

8 The Art and Science of Reconstructing Life

Regarding that (purification of our ordinary perception of the life-cycle), a person who has previously collected the evolutionary action which is the cause of taking birth in the womb dies and attains the between state; then the between-state being enters the womb of the mother and, having remained there, finally gets born outside; then having taken a wife he performs the deeds of having sons and daughters, (so) having taken (all of those ordinary life-cycle) things as the objects of correspondence, it is in correspondence with those that one meditates the Creation Stage.

(Tsong Khapa, *Great Exposition of the Poetic Path*¹)

The wisdom of the constructive phase of process practice is clear in the way the art of role-modeling comes to life through the insight-guided narrative imagery mapped out by the creation stage. As role-modeling helps gradually transform our traumatic images of self and world, we find ourselves in the integration phase, entering the transformative realm opened up by the optimal integral process. If the aim of process imagery is to purify our ordinary perception of self and world, the optimal integral form of that process is to guide us through nothing less than a complete, insight-oriented revision of the ordinary life-story or narrative which frames that perception. This revision is made possible by a counter-narrative of ideal self-creation which guides the creation stage, and works to transform our ordinary, traumatic experience of life into the impassioned experience of a heroic altruist.

In essence, the basic role-modeling imagery traditionally used to introduce us to the process path works like a snap-shot, giving us a taste of our potential to transform our reactive, childhood experience of self and world into a corrective experience of proactive being and living. Yet, since our images of self, others, and the world we share are set in a complex narrative that locates us within an ongoing story of individuality, family, community, and environment, the full art of transformative imagery in the optimal integral creation stage sets that snap-shot within an unfolding counter-narrative meant to guide a full reconstruction of our experience of our self and world over time. Tsong Khapa explains the rationale for this in his *Great Exposition*:

Here, (in a context) wherein “ordinary conceptual thought” is explained to be an inner monologue having the form of “I” and “mine” and subject and object, then when the text refers to “the suffering which has the nature of existence” the contextual meaning is that “(the inner monologue) is the chief cause of suffering which has the nature of existence.”²

While it seems hard to imagine any narrative sense of self that doesn’t revolve around the first person pronouns, a remarkable study by health psychologist Larry Scherwitz lends some very strong support to the idea that the statistically normal way we cling to our constructs of “myself” and “my life” in fact makes us prone to suffering and disease.³ In an elegant piece of research based on the findings of a multi-center prospective study of coronary artery disease (CAD) by the National Institutes of Health, Scherwitz developed a powerful way to tease out the risk related to a mental habit he called self-involvement. By counting the number of times per phrase study participants used a first person pronoun in their unstructured interviews, he arrived at a novel way to measure one of the traits thought to be part of the Type-A personality cluster.

After analyzing the correlations between self-involvement and the incidence of coronary disease and its complications, Scherwitz came upon a series of findings that were as unexpected as they were hard to contest. Not only did a habit of frequently saying “I,” “me,” and “mine” turn out to be a statistically significant risk factor predicting the incidence of the disease, it also appeared to be a major risk factor for morbidity and mortality. Specifically, the more self-involved cohort of people who developed the disorder were significantly more likely to have a heart attack, and the more self-involved cohort of those with heart attacks were more likely to have a fatal event. In fact, among those with heart attacks, self-involvement turned out to be a

stronger predictor of death than all the other variables tracked in the study, including smoking history, high blood cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, and depression. These findings, which are utterly unexpected and anomalous for modern biomedicine, are precisely what a Buddhist physician or psychologist would predict,⁴ given the classical analysis expressed by Tsong Khapa.

Taken together with the findings of current stress research⁵ and positive psychology,⁶ this kind of research clearly suggests that clinging to a self-reifying, traumatic narrative really does create needless suffering. Since our ordinary life-narrative is structured around the biological events of development, birth and death, the counter-story of the creation stage must likewise be structured around the corresponding nodes in the life-narrative of a heroic altruist. Tsong Khapa alludes to this in our opening quote. Though our modern one-life worldview sequences those events differently from the multi-life worldview of Buddhism, the creation stage art of narrative reconstruction can be made to fit our ordinary narrative with surprisingly minor revisions.

