

12 Uniting Pure Inspiration with Perfect Clarity

“Art” is the magic (virtual) body which is the purity of the superficial reality, and “wisdom” is stated to be the ultimate reality, it being the clear light intuition that is of one taste with that (reality). “Uniting together” is uniting (them) indivisibly in actuality.... Having made them one in the form of the great seal deity body, in the center of that vessel and essence you should meditate the form of the communion master altruist.

(Tsong Khapa, *Brilliant Illumination of the Lamp of the Five Stages*¹)

There’s No Place Like Home: Realizing the Great Seal in the Great Perfection Stage

This packed quote from Tsong Khapa on “the learner’s communion” surveys the whole arc of the “great” perfection stage. He begins where the gateway of freedom of mind left us, emerging from the ultimate metaphoric clear light into the (still impure) personification of joy called the virtual body. He then moves through that body’s purification on the third stage to its final immersion in sheer translucency called the objective clear light, gateway to the fourth stage. And finally he concludes with the fifth stage, the learner’s communion, in which the now pure virtual body and the objective clear light mind are seamlessly sealed together as one. This great arc lays out the last leg of our journey together: surveying the work of inspiration, clarity and communion that yields the mature mastery of heroic altruism, the final fruition of the whole process path.

What remains is for us to see how the warp of principles and woof of practices we’ve already explored is woven together into the fine fabric of altruistic mastery in the course of the great perfection stage. One simple way to orient ourselves to the final challenge ahead is to recall the analogy Gelek Rinpoche has drawn between the journey of the gradual path and the epic journey of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Like the journey of Odysseus, the process path first leads us far away from our familiar selves and lives, far outside our familiar map of world, to a heroic encounter with the primal forces of nature and life. Once there, it then follows us back through a return to the familiar world, only now with a newfound, heroic way of being, and a whole new relationship to everyone and everything we thought we knew. Prepared by our initial journey through the coarse and subtle creation stage, the hurdles we’ve had to navigate thus far are marked by the gateways called freedom of body, speech, and mind. Clearing these hurdles will effectively free us from the conditioned perceptions, conceptions and emotional states that had locked us in the armor of our compulsive self and life. Given the death to our traumatic selves we’ve experienced in the metaphoric clear light, we’re now prepared to start the return leg of our journey, reemerging for the first time in the nascent heroic form that will eventually mature into the new body and mind of a master altruist.

Since the phase of the process odyssey we’ll cover in this chapter completes the deconstruction of our reactive old self and life with the reconstruction of a new altruistic self and life, it offers us a mirror in which to review the map of the perfection stage path as well as a window through which to look at the ethics of the perfection stage. We’ll begin with a brief overview to help cross-reference the contemplative map of the five stages with the ethical map of the ten stages of enlightened altruism. Then we’ll look more closely at the aims and methods of the remaining three stages. Finally, we’ll link these to contemporary science and psychotherapy.

Body, Speech, Mind, and Reality: Reviewing the Odyssey of the Perfection Stage

Perhaps the simplest overview of the perfection stage maps its journey into three purifications—of body, speech, and mind—plus realization of the two realities. In other words, the odyssey has two parts: gaining freedom from the jaws of compulsive life; and gaining realization of the healing mastery of reality, just as it is. If you recall our exploration of the path of engagement in part 2, you may remember the view that the true nature of things is taught in terms of two realities: the superficial conventional reality and the profound ultimate reality. And you may also recall that the path and fruit of altruistic enlightenment are both taught in ways that align with that view of reality. So, the way to master the surface reality of social consensus is *via* the path of universal compassion; and the way to master the ultimate nature of reality is *via* the path of radical openness realized as emptiness. These two paths in turn shape the final fruition of enlightened altruism, which joins the full development of compassion with the final realization of openness as its physical form body and mental truth body, respectively.

Drawing on the “noble” tradition of aligning the optimal process path with this centrist approach to the engaged path, Tsong Khapa called his chapter on the third stage “the two reality perfection stage.” Assuming this tradition, his title aligns the third and fourth stage achievements of virtual body and clear light with the conventional and ultimate realities, as well as the form and truth bodies of enlightened altruism. In what follows, we’ll be unpacking the parallel alignment of the engaged and process paths to altruism, focusing both on their deep resonance as well as on key distinctions.

Three Vehicles, One Compass: The Five Stages on the Contemplative Path

If we go in for a more in depth look at the way these two maps of contemplative practice and moral development are aligned, there are many different traditions about how the engaged stages and the process stages might be linked. The touchstone of these is the system of five stages on the contemplative path, which ultimately refers back to the foundations of Buddhist contemplative science in the path of self-healing. After reviewing a wide array of remarkably divergent ways of aligning the process path with the ten-stage map of the engaged path to enlightened altruism and the five stage map of the path of self-healing, Tsong Khapa reconciles them as much as possible and suggests his own approach.² This approach aligns the early phases of the optimal process path—initiation, coarse creation stage and subtle creation stage—with the contemplative stage of accumulation, since these involve amassing the momentum of compassion and wisdom, altruistic vision and enlightened dignity, we need to embark on the perfection stage process of intuitive realization. As for the perfection sub-stages, the first, second, and third stages—freedom of speech, freedom of mind, and virtual body—are aligned with the path of preparation, since these involve preparing the mind/ body process for the direct intuitive realization of emptiness which is the gateway to the fourth perfection stage called “manifest enlightenment” or “clear light translucence.”

As on the engaged path, so here too on this map of the process path, the breakthrough of direct realization of emptiness marks the beginning of the path of insight, the irreversible path to altruism, so the commencement of the fourth perfection stage is aligned with the first of the ten stages of enlightened altruism. As we build and refine great bliss and intuitive clarity on the fourth and fifth perfection stage—clear light and learner’s communion—we gradually progress through the paths of meditation and mastery, as well as the ten stages of enlightened altruism. When we finally reach the perfect communion of the master altruist, we’ve arrived at the full maturity of a perfectly enlightened being.

With this brief overview of the contemplative map of moral development on the process path, we’re ready for a closer look at the three final stages of the perfection stage: virtual body, clear light, and communion. As for the first of these, the stage alternately called virtual body or self-consecration is crucial to understanding the remarkable contemplative fruition and ethical maturation that takes place in the great perfection stage. Following the classical teaching tradition, we’ll touch on four key points that illustrate the nature and function of the virtual body: (1) basic science; (2) contemplative practice; (3) qualities of experience; (4) arts of enhancement.

Virtual Body Basic Science: The Dreamlike Nature of Constructed Mind

The first key point about the virtual body is that it assumes the basic science of the subtle and subtlest body-mind laid out in our last chapter on freedom of mind. If you recall, the emphasis on that second perfection stage was the deconstruction of the learned and innate patterns that structure and drive the normal, compulsive body-mind. Once we’ve succeeded in disarming and dissolving these patterns into the translucent freedom called the clear light, the natural re-emergence of subtle and coarse consciousness in the aftermath

awakens us to the ways in which the subtlest and subtle energy-mind structure experience and perception.³ In effect, once our subtlest awareness has been consciously reached, our minds are no longer confused with those patterns and are free to prune and cultivate them artfully into a “new normal” body-mind state called the virtual body. So the first key point in this art is the recognition of the natural power of our subtlest energy-mind to shape our experience, as our minds normally do in a dream. In unpacking this point, Tsong Khapa cites this passage from Nagarjuna’s *Five Stages*:

All beings are powerless,
Not born voluntarily,
The cause of that is clear,
Universal void, transparency.

The mind that serves
To bind fools in the life cycle,
That same mind takes practitioners
To the bliss lord exaltation.

