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Walsh, RN

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# JOURNEY BEYOND BELIEF<sup>1</sup>



ROGER WALSH is an Associate Professor of Psychiatry in the University of California at Irvine School of Medicine. The development of his interest in humanistic and related areas is traced in this article. His current interests and work include comparative psychologies and religions and also “the psychology of human survival”; the psychological dimensions underlying the current global threats to human survival and well-being.

## Summary

“Journey Beyond Belief” is an autobiographical account of the experiences and understandings that emerged from a personal exploration of a variety of growth disciplines. The author traces his trajectory from a hard-nosed neuroscientist with no faith in things subjective or emotional through the repeated shattering of his belief systems to a recognition of the vast reaches and varieties of inner experience. Beginning with psychotherapy and progressing through a number of humanistic, group, and meditative disciplines, he began to appreciate the limited and limiting nature of many of his own and the culture’s beliefs, experiences, and behaviors. He was repeatedly shocked by the extent to which he had underestimated the vastness and richness of the inner universe, by the extent to which the untrained mind is out of control and continuously creates encompassing and entrapping illusory realities, by the amount of unnecessary suffering which this causes, by the fact that it is possible to train the mind to degrees considerably beyond those usually recognized by Western psychology, and by the fact that, at least at their usually unrecognized esoteric core, the world’s great religions represent roadmaps for mental training designed to induce transcendent states.

Around the turn of the century in a little Russian village, there lived a Jewish rabbi who pondered deeply for many years the basic questions of existence and was forced to acknowledge that he could not answer with certainty even the most elementary questions. He was forced to acknowledge that he just didn’t know.

One day, as he was crossing the village square to pray in the temple, he was accosted by the village cossack who was in a bad mood and greeted him gruffly with,  
“Hi Rabbi, where are you going?”

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“Don’t know,” said the rabbi.

“What?” roared the cossack. “What do you mean you don’t know? Every morning for twenty years you’ve gotten up and crossed this square on the way to the temple to pray, and now you’re telling me you don’t know where you’re going?”

With that he grabbed the rabbi and hauled him off to the village jail, and just as he was about to throw him into the cell, the rabbi turned and said,

“See, you just don’t know.”

For some seven years now, I have lived in a state of chronic shock and disbelief. One after another, my most cherished, stable, sensible, common, ordinary, taken-for-granted, and culturally shared beliefs have been shattered. Time and time again I have taken the pieces of my shattered belief system and shaped a new, more comprehensive system to encompass the unexpected experiences and information which had done so much damage to the previous one. And time and time again the new expanded system has proven too limited to encompass the next set of experiences. Often with fear, doubt, and confusion, but also with increasing trust, allowing, and humor, and decreasing resistance and pain, I have been forced to recognize that I just don’t know.

I don’t know whether I’m right or wrong or how correct my currently cherished set of beliefs, assumptions, and world views are. I don’t know how my mind works, how deeply it extends, how to control it, how to escape from the all-encompassing realities it appears to create. I don’t know what consciousness is, what its limits are, don’t even know if the concept of limits applies to consciousness or to us. I don’t know how unaware I am or how aware I can become, what the limits to knowledge are, what our capacities and potentials may be, or whether I can accurately assess the wisdom and well-being of anyone significantly wiser than myself.

I do feel that I know that I’ve been wrong, that I’ve underestimated the mind, consciousness, us, the extent to which we are asleep, sleepwalking, and trapped in our individual and shared cultural illusions. I’ve also underestimated the vastness of human suffering, especially the extent of unnecessary, well-intended suffering. I am clear that I’ve totally misunderstood the nature of

the great religions, the practices such as meditation and yoga, and that I've underestimated the potential sensitivity of perception and introspection and the extent of wisdom that lies within us all.

How did this come about? Very simply, by starting to examine my own mind and to pay attention to what was formerly unrecognized subliminal experience.

It began with an entirely fortuitous entry into psychotherapy. Part of my postdoctoral training in psychiatry involved doing psychotherapy, but having examined the research literature and found very little that was unequivocally favorable, I had precious little faith in it. I was in the paradoxical situation of doing something that I really didn't believe worked. By a series of coincidences, I had the opportunity of going into therapy with a very competent therapist of (at that time) primarily humanistic-existential orientation by the name of Jim Bugental. And so, almost to my surprise, I found myself on the therapeutic couch expecting an interesting few weeks but not too much in the way of surprise or major benefit. I could hardly have been more wrong. Not only did I begin to undergo a series of totally unexpected and formerly unknown experiences, but they were of such profundity and impact as to change the course of my life from that time on.

Jim's primary mode of working was to train his clients in the development of heightened sensitivity to, and appreciation of, their own inner experience and subjective world. He was remarkably skillful in this, and within a few weeks, I began to find in myself a capacity for subjective sensitivity deeper than anything I had realized was possible. To give one simple example, I found that fairly soon I was experiencing synesthesia (cross modality perception in which one experiences in several modalities a stimulus presented in only one). Thus, for example, one may experience visual and tactile images of a sound. Usually this capacity has been thought of as rare, but my experience soon began to suggest that it was a latent capacity in all of us, buried under our own perceptual insensitivities. This and other evidence of greater sensitivity I have described elsewhere (Walsh, 1976) and so I will only touch on certain issues central to this current discussion.

Not only was it possible to detect formerly unsuspected experiences, but these experiences proved to be an unanticipated source

of personal information and understanding. Gradually there occurred

the slowly dawning awareness of the presence of a formerly subliminal, continuously changing stream of inner experience. The range and richness, Heraclitean and awesome nature of this internal universe, amazed and continues to amaze me. Here was an everpresent, but formerly unsuspected veritable internal universe. After a couple of months, I began to perceive more clearly a constant flux of visual images. One of the most exciting memories is that of the sudden recognition that these images exquisitely symbolized what I was feeling and experiencing in each moment. Here was a previously unsuspected goldmine of information about myself and the meaning of my experiences. As my sensitivity increased, I found that the images accompanied subtle physical sensations in my body, and that these sensations were the somatic representations of emotion. With this Rosetta stone I was helped to a greater sensitivity of my moment-to-moment emotions. Experiencing this inner world began to become very pleasurable. Whereas initially I had believed that the inner world must of necessity harbor unwholesome collections of monsters, which I had avoided confronting all my life, I now came to think of this inner world as a very attractive, pleasant source of positive information. (Walsh, 1976)

With this heightened awareness as a tool of investigation, I was now able to explore my experience, mind, beliefs, and relationships more deeply than ever before, and what I found was often quite unexpected and contrary to my own and the culture's traditional assumptions. To name but a few, I experienced that, at least within the limits of my ability to detect, I was creating my own experience intentionally. Thus, not only were the good and happy feelings intentionally created, but also the painful, the anxious, and the depressed, as well as the defenses. Formerly I had thought of myself as a helpless victim of uncomfortable emotions, symptoms, and defenses, but now I could observe the process by which these were actively chosen and created. Thus I was forced to acknowledge a level of responsibility far more extensive than anything I had previously considered possible.

My belief system was already taking quite a beating. And the more I examined my beliefs, the more I was awed at their power

to operate as self-fulfilling prophecies. I was forced to agree with John Lilly's (1972) statement that

within the province of the mind, what I believe to be true is true, within limits to be found experientially and experimentally. These limits are further beliefs to be transcended. In the province of the mind there are no limits.