The Art of Narrative Self-Creation: Restructuring the Story and Facts of Life

The traditional formula for how the insight-guided imagery of the creation stage can fully “purify” our ordinary life narrative revolves around three biological events—development, birth, and death—which it takes as the three “basic things to be purified.” In these three facts, we see more or less the same biological main events we would recognize as pivotal to life, although the tradition naturally views them based on the *karmic* assumption that our development in this life is continuous with a death in a previous life. This is why, as our opening passage suggests, the traditional sequence of events to be revised is death, development, and birth, rather than (intrauterine) development, birth, and death. The other main difference follows from the same assumption. Traditionally, the phase I’ve called development is not seen as limited to development *within* the womb, but includes two sub-phases: the first stretching from the death in a prior life to conception, and the second from conception in the womb to birth. This pre-conception phase is described not simply as development but more broadly as a death-life transition and called the between state or *bardo*.⁷

While the traditional sequencing of the main events in our ordinary life narrative doesn’t exactly match our modern view of life, as I’ve said, this cross-cultural gap can be bridged if we take the Buddhist view as consistent with our evolutionary view that the physical and mental raw materials for our development come not out of nowhere or from God but from the mind/ body processes of individuals from prior generations.⁸ More to the point, a psychological reading of the act of consciously recreating our unexamined life narrative must begin with the death of our identification with a reified image and construct of self. If and only if we’re ready to voluntarily die to our traumatized sense of self can we have the mental space and breathing room to begin envisioning and embarking on our transition to a new, proactive self, life, and world.

Given this cross-cultural adjustment, we can now look at the process of revising our ordinary view of these basic facts of life, traditionally called “conversion.” This process is conceived as a cognitive-perceptual restructuring of the basic facts of life. No mere reframing, it is meant to “convert” the sense and reference of these facts, in a way that helps restructure the biological life-cycle into raw material for the creation of a consciously chosen multi-life-cycle and way of life. The basic biological fact of death is imaginatively converted into a way of embodying unconditional openness to reality or truth; the basic fact of development or life-transition is converted into a way of embodying the pure enjoyment, aesthetic experience or empathic expression of radical open-mindedness; and the basic fact of birth or life is converted into a way of embodying the incarnation or concrete manifestation of pure open-mindedness.

The Three Conversions and the Threefold Embodiment of Altruism

These three conversions assume a threefold embodiment of altruism which expands on a framework we explored in part 2. Specifically, it expands on the twofold framework of altruism—as the union of pure openness of mind and full embodiment of compassion—by dividing the embodiment of compassion in two; the expressive aspect of compassion, and its physical manifestation. In either case, the parallel is no accident but reflects the intentional congruence of the exoteric path of engagement with the esoteric path of process-oriented self-transformation. In effect, the insight-guided path of narrative self-creation in the process tradition figures as a quicker, multi-modal form of the transformative art Chekawa described, “The aim of this (practice) is to turn the evolution of five toxic (mind/body) systems into a path to enlightenment.”

Of course, these three very general facts of life don’t begin to exhaust the biographical details we think of

as our ordinary life narratives, especially not in the textured way we examine our story in our inner monologue or the dialogue of psychotherapy. Yet the generic nature of the counter-narrative we generate through the three conversions of the creation stage is not meant to address all particulars. Instead, its archetypal form helps us gain an objective perspective on our myopic story of self, the better to break its self-limiting grip on our imagination and perception.

In essence, the work of the three conversions is not to change our view of the minutia of our default story of life but rather to challenge us to completely revise the tacit assumptions about ourselves and the life-cycle that make up the basic form of our stories of life. Our ordinary sense of ourselves as thrown into the world by superhuman forces and caught on a wheel of survival that drives us to repeat the tragic cycle of compulsive development, mindless reproduction and traumatic death, is reframed as the archetypal tale of our death to compulsive life, followed by our self-creative development and manifestation of a life of heroic altruism and pure genius. Within this counter-narrative, the supposedly given facts of death, development, and birth are transformed into three narrative nodes in the triumphant story of our complete transformation of ourselves into models of optimal altruistic development.