Here there is no birth at all,
There is no death at all;
So you should understand the life cycle itself,
Constituted (only) by instincts of the mind.⁴

If we look past its technical terminology, the gist of this remarkable passage is surprisingly consistent with what we’ve learned from modern neuroscience. Our minds and brains are not “hard wired” but naturally and remarkably plastic. Our primary nature as humans, biologists tell us, is to be “malleable” and “educable,” in other words, to be naturally natureless and free to learn. This among other things is what is conveyed by the teaching that at the root of our lives is the naturally free and open mind of clear light transparency. The term Thurman translates with the pejorative “foolish” literally means “childish,” which I prefer. The point here is that the selves and lives we take to be naturally or objectively ours are in fact constructs of our selfless mindbrains, woven as in a nightmare from a network of survival instincts to which we cling for dear life. The basic science underlying the achievement of the virtual body is the fact that we naturally have the freedom and clarity to artfully weave a new mentality or subjectivity in and through which to live, by consciously choosing and shaping our instincts into a transparent agency that harnesses and guides the very best in our nature. This potential for enlightened agency is often described as the “wish-fulfilling jewel” hidden in “the jewel sack of the body.”⁵

Jewel in the Sack: The Magic Gem that Holds the Five Energies

With this key potential of our subtle mind clear, there’s one more fact of basic process science we need to recall in order to grasp the basis of the art of the virtual body. That is the fact, mentioned repeatedly in our discussion of freedom of mind, that the key to disarming and mastering the instinctive patterns of our body-mind is the art of controlling and harnessing the vital energies of the subtle nervous system. Tsong Khapa highlights this point with this quote from the *Diamond Rosary*:

Than your life-energy vital essence,
There is nothing other in the three realms;
By the magical wind-energy, the three (life) realms
Are seen as like dreaming (in) a dream.

Birth, living, and dying,
And abiding in the between existence,
Whatever (states) the world constructs,
Are the emanations of the energy of mind.⁶

As remarkable as the *Five Stages* quote above, this passage highlights the link between the neural energies of our subtle and subtlest body-mind and the activation of instinctive patterns that drive the construction of waking experience, as in normal dreaming. And this basic insight into the normal functioning of our body-mind also anticipates current neuroscience, especially findings that link neural oscillators in the basal ganglia

with the wave-like construction of perception and experience in both normal waking and dreaming.⁷ What is unique to the process tradition is that this basic insight becomes the rationale for a practice of dismantling our unconscious self-world construction, by dissolving the reactive energy fueling the instinctive patterns underlying it. The other side of that deconstructive work is the transformational art of conceiving the new self and world of the virtual body—the form of altruistic agency inspired by the energy of blissful openness. Consider this quote from the *Concise Five Stages*:

Ordinary construction-instincts ...
Are visualized as the mind of affirmation itself
(And so deconstructed through diamond recitation).
Purifying the (subtle) body purifies constructions,
Purifying wind-energy, one becomes taintless,
And manifests the wisdom superficial virtual (body) ...
The virtual body, along with its luminance,
Arises from the mere wind-energy and mind.⁸

Virtual Body Contemplative Art: Personifying Dreamy Aftermath Wisdom

Next, we need to understand the idea of the virtual body in terms of the principles of the path of altruism in both the engaged and process traditions. The *Concise Five Stages* quote above includes several key terms that can help us flesh out that idea. The first of these comes in the next-to-last line, which suggests that our subtle intuitive mind, freed from reactive energies and so untainted by instinctive patterns and traumatic constructions, is precisely what manifests the virtual body. In other words, this “body” represents a kind of mentality or subjectivity that can voluntarily engage in experience and action in the world, without being driven by the compulsions that drive the life cycle of stress and trauma.

Our second clue comes from the adjectives used to describe that subjectivity, namely “wisdom superficial.” The direct reference here is back to the two reality framework of Centrist thought; the implicit reference is to its contemplative practice on the engaged path of insight. Specifically, the subjectivity that emerges from freedom of mind is “superficial” in the sense that it aligns with the reality of appearance and social consensus. It is “wisdom” because it is the process equivalent of the dreamlike aftermath intuition of emptiness, which follows after the spacious equipoise intuition of emptiness in engaged practice. In other words, of the two modes of engaged contemplation—the profound equipoise that cultivates openness and the dreamy aftermath that cultivates compassion—the virtual body is more closely aligned with the latter.

These two suggestions are enough for us to consider the meaning of the term, “virtual body.” The first half of the term, “virtual,” is more usually translated “illusory” or “illusion,” although Thurman prefers the word “magic,” evoking the human art of working skillfully with illusion. If you recall, the dreamy or illusory aftermath comes as we reemerge from formless equipoise on emptiness into the many and varied forms of appearance; it serves to remind us that things are not real in themselves, as they seem, but dawn like dreams, illusions, reflections, mirages, as part of a seamless network of infinite, interdependent causes and conditions. As you may also recall, the contemplative work of this intuition was to help give us the empathic openness and altruistic responsiveness to assume whatever form of expression or action would be of most help to those around us.

The second part of the term, “body,” suggests that this art expresses or manifests the natural embodiment of an animal spirit of blissful openness, in the altruistic form of a naturally joyful subjectivity and compassionate agency. Specifically, on the process path, this manifest form of the wisdom of blissful openness relates not just to any body, but to very specific mental and physical forms. Mentally, the self-image that arises in our minds at this point is a subtler, purer form of the archetypal self-image cultivated from the creation stage right up to the prior perfection stage (as an empty bubble holding pure light-energy). However, in addition to being fully purged of any lingering associations to our old, ordinary self-image, self-concept or affective self-state, it is also now not merely “prosthetic” or “mental” but truly embodied and inspired by the subtle energy-mind of the emerging bliss-void intuitions. This new, consciously created subjectivity is thus fully primed and inspired to act as an agent of blissful compassionate wisdom, seeing all people and things as dreamlike reflections of causes and conditions ready to be purified and transformed into bliss-void energy-mind that can manifest in heroic form. Listen to this passage from the *Five Stages*:

Again the same threefold consciousness,
Endowed with wind-energy,

Arises in the practitioner's form,
Called "magic body."

Thus all beings here
Are said to be like magical illusions;
Staying in the magical concentration,
One sees everything as just like that.⁹

To clarify, Tsong Khapa quotes Aryadeva's comments on this, from the *Integrated Practices*:

"The thorough realization of one's mind's reality" does not exist in the aggregates, elements, and media, but appears as mere wisdom-intuition, apprehended as the deity body fully endowed with (marks and) signs, as illustrated by the twelve similes such as magic and dream—being the body of the nature of the mentality of the enlightened.¹⁰

Drawing the Reed from its Sheath: Uncoupling the Coarse and Subtle Energy-Mind

As for the twelve similes of the virtual body, we'll return to them soon in exploring its lived experience. For now, I draw your attention to two features of Aryadeva's description. First, in terms of appearance, the archetypal body-image we take on at this stage is distinguished by having all the marks and signs of fully evolved and perfectly developed altruism. Second, physically, the "mind's reality" we realize at the gateway of freedom of mind is further defined as distinct from the coarse physical body-mind (of aggregates, media and elements) familiar from the waking state and ordinary sensation, as a reed is distinct from its sheath.

On the other hand, it isn't "mere mind" with no physical support or embodiment at all, but rather the "mere wisdom-intuition" of the bliss-voids, inseparable from the subtle energy and chemistry of orgasmic bliss accessed through death-like dissolving into the heart. This distinction implies a key aspect of process science: the idea that consciousness can separate itself from the level of the coarse body-mind, but is inseparable from the subtle and subtlest energy-drops. Doing this experiment fully and decisively through the profound death-like dissolution that yields freedom of mind is what proves the point and constitutes "thorough realization of one's mind's reality." Another passage from the *Integrated Practices* references a common analogy of the interdependence of subtle mind and subtle energy at advanced stages of contemplative self-regulation, namely, the simile of mind and energy as rider and horse:

In truth, the mind is just like luminance apart from shape and color, its reality like space, hard to touch like ultimate reality. That being granted, the three luminances of mere luminosity come to depend on windenergy, and becoming common become light; therefore, the wind-energy binds the consciousness. Then the two luminances of wisdom and art, endowed with light rays, come to arise as the illusory deity body endowed with all variety and excellence. What is its mount? It is (subtle wind-) energy, which the mind-diamond rides like a horse, traveling wherever it wishes.¹¹

The Mind-Made Body, Animal Spirit, and Self-Proclaimed Identity of Joy

As we emerge from the extremely subtle, inseparable bliss-void energy-intuition of the clear light, the immanence intuition of the reemergence sequence takes the subtle energy of supreme bliss as its "mount," and that animal spirit in turn bonds with our lucid subtle awareness, setting the stage for the spontaneous co-emergence of the subsequent intuitions and energies. Called "wisdom" and "art," the radiance and luminance intuitions then naturally assume the form of our lucid, archetypal self-image, while staying bound to the emerging animal spirits of bliss-void energy and chemistry. Staying intimately bound to these altruistic spirits allows our lucid, altruistic self-image to stay inspired by the neurobiology of blissful openness that insures spontaneous compassion in all our intentions and interactions in the world.

