emphasis mine)

> be studied in isolation, and, once their dynamics are understood, they can be resituated in the larger systems to which they belong in order to identify the emergent dynamics. However, many biological systems with emergent properties cannot be decomposed into discrete subsystems without losing essential features of their dynamics (Bechtel and Richardson, 2010; Bedau and Humphreys, 2008). (630)

Because such systems are "emergent," non-reductive systems tools and frameworks are required to accurately describe their behavior —some of which have existed for decades and others which are only recently developed. Kirmayer explains how the subtitle to his chapter, "Towards an Ecology of Mind" pays homage to Gregory Bateson who was a participant in the Macy conferences out of which systems theory and cybernetics were developed (638). He remarks that while "these early versions of systems theory were criticized as too general and vague to address key questions in neuroscience and psychiatry and make useful predictions," recent advances in systems science in mathematics (dynamical systems theory and complexity theory) and biological science (systems biology) "have important implications for psychiatric theory and practice" (638). While Bateson understood the mind as "as embodied and enacted through brain-body-environment loops" already in the 1970's, more recent approaches to cognitive science (by people like Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson) which incorporate these recent advances in systems science similarly envisions mental processes as emergent properties of systems such that "Mind, in this view, resides in systems that include brains, bodies, and the environment in interacting relationships" (638).

While they sought to salvage their earlier work in putting forth a "new perspective" in the introduction, what they call, "dynamic mechanistic explanation" which incorporates "analytical concepts and tools that have been developed in dynamical systems theory, they acknowledge that some might see this development as exactly the opposite of their original thesis (xxxviii). They write that, "Although for some theorists the invocation of dynamics entails a repudiation of mechanism, others recognize the need for dynamic mechanistic explanation" (xxxviii). Dupre (2013) is an example of such an opposing view that "examines critically the increasing tendency to equate causal explanation with the identification of mechanism" and concludes that, "While in principle it might be possible to accommodate an account of mechanism" to the dynamic features of living systems, "the attempt to do so risks reducing the idea of a mechanism to vacuity" (19).

Finally, he argues that this "way of looking at mental phenomena as emergent from interactions between brains, bodies, persons and environment has important implications for psychiatry" (639). One of the implications of this view concerns interventions which, "because problems can potentially occur at any level in the hierarchy from molecular biology to society…interventions may operate at many levels" as well (648). He continues,

> Although particular kinds of intervention may target specific levels, any intervention will have effects at multiple levels. Hence, conceptualizing any treatment as a multilevel, systemic intervention will allow the clinician to identify complementary strategies to reinforce its effect and anticipate potential wider ramifications. This requires knowledge of the dynamics at each level and how they may work together synergistically or in ways that conflict and require thinking through potential tradeoffs between psychological and social benefits and costs. (649)

Because mind resides in a multi-level interactive system consisting of the brain, body, and the environment, interventions can target one or more of these levels (or sub-levels within them) and one must have at least a working model of these dynamics to design an effective intervention strategy.

Kirmayer's work in social and cultural psychiatry actively incorporates complex systems theory as a means to integrate different disciplinary perspectives in making sense of the different components of psychopathology. Most relevant for our purposes is how this perspective can improve our own emerging framework for making sense of meditation-related difficulties in ways that can improve care, and one place it can contribute to this is in making the PiMS model more dynamic and fine-grained. As discussed in chapter two, according to the PiMS model once the hyperplastic state is accessed either through ascetic practices or psychedelic compounds which "destabilize" one's current state or trajectory, the psychological system can branch off on a new trajectory leading to either wellness or pathology. According to this understanding, the "contextual factors" biasing the system in one

direction or the other refers to “both biological (e.g., polygenic) predisposition as well as the individual’s immediate and remote environmental context” where “the term ‘context’ is used here in an extended biopsychosocial and temporal way” (Brouwer and Carhart-Harris 2021, 320). This range in timescales and factors would include things in one’s more distant past like "an enriched versus adverse childhood or any past trauma but it can also include what is inherited (i.e., genetically encoded)” as well as more temporally proximate factors like “a recent relationship breakdown or a bereavement, ongoing cultural or social crisis, or recent success or cause for celebration” (320). Elsewhere they invoke a “wealth of evidence from psychedelic drug, child psychology and mental health research can be cited to highlight the importance of contextual factors, such as: (a) preparedness, (b) intentions and expectations, (c) inter-personal trust/therapeutic alliance, (d) community support and (e) other forms of psychological integration, for safe guarding against harm and enhancing positive therapeutic outcomes” (323). While this list of factors is given here in a static way, in Carhart-Harris and colleagues’ “extra-pharmacological” model of psychedelic drug action that also “takes into account salient contextual factors” (Carhart-Harris et al. 2018, 727), a slightly more dynamic picture is provided. In this model, the environment (including the sociocultural context) influences the pre-state expectations, the acute state, as well as longer term outcomes. They understand this model to be “complementary” to their “cultural feedback loop model” where “acute and longer-term responses to psychedelics, feed back into cultural context via media reporting which subsequently affects public opinion, thus influencing the expectations and preconceptions of individuals who intend to take a psychedelic—and so perpetuating the process” (726). Here we see how the reports of psychological experiences impact the sociocultural through media coverage, which then shapes the expectations of others in their

engagements with psychedelics, impacting their acute psychological experience and (therefore) long term outcomes influenced by the plasticity of the acute state.[125]

The PiMS model—with the extra-pharmacological model implicit within it or associated with it—does elucidate a host of biopsychosocial factors that contribute to psychedelics experiences and the different outcomes that are possible from such states, but is relatively limited in describing how the biological, psychological, and social factors interact. While the cultural feedback model provides a bit more guidance in this direction—in specifying one pathway through which sociocultural factors can influence expectations which then impact the acute experience and then long-term outcomes—alternative causal pathways are left unspecified, especially in terms of the causal influence of other sociocultural dimensions and dynamics.

Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer (2023) discuss how, "The biopsychosocial (BPS) approach championed by Engel promised a conceptual framework to integrate multiple levels of analysis in psychiatry based on general systems theory[126]" and that the "motivation for this was a concern to give a place in clinical theory and practice to the intrapsychic processes

[125] Taves (2020) emphasizes the importance of distinguishing "between the interaction of factors within the context of the event itself and the environmental factors that affect the prestate and the long-term outcome" as Carhart-Harris does in this cultural feedback loop model (11). She also specifies that the perennialist claim that Stace-type experiences of unity are at the core of the world's religions is part of this larger cultural feedback loop since the "claim primes participants to anticipate the potentially transformative effects of such experiences and to view what they experience in relation to ultimate questions of meaning and significance" (11). I would add here the possibility that other kinds of religious and spiritual discourse, such as understandings of nonduality, and/or discourse about the relationship between religious and scientific domains such as "neuro-nihilism" could have similar dynamics.

[126] In his article summarizing and then evaluating critiques of the BPS model, Benning (2015) describes how, "one would have to acknowledge that there are aspects of GST that tend to be either ignored all together or downplayed both in Engel's writings and in the day-to-day application of the BPS model. These include the notion that systems − including minds − are "complex" and "open" and that they are, as such, often subject to the influence of unidentified factors" (349). In other words, the original BPS model may actually have addressed some of the critiques of it that have been leveled on how it has been applied in practice.

characterized by psychodynamic theory and patients' own experience and understanding of their condition" (5). However, they argue that "the definition and operationalization of these levels and their exact interplay in cross-level formulations, were left undetermined" and that "the BPS remains mainly descriptive rather than dynamic, simply enumerating potential risk, causal or maintaining factors, without detailing causal mechanisms that could guide intervention" (5). In another work, Carillo et al. (2023) reiterate this critique of the model for "being underspecified and for often resulting in a static list of factors" but provide a bit more information on how the model is employed today:

> The biopsychosocial approach lists levels of explanation from the training of health practitioners in biology, psychology, and social sciences, and it aims to promote case formulation for a patient beyond a diagnostic label. In psychiatric training, practitioners are often taught to formulate cases using a grid based on Engel's biopsychosocial model combined with a temporal framework of predisposing, precipitating, perpetuating, and protective factors. Trainees are usually advised to start this case formulation with biological factors and then move on to social factors that are believed to lead to the behavioural and psychological processes that the clinician can assess... In practice, this process often results in a static formulation with little integration of mechanisms across levels. As mentioned by Engel, these mechanisms should not be thought of as distinct levels (i.e., bio, psycho, and social) but require dynamic systems thinking to include the developmental effects and health consequences of the social context and life trajectory of an individual. (297)

They then summarize that, "There is a clear need for a more process-oriented integrative framework for psychiatric theory and practice, which includes the effects of cultural meaning, social context, and self-understanding on the causes and course of mental disorders" (297).

Thankfully, they don't stop at critique but also propose an alternative "cultural-ecosocial" (hereafter just referred to as ecosocial) approach to psychiatry that makes up for these shortcomings. They describe four particular areas where their model extends and improves on the BPS framework. First, it "emphasizes the social–ecological context to highlight the essential dynamic and interactional nature of biological, psychological, and

social processes, and it expands them to include culture**,** which involves shared meanings, identities, institutions, and practices" (299). Second, "It uses work in 4E (embodiment, enactment, embedding, and extension) cognitive science to integrate neurobiology, phenomenology, and social processes through the concepts of embodiment and enactment, which involve multiple levels of embedding in and extension through local context and wider environments, to give more process-oriented formulations" (299). It does this by grounding "human cognition and behaviour in bodily experience (i.e., embodiment), which is in turn embedded in and affected by physiological, psychological, and social–cultural contexts through ongoing cycles of action and perception (i.e., enactments), which extend into the environment through interactions with other people and through the cultural affordances (i.e., potentials for action and perception) provided by tools, media, and institutions" (299). And finally, it "includes explicit attention to how self-understanding and illness explanations loop back to affect neurobiology, cognition, and coping and treatment responses" (299).

Using 4E cognitive science to integrate the varied levels of psychopathology brings in to focus the various interdependent feedback loops and "loopy dynamics" that exist between them (Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer 2023, 6). The 4E perspective sees a landscape of interactions between "the brain [which] is composed of functional circuits, which are made up of neurons; the social world [which] is made up of roles, niches and institutions which are constituted by patterned relationships among individuals, whose behavior is regulated by cognitive maps, models and affordances, social positionality, norms, and conventions" (6). Crucially for this framework, "Each level enables processes that contribute to the causal mechanisms that underlie a particular symptom, syndrome or affliction" and though neurobiological mechanisms are certainly acknowledged as important, "Experience, behavior,

narrative self-understanding, and social interactions can all contribute causally to the dynamics of psychiatric symptoms and disorders" as well (6). For example,

> Social interactions can also feed back into cognitive and bodily processes in ways that amplify or diminish symptoms and distress. These loops correspond to relationships between different aspects of the organism or between the organism and the environment. Loops may result in cycles of positive and negative feedback, with effects locally as well as across the organizational hierarchy. Depending on their structure, parameters and initial conditions, loops can result in nonlinear dynamics, for example, growing exponentially, showing discontinuities, bifurcations, or other complex dynamics. (6)

Perhaps most importantly, these loops between levels "can be viewed as specific mechanisms that need to be considered in diagnostic assessment and case formulations and that can be the target of clinical intervention" (6). And particularly germane for our purposes, they highlight how "The patient's own interpretations and self-construal," which is "based on cognitive, social and cultural models, institutions and practices," effect the "impact of any intervention and any subsequent interaction with the clinician" (8). All this taken together calls for a "circular hermeneutics to complement our models of circular causality" (8).