Even things as apparently physiologically determined as sleep needs proved to be functions of my psychological state and beliefs. Whereas formerly I had believed that eight hours of sleep were an absolute necessity if I was to be anywhere near fully functional the next day, I now began to see the ways in which I created fatigue in order to avoid experiences and literally drive myself unconscious (asleep). Furthermore, feelings of fatigue often proved to represent accumulated psychological tensions, incomplete gestalts, or subliminal preoccupations which could disappear and complete themselves when they were raised to conscious awareness. From the very day on which I first saw my creation of fatigue in order to escape conscious experience, I found that I needed an hour's less sleep per night. With further insight, this continued to diminish until at the present time I usually need only four to five hours and find that I have more energy than when I was getting eight.

These experiences will probably suffice to give some indication of the fact that I was beginning to realize that my former beliefs about myself, the nature of mind, consciousness, beliefs, and the extent of our potentials, and parts of the cultural belief system were considerably in error, and that I had gravely underestimated our capacities and the power of mind to create our world view and sense of self. This is not to say that the process was one of continuous light and joy or that it was free of anxiety, confusion, and uncertainty. There were lots of these and I will describe some of them subsequently. But suffice it to say that it was now very clear to me that I and many others had been very wrong about who and what we are and can become and that I was firmly committed to exploring and attempting to understand these formerly unsuspected potentials.

Since I was living in California at the time, there was no shortage of groups and organizations promising various kinds

and degrees of growth, awakening, and enlightenment. I gradually underwent a number of these including groups in Gestalt, transactional analysis, and Rogerian therapy and less traditional experiences such as est, Living Love, and Arica.

To some, I may well have looked like the stereotypic seeker lost in a narcissistic search for self which Peter Marin and Christopher Lasch (Lasch, 1978), among others, have so soundly castigated. And yet, somehow the process didn't seem narcissistic, or at least no more so than the rest of my life and the more traditional educational pursuits I have spent so many years at. True, there was a large element of self-serving motivation, but there was also a compelling sense of the importance of this exploration, an importance not limited to myself alone. For although the programs and the motivation of those giving and taking them varied widely, the best of them seemed to contain significant information and skills in the basic essentials of living one's life skillfully, happily, and in a way which contributed to others. Moreover, much of it was information which I had not found in my traditional professional training, either medical, psychological, or psychiatric.

The type of learning was clearly experiential as much as intellectual, and I began to see why there had been so much misunderstanding of things such as the human potential movement and various growth-oriented trainings. While there were some which clearly epitomized the caricatures, there were also a great number which appeared to make some very valuable contributions to those who went through them. And yet, those people often found the experiences and processes they'd been through difficult to describe to those without similar experience. This was certainly true for me initially. In part, this reflected the limits of my own communicative skills which have tended to improve with reflection and practice. However, I was also beginning to appreciate the importance of an experiential foundation for intellectual understanding and the extraordinary extent of miscommunication and projection which operated in these areas.

Many times, I listened to people explaining their misgivings about such-and-such a program and I was left wondering if we could possibly be talking about the same thing. I was no exception to these barriers and was amazed to see how radically my

perceptions of a person or program depended on my psychological state. For example, on first reading the books of Ram Dass, I announced to several people that he was either psychotic or knew so much more than I did that I couldn't understand him, but I suspected the former. Six months later, on rereading the books, I found myself amazed that I could have failed to appreciate the depth of wisdom in them. Going through the est training in 1975, I walked out after the first three days feeling that I already knew all this. Some months later, I had the opportunity of meeting its founder Werner Erhard and found to my amazement that the man seemed to know considerably more about the workings of the mind than I did. Somewhat humbled, I went back and redid the est training and was astounded to find out how much it seemed to have improved. It became apparent that I had tried to protect my self-image as a highly trained mental health professional who must therefore know more than the people giving the est training, most of whom did not have professional degrees. I had apparently thus blocked my ability to hear anything of deeper significance than I already knew.

A similar process occurred with *A Course in Miracles*, a three-volume self-instruction program of mind training written in Christian language and metaphor. On my first exposure to it, I saw words like "God" and "Holy Spirit," closed the book immediately, and refused to have anything further to do with it for two years. Only through repeated exposure to a number of highly intelligent, competent, and sober individuals who were impressed by the material, some of them respected academicians and statesmen, did I finally deign to examine it again. When I finally broke through my aversive conditioning to the Christian language, I was amazed both by the profundity of the material and the extent to which my aversion had limited my ability to perceive the profundity.

I could give other examples, but the general principle should be clear by now. Basically, my defenses, biases, and lack of experience limited my capacity to appreciate people or information of greater wisdom than I myself possessed. Moreover, it seemed that not only was I passively incapable of hearing it, but was also at times actively defended against it.



On one occasion, I went to a public lecture given by Ram Dass in the San Francisco City Hall with approximately three thousand other people. During the course of the evening, he started to outline a multilevel model of consciousness and described the component states in ascending order from the usual to the more transcendent. My reactions and those of the audience provided unexpected insights into the nature of our usual states of consciousness and its relationship to apparently more developed states. As he ran through the first two levels, they seemed very reasonable and readily understandable, the third was a little less usual and more interesting, and the description of the fourth immediately evoked an experience in which I heard his words with perfect clarity, was struck by their import, and immediately afterwards could not remember a word he had said. My next memory was of being woken up by the snores of the person next to me, and looking round the hall I saw that approximately one quarter of the audience had very suddenly fallen asleep.

It was not until some two weeks later in a discussion with a psychoanalytic friend that I began to appreciate the implications of this experience. Clearly, I had undergone massive repression or denial resulting in a literal and extremely rapid loss of consciousness, as presumably had a significant number of those people who had fallen asleep at the time I did. Yet in order to repress something we have to at least partially recognize it and assess it as dangerous. Yet if the descriptions of the higher states of consciousness were recognized and repressed it could only mean that they were already known and that this related knowledge was denied awareness through active defenses. This and related experiences led me to a total reevaluation of the relationship between ordinary and "higher" states. Formerly I had assumed that deeper wisdom and higher states were attained through the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding. However, now I was forced to consider the possibility that we already possess the requisite knowledge, that our usual state represents an actively and defensively contracted state, and that higher states are attainable, not by the acquisition of something new, but by the release of current defenses and the resultant expression of already existing capacities.

Needless to say, many of these experiences ran counter to my previous professional training. I therefore began to explore the existential and humanistic psychology literature because my traditional psychiatric and psychological texts contained almost no information on the experiences I was having or implied that they might be pathological. However, in time and particularly with the commencement of meditation practice, even the humanistic and existential literature began to show gaps in its coverage of the range of experiences which were occurring.

Thus, for example, by this time I was beginning to experience that one could function quite nicely, even if only transiently, at my level of development, without anxiety or guilt, and that they seemed harmful rather than essential and useful as is often thought. Indeed my traditional texts assured me that the absence of anxiety and guilt could be a hallmark of psychopathy.

As an interesting aside, I have since had the opportunity of working intensively with large numbers of state hospital drug addicts, many of whom meet the criteria for diagnosis as psychopathic personalities. What I have found in every person with whom I've worked intensely is not that these people are guilt-free, but rather that they are guilt-ridden. Moreover, they seem to suffer terribly from that guilt and accompanying sense of unworthiness and often perpetuate self-defeating behavior because of it. Yet they construct desperately tough, apparently guilt-free facades or personas to hide behind. Possibly, these facades, which can often be very hard to crack, are the reasons why psychopaths have been traditionally thought of as guilt-free.