In what follows, we'll explore the way the imagery of narrative conversion works to deepen the role-modeling process on the creation stage path of insight. Although this art is only fully elaborated in the imagery of the optimal integral process, the principles of self-creation which guide the optimal integral creation stage are tacitly at work in the constructive phase of the three introductory levels of process-oriented practice.⁹ Set within the sevenfold framework of the two oldest and most common performance process practices of wisdom, we'll explore the three conversions that define the art of narrative self-creation. The two practices revolve around the prime male and female archetypes of philosophical-psychological-scientific genius in both the engaged and process traditions: the crown prince, *Sheer Brilliance*, and the mother goddess, *Transcendent Wisdom*. Before we turn to our initial meditative experiment with this art, it may help to briefly review the key points in the practice.

The Conversions in Context: The Framework of Narrative Imagery and Affirmation

Traditionally, the actual practice of purifying our ordinary life narrative based on the three conversions is sandwiched between preliminary and concluding steps, which overlap with the seven steps of the role-modeling process explored in chapter 7. Of the three preliminary points, the first—building pure motivation—overlaps with the four steps of admiring, welcoming, disclosing, and enjoying; while the second and third—establishing pure wisdom and perfect security—come between the fourth step of enjoying and the fifth step of requesting help.

Grounded in these three preliminary points, the three points of actual practice are the three conversions—of death, development, and rebirth—which culminate in the recreation of one's ordinary self and life as a threefold embodiment of heroic altruism. These three points all overlap with the fifth role-modeling step of requesting help.

Once we've arrived at our new form of life through narrative self-transformation, we come to the two concluding points—rehearsing a lifestyle of heroic altruism and closing the practice session. Of these, rehearsing also overlaps with fifth role-modeling step of requesting help, while closing overlaps with the sixth and seventh role-modeling steps: requesting constancy and dedication. So, the actual art of narrative self-revision on the creation stage path of insight is effectively inserted in the sevenfold role-modeling process as an expanded journey of requesting and receiving help purifying and transforming our ordinary perception of life.

Another key aspect of this narrative insight practice is its dramatic use of a handful of affirmative formulas of intuitive wisdom and narrative conversion as performative statements which effectively prime and enact the change we're seeking to make. This practice begins with the use of the two great affirmations—of vivid imagery and enlightened dignity—to evoke and pronounce our generation of the preliminary factors of motivation and wisdom. And it concludes with the use of the three great affirmations which seal the conversion of our ordinary life narrative to the visionary narrative of a heroic altruist.

If you recall, there are two great affirmations which serve to ground our vivid imagery and enlightened dignity in the intuitive wisdoms of illusory aftermath and spacious equipoise respectively: "*I have a pure nature which is the natural purity of all things,*" and "*I have a self whose nature is the diamond intuition of emptiness.*" These are key mnemonics for establishing the motivation and wisdom we need for an effective conversion, since establishing that our imagery is both vivid and transparent helps to ground our practice in a truly positive

affective state, while establishing the awareness which holds that imagery in the selfless dignity of radical open-mindedness helps insure that that ground is purified and sealed with intuitive wisdom.