The rubber meets the road in all of this in terms of clinical case formulation leading to intervention. They note that a comprehensive "diagnosis and treatment in psychiatry requires addressing pathology in all its dimensions: biological, psychological, social, cultural, and environmental" and yet integrating these into "causal explanations of particular types of problems remains a challenge for psychiatric theory and practice" (10). To address these challenges, "An ecosystemic approach to integration aims to identify multiple causal processes or mechanisms within and between levels of organization and articulate their connections in an overarching system" (10). Additionally, it requires

> approaching the patient as embodied and embedded in an ecosocial niche that presents an array of inter-related social determinants of health with differential constraining and enabling opportunities. The same niche also provides models for self-understanding, values, aspirations, and afflictions that shape experience, adaptation, coping, and help-seeking behavior, as well as access to services, educational and vocational opportunities, and other resources. Individuals' responses to adversity, symptoms or disorders, and modes of recovery will be influenced by the norms, expectations, and constraints of the sociocultural contexts they inhabit. (10)

They acknowledge that efforts "to provide multilevel systems explanations of health problems are often challenged as "too complex" for practical application" and "complex systems can exhibit counterintuitive properties," yet nevertheless posit that "qualitative understanding is often sufficient to guide practice" (14). While the "challenges associated with complexity reflect the real-world dynamics of human problems, it also underscores the need for idiographic methods of case formulation, which may include characterizing networks of relationships among symptoms and related biological, cognitive, and social processes" (14). These complex ecosocial models "could be used as decision tools" or they may also be used "by clinicians and patients to foster mutual understanding and motivate interventions" since "The models we offer to patients are themselves interventions that may guide self- reflection and elicit new behaviors" (14). Such person-centered network models constructed according to such an ecosocial perspective "offers a way for clinicians to organize the multiple explanatory models needed to capture the complexity and heterogeneity of psychiatric disorders and illness experience" (14). They conclude that based on such a view of "psychiatric disorders as involving complex system dynamics, an ecosocial systems approach allows clinicians to use multiple languages of description to assess processes within and across levels of organization of an overarching ecology of mind and to prioritize those that offer the greatest therapeutic leverage and optimal use of resources for person-centered practice" (14).

A Brief Interlude on "Levels" and "Mechanisms"

In the introduction to the cultural-ecosocial approach just sketched, the authors freely make use of the idea of multiple "levels," particularly in arguing that their model is more useful than the bio-psycho-social (BPS) framework which sought to combine different "levels of analysis" but which failed to describe "mechanisms across levels." Since both the metaphor of "levels" and the conception of "mechanism" are understood in different ways by different researchers, it is worthwhile to take a moment to clarify what these authors mean by these terms in particular.

Craver (2007) offers a "Field-Guide" or "taxonomy" of different kinds of "levels" discussed in scientific literature and argues "one must be careful to keep these different kinds" of levels distinct (163). He most broadly distinguishes levels of nature from levels of science, then distinguishes the former into levels of causation, levels of size, and levels of composition (171). Levels of composition can then be broken down into levels of mereology, levels of aggregativity, levels of mere material/spatial containment, and finally his particular interest, levels of mechanisms (171).[127] Here he defines a mechanism as "a set of entities and activities organized such that they exhibit the phenomenon to be explained," where "Entities are the components or parts in mechanisms," "Activities are the causal components in mechanisms," and "Finally, the entities and activities in mechanisms are organized together spatially,

[127] In Craver (2015), he argues that "the levels metaphor" is still "ubiquitous and so promiscuously applied" in contemporary science and philosophy (23), but here he specifies slightly different applications of the "metaphor" of levels such as, "levels of science, theory, realization, size, mereology, aggregation, and mechanism" (23).

temporally, causally, and hierarchically" such that the "behavior of the mechanism as a whole requires the organization of its components" (6).

Asprem and Taves (2018) follow Craver in emphasizing that "'Levels of mechanisms' are *not* to be confused with levels of 'nature' (ranked according to features such as size and complexity [e.g., atoms, molecules, cells, organs, and organisms]) or 'disciplinary levels' (e.g., physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, the social sciences, and the humanities) (146). They highlight that this type of analysis is "decompositional" in specifying the components and their organization that make up the phenomena, and that it is "*synchronic* as opposed to *diachronic*, in the sense that it considers some phenomenon as a system (S), and analyzes it in terms of component parts that are all interacting synchronously" (147; emphasis original).[128] And finally, and perhaps most importantly for our purposes, "there is no causal interaction between levels" but only "*at a level,"* since the lower level fully constitutes the higher level of the phenomena and is thus identical with it. In other words, the conception of "levels of mechanism" outlined by Craver and the other 'new mechanists' is one in which there can never be interlevel causality, since the levels are a species of whole-part relations and therefore, "the idea of interlevel causation is conceptually awkward within levels of mechanisms" (Craver 2015, 2).

From this perspective, it would appear that Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer, as well as Evan Thompson in the last chapter, are either guilty of a conflating levels of mechanism with levels of nature or analysis—since interlevel causal relations between mechanisms are

[128] They also note that the causal interaction at one level "takes place *over time*, which may alter the causal capacity of the system in question and, thus, its ability to effect change over time. A single mechanism, thus, links synchronic and diachronic processes" (148, emphasis original).

impossible and both of their frameworks are built on interlevel causal relations—or they are using a different application of the levels metaphor[129] in connection with a different understanding of mechanism. On the other hand, at times Craver's conception of mechanisms as systems sounds compatible with many of the complex systems frameworks we have examined in the previous chapters, such as when he later (2015) defines a mechanism as a "non-aggregative compositional systems in which the parts interact and collectively realize the behavior or property of the whole," such that, "Mechanisms are by definition more than the sums of their parts: they have properties their parts do not have, and they engage in activities that their parts cannot accomplish on their own" (16). Or when he explicitly acknowledges that "complexity" can result from "feedback relations that introduce nonlinear interactions into the operation of the mechanism itself" or that one could justifiably characterize his view "with the language of emergence" (2015, 20-21). How can we situate these different emergent and complex systems-based approaches in relation to each other?!

At face value and based solely on his discussion of "Emergence and levels of mechanism," particularly in so far as he accepts and builds on Jaegwon Kim's (1998) critique of emergence and downward causation, it would seem that Craver would consider Thompsons's conception of emergence ("dynamic co-emergence" that entails "circular causality") a species of "*spooky emergence"* that he believes is "incoherent" (Craver 2015, 20-21; Thompson 2007, 431). From this perspective, we would characterize the difference between the two as Craver subscribing to a version of epistemological emergentism, or as he

[129] And, in fact, Craver (2015) acknowledges that "our ways of describing science and the world contain many distinct, legitimate applications of the levels metaphor that are either unrelated or that have only indirect relations with one another" and (almost convincingly) argues that he is not trying to "defend levels of mechanisms as the one true application of the levels metaphor" (2). Instead, he aims to "show that this application is metaphysically benign yet exceptionally important for doing science" (2).

calls it in another work, "epistemic emergence" (Povich and Craver 2018, 190), whereas Thompson subscribes to a species of ontological emergentism. However, on a closer look, "organization" in Craver's understanding of mechanisms as complex systems seems to narrow the gap considerably between the two,[130] as does the fact that Thompson's conception of emergence doesn't introduce "anything that is metaphysically novel or suspect" (Craver 2015, 20-21).

This narrowing is evident in Povich and Craver (2018) where they specify again that "Mechanisms are not aggregates" such that "A property or activity at a higher level of mechanistic organization […] is literally more than the sum of the properties of its parts" and "emergence is defined as the failure of aggregativity" (190). Similarly, Thompson clarifies that, "ontological emergentism" is defined as the conception "that a whole is more than the sum of its parts and their intrinsic properties" (2007, 417). Then, in a footnote, he elaborates that, "Ontological emergence in the form of relational holism violates atomistic mereological supervenience, but perhaps not every form of mereological supervenience" (2007, 479 n5). He explains:

[130] For an argument that there is a considerable gap between dynamicist and mechanistic explanatory frameworks, see Silberstein and Chemero (2013). For a response to the critiques of mechanistic explanatory frameworks in that paper, see Kaplan (2018). Kaplan argues that two particular challenges to the mechanistic approach "raised by the purported non-decomposability of many dynamical systems"—the "challenge from functional indistinguishable component parts" and the "challenge from nonlinearity"—don't pose a "real threat to the prospects for mechanistic explanation" (275-277). However, he does mention the following in his conclusion: "In addition to the challenges for the mechanistic approach to dynamical explanation identified earlier, more hard work remains for those wishing to defend a mechanistic perspective. For instance, dynamists have also appealed to notions of emergence or downward causation in complex dynamical systems to argue for the limit of the mechanistic perspective" (278). While he emphasizes that, "to date, defenders of the mechanistic approach have not satisfactorily addressed this challenge," he simultaneously posits that this topic represents an undeniable growth area in contemporary philosophy of science that stands to shed new and valuable light on the nature of the relationship between the frameworks of dynamics and mechanism" (278). Indeed, the reliance of Enactivism on the biological phenomena of, "autopoiesis," "self-organization," and "organizational closure" as they relate to downward causation and "dynamic co-emergence" do seem to be a genuine difference in these frameworks as they have been developed so far (Thompson 2007, 417-431).

> Atomism states that every property of a whole is logically supervenient on, or logically determined by, the intrinsic properties of the whole's most fundamental parts. In this view, every relation is a reducible relation. Yet, if mereological supervenience were taken more liberally to mean that every property of a whole is logically supervenient on, or logically determined by, the properties of the parts and their relations—where this allows for nonatomistic or irreducible relations—then mereological supervenience would be consistent with relational holism. (479-480 n5)

Thompson also notes that his understanding is actually not so different from Kim's when Kim writes that "macroproperties can, and in general do, have their own causal powers, powers that go beyond the causal powers of their microconstituents" (Kim 1998, 85; quoted in Thompson 2007, 437).[131] He notes that the real difference is between how Kim is defining an emergent property—based on the British emergentists of the 19th and early 20th centuries—as "not to be identified with the macrolevel organization itself, but with a qualitatively distinct property that supervenes on and has as its emergence base that organization" (Thompson 2007, 438). Instead, Thompson argues that there "is no compelling reason today to endorse this particular conception of emergence…It is not classical British emergentism but contemporary science that should guide our thinking about emergence" (438). Thus, when Craver writes that through "organization, wholes have causal powers that their parts individually do not have (2015, 20), it becomes clear that Thompson's relational holism and ontological emergence is less spooky than it first appeared, and actually quite similar if not identical to what Povich and Craver (2018) espouse and refer to as "*organizational emergence*" (2018, 190; emphasis original). Hence the importance of 'organization' within the consensus definition of a mechanism for the new mechanists: a "mechanism for a phenomenon consists of entities and activities organized in such a way that they are

[131] For Thompson's discussion and critique of Kim, see Thompson (2007, 431-441).

responsible for the phenomenon" (Illari and Williamson 2011, 120 quoted in Asprem and Taves 2018, 146).