In short, I was becoming aware that either I was becoming increasingly disturbed, which certainly didn't feel true and was not true as judged by the writings in various consciousness disciplines, or that some of our traditional psychiatric models and assumptions tended to misinterpret and pathologize certain non-pathological states and experiences which occurred with heightened sensitivity to experience. Indeed, I began to suspect that a significant number of our traditional cultural values and assumptions about our psychological nature were distressingly incorrect, illusory, and productive of unnecessary suffering. These suspicions were further deepened when I began to practice meditation.

## MEDITATION

Meditation has proved to be a most valuable tool for me. This was not always so since over a period of two or three years when I was first exposed to various meditative practices I found them neither particularly attractive nor helpful. Sitting still and attempting to control the mind proved both physically and mentally uncomfortable. Sporadic ten- or twenty-minute sittings elicited no discernable benefits and it was not until almost two years later when I began a daily practice of sitting for one-half to one hour per day that I was sure I could detect any real benefits, and even these seemed pretty minimal. If it had not been for the encouragement of friends who had gone further I would certainly never have continued.

What finally seduced me was a statement by Steven Levine, a meditation teacher and author of *A Gradual Awakening*, that Vipassana or insight meditation was a perfect tool for observing the workings of mind. My curiosity was immediately captured and so full of naive innocence that I immediately enrolled in a ten-day retreat. Little did I know what I was letting myself in for. These retreats comprise about 18 hours per day of continuous sitting and walking meditation performed in total silence and without eye contact, reading, or writing. The practice consists of attempting to maintain continuous awareness and to allow attention to focus on whatever stimulus is predominant at any time. This sounds simple and indeed it is except that the difficulty of maintaining, or even attempting to maintain, anything like continuous awareness, and the intensity of the resultant experiences are so great as to be literally mind-boggling. The following is a sampling of experiences, and a more detailed account is available elsewhere (Walsh, 1977, 1978). "When one sits down with eyes closed to silence the mind, one is at first submerged by a torrent of thoughts—they crop up everywhere like frightened, nay, aggressive rats" (Satprem, 1968).

The more sensitive my meditation became, the more I was forced to recognize that what I had formerly believed to be my rational mind preoccupied with cognition, planning, problem solving, etc., actually comprised a frantic torrent of forceful, demanding, loud, and often unrelated thoughts and fantasies

which filled an unbelievable proportion of consciousness even during purposive behavior. The incredible proportion of consciousness which this fantasy world occupied, my powerlessness to remove it for more than a few seconds, and my former state of mindlessness or ignorance of its existence staggered me. Interestingly, this "mindlessness" seemed much more intense and difficult to deal with than in psychotherapy (Walsh, 1976) where the depth and sensitivity of inner awareness seemed less, and where the therapist provided a perceptual focus and was available to pull me back if I started to get lost in fantasy.

The subtlety, complexity, infinite range and number, and entrapping power of the fantasies which the mind creates seem impossible to comprehend, to differentiate from reality while in them, and even more so to describe to one who has not experienced them. Layer upon layer of imagery and quasilogic open up at any point to which attention is directed. Indeed, it gradually becomes apparent that it is impossible to question and reason one's way out of this all-encompassing fantasy since the very process of questioning, thinking, and seeking only creates further fantasy.

The power and pervasiveness of these inner dialogues and fantasies left me amazed that we could be so unaware of them during our normal waking life and reminded me of the Eastern concept of *maya* or all-consuming illusion.

### *Attachments and Needs*

It soon became apparent that the type of material which forcibly erupted into awareness and disrupted concentration was most often material—ideas, fantasies, thoughts, etc.—to which I was attached (addicted) and around which there was considerable affective charge. There was a definite sense that attachments reduced the flexibility and power of the mind. Whenever I was preoccupied with a stimulus to which I was attached, then I had difficulty in withdrawing my attention from it to observe other stimuli which passed through awareness. . . .

Paradoxically, it seems that a need or attachment to be rid of a certain experience or state may lead to its perpetuation. The clearest example of this has been with anxiety. At one stage I

suddenly began to experience mild anxiety attacks of unknown origin which curiously enough seemed to occur most often when I was feeling really good and often in the presence of a particular person who I loved. At such times I would try all my various psychological gymnastics to eradicate it since it was clearly not okay with me to feel anxious. However, these episodes continued for some five months in spite of, or as it actually turned out because of, my resistance to them. During this time, my practice deepened and I was able to examine more and more of the process during meditation. What I found was that I had considerable fear of fear and my mind therefore surveyed in a radar-like fashion all internal and external stimuli for their fear-evoking potential and all reactions for any fear component. Thus, there was a continuous mental radar-like scanning process preset in an exquisitely sensitive fashion for the detection of anything resembling fear. Consequently, there were a considerable number of false positives, that is, non-fearful stimuli and reactions which were interpreted as being fearful or potentially fear provoking. Since the reactions to the false positives themselves comprised fear and fear components, there was of course an immediate chain reaction set up with one fear response acting as the stimulus for the next. It thus became very clear that my fear of and resistance to fear was exactly what was perpetuating it.

This insight and the further application of meditative awareness to the process certainly reduced but did not eradicate these episodes entirely. Paradoxically, they still tended to recur when I felt very calm and peaceful. It was not until the middle of the next meditation retreat that the reasons for this became clear. After the first few days of pain and agitation, I began to feel more and more peaceful and there came a sitting in which I could feel my meditation deepen perceptibly and the restless mental scanning slow more and more. Then as the process continued to deepen and slow, I was literally jolted by a flash of agitation and anxiety accompanying a thought: "But what do I do now if there's no more anxiety to look for?" It was apparent that if I continued to quieten, there would be neither anxiety to scan for nor a scanning process itself, and my need to get rid of anxiety demanded that I have a continuous scanning mechanism, and the presence of the mechanism in turn created the presence of anxiety. My "but what do I do

now?" fear had very effectively removed the possibility of the dissipation of both, and its occurrence at a time when I was feeling most peaceful, relaxed, and safe, of course explained why I had been subject to these anxiety episodes at the apparently paradoxical times when I felt best. Paradoxically then, it appears that within the mind, if you need to be rid of certain experiences, then not only are you likely to experience a number of false positives but you may also need to have them around continuously so that you can keep getting rid of them. Thus, within the province of the mind, what you resist is what you get.

### *Perceptions*

With continued practice, the speed, power, loudness, and continuity of thoughts and fantasies began to slowly diminish, leaving subtle sensations of greater peace and quiet. After a period of about four or five months, there occurred episodes in which I would open my eyes at the end of meditation and look at the outside world without the presence of concomitant internal dialogue. This state would be rapidly terminated by a rising sense of anxiety and anomie accompanied by the thought, "I don't know what anything means." Thus, I could be looking at something completely familiar, such as a tree, a building, or the sky, and yet without an accompanying internal dialogue to label and categorize it, it felt totally strange and devoid of meaning. It seems that what made something familiar and hence secure was not simply its recognition, but the actual cognitive process of matching, categorizing, and labeling it. Once this was done, more attention and reactivity were focused on the label and its associations than on the stimulus itself. Thus, the initial fantasy and thought-free period may feel both strange and distinctly unpleasant so that we are at first punished by their unfamiliarity. We have created an unseen prison for ourselves whose bars are comprised of thoughts and fantasies of which we remain largely unaware unless we undertake intensive perceptual training. Moreover, if they are removed, we may be frightened by the unfamiliarity of the experience and rapidly reinstate them. As is noted in the Carlos Castaneda books, "We uphold the world with our internal dialogue" (Castaneda, 1974).