Given this understanding of the subtle perceptual and affective dimensions of the virtual body, there is one more feature that seals the completeness and genuineness of the practice: the cognitive dimension of self-ascription or performative identification. Just as our ordinary self is the product of a social consensual designation of "self," and, just as the archetypal self of the creation stage was sealed by the enlightened dignity that identifies the emptiness insight transparent self-image as "I" and "mine," so achieving the virtual body on

the third stage is sealed by our identifying the emerging inspired, lucid self-image as “I” and “mine.” Because this decisive pronouncement, when correct, is what seals the achievement of the virtual body as the realized, actualized form of our previous altruistic vision of self, this stage is also called the stage of “self-consecration.” Tsong Khapa summarizes:

Likewise, when the necessary preliminaries of freedom of mind, such as diamond recitation and so forth, the inner and outer life-energy control meditations, have been consummated, that very same complete generation of freedom of mind, from the perspective of generating earth dissolving into water and so on as in the process of death, itself separates the two bodies (of coarse and subtle energy), and the self-consecration magic body is achieved from the mere wind-energy-mind of the voids. The self here is the wind-energy-mind that serves as the base of the designation thinking “I.” That very thing is created as the master altruist body, which is the consecration.¹²

In cross-cultural terms, this profound and subtle shift in self-sense may be compared with the radical shift in people who’ve undergone near-death experiences or mind-altering conditions like euphoric temporal lobe epilepsy, except that the shift here is contemplatively induced while the shift in these medical conditions is biologically induced. We’ll return to explore these analogues and basic science models at the close of this chapter, for now let’s look at the finishing touches that actualize our virtual body.

Dream Body Meets Dreamlike World: The Conjunction of Inner and Outer Resolve

Despite the emphasis on self-ascription, it’s vital that we recall Tsong Khapa’s insistence that achieving the virtual body is nevertheless not a merely mental or internal event. This may be further clarified by the multi-dimensional context said to be vital for realizing it. In addition to the three internal, mind/ body features of this complex context—pure visionary self-image, subtle energy of blissful openness, and accurate self-ascription—there are two further features that set the total context for this profound stage of attunement. Specifically, these are the external features of social consensus in an intimate dialogue with the mentor, and of organic attunement of our microcosmic development with the macrocosmic rhythms of day and night, sun and moon. These external features are conveyed in the teachings that the virtual body can only be realized in intimate collaboration with the mentor, and that it can only be fully realized and purified at the end of the third stage, at the rare moment of conjunction when our inner enlightenment aligns with the moment of predawn, the outer enlightenment of the natural world.

In explaining the former point, Tsong Khapa cites this verse from the *Five Stages*:

The so-called “stage of self-consecration,”
The teaching of the reality of the superficial
That is obtained by the grace of the mentor’s foot,
And not in any other way.¹³

As for the latter, he alludes to the need to align outer and inner aspects of enlightenment in this comment on the third stage work of purifying the virtual body of subjective elements that block its full attunement with objective reality:

Once one has attained the (fourth stage) magic body of the learner’s communion, as its homogeneous continuity is uninterrupted, one is said to “live in reality,” and characteristics of the “diamond body” are complete. The third stage magic body proceeds by purifying itself by realizing objective clear light; so though it is called “diamond body,” it is not full-fledged, (with characteristics complete).¹⁴

When it comes to the contemplative art of realizing the virtual body, it involves three main practices: making a firm resolve to realize the virtual body; checking our realization against the twelve similes of the virtual body; and relying on the mergers and seals to purify and refine it. The latter two we’ll cover in key points three and four. For now, the main method is to align our best motivation and full resolve to become a master altruist with the nearterm objective of emerging from the bliss-void translucence of freedom of mind in the form of the virtual body. This resolution is reminiscent of one of the methods Tsong Khapa described for contemplative dream-work, except that here, as in the process form of that work, the resolution is conjoined with the arts of dissolving into clear light and fully accessing the blissful openness of the death-like orgasmic

bliss/complete void mind-energy-drop. Of course, key to making this resolve in the most decisive form is the rational realization that the quickest, most effective way to realize mature altruism in this life is by way of the learner's communion; that the only way to reach that stage is to join the pure virtual body with the objective clear light; and that the only way to realize the objective clear light and purify the virtual body is to achieve the (impure) virtual body on entering the third stage. With this, we now turn to the third key point.

Recognizing the True Experience of the Virtual Body: The Twelve Similes

The teaching of the virtual body is traditionally framed in terms of twelve similes.¹⁵ Like the illusion of a person created by magic, the virtual body appears like a fully formed human body but is made of sheer, subtle energy-mind. Like the moon's reflection in various bodies of water, the virtual body can manifest in many mind-bodies at once. Like the hallucination of a person where there is only a shadow, it seems like a real body but in fact is not. Like a mirage, it shape-shifts moment-by-moment. Like a dream body, it is distinct from the coarse physical body and made of mere neural energy and mind. Like an echo, it comes out of one mind/body process, but appears as another. Like a spirit city, it manifests a natural and social environment that seems real but in fact is not. Like the illusion of an image refracted in a jewel, it is one body which can appear as multiple. Like a rainbow, it harnesses the body's five energies distinctly without blurring or clouding. Like a lightning bolt in the midst of a thundercloud, it emerges within the coarse physical body. Like a bubble formed spontaneously out of water, it erupts suddenly from the realization of emptiness. And like a mirror-image of a master altruist, it appears as a whole and complete human body, though it is only a reflection of subtle energy-mind. In explaining the appearance of the virtual body, Tsong Khapa quotes the *Five Stages*:

Free from existence and non-existence,
A well-formed heroic altruist appears,
As if reflected clearly In a flawless mirror.

Endowed with all the best forms,
This body that always fascinates
Should be shown to the good disciple;
That is called "self-consecration."¹⁶

And to explain the experience, he cites this remarkable passage from the *Esoteric Community Process*, describing the virtual body as the magnetic, gemlike personification of inner radiance and luminance which dawns from the bliss-void of clear light:

Meditate sheer diamond
In body, speech, mind scepters,
Elaborating body, speech and mind,
Become like sheer diamond.
By lights of blazing scepters,
To the extent of a hundred leagues,
You shine, the personification of joy,
Adorned by every ornament;
And the gods Brahma and Rudra
Are never able to behold you.¹⁷

The mythological reference here is to the conventional Indic gods of creation and power, who are said to be unable to conceive of the ecstatic bliss and openness of the virtual body because of their resistance to dissolving their justified, though reified, pride of self in emptiness.

As for the precursors and arts besides resolution we need to emerge from clear light in a virtual body, Tsong Khapa quotes at length from the *Four Point*:

As for the magic body, the Noble father and sons (Nagarjuna, Aryadeva and so on) claim that the "magic" is that it appears without (having) intrinsic reality, and the "body" is the (archetypal) deity body; so it is a deity body that appears without intrinsic reality. As for the originating cause, the creation stage deity-body meditation and the creation stage deity-body-upholding habit are purified by the three voids,

and hence the art and wisdom deity body freshly arises uninterruptedly like a bubble bursting forth in water or like a fish leaping from a clear stream. Furthermore, the four neuter syllables dissolve into the indestructible drop, causing the drop to arise as a deity body. The mother symbolizes void, the father symbolizes vision; their mutual kiss is the taste of vision-void arising as bliss. Like the linear short A that abides endowed with the five light rays; it is the wind-energy-mind body, hence one meditates compressing down to that.¹⁸

The allusions here to the dissolution of four syllables into one drop, and the A-stroke that harnesses the five energies like rays reflect the arts of inner fire and diamond recitation, compressing and dissolving energy-mind into the heart-drop, since these arts culminate in the orgasmic bliss-void of ultimate metaphoric clear light which yields freedom of mind and is also the material cause of the virtual body. In quoting this remarkable passage, though, Tsong Khapa is careful to remind us again that the arts of visualization and recitation that help orchestrate the death-like transition into that most profound state of blissful openness must not be confused with the objective neural reality of that state itself, which is the indispensable material cause of the real virtual body. Consider his sober words:

Thus, the intent of the instructions that explain the drop arising as deity body to be the creation of the magic body, and the drop and the syllable to be the magic body should be understood as meaning that the magic body is created from the subtle wind-energy-mind body indicated by those (drops and syllables); so the magic body should not be interpreted as the mere(ly imagined) deity body created from the transformation of the drop and syllable appearing in the mind's eye.¹⁹

In short, we must not confuse our mental image of an archetypal body, no matter how vivid, with the bliss-void energy and luminous mind which make it an actual virtual body, and which can only occur based on the death-like altered state of the ultimate metaphoric or objective clear light. Finally, before we turn to the fourth key point of this practice, we'll need to consider a special use of the similes of the virtual body which sheds more light on the practice of achieving the virtual body. Specifically, several of the similes are singled out from the twelve as especially useful or relevant to key aspects of practice. The first of these is a set of three—mirror-image, rainbow, and water-moon—which help locate the practice of the virtual body within the system of the nine mergers. In particular, the mirror-image illustrates the art of merging the disappearance of the virtual body with the dissolution into the clear lights of sleep, death, and orgasm. The rainbow simile illustrates the art of merging the reemergence of the virtual body from clear light with the resurrection of the transitional body of development in dreams, near-death and the post-coital transition. And the water-moon simile illustrates the art of merging the voluntary incarnation of the virtual body in various physical forms of embodied altruism with the emanation body in awakening, voluntary reincarnation, and the post-coital afterglow.

A fourth simile set apart from the twelve is the simile of the virtual body to a dream body. In fact, this simile is often distinguished as the most important of the twelve, for two reasons. First, it provides a clear and convincing example, accessible to all, of a body that seems fully developed but is made of subtle energy-mind. Second, it prepares us for the work of the third stage, which depends on repeatedly refining our initial, "impure" experience of the virtual body by the merger and seal practices including dream-work. This brings us to the fourth key point, the need to enhance the practice by relying on the mergers and seals.

Purifying the Third Stage Virtual Body through the Mergers and Seals

The key point here is that the initial virtual body that emerges out of the ultimate metaphoric clear light is not yet fully purified of the taints of instinctive patterns and cognitive subtle blocks that bind and impede the mind/body process. This is reflected in the terminology used to distinguish the virtual body on the third stage—as impure—compared with that which emerges from the final direct realization of clear light which is the culmination of the work of the third stage and the gateway to the fourth. Once we have finally and directly realized clear light without the need or medium of any symbolic mental image at all, the virtual body that emerges is now purged of any residual taints of aversive conditioning or compulsive instinct. That fourth stage virtual body is distinguished as "pure," and is also called the "diamond body." Since we've already explored the arts of the mergers and seals which foster the gradual refinement of the impure virtual body on the third stage, there's no need for more detail now. Here, though, are two verses Tsong Khapa cites to describe this work. The first, from the *Concise Five Stages*, focuses on the mergers:

By the energy of the furor-fire yoga,
The mind objective is great bliss.
Uniting dream and magic as one;
You should merge the three between.
Addictions become the path of wisdoms.²⁰

Here, “the three between” refers to the mergers of emerging from clear light while awake, emerging from the clear light of sleep into dreaming, and emerging from the clear light of death into the near-death transition-state.

The second verse, from the *Diamond Rosary*, focuses on the art of uniting with the virtual and actual seals through the “conducts” of complicated, uncomplicated, and extremely uncomplicated forms of intimacy:

Knowing to separate instincts from luminance,
Then (you) should perform the conducts.
Abandoning the evolutionary body,
(You) will attain the diamond body.²¹

As for the ethical intention and developmental fruition of the third stage virtual body, the near-term objective is to purge our subjectivity of learned and innate blocks to the point that we’re able to immerse our energy-minds fully and unreservedly into clear light, dispensing with the need for any symbolic image to mediate our intuition. Tsong Khapa supports this point with this verse from the *Five Stages*:

The concentration of self-consecration
And likewise the state of clear light,
Distinguished as cause and effect,
Indicate the two realities.
By the process of self-consecration,
The clear light transparency is attained.²²

Of note, commenting on this, Aryadeva paraphrases the famous verse from Nagarjuna’s foundational work on the engaged insight path, *Foundational Central Way Verses*, “Apart from realizing superficial reality, you cannot realize ultimate reality.”²³

The long-term objective of this art is to become free enough to complete the fourth stage of clear light and embark on the learner’s communion, in which we master the art of embodying spontaneous compassion, personified in the magnetic form of pure blissful openness and actualized in its “magic network” of inspired interaction. In describing the emergence of the pure virtual body on the fourth stage, Tsong Khapa quotes this passage, also from the *Five Stages*:

The aim of beings may sometimes be (realized)
By the process of self-consecration,
Which yokes consciousness with (pure) wind-energy,
And releases corresponding (intuitions like) light rays.
Just as from clear stream water,
The fish leap up so swiftly,
So from the universal void clear light
The net of magic expresses itself.²⁴

Finally, in reflecting on the art of the virtual body overall, in his chapter on the fourth stage of clear light, Tsong Khapa points out the exceptional role and benefits of this process art, as compared with the analogous arts of the engaged path such as deepening wisdom by quiescence-based equipoise and building compassion through the dreamy aftermath. Specifically, because of the non-dual merger of orgasmic bliss-void in clear light and the non-dual communion of lucid awareness and blissful energy in the virtual body, the subjectivity of the virtual body offers an integrated platform for combining the work of deepening emptiness insight and the work of accumulating altruistic spirit or “merit” simultaneously in one practice. So we close our look at the third stage virtual body with these words from Tsong Khapa:



Figure 12.1 Tsong Khapa, Master of Threefold Process Ethics

Although when orgasmic bliss takes voidness as its object, there is a door for developing a distinctive ability to purify objective obscurations through that subjectivity, in this context of the perfection stage, the magic body is (also) the substitute of the infinite stores of merit of the other vehicles. Recognizing the combination of the two is the ultimate vital key point.²⁵

The Stage of Manifest Enlightenment: Becoming Objective Translucency

With this introduction to the virtual body and the work of the third perfection stage, we're ready to cross the threshold of objective clear light and embark on the work of realizing and embodying pure enlightenment. Our brief overview of this stage will survey three key points: (1) enlightenment as the perfect attunement of subjectivity with objective reality; (2) the contemplative arts that refine the fourth stage bliss body and purge the clear mind; (3) the gemlike fruition of the diamond body.

Living in Reality: The Conjunction of Outer and Inner Enlightenment

Since enlightenment involves plumbing the most profound depths of our being and is commonly considered

the most interior of all human experiences, the very idea of clear light as transparency to objective reality may seem surprising. Nonetheless, the first key point we must face on this stage, called “manifest enlightenment,” highlights the non-dual nature of its realization: as the simultaneous and inextricable alignment of enlightenment as a microcosmic event with enlightenment as an objective reality in the natural and social worlds. We’ve already encountered the multi-dimensional nature of enlightenment in discussing the complex context for achieving the virtual body, a context which involves the conjunction of physiological, psychological, natural and social conditions. Nowhere is this clearer than in the teaching of the two enlightenments, alluded to above. In the following *Five Stages* passage cited by Tsong Khapa, Nagarjuna describes this conjunction—the momentous attainment of objective clear light—as the culmination of the final death-like dissolution of the impure virtual body which yields the dawn of the fourth perfection stage of manifest enlightenment:

(Moonlit) luminance is part of the night,
Day where bright sun-rays spread is luminance radiance,
Dusk is luminance immanence,
And gradually one’s instinctual natures go (away).
Freedom from instincts is neither night, nor day, nor dusk dark,
It is just the instant of enlightenment taught by the best mentor,
The goal of the practitioners themselves.
Dusk limit not ended, but its deep black darkness fully past,
Yet the sun has not risen—this moment (before dawn)
Is proclaimed the taintless limit of reality.
The supreme master free from confusion
Shows the outer enlightenment to the disciple,
Who attains inner bliss by this
Instant of Buddha enlightenment.²⁶