With regard to Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer (2023), they actually do address both the concerns about conflation of the levels metaphor, as well as the standard new mechanist argument against interlevel causality of mechanisms. With regard to the first, they note that "Biological systems are hierarchically organized that are arranged in ways that give rise to stable structures with new properties and processes" and "new control processes emerge as a result of the hierarchy" (3). While they acknowledge the critique of "the notion of 'top-down' causation" and those like Craver who argue that "causal processes can only involve same-level processes that are materially linked," they respond firmly that "In reality, top-down causation is common in complex systems and is central to organismic biology" (3). They then cite Woodward's (2020) critique of Craver and Bechtel's (2007) article to argue that there "are many types of organization that can be discerned in the world or applied to experience and the utility of concepts of hierarchy and levels depends on the specific question, problem, object of interest and pragmatic task at hand" and proceed to outline some of them:

> The notion of hierarchy is used in multiple ways in biology that include *subsumption*, *composition*, *scale*, *causality*, and *control*. Hierarchy implies organization into levels, but the significance of these levels differs in each of these versions of hierarchy. In biology, each of these notions of hierarchy is useful but the one that is most important for an ecosocial systems view in psychiatry is that of control hierarchies. (3)

Here, they are explicit in clarifying their particular application of the levels metaphor, namely levels of control, which is seemingly one of the levels applications that Craver (2015) believes is "legitimate" or a viable alternative to levels of mechanisms.[132]They cite Craver's work in

[132] Craver (2015) writes,

describing causal hierarchies which, "reflect arrangements determined by mechanisms or processes that produce a given effect" but note that "the assumption of unidirectionality at one causal level may not hold when the larger system of relationships is considered" (4). After voicing the perceived limitations of this category, they add that "Most biological systems involve mutual or circular causality or feedback loops. Indeed, circularity (autocatalysis, self-assembly or autopoiesis) is essential to what characterizes a system as living. Through such circularity and self-reference, biological systems then instantiate another form of hierarchy that involves self-regulation or control," *control hierarchies*:

> Control hierarchies are defined in terms of successive levels of regulatory loops. The control systems perspective is especially relevant to understanding biological processes (and psychopathology) because it leads to a useful way of understanding function and dysfunction in terms of the goal-oriented nature of behavior and adaptation….This is the kind of hierarchy of greatest interest in making sense of the dynamics of living systems. For living systems, these loops are characterized by a fundamental regulatory goal of maintaining organism integrity and persistence in the service of reproduction and other goals. The resultant teleodynamics distinguish living systems from other regulatory systems that lack the capacity to generate organism-specific goals and norms and to function in ways that are explicitly informed by future possibility. In humans, this process extends to the self-reflexive, imaginative and cooperative processes of agency enabled by language and culture. (4)

It is worth noting here both the connection between levels of control and a form of naturalistic normativity related to goal-directed action and adaptation—hence its relevance to psychopathology—as well as the specification of this application of levels as being the most

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> In levels of control, the relata are agencies and the relation is dominance, Items at higher levels direct or regulate the activities of their underlings. Items at higher levels direct or regulate the activities of their underlings. Majors and corporals, queen bees and drones, bosses and workers occupy different levels of a control hierarchy. Analogous relations are sometimes found among physiological systems. When one speaks of "executive function" in cognition, one is describing levels of control. The idea of control or dominance is a causal notion, and it is independent of matters of size (witness the sauropod brain)… In levels of control, the relata are logically independent and spatiotemporally distinct interactors. It is not at all implausible for one to control the other causally (11).

This is in contrast to things at different "levels of organization (aggregation and mechanism)" which, "do not causally interact with one another…if we think about the world in terms of levels of organization, we should not be tempted into thinking that things at higher levels control or dominate things at lower levels" (23).

useful in making sense of the *dynamics* of living systems. They invoke emergence[133] and the "evidence for hierarchical organization…in many emergent phenomena" to declare (importantly for our purposes) that the "emergence of new structures with distinctive properties and of processes with new dynamics warrants the use of the concept of *levels of organization* and corresponding levels of description" (4-5; emphasis original). At last, it is clarified that by "levels" they mean levels of control, which they take to be identical to levels of organization.

Situating themselves within the field of psychiatry, they describe how they start from the premise that "symptoms and syndromes in psychiatry arise from the interaction of psychophysiological, cognitive-affective, and cultural processes" (5). Psychiatric disorders are "complex, multidimensional constructs" and "emerge within loops that involve the biology of human adaptation as well as cultural practices of diagnostic labelling, health care systems, and larger discursive formulations" (5). Their perspective is "consistent with recent work in symptom network theory, which suggests that psychiatric disorders result from the dynamic interaction of multiple symptoms each of which may have its own pathophysiology or psychopathology" and "views disorders as systems of causally connected symptoms" which can involve "physiology, behavior, experience, and interpersonal interaction, as well as the responses of social institutions and the environment" (5). Lastly, "the ecosocial systems we outline in this paper extends the idea of symptom networks to include social-cultural contexts, self-reflection, and narration as active causal processes" and they believe the

[133] They define emergence as "the appearance of new levels of organizational structure without implying the loss of underlying structures or component levels. These new levels of organization have their own dynamic processes" (4).

organizational levels of biological, psychological, and social processes at different scales each have their own causal dynamics and are causally interrelated with each other (6). The latter are what they refer to "positive and negative feedback" loops and "correspond to relationships between different aspects of the organism or between the organism and the environment" (6). As they explain,

> Depending on their structure, parameters and initial conditions, loops can result in nonlinear dynamics, for example, growing exponentially, showing discontinuities, bifurcations, or other complex dynamics. To the extent that these loops have their own dynamics, they can be viewed as specific mechanisms that need to be considered in diagnostic assessment and case formulations and that can be the target of clinical intervention…Identifying these stable patterns or trajectories could provide a basis for a typology of disorders organized in terms of regulatory processes that exhibit stable attractors, limit cycles, and final common pathways. If these can be identified and empirically validated, they could be used as a basis for diagnoses that are *prognostic* (predicting outcomes) or that indicate potentially effective treatments, and that point to specific targets for intervention. This systems-based nosology, however, will generally be quite different than simply identifying single mechanisms, causal factors, or etiologies for disorders because it involves dynamic properties of systems with looping effects. A typology of looping effects (vicious or virtuous) could complement current diagnostic nosology (6).

To return and conclude our foray into levels and mechanisms, it is clear that the new mechanism camp[134]and the ecosocial systems camp have differences in opinion regarding the most optimal application of the levels metaphor for scientific explanation (generally as well as in their fields) and which is more deserving of being referred to as "levels of organization." However, we can sidestep many of the active debates by clarifying that, when discussing the

[134] It does seem as though Bechtel has recently changed his position quite dramatically, such that it starts to sound more like the ecosocial position on this issue. Bechtel (2017) appears to argue against the new mechanist explanatory framework when he identifies levels of mechanism with levels of control capable of interlevel causal influence, and concludes that "top-down causation, as exhibited in the hierarchical control of biological mechanisms, is a fundamental feature of biological and neural systems" (204). He still abides by the same definition of mechanism but identifies several "shortcoming[s]" of his paper with Craver in 2007 on their mechanistic explanation of top-down causation, one of which was "that it suggested that all causality is in fact at the lower level" (205).

interlevel looping "mechanisms" that the ecosocial psychiatry camp finds particularly important for case formulation and targeting interventions, I am following their application of the levels metaphor as levels of control that allows for interlevel causal influences and looping effects between hierarchical domains such as the biological, the psychological, and the sociocultural. From the new mechanist perspective of "compositional" levels of mechanism (Woodward 2020, 442),[135] however, it doesn't make sense to speak of interlevel dynamics and these "looping effects" would be understood to occur within the same mechanistic level of the decomposed system or phenomena and whose organizational dynamics occur between specific biological, psychological, or sociocultural component parts.

AN ECOSOCIAL SYSTEMS APPROACH TO MEDITATION-RELATED DIFFICULTIES

While hopefully the import of the CST-based ecosocial systems approach for meditation-related difficulties is clear already, it still may be worthwhile to make a few connections explicit. Based on the section above, we can hopefully see that:

a) Causal pathways for meditation-related difficulties, overlapping as they do with cultural psychiatric conceptualizations of psychopathology, are complex constructions of interdependent biological, psychological, and sociocultural dynamical processes

135

b) To design effective intervention strategies and provide optimal care, these multi-level organizational causal dynamics must be understood and appreciated, at least in a basic or "qualitative" way

While the first point is made explicitly in a recent paper on meditation-related difficulties with Kirmayer (Lindahl et al. 2019), the second is only implicit and one of the contributions of this chapter is to develop it more fully in relation to meditation-related difficulties in Abrahamic traditions.

In this collaboration, the authors propose that a "person-centered"[136] approach to meditation difficulties is aligned with findings from the VCE study, specifically that "Practitioners consistently reported that finding helpers who supported their goals, expectations, and values around meditation was critical for navigating meditation-related challenges" (Lindahl et al. 2019, 17). They quietly shift from a purely descriptive analysis of the findings of their mixed-methods study into prescriptive territory when they advocate that such an approach be adopted by clinicians and other care providers in the treatment of these difficulties. They go on to argue that instead of seeking to distinguish between normative and pathological meditation experiences, "practitioners, teachers, and clinicians may be better served by focusing on the practical questions: (1) whether the experience warrants additional support or intervention; and (2) what type of support or intervention might be most appropriate" (19). While I agree that such a person-centered approach is warranted and

[136] They clarify that a "person-centered approach" is "contrasted with a disease or disorder-centered approach in that it aims to address the needs of the person (including the totality of the person's health, both illness- and wellness-related aspects), as engaged by the person (with both patients and clinicians extending themselves as full human beings), for the person (assisting the fulfillment of the person's aspirations and life project), and with the person (in a respectful and empowering relationship with the person who consults) (Mezzich et al., 2010; Cloninger and Cloninger, 2011; Kirmayer et al., 2016b)" (Lindahl et al 2019, 17).

advisable in responding to individuals suffering from meditation-related difficulties, the authors don't specify *how* care providers in concert with meditators in distress ought to determine what type of support or intervention is most appropriate. I believe the utilization of the CST-based cultural-ecosocial approach, with its attention to inter-level causal mechanisms and 'looping effects,' is a particularly helpful strategy. They do list "the most widely agreed upon criteria" currently used by Buddhist meditation teachers—and which they seemingly are in support of—to determine if additional support is needed, such as "degree of distress and functional impairment, duration, degree of control, and relationship to the client's and the tradition's cultural norms" (19). Additionally, they remark that "cultural psychiatry and psychology emphasizes the importance of considering the social contexts, positions, identities, relationships, and power dynamics of the practitioner and others, including any authorities—such as a clinician or meditation teacher—who are involved in the decision-making process" (19). However, as with the BPS model, I believe the elucidation of inter-level dynamics and mechanisms can take this static list and transform it into a dynamic systems framework or map that can be utilized by care providers in dialogue with meditators in distress to develop effective intervention strategies. An idiographic approach[137] to case formulation with attention to looping effects is a natural complement to a person-centered approach that is undertaken *for* and *with* the meditator undergoing challenges.