Presumably, this labeling process must modify our perception in many ways, including reducing our ability to experience each stimulus fully, richly, and newly, by reducing its multidimensional nature into a lesser dimensional cognitive labeling framework. This must necessarily derive from the past, be less tolerant of ambiguity, less here now, and perpetuating a sense of sameness and continuity to the world. This process may represent the phenomenological and cognitive basis of Deikman's (Deikman, 1966) concept of automatization and Don Juan's "maintaining the world as we know it" (Castaneda, 1971, 1974).

Interestingly, the extent of reaction to the stimulus itself as opposed to the label seems to be a direct function of the degree of mindfulness or meditative awareness. If I am mindful, then I tend to be focused on the primary sensations themselves, to label less, and to react to these labels less. For example, there was a period of about six weeks during which I felt mildly depressed. I was not incapacitated, but was uncomfortable, dysphoric, and confused about what was happening to me throughout most of the waking day. However, during daily meditation, this experience and its affective quality changed markedly. The experience then felt somewhat like being on sensory overload, with many vague, ill-defined, somatic sensations and a large number of rapidly appearing and disappearing unclear visual images. However, to my surprise, nowhere could I find stimuli which were actually painful. Rather, there was just a large input of vague stimuli of uncertain significance and meaning. I would therefore emerge from each sitting with the recognition that I was actually not experiencing any pain and feeling considerably better. This is analogous to Tarthang Tulku's (1974) statement that "the more you go into the disturbance—when you really get there—the emotional characteristics no longer exist."

However, within a very short time I would lapse once more into my habitual non-mindful state and when I next became mindful once again I would find that I had been automatically labeling the stimulus complex as depression and then reacting to this label with thoughts and feelings such as "I'm depressed, I feel awful, what have I done to deserve this?" etc. A couple of moments of relaxed mindfulness would be sufficient to switch the focus back to the primary sensations and the recognition once

again that I was actually not experiencing discomfort. This process repeated itself endlessly during each day. This demonstrates one of the differences between meditation and most psychotherapies. Whereas the latter attempt to change the content of this experience, in this case from depression to positive affect, meditation is also interested in modifying the perceptual-cognitive processes by which the mind processes such experiences.

### *Perceptual Sensitivity*

One of the most fundamental changes was an increase in perceptual sensitivity which seemed to include both absolute and discrimination thresholds. Examples of this included both a more subtle awareness of previously known precepts and a novel identification of previously unrecognized phenomena.

Sensitivity and clarity frequently seem enhanced following a meditation sitting or retreat. Thus, for example, at these times it seems that I can discriminate visual forms and outlines more clearly. It also feels as though empathy were significantly increased and that I am more aware of other people's subtle behaviors, vocal intonations, etc., as well as my own affective responses to them. The experience feels like having a faint but discernible veil removed from my eyes, and that the veil is comprised of hundreds of subtle thoughts and feelings. Each of these thoughts and feelings seems to act as a competing stimulus or "noise" which thus reduces sensitivity to any one object. Thus, after meditation, any specific stimulus appears stonger and clearer, presumably because the signal-noise ratio is increased. These observations provide a phenomenological basis and possible perceptual mechanism to explain the findings that meditators in general tend to exhibit heightened perceptual sensitivity and empathy (Shapiro, 1980; Shapiro & Walsh, in press).

### *Trust and Surrender*

These experiences have led to a greater understanding of, and willingness to surrender to, the meditative process. In the West, surrender has connotations of succumbing or being overwhelmed, but here it is employed more in line with its use in the meditative



traditions. Thus, with increasing experience I have begun to surrender to the process in the sense of trusting, following, and allowing it to unfold without attempting to change, coerce, or manipulate it and without necessarily requiring prior understanding of what I may be about to go through or predicting the outcome.

Furthermore, it now seems clear that allowing experiences to be as they are, and experiencing them without forcibly trying to change them, is effective. This is especially true when viewed with the recognition that any experience can be used for growth even to the point of perceiving the experience as necessary and perfect for the process. Indeed, recognizing the perfection and functionality of each experience appears to be a highly productive perspective for several reasons. First, it reduces the deleterious agitation, resistance, and eruption of defenses and manipulations which occur secondary to judgment and negative perspectives. Second, contrary to my previous beliefs, acceptance and a nonjudgmental attitude toward an experience or situation does not necessarily remove either the motivation or capacity to deal with it in the most effective manner. Thus, my prior beliefs were that I *needed* my judgments, aversions, and negative reactions in order to power my motivation to modify the situations and stimuli eliciting them. It should be noted here that the experience of perfection is just that—an experience, which may say more about the psychological state of the individual perceiving it than about the stimulus per se, and may not necessarily in any way vitiate the perceiver's perception of the need to modify it. Finally, there has been the recognition that the great meditation teachers really knew what they were talking about. Time and time again I have read descriptions, explanations, and predictions about meditation, the normal psychological state, the states that arise with more and more meditation, latent capacities, etc., etc., and have scoffed and argued against them feeling that they were just so removed from my prior experiences and beliefs that they could not possibly be true. However, by now I have had a variety of experiences which I formerly would have believed to be impossible and have gained the experiential background with which to understand more of what is being taught. Thus, I now have to acknowledge that these people know vastly more than I do and

that it is certainly worth my while to pay careful attention to their suggestions. Thus, experiential knowledge may be an essential prerequisite for intellectual understanding in these areas.

## FEARS ALONG THE WAY

This journey has been many things, but rarely boring. Sometimes it's been joyous, exciting, often awesome, occasionally mundane, and sometimes very fearful. Having considered myself a relatively fearless daredevil type (and hadn't I done high-diving, trampolining, scuba diving, parachuting, and circus trapeze?), I was amazed to discover the extent of my fears as I continued to explore more deeply. Wholly unsuspected anxieties and fears emerged one after another, layer after layer, and this discovery led me directly into a trap of my own making. For what I concluded was that I must be an exceptionally fearful person, and this conclusion molded my self-image and behavior over many, many months.

Many of these fears represented the surfacing of simple subliminal anxieties about everyday matters such as social skills, intimacy, performance, and ability. However, another whole family of them proved to be related to my concerns about who I would become and what would happen to me if I continued to explore and open my mind, and they centered around the belief that in some way I would be incapacitated or disabled if I continued.

Each fear presented a new choice point, whether to go back or to continue forward and risk the feared consequence. Sometimes I would remain scared and retreat, often using defenses of one type or another to deny that this was what I was doing, only recognizing the fact in retrospect. How many times I retreated without even retrospective awareness I will probably never know, but presumably it was no small figure. Abraham Maslow (1971) pointed to the dozens of microdecisions that face us each day and advised as one strategy for self-actualization adopting the habit of always taking the growth choice. I suspect that if anything, Maslow underestimated the number of choices and that it is actually a continuous, ongoing process in which the pulls

to self-actualization complete with the fears of awareness, thus creating a dynamic ebb and flow of growth motivation.

With deeper exploration, it began to become apparent that these fears, no matter how diverse their apparent concerns, appeared to all be founded on limiting self-beliefs such as about my lack of capability, trustworthiness, and my need for defenses. And even more striking was the fact that when I pushed forward in spite of them, always the fear and the underlying limiting beliefs proved to be illusory and based on attachment. For example, in my very first therapy session, I became anxious that if the therapy were effective, I would never amount to anything because I would lose much of my motivation. I feared that without my conflicts and neuroses I would be inert and passive, without the necessary drives for productivity and achievement. It looked as though I would have to sacrifice them and become what I feared in order to grow.