As we can see, this densely packed passage touches on all the exceptional inner and outer conditions aligned in this momentous conjunction: the outer moment just before dawn; the supreme master who acts as an external guide; the inner transmutation of compulsive instincts into great bliss; the purity of the practitioner, internally free and clear; and the consensual pronouncement of that practitioner as truly embodying in that moment archetypal enlightenment. Tsong Khapa summarizes:

Thus, since the realization of the objective clear light specifically relates to the predawn time, it is called outer enlightenment, and since the realization is accomplished by the process of the four inner voids, it is called the inner enlightenment.²⁷

The Road Ahead: Refining the Jewel in the Fire of Clear Light

Although the process path is not yet at an end, and there is still more refinement and integration that lies ahead, the profound and momentous import of this achievement reflects the fact that the refined subjectivity of the virtual body at this point allows the practitioner to directly realize emptiness as objective clear light translucence. And the import of that direct intuitive realization is that it gives the mind the untainted clarity to fully and finally see through and dissolve both the subtlest, nonverbal symbolic conditionings learned in this life and the reifying instincts underlying them. As a result, this realization frees the nascent altruist from both the learned and innate forms of self-reification which bind us, galvanizing her/his progress on the rest of the path and guaranteeing her/his eventual realization of the exceptional integrity of a master altruist. Tsong Khapa explains:

Wherefore, by this reason, by this stage of clear enlightenment, one truly attains clear light, the taintless nature of one’s body, speech, and mind becomes universal voidness—the reality of transcendent wisdom that purifies the three consciousnesses, and that thought-free and inexpressible condition is the realm of Nirvana, formless, hard to know, delivered from evolution and birth, extremely clear like the light of the sun, moon, fire and jewels.²⁸

Of course, in keeping with the radically non-dual nature of this personal attainment, realizing objective clear light simultaneously insures the attainment of the pure virtual body which furthers the altruistic aims of

others by flawlessly expressing the supreme joy of enlightenment. It may help to recall this evocative description from the *Five Stages*:

The aim of beings may sometimes be (realized)
By the process of self-consecration,
Which yokes consciousness with (pure) wind-energy,
And releases corresponding (intuitions like) light rays.
Just as from clear stream water,
The fish leap up so swiftly,
So from the universal void clear light
The net of magic expresses itself.²⁹

What the Pure Body Reveals: The Holographic Jewel Net of Clear Mind

In a sense, the pure virtual body is the jewel through which the objective clear light illumines the world. The magic net is the jewel net of Indra, king of the Vedic pantheon, an infinite holographic network of gems, each of which reflects all the others in perfect wholeness and clarity. One of the twelve similes for the virtual body, the metaphor clearly suggests to moderns the holographic network of the human mind-brain, each of whose cells is a many-faceted gem which contains and reflects the information distributed throughout the whole. And at the same time, it also suggests the holographic social network of individual human mind-brains, each of which is a microcosmic gem that reflects the macrocosmic whole, especially though the reflective magic of our mirror neurons.

In the traditional context, the metaphor suggests the way the full transparency and natural brilliance of intuitive consciousness is perfectly conducted by the gem-like network of bliss-void energy-drops which inspires and supports the virtual body. At the same time it also suggests the “magical” capacity of the virtual body’s subtle energy-mind to manifest simultaneously in multiple forms distributed across multiple body-minds, like a moon reflected in many bodies of water, or a person reflected in the endless gems of Indra’s net. In this sense, the objective clear light mind fully immersed in reality—known as “thatness”—is the fire that purifies the jewel of the virtual body; while the jewel mined from that light is the subtle lens which magnifies for the world its freeing clarity and truth. These two sides of the net of enlightenment are eloquently described in this brief verse Tsong Khapa cites from the adept Nagabodhi:

The true savior, striving
In thatness, stays hidden
In the jewel sack of the body.³⁰

Hidden within the coarse body’s subtle nervous system, the mind of the master altruist lives and works in and through transparency to others and the real, reflecting its intuitive clarity through the jewel net of the pure virtual body, the neural network fully purged and opened by the spirit of altruistic great bliss.

Holistic Gathering and Concentric Dissolving: Refining Light

Given this glimpse of the transparency called objective clear light, we now consider the contemplative arts that purge the virtual body by successive immersion in its death-like light. In effect, these arts—called holistic gathering and concentric dissolving—are extensions and refinements of the arts of kiss-connection and compression used to immerse subtle energy mind into the heart-drop and so realize the ultimate metaphoric clear light and basic freedom of mind. Tsong Khapa cites this explicit passage from the *Five Stages*:

The disciple who has gotten the private instruction,
Then learns the two kinds of yoga:
The process of holistic holding
And of serial dissolving.

From the head or the feet,
Until it reaches the heart center,
The practitioner should enter the truth limit—
That is called holistic holding.

First having made the animate and inanimate
(Environments) into clear light,
(The practitioner) should make (his/her own) nature such—
That is the (serial) dissolving process.

As breath on a mirror
Completely dissolves,
So the practitioner should enter the truth limit
Again and again.³¹

Of course, the natural and social environments that melt into clear light in the art of dissolving are in fact the archetypal world and community envisioned on the creation stage, while the body to be held or gathered into the heart is the virtual body conceived and increasingly purged from the third stage into the fourth. Here we see an elegant application of the mirror-image simile to contemplate the waking merger of death-like dissolution with the truth body, namely: the evocative meditation that even after the body-image is gone, the subtle energy inspiring it dissolves like breath on a mirror. Tsong Khapa also cites other similes for the process including Aryadeva's simile in the *Integrated Practices* likening this art of dissolution to the process of a snowball (or "snowflake" in one translation) melting in a clear stream or pond.

In unpacking the art of gathering, Tsong Khapa references the great Indian process commentator Abhyakaragupta, who explains that "holding" or "gathering" here means that the whole virtual body, being "held" by emptiness, is gathered into the clear light void. He also points out that the gathering involves not just a mental exercise but should be coordinated with the compression of the subtle energy which fuels the virtual body into the indestructible drop at the heart, prompting the process of death-like dissolution. He cites this reference from the *Four Goddess Dialogue*:

Always abide in the center of the heart,
Endowed with the blaze of great light,
Up to reaching the nine,
Abiding in the forehead and down to the foot soles,
Compress all that into a drop,
Abiding into the center of that hub.³²

Though Tsong Khapa does not comment on "the nine," we can assume that it refers to the ninth transition into clear light which culminates from the eight stage process of death-like dissolution. In any case, he does devote a good deal of attention to the fine points of these arts, unpacking a practice tradition based on visualizing the "three heroes" of diamond body, speech, and mind, nested within one another like a set of Russian dolls.

Dissolving and Gathering: The Nested Three Heroes

While different process traditions frame the actual application of these arts in various ways, Tsong Khapa reviews and integrates them, more or less as follows. Envisioning ourselves in the archetypal form of the virtual body, we take the empty shell of that body-image as the "commitment hero" personifying the diamond body, and nest within ourselves a miniature "wisdom hero" at our heart, personifying diamond speech. Finally, at his/ her heart we envision the heart drop as the sapphire blue A-stroke syllable (or exclamation point), representing the "concentration hero" and diamond mind. Conjoined with this we meditate the three seed syllables of body, speech, and mind from the diamond recitation—OM, AH, HUM—as merged into the A-stroke at the heart. Given this setup, we beam rainbow lights from the A to concentrically dissolve the natural and social environments back into our body as the commitment hero; then holistically gather the energy-mind of that body from toe and head into the wisdom hero at our heart; and finally, compress them into the concentration hero A-stroke and the A-stroke into clear light. In support of this reading, Tsong Khapa cites these lines from the *Five Stages* and *Integrated Practices*, respectively:

The magical illusion concentration (or virtual body)
Is purified by (immersion in clear light) the limit of reality.³³

And:

Superficial reality is purified by ultimate reality.³⁴

Finally, he summarizes, mentioning the need to conjoin these arts with the wisdom of emptiness and enhance them with the mergers or seal practice, striking a cautionary note. His illuminating comments bear quoting at length:

Here, relying on the two contemplations and the seal (partner), at the time of repeating the fourth void, if you do not meditate by conjoining as subject and object that bliss and void of decisive insight into reality, however you accustom yourself to the four voids coming from the mere process of compressing the energy and mind, it is impossible to realize the objective clear light. Thus it is necessary to have the way of uniting bliss and void of the sages. And in that context, though many predawn-like clear skies may arise, purged of coarse dualistic appearance, the extremely subtle dualistic appearances will not be eliminated, and the direct realization of voidness coming from one taste of the two things, subjective bliss and objective reality, will not arise. Thus you must well distinguish between (the real transparency-purified virtual body) and these conditions of the magic body which have not been (fully) purified in clear light.³⁵

Gemlike Fruition: Realizing the Diamond Body

In unpacking the path from the third stage virtual body, through the fourth stage of clear light and into the fifth stage of learner's communion, Tsong Khapa reviews the many ways in which commentators have aligned the story of Shakyamuni's enlightenment and the engaged path of altruism with the final steps on the great perfection stage. In particular, the attainment of the diamond body on the fourth stage is aligned with the diamond concentration which led to Shakyamuni's enlightenment:

By the diamond-like concentration,
At the time when gray (predawn) light arises,
He is adorned by the qualities of the magic (body),
Such as water-moon and hallucination,
He conquered all the devils.
The Shakya Savior well attained
The realistic unexcelled intuition,
Saving and helping beings,
He taught all (things') thatness.³⁶

As on the engaged path, the devils dispelled on the process path, the four demons—compulsions, self-reification, fear of death and infantile narcissism—are dissolved along with the reactive energy and instincts underlying them at the moment of altruistic enlightenment. While on the engaged path, that begins on the first stage of enlightened altruism and is completed on the remaining nine stages gradually over multiple lives, on the process path, as in the last hours of Shakyamuni's enlightenment, this triumphant fruition takes place in the fourth and fifth stages, compressed into years, days, or even hours.

This fruition consists in repeated immersion of the pure virtual body into clear light, gradually purging it of the subtle cognitive blocks that remain even after realizing objective clear light. In this sense, even the pure virtual body of the fourth stage resembles a diamond-in-the-rough that must still be further purified by being plunged in the refining fire of objective clear light, again and again. With each immersion, the translucency of the mind to the objective reality of emptiness is further refined, and the purity and expansiveness of orgasmic bliss it can enjoy and express is amplified, effectively speeding our progress through the compressed stages of enlightened altruism. Tsong Khapa concludes by reminding us that this process of synergistic refinement of virtual body and clear light mind leads directly to the same two embodiments—of matter and truth—which yield enlightened altruists or fully enlightened beings like Shakyamuni, only far more quickly and efficiently:

Therefore, until you have meditated on the direct realization of the import of thatness with the orgasmic great bliss, you will not attain the truth body (of objective clear light) that completely abandons the objective obscurations. And until you have attained the magic (virtual) body from the mere wind-energy cultivated by the objective clear light, you will not attain the learner's matter body. Since these are taught, that teaches that the union of bliss and void and the achievement of the magic body are the ultimate essence of the unexcelled vehicle and these two are the two extraordinary causes of the two bodies (of a

master altruist).³⁷

The Fifth Perfection Stage: The Communion of Superficial and Ultimate

As we near the end of our odyssey, having realized the pure bliss and clarity that are the causes of a master altruist's body and mind, we enter the phase in which our long journey reaches its final fruition. When the fully purified virtual body—real diamond body of the fourth stage—is finally and fully immersed again in objective clear light, it emerges for the first time in the integrated form which allows us to practice the learner's communion. In describing this final stage, Tsong Khapa explains why, despite the fact that both the virtual body and the clear light have been cultivated in the mode of non-dual intuition, with no distinction of subject and object, there still remains the very subtlest residue of dualism in the sense of the two—body and light—as distinct in any way. As Thurman notes, it's intriguing that Tsong Khapa explains the fifth stage work of removing any subtle distinction between the altruistic body and mind in terms that are reminiscent of how he explains the gradual convergence of the altruist's oscillating spacious and dreamy emptiness intuitions on the engaged insight path:

In that regard, before attaining the objective clear light, when the magic body achieved from the five energies' light rays is present, the mind is not the clear light of the same taste as ultimate reality. Before attaining communion, when the clear light of the same taste as the bliss-mind ultimate reality is present, there is no superficial reality body that serves as the magic body. Thus there is no communion since these two (mental and physical, superficial and ultimate realities) are merely alternating. When the body is consummated as the superficial reality magic body called "self-consecration," and the mind is consummated as the "clear light" ultimate reality, and these combine at one time in one continuum, coming together equally without alternation, then communion is attained.³⁸

Here Tsong Khapa points out that this attainment reflects the final dissolution of learned habits and innate instincts for reifying subjects and objects, people and things:

Therefore, communion in this context is just the non-dual intuition (of emptiness) that abandons all ideas that adhere to truth-status perceived in persons and objects, along with their instinctual propensities.³⁹

In addressing the question of how such a profound breakthrough and reintegration can be realized all at once after the fourth stage objective clear light, Tsong Khapa reminds us of the long path of gradual practice which gradually purged the impure virtual body of reifying habits on the third stage. And this profound fruition of such long, gradual practice also explains why, in the instant we emerge from the objective clear light, our subtle energy-mind assumes the form of the pure virtual body, now de-reified and transparent enough to merit the term, "diamond body." To illustrate this other face of communion, Tsong Khapa quotes the *Integrated Practices*:

Therefore, by such sky-like illumination, from the store of luminances that remain the same reality as voidness, all the world realms are illumined. The actuality of the indestructible diamond body, inseparably and indestructibly together like a shadow with its subtle elements, without transmigration and uncontaminated, liberated from all instincts of addictions, accomplished in mastery of whatever one wishes, like a fish leaping from water, or like suddenly sleeping and awakening, a form of a reality body of supreme joy arises; such a form being named "great master altruist," and "freedom," since one is definitely delivered from all bonds of cyclic life.⁴⁰

As a result of this profound breakthrough, we become able to stay fully immersed at great length in the objective clear light, since we no longer reify any other sense of self that could be lost through such immersion. On the other hand, despite this quantum leap, the path is not yet over, since subtle, preverbal intuitions of distinction between mind and body, self and object, superficial and ultimate remain to be analyzed on the fifth stage. Unlike the mainly affective blocks to subjective freedom removed by the time we enter the gateway to the fourth stage, the subtler blocks to be removed here are the remaining cognitive blocks to sheer objectivity. The purification of these subtle mental blocks is what is achieved by the twenty-three forms of communion to be contemplated on this stage, according to the *Five Stages*. Tsong Khapa specifically references the *Five Stages* on the four most crucial of these:

Abandoning the two notions
Of life cycle and liberation,
When all becomes one reality—
That is said to be communion ...

Having abandoned the two notions
Of material and immaterial,
The lord of practitioners who realizes peace—
Thereby attains communion.

The knower of thatness sequentially
Understands self-consecration and clear light;
And when just those become united,
This is the stage of communion.

Having critically understood apart,
The superficial and the ultimate,
When you truly commingle the two,
That is pronounced to be “communion.”⁴¹

In fact, when the subtlest blocks to these intuitions have been removed and we reach the master’s communion, where clear light mind and virtual body are inseparable as two faces of one being, there may be nothing new to learn but we’ll still need time to savor and deepen our integration of all we’ve already learned. Here too, we may choose to do that by means of the mergers or the extremely uncomplicated conduct of the seals, to deepen the impact of our prior realizations. To highlight this mastery phase of practice, Tsong Khapa quotes this eloquent passage from Nagabodhi:

Nonconceptual, profound,
Magnificent, the body of the enlightened;
This is explained as the two realities,
The superficial and the ultimate in import;
Having analytically known them separately,
Having then merged them into one,
You should meditate the uncontaminated place.
Therefore, striving you should realize,
By the kindness of the foot of the mentor,
When mentality comes clear by thatness,
Then you should engage in the conduct.⁴²

The Pure Conduct of the Third Seal: Partnering with the Universe

So while on the third and fourth stage we may still practice the mergers or seals to enhance our ability to impact others through “common” attainments like peace-making, building effectiveness, increasing abundance, or fierce compassion, by the time we’re on the fifth stage we mainly rely on the third, great seal practice: deepening and expanding our intuitive ability to commune with the blissful openness of all beings and things. In effect, this great seal practice treats the objective reality of others and the world as a universal partner to support our work on the stages of learner’s and master’s communion. Combining the inner arts of gathering and dissolving into clear light with the diamond body’s outward expression and manifestation of blissful openness, this great seal practice allows us to continually refine our communion with others and the world in the course “living in reality” through both meditation and action. In this sense, it not only continues the work of further dissolving any distinction between altruism of mind and body, sheer transparency and blissful agency, but also weaves our practice seamlessly into the intimate fabric of our new, everyday world.