ABRAHAMIC MEDITATION-RELATED DIFFICULTIES

[137] Idiographic approaches in clinical science refer to "individual-level" approaches to the study or treatment of clinical disorders and tend to involve more qualitative methods, contrasted with "nomothetic" approaches focusing on general principles or patterns that apply to groups and involve quantitative methods (Hayes and Andrews 2020, 6).

A particularly important "element in an ecosocial systemic approach is recognizing the role that the person's own understanding of and response to symptoms and suffering play in the dynamics of mental disorders, coping, help-seeking, treatment response and recovery" (Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer 2023, 12). This, as I hope is clear, was the major concern of the Grofs in proposing the construct of spiritual emergency for (some) individuals suffering from difficulties resulting from contemplative practice and all those (like this author and colleagues) who have focused on appraisal processes and differential diagnosis related to "spiritual" experiences since. In an ecosocial approach to meditation-related difficulties, there must be an emphasis on "culturally shaped attributional processes" and "modes of self-construal based on cognitive, social and cultural models, institutions and practices" that lead to "particular modes of coping and help-seeking" (Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer 2023, 8). Furthermore, "Comprehensive diagnosis and treatment in psychiatry requires addressing pathology in all its dimensions: biological, psychological, social, cultural, and environmental" but "Integrating these into causal explanations of particular types of problems" like meditation-related difficulties is certainly a tall order (10). To assist us in this endeavor, we can follow "an ecosystemic approach to integration" which "aims to identify multiple causal processes or mechanisms within and between levels of organization" and takes the lens of "human ecological niches," which are "fundamentally *social*—with socially constructed contexts and relationship providing the essential matrix of development from inception—and *cultural*, with shared meanings, values and practices shaping cognition and experience across the lifespan" (13). This lens emphasizes "the embedding of the individual in multiple, nested environmental contexts, defined by socio-relational and spatio-temporal scale and

composition to include: *micro* (immediate family and friends, community and work-school setting); *meso* or *exo* (neighborhoods, wider networks, and larger community); and *macro* (society, nation, transnational) contexts" (13). Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer "unpack the notion of niche in a way that can serve a person-centered clinical approach" by highlighting the "intersections and interactions across at least four over-lapping domains: (1) lifespan developmental history; (2) social structure and positioning; (3) cultural meaning, norms, values and affordances;[138] and (4) individual biography and self-understanding (which draws selectively from each of the other domains)" (13). We will borrow this fourfold schema to examine two different case studies through this lens.

"JANE" (99125)

The practitioner Jane[139] (99125) is a 64-year-old Caucasian woman who had been practicing meditation within multiple Sufi traditions since she was in her mid 20s. She described her upbringing as "interesting" but also shared that "for the past 40 years I would have described it as highly traumatic." She described (and diagnosed) both her parents as having PTSD, "my father from World War 2 and my mother from sexual trauma" and her

[138] Their understanding of "affordances," and particularly the "expanded concept of 'affordance' that extends to sociocultural forms of life," is based on Ramstead et al. (2016, 2). There, the authors build on the ecological psychology of Gibson to define affordances as, "possibilities for action afforded to organisms by the things and creatures that populate its environmental niche, as engaged through their perceptual and sensorimotor abilities" (3). On this account, "the world is the totality of possibilities of action, not of things" (3). They posit that "one pathway by which cultural affordances may be transmitted is through the manipulation of attention….including what we might call 'regimes of attention'" (16). They hypothesize that these regimes of attention "are enacted through patterned practices (especially those which modulate the allocation of attention) and are embodied in sundry ways: in the predictive hierarchies of individual agents in a community, as encoded sets of expectations, and in the concrete social and cultural world, as constructed human environments, designed to solicit certain expectations and direct attention" (17).

[139] Name has been changed to protect anonymity of the subject

father “self-medicated with alcohol” leading to her family life being “absolute chaos.” This included emotional abuse from her father and mother, physical abuse from her father, and sexual abuse from other family members and family friends until the age of 12. She had “many mystical experiences” as a child that “didn’t feel escapist” and eventually encountered “four adult women” in her local community who helped raise her. After beginning a successful career out of college, she reported “getting called back to my inner life in a big way.” Her father was not religious, but her mother had a deep Lutheran faith “that sustained her" and made an impact on Jane. She began Sufi practice in a western Sufi tradition in her mid 20s, where she undertook a period of “7 years of intensive practice and retreats” working with two Sufi teachers, and doing spiritual practice for 90 minutes to 2 hours each day which included prayer, concentrative meditation and simple breath practices (pranayama), other chanting, sounds, and sacred name practices (*zhikr)*. She also sometimes did Hindu or Buddhist practices “as an adjunct,” which was allowed and even encouraged by her teachers.

She reported participating in many retreats during those 7 years and would do retreats over a 3-day weekend, completing 12-14 hours of practice a day. She shared that at the time, “I had many mystical experiences but,

> *the greatest thing is that I feel my being was, I transformed my vehicle for working with anything I didn’t understand. I developed inner processes for understanding and appreciating, “oh this is God too.” So anything that I would have like to have split off from, or anything I had split off from in the past, that overwhelmed my psyche in childhood say, or any misunderstandings about life that I took on—these retreats put these in the context of sacred travel on the inner journey, great compassion and forgiveness for myself, for other people, releasing the hold of some traumatic experiences from childhood. Releasing the hold of those experiences on my psyche until I just had greater and greater ease in my daily life and delight*

Things had been “pretty manageable” during this period until before one particular retreat she had a waking vision of her teacher—which was rare because she didn’t otherwise have a very

active imagination, so she emphasized that she pays particular attention when it does happen—standing at a lectern pointing to Sanskrit words on a papyrus paper. "He'd point to one and I'd shake my head no and he'd point to another, and I'd shake my head no. He then pointed to the word 'agni'…and I shake my head yes and my eyes lit up and my heart is jumping up and down. And he looks at me really quizzically like 'are you sure?' And I'm like 'absolutely, let's go for it'" even though she had no idea what the word meant in the dream. Jane then reported how

> *about a day and a half into the workshop I started going psychotic…and I started shaking, like overwhelming feelings, and I'm not talking about fleeting feelings of happiness or sadness. I'm talking about a volcano of epic proportions, at least for my psyche (laughs), arising from my belly into my heart. My head couldn't process any of it and my body was physically shaking. I was terrified, I didn't know what it was …I knew where I was, but it just felt like everything was smashing to smithereens, everything that I understood. I mean in retrospect, yea I was losing cortical control but, you know, when it's really happening, you're not thinking that. I wasn't thinking that. So, a lesser person than my teacher would have dropped me off at the local psych ward where they would prescribed anti-psychotics, calmed me down—oh, I couldn't sleep either, that started to happen—prescribed some kind of anti-psychotic probably, which I would probably still be on now (laughs). But this person, and we, again, over many years built a trusted relationship, he and his wife piled me into their little Volkswagen van and took me to the next town where their next workshop was.*

He then arranged for her to stay with some friends in a guest room and he would come and see her twice a day. She then clarified that,

> *This is not something this guy did all the time, it's not like he was a therapist or counselor. He was a very wise grounded person and a sincere understanding, he had a deep understanding about life. So I would sit there like, my hands and fists hitting against the air saying, "I just don't know what's wrong, I just don't (gurgling noise)". At a certain point he figured out…that I felt guilty about something. And he started saying "notice what happens when you hear this: you haven't done anything wrong". This is my most trusted friend on the planet, saying "you haven't done anything wrong". So that confronted my guilt, because I was willing to try on what he said as a better reality than (laughs) the one that was rattling around inside me. So then he's watching me hit my fists against the air…I was on the bed and he was in a chair, he then climbed behind me on the bed and puts his hands behind my forearms so that instead of hitting against the air he took over my holding back of my musculature, so*

> *I could still do the movement but he was (inaudible) on the holding back. So…Nathan, I started screaming and sobbing, screaming and sobbing. Really, I'm sure I looked like pictures of somebody who had been possessed, having a de-possession, because even having a baby I never screamed like this. My whole body-mind screaming, sobbing, screaming, sobbing…*

She described where she felt the guilt had come from:

> *when I was little, my family had moved west and they said it was because of my health. When my grandfather had died my mother said, "If we had never left (home state) he wouldn't have died." In my little kid brain-heart, I had put those two things together, that it was my fault that Grandpa died. And that seed had stayed with me clear until I was, I guess maybe 27 or 28, I'm not sure the exact date, but about that age…And it took me maybe 20 to 30 minutes of screaming and yelling and sobbing and slobbering as this unwound, this scary distorted belief about reality and myself and my guilt…And then I was returned, to not just reality but an enhanced reality. And my teacher walked me outside and there was a hose sprinkler going on and there was a rainbow above the sprinkler…I danced through the rainbow, and I'm usually not this playful in life, but it was one of the most wonderful moments. And I feel that, not just because my Sufi teacher was there but I feel like it was the fruit of practice and trust and development that took me to my deepest holding back, my deepest misunderstanding about life and myself, and freed me—to love and safety.*

When I later asked what "*agni*" meant or meant to her, she described it as "purification by fire." She interpreted her imaginal vision or encounter with her teacher "where basically he was asking me 'well what's next? Purification by fire?' And I go 'sure'…so then he shows up and I start entering that fire, which was like that volcano coming up from inside me." She related that as part of her current appraisal, "my language for it now would be unconscious emotional material and fear and trepidation" and that "my language is I was so identified with that. I had built so much of my experience of myself around that, that that coming up is going to look like death to me…to let go of that, because so much of what I believed about life was that it was my fault. I have to be a good girl because it was my fault, I have to put my own needs [aside] because it was all my fault, it was all my fault." Altogether the acute event lasted 9 days, between two workshops, and although "I'm sure he didn't know what was going to

happen either," she is "forever grateful" for his care during that time and over the years in which she worked with him.

Discussion

In terms of lifespan developmental history, this practitioner reported an extremely challenging and traumatic childhood of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. She also reported four women in her community who took on parental and care-giving responsibilities and whose influence Jane credited with affording her the opportunity to pursue a college education that itself provided her the opportunity to pursue a successful and well-paying career afterwards. At the time of her most serious meditation-related difficulty, she was firmly embedded in a supportive spiritual community with a close and longstanding relationship with a teacher she described as "her most trusted friend on the planet." There were several different psychological and spiritual (cultural) meaning-making frameworks she employed in situating and making sense of this experience (3rd and 4th niche domains), including psychodynamic and psychotherapeutic understandings of trauma and the unconscious, and her own western Sufi tradition, the combination of which yielded a psycho-spiritual framework wherein she learned to see "anything I had split off from in the past" or "that overwhelmed my psyche in childhood" as "this is God too." These enabled the development of coping skills such as "great compassion and forgiveness for myself" and resources such as the close relationship with her

teacher, which resulted in “releasing the hold of some traumatic experiences from childhood” and generated “greater ease in my daily life” and “delight.”

A few things stand out about this particular case. The first is that it is one of the clearest examples in all the interviews of a state and event which was acutely and plainly pivotal in the sense that there was a major fork in the road between psychospiritual growth and debilitating mental illness. On the one hand, as the subject acknowledged, some people would have “dropped me off at the local psych ward where they would prescribed anti-psychotics” because of her presentation of “psychotic” symptoms, which may have initiated a lengthy ongoing treatment in inpatient and later outpatient facilities. With a combination of medication and traditional psychotherapy she may have similarly healed and returned to her life, but there’s certainly a chance she may not have healed as quickly or at all, and then additionally would have had to navigate any side effects from the medication as well as altered social dynamics (stigma) and the new ‘self-construal’ of her psychiatric diagnosis. Instead, after an acute period (9 days) of distress and pretty severe impairment, she emerged from the event more psychologically “whole” than she was before it and seemingly “purified” of “the deepest misunderstanding about life and myself.”