However, on those occasions when I made the growth choice and proceeded in spite of fear, it always became apparent that there was in fact no sacrifice. What was necessary was to be *willing* to let go of the attachment and to be *willing* to experience the feared consequence. But after having let go it almost invariably seemed to turn out that all that was “sacrificed” was the attachment, not the skill, capacity, or result on which the attachment centered. Before making the growth choice, it always looked like it involved sacrifice; after making it, it always seemed to be only an illusory loss of attachment and a very real gain in freedom. Thus, for example, I do not appear to have lost my achievement need and productivity (or else I haven’t been sufficiently motivated to observe it). If anything, I am still somewhat of an overachiever though less driven than before this particular attachment was first confronted.

However, there has been no shortage of other fears which have arisen at regular intervals along the way. Related to the fear that I would cease to be achieving was one that I would become intellectually sloppy and not demand of myself a high quality of intellectual precision. This seems to be a nice example of the truism that our strengths can become our traps in as much as we become attached to them.

A pervasive early fear was that if I turned my attention inward, I would find a Freudian nightmare. I fully expected to uncover various monsters and bogeymen composed of unbridled emotions and drives, such as anger, hatred, jealousy, lust, greed, etc., kept in check only by continuous superego monitoring and repression. Invariably, I believed that the experience of becoming aware of this internal world would be highly unpleasant, requiring great determination in the face of unsavory experiences.

Yet, what I found was quite the opposite. True, there were anger, much fear, and other negative emotions, but these paled beside the wells and depths of positivity such as warmth, joy, caring, and compassion which lay below them. I began to suspect that what has often been thought of as “*the* unconscious” and invariably negative and “idish” was only an initial layer of a far larger more positive unconscious. The curious paradox was that my beliefs in the existence of the internal bogeymen had effectively prevented me from looking inside to discover what was really there and had thus perpetuated the beliefs.

Related to this was a fear that if I really opened up I would be overwhelmed by my own negativity. I really expected that there would be times when I would be gripped by fears and noxious experiences of one type or another of a power and aversiveness which would leave me helpless. As it turns out, there have certainly been many difficult experiences, but also an increasing ability to work with and discharge such negative emotions as have arisen.

Certainly I feared that I would lose control. Yet “control,” like many other common unexamined values, turned out to be a paradox. For it became apparent that what most of us term “control” was actually an obsessive rigidity, characterized by an inability to let go control and to emotive freely. The extreme example of this fear of loss of control was a belief that I might become psychotic, a fear strongly founded on the belief in my own essential negativity and untrustworthiness and an accompanying belief in the need for continuous defensive control of this inherently untrustworthy self-nature. Such a belief led obviously and logically to subsequent tragically limiting beliefs in the inevitability of defenses, control, intrapsychic conflict, and the dangerous consequences of self-awareness.

Then there was the fear of aloneness, the fear that if I continued this exploration I would end up as an eccentric outcast whose beliefs and experiences were so different from other people's as to separate us and preclude the possibility of friendship and intimacy. How many people, I wondered, would there be who could understand what I was going through and who shared my emerging values? Surely the deeper I went, the fewer people I could expect to find who would share such experiences. It looked as though the price of deep exploration might be a life apart from all those who had not trodden the same path.

And yet, once again, there turned out to be a curious and delightful paradox. True, the further I continued, the fewer fellow travelers there were, but new networks and friendships developed. Furthermore, by virtue of the commonality and depth of shared experience, there was a corresponding increase in the potential for depth and rapidly establishing deep meaningful relationships. A further benefit was that in these networks there were always people who had proceeded further than I, and these individuals turned out to be invaluable resources who could point the way to the next steps and to some of the traps to be avoided along the way. Some of these people had gone very much further than I and having the opportunity of being with and learning from them proved to be one of the real gifts of the whole process.

On the other hand, those who were not making the same journey, including some of my fellow psychiatrists, became perturbed and expressed concerns about the directions in which I was headed. In one group meeting with my fellow psychiatry residents, it was suggested that if I continued I would probably be unlikely to function well enough to maintain my professional standing and would most likely drop out of psychiatry and possibly "end up selling candles on the beaches in Southern California." In retrospect, it's fascinating to see how closely my peers appeared to be reflecting my own fears and projecting theirs onto me. As we were a fairly homogenous group of somewhat obsessive nature, it's hardly surprising that my questioning of the beliefs and defenses we shared would evoke such strong reactions. Now it all seems very funny, but at the time it was quite fearful, and had it not been for the support and

reality testing of my therapist and people involved in similar explorations, I might well have abandoned the exploration and returned to old styles. Since then, I have indeed moved to Southern California but as yet have not started selling candles. Perhaps that will come at a later stage.

As these and other fears came and went and came again, I began to gain a new perspective on how and why they occurred. Initially, I had thought of them as experiences forced upon me unwillingly. Yet, the more I examined them, the more I began to realize that I was actively and choicefully creating them out of the perceived need to protect myself. It began to be apparent that I was creating my experience and self-sense moment by moment exactly the way I thought I needed to, and at some deep level also wanted to in light of my belief system about self and the world. Fears and defenses and unpleasant psychological experiences were not things that were thrust upon me helplessly but rather were things I was actively and intentionally creating.

The most dramatic and belief-shattering example of this came at a time when I was feeling somewhat depressed. At that stage, I was very much into behavior modification and had conditioned a number of responses in myself such as relaxation, assertiveness, and a sense of well-being. However, it was not until some three days into my depression that I finally remembered I had these tools available. My whole belief system about my role and relationship to symptoms was shattered at that moment. For what I immediately found was that I simply did not want to use any of those conditioned responses but rather preferred to remain depressed. It was another three days before I actually used any of them.

It became apparent then that at some level I believed that these symptoms and defenses were necessary and functional. Further inspection suggested that they represented functional compromises or responses to my beliefs about the nature of myself and reality. I was not responding to things as they were but rather to my beliefs about them. Those beliefs appeared to construct my world view and sense of self and within the context of that world view; my responses to it appeared not only consistent but totally logical. I was beginning to agree with the statements such as

those of Willis Harman (1962): "We are all hypnotized from infancy. . . . We do not perceive ourselves and the world about us as they are but as we have been persuaded to perceive them."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, to repeat, it was becoming clear that from the perspective of this hypnotized, illusory world view, my symptoms and defenses appeared not only logical but optimal. It would have seemed stupid to act in any other way. And here was the key to a new understanding of the nature of defenses and resistance. If from our perceived world view we are already acting optimally, then of course we would resist change of any type and would seek to strengthen our defenses rather than relinquish them. To relinquish them would feel like sacrificing those very strategies which we believe to be essential for our well-being. Now I could begin to make sense out of the old adage that neurotics don't come into psychotherapy to get better; they come in to learn how to be better neurotics. A corollary of this is that the really important growth choices involve changes in the beliefs, perspectives, and viewpoints from which we are perceiving rather than attempting to change that which we are looking at. That is, the changes are process, second order, contextual, or perspective changes.

These insights gave me a very new perspective on the nature of personality, neurosis, neurotic symptoms, self-actualization, authenticity, and courage. Now I could look at people and see that each and everyone of them, each and everyone of us, was courageously coping with reality and themselves as he or she believed, and hence perceived, them to be. Furthermore, they acted and perceived with total commitment in ways that seemed to them absolutely necessary and appropriate. Moreover, each person daily created and endured an extraordinary amount of well-intended suffering in a continuous battle which was fought day in and day out with total but almost totally unappreciated commitment and courage. For each of them, for each of us, every response appeared to represent the optimal self-actualizing strategy, and I could now understand the humanistic psychology position as enunciated by Carl Rogers (1959) that the "basic actualizing tendency is the only motive which is postulated in this theoretical system."