In effect, the third preliminary—establishing perfect security—simply affirms that our minds are utterly safe and secure from the disturbing influence of stress and trauma, since they are sealed within the firewall of unconditional compassion and selfless wisdom by virtue of our vivid imagery and enlightened dignity. While this firewall is set up in various ways in various practices, such as the shields we set up with the *Healing Mother*, for our purposes we can reduce this setup to its simplest form by imagining that our minds are emanating an impenetrable shield made of a blissful flow as hard as diamond, and a discriminating analysis as all-consuming as a supernova. We can then check and seal the truth of this visualization with the affirmation, “*I am safe within the firewall of diamond compassion and blazing wisdom!*”

Pronouncing the Three Conversions: The Poetics of Self-Creation

Each of the three conversions consists in a signature sequence of imagery and is sealed by a performative affirmation. The conversion of death into a path to true open-mindedness involves a sequence of imagery that rehearses the dissolution of our mind/body process as in the course of dying or the similar state-transitions into deep sleep or sexual orgasm. It is sealed by the affirmation, “*I now take death as a path to embodying truth!*” The conversion of development into a path to the joyful expression of creative openness involves a sequence of imagery that rehearses the reemergence of mind/body complexity which takes place in the course of intrauterine development or similar reconstructive states like dreaming and the afterglow of sexual experience. It is sealed by the affirmation, “*I now take development as a path to embodying bliss!*” And finally, the conversion of ordinary birth or life into a path to manifesting heroic altruism involves a sequence of imagery that rehearses the fruition of development which takes place in the course of full maturation and similar states, such as the normal waking state or consummated mature love. It is sealed by the affirmation, “*I now take rebirth as a path to manifesting heroic mastery!*” Tsong Khapa summarizes the logic of these conversions, pointing out how the vivid mental imagery of our new life narrative counteracts ordinary perceptions while the self-creative formulas of enlightened pride counteract ordinary conception:

The Creation Stage meditation on the habitat celestial mansion and the inhabitant deity was taught as the antidote to both ordinary perception and ordinary conception. Thus, through familiarization with the perception that gives rise to the habitat celestial mansion and the inhabitant deity, one will get rid of ordinary perception, and through the thoughts “*I am (the Buddha) Immovable,*” and “*I am (the Buddha) Illuminator,*” and so on, (one will get rid of) ordinary pride. Having eliminated ordinary pride, (one’s identity) is transformed into divine pride.¹⁰

As for concluding points, the most crucial is the act of rehearsing the lifestyle of heroic altruism. This involves a sequence of imagery that rehearses the activities of heroic altruism: creating an altruistic community; marshaling the ideal environment and resources of that community; and transforming the world and all life into an ideal environment for the universal development and spread of heroic altruism. This enactment is obviously crucial to priming the mind/body process to manifest a life of heroic altruism, with all its necessary supporting factors and communal benefits. And, as in our prior experiments, this enhanced role-modeling practice is closed with the final steps of requesting constancy and dedication, which may include requesting help on all stages of the path or dedicating all our efforts to success on those stages.¹¹

To take the next step towards exploring this art of self-creative imagery, it’s time to turn to our first meditative experiment, based on the performance process practice of *Sheer Brilliance* (a.k.a. *Sheer Eloquence*). As before, directions and affirmations appear in italics. To prime your mind for experiment 8.1, please refer to the image of *Youthful Sheer Brilliance* in the color insert.

Meditative Experiment 8.1: Embodying *Sheer Brilliance*

*In as peaceful and uplifting a place as possible,
With or without real offerings or images
Of your mentor or archetype of Brilliance,
Settle into a comfortable, stable posture,
And clear your energy with a deep and full sigh
Or with nine rounds of alternate nostril breathing.*

Then gradually shift into a kinder, gentler breath-rhythm
 And use that rhythm, centered at your heart,
 As a focal point to center your whole body-mind
 In a meditative state of greater clarity and calm.
 Then recite mentally or out loud the following
 Performance script, based on the sevenfold role-modeling process
 Of Sheer Brilliance, pausing after each section
 For as long as you like to envision its imagery,
 Focus on your experience, or contemplate its meaning.

1. *Evoking and Admiring a Vision of Sheer Brilliance*

“Suddenly the whole universe, including my body-mind, Returns to its natural state of pure energy and openness.

I HAVE THE PURE NATURE WHICH IS THE NATURAL PURITY OF ALL THINGS!