So what was it that made the difference between these two potential trajectories? I think her own understanding is quite aligned with the ecosocial (as a more dynamic biopsychosocial) perspective which would argue that it was the spiritual, cultural and social “context” within which the experience (and her broader contemplative practice) was held and care was provided which was the difference that made the difference. As she identified, one crucial component was her relationship with her teacher which had been forged over several years and with whom she trusted greatly. As she expressed, “This is my most trusted friend

on the planet" and therefore "I was willing to try on what he said as a better reality than (laughs) the one that was rattling around inside me." Without the deep bond between them, it is unlikely his intervention of saying "you haven't done anything wrong" would have anywhere near the impact it did. On his side too, without this being a student he had worked with for years and his awareness that this episode was extremely unusual for her, it is likely he wouldn't have taken the initiative to try and provide care for her himself, especially since he had no psychological training.

Some other contextual factors were definitely helpful—for example, that this teacher had another workshop afterwards nearby and a relationship with those in that next community that allowed him to find the subject a place to stay for a few more days. And further, that it was a home where someone screaming more intensely than a person in labor was not interrupted but allowed to continue until a healing outcome was reached. Additionally, the teacher's (seemingly) intuitive acute intervention to assist in the physical movements[140] she was making was also highlighted as important and likely contributed to the "distorted belief" and "guilt' that she had carried for her whole life being "unwound." But the broader spiritual and cultural context, which shaped her imaginal vision and her appraisal of it, allowed the entire event to be understood in a meaningful context. For example, the Indian historical developmental context of the particular Sufi tradition into which she had been initiated likely influenced her use of the Sanskrit word "Agni"—even though she claimed that consciously she did not know the meaning of the term at the time—and the teachings and framework of the tradition undoubtedly influenced her later appraisal of this experience as a part of a

[140] This is related to the theme mentioned by several subjects and highlighted in chapter one—the somatic and sensorimotor nature of pathology as discussed and worked with in contemporary therapeutic modalities like 'somatic experiencing.'

spiritual purification process that she had actually consented to on an "inner" level. The fact that this western Sufi tradition also has an ecumenical and universalist orientation also likely provided some interpretive flexibility in making meaning of the event, allowing her to feel comfortable adopting and/or adapting Vedic or Yogic frameworks to fit her experience. Other important influences on her appraisal process (which may have come months or years after the experience) are the fact that the tradition and framework within which she was training was one that taught her an interpretive stance or posture towards the world of "this is God too" which included developmental and psycho-emotional challenges. All in all, from an ecosocial perspective, her immediate situation as an initiated member of a contemporary Sufi tradition with a close multi-year relationship with a teacher provided the context in which she could appraise her experience as fitting into her spiritual trajectory and as meaningful in the context of the goals she has for her life. Taken together, these are all "active causal processes" that played the pivotal role in producing the positive outcome of her distressing and debilitating meditation-related experience.

"SANDY" (99122)

The importance of the 'ecosocial niche' within which this practitioner was embedded before, during, and after this experience is brought into sharp relief when compared to difficulties shared by another Sufi practitioner in the study. Sandy was 55 years old at the time of the interview, also had a psychological and trauma history (sexual abuse), and also became initiated into a Sufi order in her 20s after converting to Islam. Her own meditation difficulties started after she began attending a "really powerful" musically infused *dhikr* group organized

by her Sufi order which complemented the silent and private *dhikr* practice she did at home. On one occasion, "during this meditation with this live music it was so powerful that it just sent me over, launched me off…It just launched me off, it just… it just like broke me open to where...my life became one long psychedelic experience." For several months her 'off-cushion' everyday experience was quite "euphoric" and "like being on a powerful drug" that included strong and blissful "vibrations" in the body, "heightened" visual perception that became synesthetic at times, and auditory experiences where "any sound was like music to me."

However, one day during this period she "had a vision" where she saw that "everything was illusory…I saw everything as an illusion, even my kids…I looked at them, I was like "these are puppets on strings, these are not people. This is a dream and I am in it….this is the real nothing, absolute zero, and then it started to get scary." At that point she found it difficult to attend the weekly musical dhikr sessions because "it all started to sound so sad to me, because my basic core became so sad…I felt so sad that there was nothing there…I was like getting sucked into this giant black hole." She described how she started to ask people in the community if they understood what she was experiencing and people responded that "No, we don't know what you're talking about." Others communicated to her that it was a difficult stage that would pass and that "you kind of really have to get through that part of it," but "I didn't feel like I had any guidance! I couldn't do it." The local Sheikh—not the one who had initiated her—tried to encourage her to "stop focusing on these things…try and get busy doing stuff" but eventually when things didn't improve, he recommended that she should go and visit the head of the order who lived in a different country. She stayed at this Sheikh's home for 10 days and "even though we never exchanged that many words" (he didn't speak English)

she felt that "he knew what my state was…he knew what was going on." However, while it was identified as "a certain state" (*hal)* and she knew that there "was a whole vocabulary" about these kinds of experiences in the tradition, because she didn't speak the native language of the master and the community, she never felt she really understood what was going on. And then when she returned from the visit, she fell away from the community and spiritual practice because she felt like "I can't hold it together" and thought she would continue to get more destabilized if she continued. It felt like "free falling off a cliff" at the time and even though she wanted to re-engage practice at various points, "I was scared to go" because "I didn't know if I could handle it." She described how at this time,

> *I was going so far off. I wasn't going to be able to get back. Because I mean, even I told my friends I said, 'you know what? there's all these crazy people in the park holding up signs. And you know what? They're not crazy. They're not nuts. They're right! They are right, they've just been so far to the edge and that's all they can do.' I said, 'I see my future. I'll be sitting in the park holding a damn sign.' You know, so that really scared me off. I got so scared. I was like, 'you know what, I can't hold it together.' And that's really when really when I left.*

Unfortunately, after she left the community, she reported that "my life really did go in the tank" because of "getting involved with people and relationships with men I shouldn't have been involved with." She did report at least on one occasion seeking out mental healthcare to address her difficulties but shared that,

> *psychologists and psychiatrists, I don't think they really can help you much. Because I tried that, and they're like, 'Wow,' they said…one guy told me that 'it sounds like you've had what you call an epiphany, you need to like talk to a priest or something.' (laughs) He said, 'you might have to take some medication for this.' But uh, I never did take medication, at all. I just said, 'no, I don't do that.'*

While she never found outward support from others for her difficulties, she did feel that continuing to work in order to support her children was what helped her "keep it together." She described how,

> *Even in the middle of all those really strange experiences I was actually doing very well financially. But then when I left and I stopped going, and I got involved with other people, my life really derailed and I ended up not doing well. And I have never recovered…I've never really recovered from that. Getting derailed and, you know, maybe if I had hung with it, I would be better off. But it just became so difficult*

When I asked when the feeling that the world was illusory or the perception that she was in a dream ended—since earlier she had noted that it continued for several years—she responded that, "I might still be there and I just got used to it, that's kind of how I feel now. I feel like I'm just putting in my time" but even so, overall "I'm pretty stable now."

Discussion

Once again there are multiple intersecting causal factors at play in Sandy's experience and the difficulties she encountered. According to our fourfold niche lens, Sandy also reported an extremely unstable and traumatic childhood (lifespan developmental history), however she was significantly less embedded within her Sufi community and she had a lower social standing more broadly in American society in terms of socio-economic status due to not graduating high school and having limited economic opportunities (social structure and positioning). Due to these factors, she had had much less instruction and training in the practices and tradition she was initiated into—she only converted to Islam to join the Sufi order and never disclosed any study of either Sufism nor Islam more broadly—and much less access to a teacher with whom she could develop rapport. She commented several times on the cultural differences between those in the community who had also immigrated from the country where the order was based and the American converts, and always felt there was "a lot [she was] missing" because she couldn't speak the language. She never had much contact

with or access to the main teacher and never felt much rapport with, or trust in, the local Sheikh. She was provided spiritual and religious appraisals of her difficulties, by both her community (a particular state or *hal* on the their path*)* and a local clinician (who called it as an epiphany), but neither led to concrete coping skills or resources that she could employ to address her difficulty and she didn't report any she had cultivated before her experience that might have served her during it. She also noticeably did not report any experience engaging with psychotherapy, therapeutic frameworks, or other cultural practices which may have helped address her challenging childhood and upbringing.

In comparing the two women of similar ages and developmental histories, Sandy reported being less stable—financially and in terms of her mental health—when she was first introduced to and then later initiated into the tradition than Jane. Speculating a bit, while both women had very traumatic childhoods, Jane did report finding several women in her community as a teenager that looked out for her and assumed some of the parental responsibilities her own parents were unable to provide her. In this case, Sandy did not report any positive, healthy, or nurturing influences throughout her childhood and adolescence, and was unable to finish high school whereas Jane was able to get a scholarship and attend college, which she attributed to the aforementioned mentorship. Although after Sandy left the community and stopped practicing meditation she did report beginning to feel more stable—either because the symptoms diminished or she just got more used to them—she also described that she became involved with romantic relationships that "derailed" her financially and more broadly in her life such that she (at the time of the interview) had no choice but to live with her children.

As Kirmayer (2019) emphasizes, the ecosocial view facilitates "a deeper understanding of resilience, healing, and recovery based not only on internal psychology or biological processes but also equally on social-interactional processes" (32). To do so, it "seeks to integrate the knowledge of the individual's life-world, their family and community as the site of both challenges and resources with which to cope, adapt, heal, and recover" (32). From this perspective, while both practitioners had some similar challenges which undoubtedly impacted their developmental psychological processes and the biology of their nervous systems, there was a great difference in their "social-interactional" processes both before their meditation-related challenges, as well as during and after them. Both were initiated into modern Sufi traditions that utilized contemplative practices that cultivated states of absorption and both felt the experiences that resulted from such practice went beyond the bounds of traditional psychotherapeutic or psychiatric frameworks. However, one had a close relationship with a senior teacher from her culture with whom she worked for years and guided her through a period of acute distress and impairment into a period of integration and meaning-making at the intersection of psychodynamic and spiritual worldviews. The Sufi community she was embedded in at the time is still an important part of her life today and she has even become connected to other Sufi communities more recently. The other had very little access to the teacher with whom she felt the most rapport and trust because he spoke a language and maintained indigenous cultural customs and practices that she didn't understand. She never had access to the religious/ spiritual, educational, or therapeutic resources that might have helped provide a more compelling interpretive framework than the particular ones she was given. She never sought out more care after one psychiatric consultation where she was prescribed medication (she decided not to take) but found stopping meditation and leaving the

community to eventually be "stabilizing." Unfortunately, she judged the romantic and other social connections she made after she left the community not to have been supportive to her life more broadly. However, at the time of the interview she did report some recent contact with people from her old Sufi community on Facebook as well as meaningful relationships with her children and the extended family of her children's father who had "adopted" her. While she reported that she was "doing pretty darn good" recently, the fact that she spent several years with impairing depersonalization symptoms, never came to a meaningful appraisal of them (whether psychopathological, spiritual, or some kind of hybrid) despite knowing there was one in the tradition, and felt she never received any "guidance" related to them, leads me to conclude that there was a need for care that was not met.