Thus it became apparent that many of the beliefs and fears I encountered were not unique to me but rather were widespread

in our culture. This raises the interesting question as to what extent they are transmitted and taught to us as part of the cultural hypnosis mentioned above.

Presumably, the most skillful approach is to assume that they are learned from others and to be very wary of communicating limiting beliefs. One of the great privileges of the last few years has been the opportunity of spending time with children whose parents were very aware of these issues and consciously refrained from transmitting limiting beliefs about what they were unable to do. Some of these children appeared to be functioning at levels very significantly above the norms and forced me to recognize my own limiting beliefs about what children could and couldn't be expected to do. Part of what the Buddhists would call "right thought" and "right speech," therefore, seems to involve a commitment to an awareness of limiting beliefs and an avoidance of transmitting them to others.

## THEORETICAL INTEGRATIONS

One of the most difficult aspects of this exploration, particularly at first and particularly on encountering the Eastern traditions, was my difficulty in integrating my own experiences and the different psychological theories. Many of the experiences, concepts, and terminology were new and at first there appeared to be very little overlap between them and traditional Western descriptions. The result was a sense of confusion and of stepping off into the unknown without any conceptual bridges or understanding to support me.

Slowly, however, very slowly it seemed, I began to see links between the Eastern and Western psychologies (Walsh, 1980, in press-a; Walsh & Shapiro, 1983; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980). The essential key was my own personal experience, and it rapidly became apparent that an adequate experiential basis was essential for any true understanding of these non-Western psychologies which were very practically and experientially directed. Time and time again I had the experience of reading something in the Eastern literature and either not understanding it or judging it to be completely false, only to find a few months later in the midst



of a new experience that what had formerly seemed incomprehensible suddenly made sense. Indeed, I have now developed somewhat of an aversion to the term "mystical" since it seems so often to be used to cover a lack of adequate personal experience and study of the traditions to which the term is applied.

Not infrequently, the Eastern concepts turned out to be extensions of recognized Western phenomena. Often these extensions seemed to incorporate more subtle and pervasive psychological levels and to include all individuals rather than just those suffering from psychopathology. The following are a few of many possible conceptual integrations which could be mentioned.

Almost without exception the consciousness disciplines emphasize the centrality of awareness, and some go so far as to state that unconsciousness is the only psychological problem. Conscious awareness, on the other hand, is said to be curative, in fact, all that is necessary for cure. Thus, many disciplines such as insight meditation work primarily with training and cultivating attention and awareness.

For many months, I was unable to make sense out of this. There seemed to be nothing comparable in Western psychology apart from parts of the human potential movement such as Gestalt psychology with its emphasis on awareness of present experience. Gradually, however, it began to dawn that "unconsciousness" was a global term referring to the net effect of all defenses. Put another way, it seemed that defenses operated to distort or reduce to unconsciousness those experiences which we were unwilling to recognize. Western psychology and particularly the psychodynamic schools have mapped the various styles of producing unconsciousness, namely the defenses, in exquisite detail and have pointed to ways of working with, and circumventing them, in psychotherapy. The Eastern psychologies, on the other hand, focused on the commonality of their effects and have pointed to ways in which they could be directly overcome by training attention and awareness.

Furthermore, the non-Western schools had recognized that these defenses operated more subtly, pervasively, and strongly in normals than had been appreciated in the West. They suggested that the result was an unrecognized distortion of such degree that our perception of the world was literally illusory, a state

described as *maya* or *samsara*. This situation, they said, stems from the uncontrolled nature of the untrained mind.

As I began to gain a broader overview of the psychologies of both East and West, it began to dawn on me that each was essentially a different model, world view, or paradigm of human nature. To oversimplify things, it looked as though Western psychology had focused on pathology and had mapped various aspects of psychopathology in exquisite detail, but neglected, and was not even really aware that it neglected, psychological health. On the other hand, the Eastern disciplines seemed to have focused more on the nature and means of attaining extreme psychological well-being, and while they recognized various psychopathological conditions, they had not been as precisely mapped as in the West. Now I could begin to see why there had been so much misunderstanding between them. Both were large complex systems and very few people had studied them in sufficient depth to be able to appreciate both and build bridges between them. Furthermore, the necessity of an experiential basis for understanding the Eastern disciplines and the failure to appreciate this fact meant that they were often misunderstood by Western psychologists who were unaware of their own misunderstandings. Indeed, it soon became apparent that most of the dismissals of the non-Western traditions by Western psychologists were made out of ignorance, or at the very least after insufficient study, rather than on the basis of informed opinion.

## THE GREAT SHOCKS OF MY LIFE

I could go on at some length about various theoretical integrations that gradually began to become apparent over the years as the explorations continued, but it would probably be more interesting at this stage to turn back to a more personal level of discussion and describe those discoveries which most deeply surprised and shocked me. I am not using the word "shocked" lightly, because each of the following recognitions represented a major blow to my belief system, world view, and sense of self, and effectively overturned or even reversed what I had assumed to be obvious and clear-cut. The first was the discovery of the formerly

unsuspected inner experiential world, with its vastness, richness, and profound depth of meaning. I have to say that like each of these recognitions, once made, I was staggered that I and most of us in this culture could live our lives so unaware of something which now seemed so important and obvious.

The second great shock was the recognition of the extent to which the mind is outside our voluntary control. Intellectually, I had some slight awareness of this. I had read the usual psychoanalytic texts and had some theoretical inkling of this fact, but nothing in my experience or theoretical reading prepared me in the least for the confrontation with the full extent of the lack of control which intensive meditation revealed. Now I could understand why in some Eastern traditions the untamed mind is referred to as a drunken, crazy, wild monkey. This apparently hyperbolic description now seemed quite appropriate. Once again, I was amazed that I could have lived my life without any real appreciation of this fact. Closely related to this was the recognition that we live in an illusion. The untamed mind filters our perceptions in unrecognized and uncontrolled ways, producing a distorted interpretation of the world rather than a veridical recognition. If I had to give a one-sentence definition of psychological well-being, I would say that it is the ability to control one's own mind.

The third great shock came at the moment that I realized that, contrary to being the opiate and pabulum of the masses, the great religions were, at least at their esoteric core, state-specific technologies and roadmaps to higher states of consciousness. Please note that I am not saying that this is necessarily all they are, but I am saying that at their esoteric core, this is at least what they are. This realization answered a question about my own behavior which had been puzzling me for several months. Much to my surprise, I had found myself spending an increasing amount of time with various religious teachers, primarily Buddhist and Hindu. While it was true I was learning some useful things about meditation, I could not for the life of me imagine how it was that I ended up in a religious setting when my interests were primarily psychological and psychotherapeutic.