Back from Death: Personifying Community and Embodying Inspiration

One aspect of the waking and sleep mergers that illustrates this seamless practice is the art of consciously using the diamond body—as personifying pure enjoyment—to return to and re-animate the coarse physical

body supporting our practice. In effect, this art involves merging the return to normal waking consciousness with the embodiment of emanation or manifestation, essentially making our ordinary body a living emanation or tangible manifestation of the selfless objectivity and bliss-void subjectivity of the clear light and virtual body, respectively. In this sense, the entire path of great perfection or great seal practice culminates in mastering this triune art: communing with the reality of others and the world, while spontaneously personifying pure inspiration, and merging these two realities inseparably together in a perfectly integrated life that perfectly embodies mature altruism.

Dematerializing the Evolutionary Body: The Perfection Stage in the *Wheel of Time*

As a bridge to our final comparison of the great perfection stage with modern science and psychotherapy, it's time for a brief encounter with the transparent process science of the great *Wheel of Time*. As the most modern and scientific of the optimal integral process traditions, the *Wheel of Time* developed a distinctive system of theory and practice which in many ways dovetails more closely with the contemporary neuroscience of self-regulation than classical process science. Of course, there's no way we can possibly do justice to so complex and refined a system of exceptional self-regulation in a few passing comments. On the other hand, our look at the optimal integral process tradition would not be complete without some mention of this crucial and highly distinctive system. This is especially true given our interest in fostering a deep dialogue between traditional process science and the science and psychotherapy of our day. So, as a middle way, let's take a quick look at five key points of divergence: (1) focus on transforming the physical body in this life; (2) the basic science of four drops and four states; (3) the path of dematerializing developmental energy, atomic structure, and chemistry; (4) the immediate goal of empty form and immutable bliss; (5) the final goal of neurochemical and neurostructural change.

Dematerializing the Body of Compulsive Development in This Life

The first distinctive feature of basic and contemplative science in the *Wheel of Time* is their unique view of the normal structure and function of the physical body, as well as the emphasis on transforming that structure and function within the span of a single lifetime. Among the many features of basic science that distinguish this system, three salient ones help flesh out the unique perspective it takes on the human body and nervous system.

First, while the classical science of the subtle body makes a clear distinction between the upper and lower circuits of the subtle nervous system above and below the heart, the *Wheel of Time* accentuates the difference. Instead of describing the polar side channels as simply triple-knotted at the heart, this system depicts them as completely switching sides at the heart. And instead of simply carrying breath energies and sexual drops throughout, it depicts the side channels of the lower body as normally also carrying urine, feces, semen and menstrual blood. While these distinctions may seem like fine points, they both make the *Wheel of Time* model more prescient and explicit, by more clearly distinguishing the upper and lower circuits we hypothetically linked to the new and old vagus and by depicting the normal functions of the lower circuit we linked to the old vagal system more graphically.

The second and third distinctive features of basic *Wheel of Time* basic science are closely linked, and both offer clues about this system of contemplative science. First, the *Wheel of Time* depicts all the channels of the nervous system, including the central channel, as normally open enough to conduct energies and drops, even without the unknotting work of contemplative self-regulation. Second, it describes the flow of energies and drops in everyday life as supporting a core experience of bliss even in normal functions like eating, sleeping, and sexual intimacy. In other words, it presents the difference between the central nervous system flow of bliss energy and chemistry in normal life and on the contemplative path not as all-or-nothing, but as merely one of degree. Complementing the first distinctive feature, these two effectively narrow the distance between the basic science of the human body-mind and the contemplative science of its transformation, presenting the path of self-regulation as more accessible.

The second main distinction we'll look at in this view of the contemplative path is its refined materialistic model of the blocks that obstruct our normal capacity for blissful openness. According to the *Wheel of Time*, the affective and cognitive blocks that limit our ability to experience the lasting bliss and pure openness of enlightenment in fact consist of developmental energy patterns inscribed in the wetware of our nervous system, and linked with an atomic microstructure that supports them. In this view, the complex of mind/ body

systems, sense faculties and action patterns we mistake for ourselves is ingrained in our nervous system by the repetition of developmental action patterns acquired in this life or transmitted from prior generations.

As a result, the contemplative path involves de-materializing this complex network of developmental structure and function, so that we can access and master our full, natural capacity for pure intuition and immutable bliss. This means that our process practice depends on having a compulsive mind/body process to purify in this life. So this tradition does *not* include a system of mergers meant to prepare us to use death, afterlife, and rebirth as opportunities to embody enlightenment. This distinctive view of the path further highlights the close family resemblance linking the *Wheel of Time's* approach to life and self-transformation with our view of the neural basis of development and self-transformation.

Four Drops Four States: A Complex Map of Neural Function and Change

The second distinctive aspect of *Wheel of Time* science is its hierarchical model of neural structure, function, and states of consciousness. Instead of depicting the layers of the subtle body-mind as three concentric circles centered around a single heart-drop, this system maps it into four levels, arrayed along the vertical axis of the central channel and supported by four distinct neural drops, each reflecting a dynamic balance of polar “male” and “female” neurochemistry. In an elegant mind/body non-dualism that allows this tradition to streamline the classical system of mergers and seals, each of these four drops is aligned with one of the four increasingly more profound states of consciousness—waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and orgasm—and, as in our modern brain model, with higher and lower complexes arrayed down the neural axis. So, the waking state is aligned with “body” drops at the crown and navel complexes; the dream state with “speech” drops at the throat and pelvic complexes; the deep sleep state with “mind” drops at the heart and sexual complexes; and the state of orgasm with “intuition” drops at the navel and sex-organ-tip complexes.

Purging the Four Drops of Developmental Energies and Molecular Structures

Given this elegant model, the structure of the path can be mapped out in equally clear and concise terms. Once the path is defined as purging the four drops of the developmental energies and molecular structures that block our ability to tap the four levels of bliss they support, these drops can be seen as body, speech, mind, and intuition diamonds-in-the-rough, to be purified by process practice into the four diamond bodies of enlightenment. The four altruistic embodiments achieved as the fruit of the path are the familiar three—emanation, enjoyment, and truth—plus the intuition embodiment which realizes the objective reality of ultimate truth.

Even more elegantly, this fourfold map then rolls out into the map of the stages of the path, as well as the system of progressive arts that achieve them. The arts of withdrawal and contemplation on the creation stage purify the waking state drop into the body diamond/emanation body; the arts of energy-control and retention on the perfection stage purify the dream state drop into the speech diamond/enjoyment body; and the arts of mindfulness and concentration purify the deep sleep and orgasm drops respectively into the mind diamond/reality body and the intuition diamond/truth body.

In short, this complex mapping of four states of consciousness onto a six-tiered vertical model of neural structure and an eight-drop model of neurochemistry better approximates our modern triune brain map of consciousness, with its complex vertical mapping of structures and its detailed analysis of neurotransmitters. In addition, it maps the contemplative path as a gradual journey of progressive self-regulation of deeper and more primal neural structure and function. In fact, this system models the process of self-regulation in ways that seem surprisingly modern. First, it describes the unlearning process as the progressive dissolution of patterns of developmental energy—reactive habits of body, speech, mind, and intuition—maintained by subtle molecular structures that are not innate in the mind or nervous system but acquired through intergenerational transmission and childhood development.

Second, it describes the re-learning process as the progressive mastery of the innate clarity of mind-energy and blissful plasticity of neural chemistry at the levels of the waking body, dream symbols, deep sleep mind, and orgasmic intuition. In other words, it models self-regulation as substituting conscious awareness, positive energy, and neural plasticity for mindless conditioning, reactive energy, and neurochemical resistance to learning. A final intriguing point of divergence from the classical process practices is that the *Wheel of Time* teaches students to tap into the central channel not at the navel, sexual organ, or heart, but at the mid-brow complex, where modern models of self-regulation locate the newest and highest order region for self-

regulation distinctive to humans: the prefrontal cortex.