Nonlinear Growth & Differential Diagnosis

These two case studies bring into sharp relief the differences in the ecosocial niches in which they were each embedded when their most impactful meditation-related difficulties arose. It also suggests that the nature, integrity, or coherence of an individual's ecosocial niche is the pivotal factor (or system of factors) that biases an embodied cognitive system in the direction of either growth and greater adaptivity to a given sociocultural world, or towards an exacerbation of distress and impairment, and maladaptation to their particular world. I would argue that particular contemplative paths (consisting of practices and teleological practice trajectories) and worldviews differ to such an extent that an etic approach to differential diagnosis—differentiating spiritual from pathological experiences—is highly unlikely to be developed with universal emic validity. Nevertheless, I do think an

etic framework differentiating distressing and impairing meditation-related difficulties that are likely to lead to growth and adaptivity (to particular sociocultural worlds) from those which are unlikely to do so is possible and that the skeletal structure of such a framework has been laid in this dissertation. While I believe a culturally sensitive normative framework can take seriously emic definitions of spiritual growth and development by evaluating the fit between a practitioner's current state and the norms of their tradition and sub-tradition, I also think a culturally sensitive etic understanding of non-normative meditation-related difficulties can recruit one additional component of the ecosocial approach that is also directly informed by complex systems theory—'allostasis.' But first a quick review of our journey in this dissertation so far, as it pertains to differential diagnosis.

One potentially controversial implication of this framework is that some distress or impairment may be necessary for some kinds of psychological growth and development. This idea overlaps to some extent with the controversial construct of "posttraumatic growth" (Eisma et al. 2019; Mangelsdorf et al 2018; Jayawickreme and Blackie 2014), but instead of being resonant with the popular conception of, "no pain, no gain," the implication from the framework discussed here might be the more tempered 'for some kinds of gain, some kinds of pain…for some." As we saw in chapter two, difficult stages of the contemplative path are reported in both the classical literature and contemporary accounts of Abrahamic meditative traditions. For these traditions, traditional goals can only be realized after some amount of "purification," which is often reported as distressing. The traditions definitely don't claim that "what doesn't kill you (necessarily) makes you stronger" or that all forms of psychological distress are spiritually beneficial. In fact, they suggest the opposite; they are unanimous in positing that some kinds of meditation-related difficulties entail real harm and unnecessary

suffering that should be avoided at all costs. And we have seen that these complex-systems frameworks can account for both the (non-normative) psychological harm and the (normative) distress and discomfort necessary for certain kinds of transformations.

However, while particular traditions have some specific criteria for identifying these kinds of normative meditation-related difficulties, the exact contours of how much distress or impairment is necessary for specific kinds of psychological growth is still very much an open empirical question in the psychological sciences. For example, Hayes and Andrews (2020) write that,

> Future research can continue to clarify how to distinguish fluctuations that are noise, random variation, or personality-based lability (e.g., neuroticism, affective lability) from those that predict system transition. It is not clear whether the signatures of early warning signals differ when predicting the onset of clinical disorders, improvement or worsening in psychotherapy, or relapse. It is clinically important to differentiate turbulence that precedes the degradation or worsening of a system from turbulence that heralds change to a more functional state. (8)

More directly related to our study, Lindahl et al. (2020) note that "it is crucial to avoid pathologizing valuable processes, which may be painful and disruptive, but yield desired growth and insight." Nonetheless, they do not provide a basis for distinguishing those potentially painful yet valuable processes that yield growth from painful processes that just exacerbate distress and lead to debilitating symptoms (16). Similarly, in a recent survey-based study of meditation-related adverse effects (MRAE), Goldberg et al. (2021) note that, "it may also be that MRAE are, at least for some, a part of the meditative process [and that] some level of discomfort may accompany both healing and meditative insights" (11). However, they also don't offer any guidance in how to distinguish adverse experiences that may be beneficial

from those that are not,[141] suggesting only that "it may be more fruitful to consider multiple contextual and person-centered factors involved in the occurrence and appraisal of MRAEs" (11).

While ultimately this is an empirical (though potentially wicked) question, I would argue that, viewed through an ecosocial lens, my interview data suggest that there may not be a difference in the biological, physiological, or even phenomenological/psychological aspects of meditation-related difficulties that lead to beneficial and harmful outcomes. Instead, the determinants of the global "pivot" towards one trajectory over the other may rest (mostly or even entirely) on the sociocultural "contextual" factor and their looping effects, i.e., the nature of the ecosocial niche within which the practitioner is or isn't embedded. We might even borrow the (now quite widespread) metaphor from Teresa of Avila[142] for the ecosocial niche

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[141] While not exactly what is being discussed here, there have been some recent proposals and hypotheses with regards to specifying certain features of such distressing experiences that may be used to discern the difference between psychopathology and non-pathological spiritual experiences with positive impact. For example, in a recent dissertation, Canby (2022) found that the construct of "connectedness" was reported by those who reported "self-boundary dissolution" experiences that were associated with greater mental health and well-being, whereas those who experienced similar dissolution experiences with a sense of "disconnectedness" were associated with "worsened mental health" (122). Deane et al (2020) engage the topic of Buddhist meditation-related difficulties and propose a featural difference between "depersonalization and the selfless experiences attained through meditation", namely that,

> Depersonalization is characterized as a loss of control, leading to the dampening of these affective valence systems. In meditation, there occurs a gradual opacification of the affective valence system. This opacification produces an important change in the meditator's relationship with the positive and negative affect—specifically, by no longer being automatically appropriated into their self-model. This has the result that changes in valence no longer create the existential urgency for change they would otherwise. It is important to note here that valence remains perfectly intact, continuing to tune the agent toward opportunities to improve in their predictive success. The purpose of the practice is not to disrupt valence itself (as happens in depersonalization) but rather to become conscious of the precision estimators in a way that allows them to select more skillful and beneficial policies. (12)

The distinction I am making between what is discussed by Lindahl et al. (2020) and Goldberg et al. (2021) versus Canby and Miller et al. is that in the former two, the discussion centers on distressing experiences that are thought to lead to psychological and spiritual growth, whereas in the latter the discussion is about the features of spiritual experiences themselves.

[142] And perhaps even the Zohar (I:15a-b; Tishby 1989, 310; Matt 2004, 109) from whom some have speculated it may have been transmitted (directly or indirectly) to Teresa as part of her converso family

as a kind of cocoon that may or may not be capable of safely holding and shaping the potential of such states in beneficial directions. The biopsychosocial dimensions of such a cocoon/niche also include the self-understanding and interpretive framework of the practitioner as they cultivate such states, and in addition to the cultural psychiatrists, psychologists of religion, and transpersonal psychologists surveyed in the introduction, several scholars of religion have also highlighted the "pivotal" role of one's interpretive framework in such sensitive contemplative transformational processes.

For example, Henry Corbin ((1977) 1987) describes how for 12th century Sufi philosopher Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, "mystical experience which is not founded on a solid philosophical education is open to all the vagaries of what goes today by the way of schizophrenia" (227, quoted in Perron 2020, 179). Similarly, and even more germane to this study, Studstill (2005) uses dynamic systems theory to discuss challenging stages of the medieval German mystical paths of Eckhart, Suso and Tauler and frames the difficulties they describe as stemming from the liminal space between the disruption of one's normative cognitive processes and its subsequent self- organization or re-constellation (238-239). He writes that it is specifically mystical study in these traditions that

> encourage[s] attitudes and practices that function in direct opposition to the ordinary processes of the cognitive system. They undermine the variables that together constrain awareness into the dualistic frame of reference of ordinary experience. The disruption of these cognitive processes, however, leaves an important question

heritage (Burgeson 1997, 4; 183. Cf. McGinn 2017, 125; 210n19). The passage reflects on the (sefirotic associations of the) word *Zohar* as "sowing a seed for its glory like the seed of fine purple silk. The silkworm wraps itself within and makes itself a palace" (quoted in Mayse 2014, 48). Burgeson notes that, "the silkworm is one of Teresa's most famous metaphors in *Interior Castle*," but the metaphor in the Zohar "is used in a different sense" (223). She describes how, "In the *Zohar*, the silkworm indicates a process of divine emanation. The cocoon is the Palace/womb of *Binah*, out of which emerge the seven *sefirot*. Teresa uses the image of the silkworm to indicate spiritual transformation and ascension. This is an opposite, though complementary, meaning to that presented in the *Zohar*…In *Binah,* the silkworm signifies a downward emanation; in Teresa, it signifies an ascension into the Seventh Mansion" (224). Matt (2004) notes that "the silk industry was extensive in Andalusia, south of Castile, where the Zohar emerged" (n19).

> unanswered. Why does this disruption prompt cognitive evolution? Chaos does not necessarily guarantee evolution in a positive direction. Psychic disorganization can just as easily precipitate devolution into psychopathological states. What determines which direction the system will take? (238)

Ultimately, he concludes that the difference rests on whether or not practitioners have "a sense of fundamental, existential trust, of believing that when you 'jump off the cliff' so to speak, someone or something is going to catch you" (239). It is this sense of "trust or faith in face of the unknown" that is the "crucial variable that connects chaos to growth" since, from "a systems perspective, openness allows the system to evolve, to self-organize into a new pattern of psychic organization characterized by freedom from dualistic conditions" (239).

It is notable as well that trust, particularly interpersonal trust in her teacher, was identified by Jane (99125) as a crucial ingredient in helping her to emerge from her acutely challenging experiences into greater wholeness and wellbeing. Similarly, as we saw back in chapter one, one Sufi teacher (99237) described how the normative stages of constriction (*qabd)* and despair on the Sufi path only yield their positive potential if you are able to "hang on" or "hold it somehow" even "at the end of your physical and mental power." In her opinion, the ability to persevere in this state was contingent upon having some "notion of something out there. And this something out there can be God, an angel, a memory of your mother or a teacher. But there has to be this sense of 'I am not alone.' If I am alone, you know, that sense of loneliness when its total and dark, it's really depression, clinical depression."