Subsequently, I came to learn that I was by no means the first person to have this recognition. Charles Tart, Ken Wilber, Stan

Grof, and Frances Vaughan, among other eminent Western psychologists, had seen the link and had already written about it. However, for me personally it was a new and totally unexpected realization since I had previously dismissed religion of all types as merely misguided fantasy. Perhaps this was not entirely unexpected since my own exposure to religion had been in its traditional institutionalized Western form and there was probably little of the transcendent in it. It took a period of several years before I felt that I had any appreciable understanding of the factors which contributed to the extraordinary schism between what I perceived as the esoteric function of religion and the ossified institutional forms and rituals into which it often seemed to crystallize. Those factors are multiple and so important that I don't want to do injustice to them by trying to present them in the limited space available here. However, perhaps I can mention that I sense that one central and absolutely essential ingredient is *adequatio*, the capacity of the individual to comprehend the message being given. As in all work with altered states, the capacity of an individual to comprehend state specific information may be limited by lack of experience of that state (Tart, 1975; Walsh, 1980, in press-a; Walsh & Shapiro, 1983; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980). Institutionalized religion tends to be interpreted and codified by individuals without such experience and hence is open to intellectualization without adequate experiential understanding (Wilber, 1981, 1982).

The fourth shock, which was more like a long, slow rumble than an abrupt onslaught, was deepening appreciation of the extraordinary wisdom contained in some of the Eastern psychologies. Much against my will, and with no lack of resistance, I was forced to acknowledge that these traditions and their founders and advanced practitioners knew vastly more about the workings and depths of mind than I had ever imagined. And I say that without exaggeration or hyperbole.

Related to this has been the fifth shock, again a slow rumble of deepening appreciation of the vastness of the mind and the task of training it and bringing it under voluntary control. It has been said that this task is the most demanding that any person can undertake and has been called the art of arts and the science of sciences. For myself, I no longer find these statements hyperbolic,

and I suspect that anyone who attempts the task will come to agree with them.

### *Our Cultural Illusions*

How could I have known so little and been so wrong? How could my beliefs have been so deficient and ignorant? And how could I have been so unaware of my experience and self? In retrospect, my own ignorance staggers me, and I suspect that if the journey of discovery continues as I hope it will, five years hence I will look back with amazement at my current level of ignorance.

And yet even worse is the fact that I suspect that my own ignorance, limiting beliefs, and illusions are a reflection and microcosm of our culturally shared limitations. Prior to undertaking this exploration, my own beliefs, fears, and cosmology were pretty much consistent with cultural norms which I had presumably incorporated.

If this is true then we effectively share a mass cultural hypnosis and psychosis. This sounds like an extreme statement, yet it is hardly a new one. The consciousness disciplines have been repeating it for at least three thousand years, and even now in modern Western psychology there is no shortage of eminent people, such as Eric Fromm, Ronald Laing, Charles Tart, Ken Wilber, Willis Harman, to name but a few, who have made the same statement.

The tragedy of it all is that the fears and illusions, and the limiting beliefs on which they are based, appear to be self-perpetuating; for they reflect our assumptions about our basic nature, and these assumptions are essentially fearful and negative. We believe our inner depths and nature are essentially idish, brutal, guilt-ridden, and untrustworthy and must be continuously defended against and repressed. These beliefs and fears prevent us from turning inward to the source of our experience to see for ourselves whether or not they are true. Thus, the illusions remain unexamined and perpetuated by the very fears they created.

Moreover, these same processes seem to act at the social level, for our social goals and mores appear to be at least partly created

by, and reinforcing of, these same fears and illusions. Indeed, from this perspective, culture can be viewed as a vast conspiracy against self-knowledge and awakening in which we collude together to reinforce one another's defenses and insanity. This idea has appeared in many forms. For Willis Harman (1962), culture is a shared hypnosis. For Ernest Becker (1973) and Otto Rank (1958), it is an immortality project supporting death denial. For Ken Wilber (1980, 1981), it is one expression of "the Atman project," the ego's self-defeating attempt to regain for itself the unitive transcendent consciousness or atonement (at-one-ment) from which it is separated by its very nature, while for the Buddhist's culture is the shared samsara of illusion. But whatever our interpretation, our task appears to be first to penetrate the defenses and illusions within ourselves and then to support others in penetrating theirs. Only by looking within can we hope to be truly effective without (Walsh, in press-b).

### *The Rewards of the Search*

I've emphasized the numerous fears and difficulties involved in the search for self-understanding, but I need to balance this by noting that it's not been all pain and hardship by any means. The rewards have been more than worth it, for no matter how partial and incomplete my own explorations have been, they have also been a source of joy, excitement, wonderment, understanding, and meaning. Not continuously and not without all other emotions as well, but certainly worth every moment of the journey.

The excitement of exploration itself has been intense. Finding that there exists a vast Heraclitean purposive, meaningful, potent, awesome, and formerly unsuspected inner world has pulled me like a magnet into deeper and deeper exploration of it. The enormity of the challenge is staggering. For me, a meditation retreat involves an increasing appreciation of the vastness and power of the mind's capacity to create all-encompassing realities and illusions, into which we get lost and then forget who created them. Our task is to remember.

Almost all traditions are unanimous in emphasizing that awakening can occur at any instant, that the journey itself is illusory, unnecessary, and ends where it begins, and that what we

are looking for is that which is looking. Yet we may be able to recognize this only in retrospect, and the experience for me has been one of extraordinary difficulty in even beginning to escape from the mind's entrapment. This has led to an admiration and appreciation for those who have actually succeeded, especially for those rare few who did it essentially unaided, such as the Buddha, and then left roadmaps for the rest of us to follow.

Then, too, the experience has been increasingly joyful. There seems to have been a gradual and fluctuating increase in the amount of pleasure experienced and a reduction of fear, anxiety, conflict, and other psychological pain. This is by no means complete, continuous, or permanent. Rather, it seems to have followed a cyclic though gradually evolving course. In the initial highs, I hoped I'd make it, that I might be permanently installed in some blissful state from which I would never fall, and when I did fall I wondered if it all had been a mistake, if I'd deceived myself, and had made no progress whatsoever. However, after hundreds and thousands of ups and downs, highs and lows, I am gradually learning to maintain a certain degree of equanimity and to not identify myself quite so fully with the mood of the moment. Indeed, what is "high" and what is "low" has become more and more a moot question since the pain of the "lows" is always an indicator of some attachment or unhandled conflict which needs attention. There is pleasure and there is feedback and this recognition starts to collapse the good/bad dichotomy.

Relationships have also been a source of deepening pleasure despite my fears of ending up as a lonely outcast. The heightened perceptual and introspective sensitivity appear to have resulted in somewhat greater empathy and understanding of others, an experience consistent with experimental findings in meditators (Shapiro, 1980; Shapiro & Walsh, in press).

This in turn seems to facilitate the development of compassion, a quality which the consciousness disciplines claim to enhance. Subjectively, it feels as though I am at least partly more aware of suffering in others and its fundamentally well-intentioned nature. Recognizing the shared nature of our well-intended but unskillful behavior, I find myself better able to understand the ways in which people create suffering for themselves and less likely to judge them for it. This is reminiscent of the French saying, "To understand everything is to forgive everything."

There is also the joy of the *sangha*, the community of people sharing the same journey. With such people I experience a shared purpose which at least partially transcends the usual personality and cultural barriers. All of us are attempting to learn and grow, and since that process is inhibited by selfishness, all of us are trying, no matter how partially or unsuccessfully, to contribute to others in whatever ways are available to us. The more the commitment to the path, the deeper the sense of identification and trust, since it seems that we identify with those with whom we share a common purpose. Sometimes there is jealousy, competitiveness, and resentment, but that too is all grist for the mill.

Jealously and competitiveness may also occur in response to those who have gone further and learned more than I have, but usually there is also a sense of deep gratitude and appreciation to them for having cleared the road and being available to point it out to me. Indeed, admiration and gratitude become useful healing emotions since they appear to inhibit competitiveness and other disrupting states. From this perspective, I can begin to understand the Buddha's statement that,

Better than a thousand offerings. . .