Empty Form and Immutable Bliss: The Master Altruist's Lucid Body and Mind

The fruits of the two final phases of the *Wheel of Time* perfection stage—mindfulness and concentration—are often seen as this system's distinctive forms of the virtual body and clear light mind. Their unique way of presenting enlightened subjectivity and objectivity further illustrate the prescient nature of this tradition. Combining the archetypal body-image, developed on the creation stage through withdrawal and contemplation, with the inner arts of energy-control and retention and the outer arts of real or virtual intimacy on the perfection stage, the empty form bodies born of mindfulness and concentration are analogous to the impure and pure virtual bodies of the third and fourth classical perfection stages.

Though generally similar to the subjectivity of the virtual body, the empty form body is distinguished by its emphasis on inspired intuition as free not just from reactive energies and instinctive patterns but also from the molecular microstructure that supports them and blocks our potential for blissful openness. So the body of empty form is an inspired, intuitive self-consciousness of an archetypal form of agency that is "empty of materiality," that is, devoid of reactive habit energies and their molecular imprints. Unlike our normal reactive personality, which is like an automaton maintained by the unconscious neural imprints of aversive conditioning, the empty form body is an inspired personification of purely present self-consciousness and fully actualized self-regulation, a perfect master of the art of conscious living.

As for the analogue of clear light, called immutable bliss, it represents the enlightened mind's intuitive awareness of its own primally blissful and empty nature. Innately present within the mind/body process of all living beings as the essential nature of all four states and drops, it is realized with increasing clarity and directness by the subjectivity of empty form that seeks to know it. Known as the great inspiration and the universal spirit naturally present in all beings, immutable bliss is seen as the objective nature of life, inseparable from the elemental awareness that pervades all forms of bodily matter, especially the prime element of bodily space.

Immutable bliss is realized when the subjectivity of empty form can immerse itself single-mindedly in realizing its own objective nature, until its subjective and objective aspects both share the one taste of blissful emptiness. Specifically, the spaciousness or emptiness here is the mind's recognition of its own natural freedom from any form of creation or destruction, a freedom or emptiness which is also recognized as its true "form." Like the objective clear light of the classical systems, immutable bliss opens and expands the individual mind outwards in and through communion with the blissful openness that is the unchanging objective reality of all nature and life. Incidentally, this elegant view of sublime lasting happiness as the objective reality of nature and life is the inspiration for the title of this book, sustainable happiness.

Neural Transformation through Gradual Energetic-Chemical-Structural Change

With this lightning overview of the remarkably modern science of the *Wheel of Time*, we're ready to conclude our survey with a glimpse of the way this system models fundamental mind-body change. Unlike the classic process traditions of the *Esoteric Community*, *Death Terminator*, or *Supreme Bliss Wheel*, this system maps the gradual process of core psychological change in terms of a quantitative algorithm of cumulative simultaneous shifts in neural energy, developmental microstructure, and neurochemistry. As in the classical systems, the *Wheel of Time* path from initiation and creation stage up to mastery of inner fire and sublimation through the perfection stage arts of energy-control and retention is aligned with the stages of accumulation and preparation. According to its uncommon map, though, once inner fire and sublimation have been initially mastered, we begin a process of amassing bliss-void intuition-dissolutions by drawing red female bliss drops from the sexual complex up the central channel to the crown and simultaneously drawing white male bliss drops from the crown down the channel to the tip of the sexual organ. Each pair of drops released and channeled in this way is then retained and accumulated, building two complementary "strings" or "stacks" of sublimated drops that meet at the heart and then carry on: a white, male string descending from crown to sexual-tip; and a red, female string ascending from sexual-tip to crown.

Simultaneous with the incremental sublimation of each of these drops, we experience a visceral intuition of immutable bliss and emptiness, along with the stilling of one of the reactive energies flowing with the breath and the dissolution of one of the molecular imprints that make up the neural architecture of our compulsive

body and life. After 1,800 pairs of these drops have been accumulated—initially by energy-control and retention, then by the inner art of mindfulness and the outer art of intimacy—we first realize the initial, qualified empty form body akin to the impure virtual body, then gradually progress from the preparation stage to the insight stage. At that point, we realize the unqualified empty form body, directly realize immutable bliss without any need for symbolic images, and begin practicing the art of single-minded concentration.

As the ten stages of enlightened altruism are compressed into the last two perfection stages on the classical map, the twelve stages of enlightened altruism recognized in the *Wheel of Time* are compressed into the final stage of this process, by applying single-minded concentration to uniting the unqualified empty form body and immutable bliss in one taste. This final stage involves the accumulation of the remaining 19,800 pairs of drops that complete the complementary male and female strings from crown to sexual-tip and back. These drops in turn support the experience of 19,800 moments of immutable bliss and emptiness, the stilling of the same number of reactive breath-energies, and the dissolution of the remaining molecular imprints that make up the neural architecture of our ordinary, compulsive body and life.

While the *Wheel of Time* system describes the final attainment of altruistic mastery as involving the deconstruction of our coarse, material body, it also describes the union of empty form and immutable bliss that is the master altruist's body-mind as "supported" by the accumulation of the 21,600 drops within the subtle central nervous system. So we must bear in mind that the de-materialization in question is not to be taken literally, as a withdrawal from the material world into a pure world of mind. According to the *Wheel of Time*, the blissful intuition of emptiness equally deconstructs any reified construct of material form *and* any reified construct of formless mind.⁴³ Technically, then, the material structure of our habitual body isn't literally de-materialized, but de-reified and transformed into the "subtle," "empty," or "open" matter of immutable bliss energy and drops.

In this sense, it may be more helpful to think of this system's emphasis on dissolving the material body of reactive molecular structures as dismantling the inertia or shadow of neural imprints and conditioned habits that have been compartmentalized by repression into a body of unconscious delusion and automatized reactivity. The agency of the master altruist is not one of disembodied mind, but rather a fully self-conscious, self-actualized form of embodiment with no shadow of repressed imprints and no inertia of unconscious conditionings.

This reading would explain the distinctive centrism of this system. The *Wheel of Time's* empty form is not formless but is said to manifest in full the life-cycle of our universe, with its stars, suns, moons, planets, oceans, continents, life-forms and atoms, seen as evolving throughout space-time in the form of its emptiness of intrinsically real creation or destruction. At the same time, his/her immutable bliss intuition is not stuck in any one form, but simultaneously manifests the non-local Nirvana of our universe, seen as immanent and pervading all beings and things through the universal inspiration and energy of great bliss present in all beings and things throughout space-time.⁴⁴ In this way, the *Wheel of Time* personifies the interconnectedness and unfolding of all our lives and minds, stretching its inspiration and intuition throughout space and time to meet and help us through the interface where our reactive suffering becomes sustainable happiness.

The Perfect Union of Inspiration and Clarity in Modern Science and Psychotherapy

This brief comparison of the classical process science of the traditional optimal integral systems with the modern process science of the *Wheel of Time* brings us to our final comparison of the great perfection stage with modern neuroscience and psychotherapy. While there is obviously no one simple model or analogy that can be drawn between this exceptional system of contemplative self-regulation and our modern science and clinical practice, it may help us all assimilate the profound and magnificent universe of this tradition if we turn our attention to four points of comparison, most of which we've already touched on.

As for basic science, I draw your attention to two phenomena that could serve as models for the virtual body and clear light mind, respectively: the life-altering neuropsychology of near-death experience; and the exceptional neurobiology of the euphoric sub-type of temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE).

As an example of a plausible model of the virtual body, the neuropsychology of near-death experience has some compelling points of similarity.⁴⁵ As in a lucid dream, but made more profound by the extreme neurophysiology of clinical brain death, many who report near-death experiences describe feeling they have a bodily sensorium and perspective separable from their gross physical body at the same time as they experience a sense of subjective continuity. After "returning" to their normal sense of embodiment, many still feel a fundamental shift in their subjectivity as it relates to their physical body and present life.