And as was saw in the last chapter, Ozelsel herself proposes a pivotal criterion as well:

> It might be asked how it is that a way of proceeding that according to one kind of judgment "makes a person sick" can be understood according to another kind of judgment as "leading to recovery." In my opinion, the difference (that is, as to whether the result will be physical health or sickness, psychosis or expanded consciousness) lies in being embedded in a clearly delineated (spiritual) system of teaching. In the

> various extremely difficult transition phases on the "way", during which the student is psychologically and physically very vulnerable, this embedding provides the necessary protective structure. (157)

In addition to philosophical and mystical study, the confidence and trust a coherent interpretive framework or system can engender, as well as the interpersonal relationships (teacher, spiritual director, community) emphasized by teachers and practitioners in chapter one, several other (ecosocial) factors have been proposed as pivotal. In their research on "spiritual struggles," Pargament and Exline (2023, 125) ask a related question: "What determines whether spiritual struggles lead to growth and/or decline?" They indicate that "A small but growing body of research has begun to examine this question, and several factors have been identified that may shape the trajectory of spiritual struggles at this vital fork in the road toward greater wholeness and growth rather than brokenness and decline" (Pargament and Exline 2023, 125). Many of the factors they identify are related to appraisal processes, such as "the ability to reframe spiritual struggles in a larger benevolent spiritual perspective (Saritoprak et al., 2017), the experience of sacred moments that offset the effects of spiritual struggles (Magyar-Russell et al., 2020) […] and the capacity to make meaning out of the struggle" (125). The others include the personality trait of "openness to change rather than inflexibility," the behavioral stances of "the willingness to face rather than avoid spiritual struggles," and finally, the social dimension of receiving "support rather than stigma…in the midst of struggles" (125). All of these could be said to partially constitute, or arise directly from, an individual's ecosocial niche, and I believe understanding them in a more dynamic and interrelated fashion as the ecosocial approach proposes, will only make for more ecologically valid research going forward. Finally, even as we are waiting for more empirical data on this question, I would encourage care-givers to steer clear of both the Charybdis of

assuming all meditation-related difficulties to be growth inducing as well as the Scylla of assuming that none of them are. Indeed, if our aim is to be culturally sensitive, then this is the only course available to us. However, I believe there is one more complex systems perspective that is compatible with all we have surveyed so far and offers a more specific lens on culturally sensitive differential diagnosis.

ALLOSTASIS

Miller et al. (2022) reviewed literature on the construct of "resilience" and found three distinct but related conceptions, "(i) inertia, i.e., the ability to resist change when subjected to a disturbing force, roughly synonymous with robustness; (ii) elasticity, i.e., the ability to flexibly return to good states following a perturbation; and (iii) plasticity, i.e., the ability to expand the repertoire of good states—and courses of action—in the face of a changing environment" (2). They relate the elastic dimension of resilience to the functions of both homeostasis and allostasis, through which

> which an organism can inhabit different states—which are adaptive in a given context—and eventually return to their characteristic states. Homeostasis refers to the capacity of an adaptive system to maintain those relatively stable internal conditions that are necessary for their survival. Maintaining oneself in a persistent, life-conducive set of states is a central process for all biological organisms. To the degree that an organism can self-regulate in ways that allow it to persist over time in the face of perturbations (from within its own body or from the world), it can be said to be resilient. As such, all persisting self-organizing systems are resilient to some degree. [] However, it is not enough to reactively avoid dangerously unexpected states as captured by homeostasis. Successfully maintaining life-conducive steady states requires that the organism be able to anticipate future disturbances and opportunities and so adjust itself and its chosen courses of actions to optimize future fitness. Hence, in complex systems, resilience requires an ability to successfully *plan*. This online evaluation of possible future needs and selection of courses of action to meet them is known as allostasis. Roughly speaking, if homeostasis is the controlled process of

> returning to set-points, allostasis is the preemptive control of set-points themselves to meet the demands of a situation. (3)[143]

However, some theorists understand allostasis as extending beyond just elasticity into plasticity[144] as "growth, the ability to explore or increase the repertoire of states that are compatible with thriving and a healthy state of being, reducing the probability that a difficult event will dissipate or destroy the agent." Miller et al. (2022) also correlate allostasis with "*psycho-immunization*, wherein the agent develops some form of resistance to future risk by learning from previous and current experiences and difficulties, and better equipping the self to handle future risks" (3; emphasis original). Brouwer and Carhart-Harris (2021) specify that their "proposal is that PiMSs have evolved to allow the experiencer a psychological 'fresh start', akin to a psychological rebirth or allostatic recalibration," in other words, a transformation of the attractor landscape itself rather than just the capacity to rebound to a previous attractor state after perturbation (333). However, in line with their overall thesis, they note that "the outcome of an allostatic recalibration process can be 'positive' (e.g. in terms of a therapeutic or spiritual breakthrough) but the same mechanism could just as easily result in a new or reinforced maladaptive strategy, perhaps best exemplified by a psychotic 'flight from reality' or progressive reinforcement of other psychological defense mechanisms" (333-

[143] Vernon et al. (2015) contrasts homeostasis and allostasis in a similar and different terms which may be helpful to note:

> allostasis differs from homeostasis is its predictive character and in its ability to anticipate and adapt to change rather than resist it. Significantly, allostasis is effected at a higher level of organization, involving greater number of sub-systems acting together in a coordinated manner with global processes modulating local ones, reflecting the character of circular causality. (7)

[144] They add that the plasticity dimension is built on the idea that "an agent must grasp at the opportunities presented by its ecological niche that…increase[e] the breadth of safe states" (3).

34).[145] Finally, our 'ecosocialists' (Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer 2023) also describe allostasis in both its elastic and plastic dimensions. They first define it in slightly different but resonant terms as, "the ways in which organisms anticipate and adapt to challenges" and note that the construct, "focuses on the function of physiological and biobehavioral systems of stress response and regulation" (9). They continue:

> Allostasis involves the organism's capacity to allocate resources to maintain an adaptive balance between coping and recovery in response to adverse conditions and events. This involves both internal physiological processes and behavioral strategies based on appraisal of challenges and available resources for coping. When allostatic regulation is insufficient, various forms of stress-related dysfunction can result from what has been described as 'allostatic overload'. […] The processes involved in allostatic regulation can be viewed from an enactive perspective as ongoing cycles of action-perception. These cycles occur internally through interoception and physiological regulation of the internal milieu and externally through behaviors that act on the body and the environment…Healing practices, therapies and treatment interventions can work to restore allostatic function where it has been disrupted. The overall aim of allostasis is to adjust regulatory systems to maintain the health, survival and reproductive fitness of the individual. More proximally, this includes responding to the challenges and demands of a social niche in ways that fit local cultural norms, roles and expectations. This may involve changing perceptions (learning new ways to attend to and interpret sensations from the body or the environment), taking new actions (enlarging the repertoire of behaviors and changing plans and priorities), or re-establishing links between action and perception that have been disconnected (providing feedback from outcomes that can guide recursive goal setting). Both internal changes and actions on the world can participate in the same adaptive cycles. (Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer 2023, 9)

Finally, they note that the various loops between the various ecosocial organizational levels "can lead to allostatic changes that contribute to resilience and recovery" if, and only if, "regulatory mechanisms are sufficient" (11). In such "favorable constellations," response to stressors "may lead one to develop new skills or positive schemas, overcome ingrained biases,

[145] They argue this same "functional explanation could also be used in reference to 'post-traumatic growth'" (334).

rescript self-understanding narratives, expand one's affordances, deepen social relationships and improve coping" (11).

I believe the allostatic perspective is ideal for our culturally sensitive meditation-related difficulties framework for several reasons. First, framing distress and impairment in terms of allostatic load and overload is (excuse the pun) less loaded than appraising it as pathological, and thus may be more palatable (drawn as it is from biology) for meditation practitioners with diverse interpretive frameworks, some of which are hostile to certain psychiatric frameworks. More importantly though, it points to how distressing experiences can be responded to with effective resources and coping strategies at any or multiple levels in the ecosocial organizational hierarchy, which aligns with the multidimensional ecosocial niches designed by all traditional contemplative traditions to hold and optimize the transformative potential of contemplative practices and states of absorption. Finally, allostasis is an inherently interactional construct, which (at least in its ecosocial usage) makes it applicable to perhaps any particular sociocultural world. It invokes and makes judgements about adaptation and adaptivity in assessing distressing experiences, but the question that naturally arises is, adaptive to what environmental context? The answer, of course, is whatever sociocultural world a person is embedded within or chooses to be aligned with. In this way, this etic normative framework is always culturally sensitive because it is always culturally specific and can be adapted to or tailored to an individual that inhabits the intersection of multiple cultures, contexts, or worldviews—making it person-centered as well.

Finally, one particular component of allostasis is the regulation of autonomic nervous system arousal, and several researchers have discussed the relevance of this

perspective for meditation-related difficulties. For example, Treleaven (2018) describes the importance of the regulation of arousal for what he termed, "trauma-sensitive mindfulness":

> In trauma-sensitive mindfulness, the variable we're interested in here is *arousal*—defined as our basic readiness for life. Arousal originates in the brain stem, activates our ANS, and helps us respond to the demands of the world. If we need energy to do something, such as get out of bed or pick up our child, arousal increases when we rest, it decreases. Trauma, meanwhile, creates acute arousal. With fight or flight, our bodies hit the accelerator. We experience a burst of exceedingly high arousal. If we then freeze, our bodies slam on the brakes. With posttraumatic stress, arousal can end up fluctuating wildly between these two extremes. Both pedals effectively remain slammed to the floor. […] This is known as *dysregulated arousal*—a state where our ability to self-regulate becomes seriously compromised. Overly sensitive to traumatic reminders, we end up experiencing too much arousal (*hyperarousal*) or too little arousal (*hypoarousal*), or swing uncontrollably between the two. (Treleaven 2018, 92; emphasis original)

Treleaven notes that "although mindfulness can enhance self-regulation […] meditation practice can also exacerbate dysregulation" (93). And Britton et al. (2021) observed that the "majority of MRAEs" documented in their experimental study, "particularly those with negative impacts, are consistent with signs of dysregulated arousal" (1197). As such, they argue that signs of dysregulated arousal may be "potential indicators of the need for intervention" and training for recognizing such signs and helping meditators re-regulate in such cases "may be important" for meditation teacher training programs.

Treleaven offers one such coping strategy or framework for addressing dysregulation, Dan Siegel's construct of "window of tolerance," the optimal arousal zone which is, "a starting point for all trauma-informed practice" and the "zone that lies between the two extremes of hyper- and hypoarousal" (93). This framework encourages meditation practitioners to be able to notice when they leave their window of tolerance and "eventually develop the skills to move back into it" (95).

It is my contention that the framework of allostasis in the ecosocial usage, with particular attention to autonomic dysregulation and the "window of tolerance" formulation, is a particularly useful one for being able to make sense of meditation-related difficulties, in both their normative and non-normative emic appraisals, in a culturally sensitive manner. It can make sense of non-normative difficulties as allostatic overload, and normative difficulties (such as those understood to be part of various purification frameworks) as plasticity or growth-inducing challenges that need to be met with appropriate coping resources and sufficient multilevel regulatory mechanisms. If such resources and regulatory loops (like those provided by contemplative traditions in the form of ecosocial niches) are not sufficient, then normative difficulties can become non-normative (overloading), as contemplative traditions themselves posit. From this perspective, if an individual is well outside their window of tolerance and is presenting signs of autonomic dysregulation, it is unlikely that meditation-related difficulties will self-organize in adaptive (to their world) directions without intervention.