Is one moment's reverence

For the man who has conquered himself. (Byrom, 1976, p. 43)

One of the most satisfying results of all has been an enhanced ability to contribute to the relief of suffering in others. One thing that has become very very clear is that we cannot successfully undertake a deep search for understanding and growth for ourselves alone. Contrary to some popular misconceptions, this type of exploration seems to ultimately lead away from rather than toward narcissistic preoccupation and selfishness (Waterman, 1981; Wilber, 1980). True, we bring our selfish habits and neuroses with us as we begin the journey, and I certainly brought my share. And yes, we can certainly pass through stages of falling into traps of selfish preoccupation, ego inflation, and obnoxiousness of one form or another, and presumably some of us remain stuck there for long periods. But there is a danger of confusing a stage or trap on the path with its goal and possibilities, and of assuming that the entire path is a trap. Then too,



there is no shortage of aberrant groups and teachings, yet it would be a mistake to assume that because superficial practices and practitioners exist, profound ones do not. Unfortunately, these mistakes of confusing traps with goals, stages with ultimate possibilities, and superficial expressions with deeper ones have been widespread and the whole inner search has sometimes been superficially and sweepingly dismissed as mere self-indulgence, narcissism, and withdrawal from service and contribution in the world.

However, to anyone who continues the journey for more than a little way, it rapidly becomes clear that selfishness is problematic, for it becomes painfully apparent that it both stems from and reinforces such disruptive motives and states as greed, anger, hatred, and guilt. In Buddhist terms, selfishness is recognized to be unskillful, causing suffering for both oneself and others (Walsh, in press-a). Sooner or later, anyone who would go further is required to work to transform and relinquish all forms of selfishness and self-indulgence. Indeed, working to transform one's neuroses and relinquish unskillful habits is the path. In the Hindu tradition, service is regarded as a path in its own right, named *Karma yoga*, and anyone who would explore the farthest reaches of the path and of him or herself must also practice karma yoga. This provides an interesting example of the collapse of the self/other, me-or-you dichotomy, because this type of service benefits both giver and receiver. We go into ourselves to more effectively go out into the world. We go out into the world to more effectively go into ourselves. And we continue this process for as long as we believe inner and outer are separate.

Thus it has been a joy to feel that my ability to contribute to others has begun to be enhanced by this exploration. This contribution may take the form of a sharing of simple facts such as specific data about resources, books, trainings, or may involve a more personal sharing of experience. Having experienced and been struck in numerous areas of confusion, difficulty, doubt, anxiety, mismotivation, etc. ad nauseam, I now find myself in an admirable position to understand and empathize with others in similar straits. Sometimes those sharings prove helpful, sometimes they don't. Often when they don't it is because my own fears, attachments, or greed have gotten in the way and reduced my sensitivity to appreciate what exactly it is that the other

person needs. This failure then becomes the next working point. In the yoga tradition, it is said that the only real failure is to stop the search.

Needless to say, these experiences provide a formerly unknown depth of meaning and purpose. As the journey progresses, it feels increasingly vast, increasingly awesome, and increasingly important. Indeed, it seems to lead in the direction of confronting the most basic and fundamental questions of human existence, the answers to which I had once thought were to be found externally, but which I now appreciate must be searched for within. The answers are not only philosophical but often highly pragmatic. What could be more practical than gaining some measure of insight into the nature, cause, and alleviation of suffering? As these insights deepen, they seem to display their own magnetic power pulling me with a gradually but continuously increasing intensity and focus toward them, creating a gentle imperative to be and contribute all that I can.

All this emphasis on the positive is not to say that I have not misused what I have learned. On the contrary, I must confess that it's hard for me to think of many things that I haven't misused. It seems to be characteristic of this game that the ego searches for ways to use any new knowledge, experience, or understanding to aggrandize itself. Even the most lofty goals and experiences may be misapplied in this way, a phenomenon which the consciousness disciplines call spiritual materialism (Trungpa, 1975).

Thus, I have watched myself maneuvering for opportunities to display my tidbits of knowledge, playing guru or teacher at the least invitation, or even without invitation, and prostituting insights for leverage in male/female sexual games. I have used whatever sensitivity and empathy I have gained to manipulate for power and prestige and to belittle others. I have been extraordinarily righteous about what I'm doing and have at times had no hesitation in telling others that they should live their lives differently, usually in ways which are remarkably similar to my own.

In short, I have misused what I have learned and created considerable suffering for others. My belief and prayer is that this suffering is less than I have been able to relieve in others and that I may be able to recognize and let go these damaging traits with increasing rapidity.

AND SO . . .

And so the journey continues. Where it will take me from here I've no idea; the more I open to it, the less predictable it becomes because the growth choice is usually into the unknown. But this much I have learned: no matter how remarkable I believe our mind, our self, and the exploration of them to be, my beliefs usually turn out to be the filters limiting still deeper appreciation of them.

Whether we know it or not, we are all on a journey beyond belief.

## NOTE

1. The journey beyond belief is both a solitary and a shared one. We must explore our inner depths alone, yet we are supported in various ways by all those who are either on or have made the journey. I can mention by name only the very few of this large number who have touched me most directly.

The Buddha said that our parents gave us so much that we could never really hope to repay them fully. This is certainly true of my own who gave me all that they could and to whose generosity I owe all the gifts of my life. I must also acknowledge the love and support of my sister and members of my extended family.

Among my fellow travelers, I thank Gary Lapid, who was the first to tell me that there was such a thing as a journey. My friend, therapist, and teacher Jim Bugental started me on the journey, illuminated the initial stages with his own clarity and wisdom, and provided me with the tools and inspiration to continue. Elizabeth Bugental added gifts of spontaneity and emotional fullness.

Maureen Christine and Jean Rossiter were the first to introduce me to the consciousness disciplines. Ram Dass' personal journey and understanding of both Western and Eastern psychologies combined to make comprehensible many concepts which had escaped my understanding. Likewise, Werner Erhard's translations of traditional concepts, his seminars, and rigorous demands for impeccability were all facilitating gifts. My meditation teachers, especially Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, are superb examples of what gnostic intermediaries can be and do. By their intense commitment and practice, they absorbed the practice and teachings to a degree that they were able to bring them from the East, transmit them from their own experience in concepts

familiar to Westerners, and serve as examples of what the practice could achieve in us all.

Bill Thetford and Helen Schucman gave us the gift of *A Course in Miracles*, and Bill has served me well as a model of egoless service and contribution as has Jerry Jampolsky. So also has Duane Elgin, whose dedication to the well-being of all humanity, inner work, and lifestyle have demonstrated the importance of combining inner work and social contribution. Ken Wilber's commitment to understanding and wisdom, to learning and communication has been inspirational, and his friendship has been a privilege, an education, and a joy. And finally, Frances Vaughan, who has been my beloved friend, teacher-student, source of love and joy, and companion on the journey beyond belief.

The concept of solidarity suggests that our cultural and intellectual achievements depend upon the contributions of those who went before us. When asked how he could manage to see so much and so far, Isaac Newton replied "because I have stood on the shoulders of giants." As in the physical world, so in the inner. To whatever extent I have been able to see, it is because I too have stood on the shoulders of giants, those I have mentioned by name and the countless millions of others who have made the journey and lit the path before me. What greater gift could there be?

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Reprint requests: Roger Walsh, Department of Psychiatry, California College of Medicine, University of California, Irvine, CA 92717.