CONCLUSION: AN ECOSOCIAL, PIVOTAL, & CRITICAL (EPIC) FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING MEDITATION-RELATED DIFFICULTIES

While not all subjects in the VCE-A study who reported any meditation-related difficulties were practicing techniques oriented towards states of absorption, all of those who reported severe impairment and distress were practicing in this manner.[146] This of course fits

[146] These were termed "lasting bad effects" (LBEs) in a recent study (Britton et al. 2021, 1192).

with the theory proposed in chapter two that such states of absorption and perceptual decoupling are simultaneously states of hyper-plasticity. The interaction of such hyper-plastic states with the many and varied 'contextual' factors posited by the BPS and PiMS model and extended in this chapter to even more 'looping' mechanisms between different levels, are what causes a particular practitioner's complex cognitive system to pivot in either adaptive or maladaptive directions. In chapter three we proposed that such hyperplastic states can flatten and destabilize existing attractor landscapes, which will exhibit "critical" behavior such as fluctuations before settling into new attractor states. These two CST-based frameworks for understanding contemplative states as pivotal and as capable of initiating oscillations before new baselines are reached, are what I argued would allow a clinician or other caregiver to be able to understand the meditation-related difficulties of practitioners within Abrahamic traditions without adopting their worldview or metaphysical commitments. Finally, in this chapter I have argued that while those frameworks make such an etic understanding possible, the additional complex systems-based understanding of multilevel and interacting causal processes in the ecosocial approach is necessary for comprehensive case formulation and successful intervention planning. If meditation-related difficulties, like forms of psychopathology more broadly, are woven out of loops of multiple causal levels and dynamics, then these need to be considered in seeking to make meaningful changes. While this may seem like a daunting task, interventions don't need to address every dynamic process at or between every ecosocial level. As we saw in the case of Jane, only certain levels in the overall "ecology of mind" were "leveraged" in the successful intervention during the acutely distressing period and others—involving meaningful appraisals developed and negotiated

between her and her teacher—were "optimally utilized" in the post-acute and later integration phases of her recovery (Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer 2023, 14).

Future Directions, Implications, and Applications

Resonance

The provision that person-centered care be coordinated *with* the recipient of the care (as we saw above) is another place where these CST-based frameworks are perhaps uniquely suited to being applied to meditation-related difficulties. This is because complex systems frameworks themselves have been adopted and endorsed by contemporary scholars and practitioners from within Abrahamic traditions, and therefore care providers can be honest and open about how they are thinking through case formulation. Additionally, there is a bridge to genuine collaboration given the points of overlap and resonance with emic frameworks. For example, in Judaism, the contemporary Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Schatz[147] reads the Lurianic

[147] Schatz (1996) has emphasized the messianic nature of the cross-pollination between Jewish mysticism and contemporary science, remarkably not just that science can learn from Kabbalah but also that modern scientific discovers can actually help us read Kabbalistic sources in their true and redemptive sense. For example, he writes:

> The true confluence and interpenetration of these systems will only emerge when, paradoxically, the newly discovered models and metaphors provided by the "external wisdom" of science will help illuminate the deepest secrets of the ancient mysteries of Kabbalah. Reciprocally, those same ancient mysteries of Kabbalah's "inner wisdom" will define, explain and help reshape our perception of the entire physical world. Together, these "twin" wisdoms will, as a whole, reflect God's unity and allow us to sense God's presence constantly, in our day-to-day lives. (Schatz 1996, 15)

And later again, regarding the "union of Kabbalah and modern science," he writes that "Science, particularly in the age of sub- atomic physics, can serve as a medium to help us understand the Kabbalah in a much deeper way" and "reciprocally, the Kabbalistic teachings, particularly of Rabbi Isaac the Blind and Rabbi Isaac Luria, can guide us to a clearer and deeper understanding of scientific findings" (49). Jonathan Garb has also written about Rabbi Schatz in a few of his recent publications. See especially Garb (2015) 122-123 and 197n52.

teachings of the idea of a *partzuf* as a code for an emergent entity or a "gestalt" (Schatz 1996, 37). He writes, "A Partzuf is a whole that unifies its parts into one essence, thereby making the whole greater than the sum of its parts" (37, emphasis original). His student, Rabbi Avinoam Fraenkel, explicitly identifies the concept of *partzuf* with the scientific conception of "emergence" and cites many contemporary scientific treatments of it in the fields of complex and dynamical systems theory and systems biology[148] (Ergas and Fraenkel 2021, 39; 727-738; 803). In Islamic traditions, we have already seen how Michaela Ozelsel (1996) uses systems theory and the work of Ilya Prigogine to account for the "extremely difficult transition phases on the 'way'" and the "radical mental re-organization" which she experienced on her retreat and finds in traditional Sufi literature. And in Christianity, the Catholic scholar Mary Frohlich (1993) calls attention to, and builds upon, the theologian Bernard Lonergan's engagement with systems frameworks, specifically the concept of "emergence" which Frohlich relates to his conception of "below upward" and "above downward" processes and micro-deterministic explanatory theories vs. macro-deterministic explanatory theories (100-109).

While Schatz, Fraenkel, Ozelsel, and Frohlich gesture in general ways toward CST, my effort in this dissertation has been to make more fine-grained connections between particular CST-based cognitive and clinical science approaches so that their utility for understanding contemporary experiences and the dynamics particular to meditation-related difficulties can be established. My intention is that these frameworks can then be more readily

[148] For example, Nicholson and Dupre (2018); Bedau and Humphreys (eds.) (2008); Clayton and Davies eds. (2009). While drawing most heavily upon Lurianic Kabbalah and teachings, he also notes that "the ideas of a whole being more than the sum of its parts is not new" and was similarly expressed by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto as well as Aristotle (728 n288). For more on the idea of emergence in Aristotle, see Juarrero (1999).

adopted by care providers and used in a genuine (collaborative) person-centered approach with the meditator in distress by providing some bridges between emic and etic frameworks. While certainly not all Jews, Christian, or Muslims will agree that there is a deep resonance between CST and CST-based frameworks and their (contemplative) traditions, nevertheless the examples above are sufficient for establishing that such a resonance does or can be developed for *some* emic Abrahamic perspectives.[149]

Uncertainty and Unpredictability

Another implication of this framework (also resonant with many emic perspectives) is that, due to nonlinear relations between parts of the cognitive system at multiple levels, the contemplative paths or trajectories of individual practitioners are seemingly (epistemically if not ontologically) unpredictable. As Kirmayer (2015) explains, "We now know that some of the complexity seen in biological systems is inherent in the dynamics of even simple model systems, which may have trajectories that show great sensitivity to initial conditions" (638). Therefore, "the critique concerning the limits of predictability of systems models may reflect something intrinsic to the dynamics of the real-world systems they try to capture, rather than any limitation of theory" (638). If this is the case, then the "person-centered approach" presented above isn't just advisable but would actually be necessary, both for clinicians (and

[149] Other potential points of resonance are also possible, particularly if one reads either Aristotle or Neoplatonism as providing early systems ideas—given the profound influence of both on broad swaths of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—or in a reading of particular metaphors used in these traditions are paradigmatic for CST. For example, the "phase transitions" of water between its liquid, gas, or solid states and the metaphor of these transitions used within classical Sufi Traditions. Or the metaphor attributed to the Baal Shem Tov where he compared difficult phases of the contemplative path to learning how to walk and the pioneering developmental psychology research of Esther Thelen (2005; Thelen and Smith 1995) investigating infants learning to walk from a dynamical system perspective.

other caregivers) but also for meditation teachers. Especially for retreats and/or practices actively seeking to cultivate deeper contemplative states of absorption, there needs to be much closer supervision of practitioners during these "critical" periods where positive changes can be amplified but harm can also be exacerbated and become deeply entrenched. This is likely why these practices in many traditional contexts are only undertaken under the close supervision of a teacher (Fisher 2019). While neither teachers nor culturally sensitive clinicians or caregivers are capable of predicting such paths and the trajectories, by knowing about an individual's developmental history and the current ecosocial niche they inhabit, they are more likely to be able to identify and intervene effectively when a need for care or intervention arises.

New Models & Intervention Approaches

A related implication is that while unpredictability may be an unwelcome insight from a scientific perspective, it does not leave us without ways of modeling or mapping practitioner trajectories. New ways of modeling and mapping a cognitive system's "phase space" follow from these CST-based approaches and can help guide intervention and care decisions. For example, Hipolito et al. (2023), Hayes and Andrews (2020) and Hayes et al. (2015) all provide "qualitative" depictions of the effects of different clinical interventions on a patient's cognitive system.

These are exciting new approaches to clinical science and research, which also open up new avenues of collaborative person-centered psychiatric care given that the "models we offer to patients are themselves interventions that may guide self-reflection and elicit new behaviors" (Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer 2023, 14). That being said, because they are new,

critical modelling questions remain to be fleshed out, such as "whether pathological and more healthy states are best conceptualized as separate networks" (as they are in Hayes and Andrews 2020) "or as part of a single larger network" and how best to illustrate the components of the network itself.[150] But there are other mapping techniques used in such CST-based approaches to clinical science which are more oriented towards case formulation leading to interventions, that would also be fruitful to be adapted for meditation-related difficulties. These include "causal loop diagrams" (Gomez-Carillo and Kirmayer 2023, 11) and "personalized network models" which "can be used as more manageable simplifications of complex dynamical systems" to "capture what went wrong and how, and what is keeping one stuck in this state and how" (de Haan 2020, 244).

Finally, one last implication of CST-based clinical frameworks for care is that interventions may be directed towards multiple causal levels (even simultaneously) since, as de Haan (2020) notes, "Complex systems can be stirred in many ways" and "offer many routes to change" (250, 249). For example, interventions can target "originary" or "maintaining" causes of distress, since in some cases (like when the initiating cause or causes aren't known) "it may be more effective to intervene on the factors that contribute to the problems' persistence" (252). Interventions can also "involve making within-attractor modifications,[151]

[150] Hayes and Andrews (2020) depict networks as consisting of cognition, emotion, behavior, and physiological responses (4), whereas Hipolito et al. (2023) don't even both to illustrate the network components.

[151] Examples of this are "harm reduction strategies" which "reduce some negative consequences of pathological patterns, but they do not induce fundamental attractor changes. An example of this kind of within-attractor change is to provide clean needles to intravenous drug users, which improves safety but does not address the addiction directly" (Hayes and Andrews 2020, 5).

switching from one existing attractor to another,[152] and destabilizing the old and developing a new more functional pattern"[153] (Hayes and Andrews 2020, 9). Because meditation-related difficulties are, from the ecosocial perspective, going to have interrelating biological, psychological, and social components to them, interventions may target mechanisms at any one of these levels or a particular looping mechanism. For example, for someone suffering from cognitive and social challenges arising in the context of contemporary mindfulness or vipassana practice, interventions might include activities that encourage social interactions like team sports, countervailing cognitive activities like getting absorbed in a novel or a movie, as well as exploring the roots of Buddhist modernism and the scientific inaccuracies involved in contemporary discourse around "neuro-nihilism" (Thompson 2020). For the challenges reported by the Sandy the Sufi practitioner above, in addition to the interventions she initiated herself (i.e., stopping meditation and focusing on her work), additional interventions might have included spiritually-oriented counseling, trauma-informed psychotherapy, the exploration of hobbies and interests with more potential for healthy social connections, and recommendations of resources on the traditional states (hal) associated with the Sufi paths as understood by authoritative Sufi masters in her tradition, such as Ibn Arabi.

[152] Examples of this kind of intervention includes when the "therapist can provide a supportive environment and therapeutic alliance to increase the patient's readiness, resources, and skills to develop (or reactivate) more healthy modes of functioning" or "positive emotion activation approaches" which "can help build and strengthen a more healthy attractor. This alternative attractor increases the probability of movement from the pathological state to a healthier state, but again, the interventions do not change the pathological attractor directly" (5)

[153] "Exposure therapy, insight-oriented therapy, and emotion-focused and cognitive re- structuring techniques are examples of interventions that introduce corrective information and skills to induce dissonance and perturb maladaptive networks" (5).

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