In the open space before me, your living, breathing presence dawns,
 Hovering like the sun’s reflection in water, in the midst of which
 Erupts a citrine gold syllable G! of 3-D laser light,
 Resonating with the optimistic sound of your voice,
 Beaming a rainbow aura all around, which purges all ailing beings
 And delights all awakened ones, inviting their wisdom
 To return like a rainbow wave, gathering back into the G!
 Until it glows like a sun-flare, beams an orange-gold orb
 That assumes your form, as the eternal youth who speaks the truth,
 Soulmate of the goddess, *Transcendent Wisdom*.
 Amid the ivory towers of your realm of pure science,
 Your sunny face unfolds a Victor’s smile and eyes
 Moist with unconditional love. Over your topknot of black hair
 Your right hand wields the light-saber of impeccable wisdom
 While at your heart your teaching hand upholds the stem of a lotus,
 Blossoming a Transcendent Wisdom text at your left shoulder.
 At ease in heavenly silks, you bear all the marks and signs
 Of perfect altruism, and the living gems of transcendent virtue.”

1a. *Inviting Your Mentor’s Spirit to Ground Your Vision*

“Your form glows like a living lamp, lit from within
 At the crown, throat, and heart by diamond, ruby and sapphire light
 Exclamation points, reflecting your awakened body, speech and mind,
 And emitting the primal breath-energy sounds, OH AH UM,
 Along with an aura of sunset brilliance, that beams five gem-toned
 Intuitive lights to develop all beings and worlds all around
 And invite your intuitive genius and the spirits of all altruists
 To melt into you and merge as one! Though, in reality,
 You neither come nor go, your acts of loving wisdom dawn
 To suit the minds you tame. Please come to stay, eternal youth!”

1b. *Taking Refuge in Your Role-Model’s Example*

“Warmed by the brilliance of your open-mindedness,
 All mother earthlings and I take refuge in your shining example.
 To heal and free all sensitive beings I will conceive
 Your altruistic spirit of pure love and sheer openness, in this life,
 As quickly as possible, and develop myself and all being
 Until we all reach true genius and perfect this world!”

2. *Welcoming Sheer Brilliance into Your World*

“In the presence of your freeing truth, all experience has the singular taste
 Of blissful openness, pervading the mind and all the senses!
 Welcoming you gratefully into my world, I offer
 A sun-shower of sense delights—the most exquisite sights,

Sounds, scents, tastes and textures, scented waters,
Incense, flowers, lights, music, and delicacies—
Converging toward you from everywhere, horizon and sky,
Like goddesses joining your god-like mind and senses!
Fully and freely I share with you all my resources,
Virtues, and every aspect of my intimate life,
My mind, body, dreams and visions, and the blissful sphere
Of my inmost truth, unveiled by habits of thought or speech,
Plus this precious earth, with its oceans, continents,
Wonders, forests, waters, and infinite web of life!”

3. *Fully Disclosing your Faults, Limits, and Blocks*

“Regretting all the negative instincts and habits I’ve indulged,
All the patterns that limit and block me from acquiring your qualities
And emulating your way of being, from the depths of my heart
I admit them all to you now, ask your acceptance and help,
And firmly resolve from here on to avoid and unlearn every one.”

4. *Enjoying the Qualities of Sheer Brilliance*

“Though all things are empty of any non-relative being,
Filled with gratitude I enjoy all the myriad forms
Of happiness you experience and share with all life,
And all the transcendent virtues that serve as their cause.”

4a. *Enhancing Enjoyment with the Four Boundless Moods*

“May all beings have real happiness and its causes!
May we all be freed from all suffering and its causes!
May we all enjoy and savor all excellent things!
May we all know unwavering equanimity!” (Repeat 3X)

5. *Requesting/Receiving Recognition and Protection*

“From your heavenly realm of pure science and healing art,
Please shower us with profound and magnificent teachings
To help cool, develop and nurture these lotus groves
Of sensitive beings, spreading the genius of pure intuition.
Moved by your loving care for all life, from your body, speech, and mind,
Diamond, ruby, and sapphire lights and nectars beam
First in sequence, then all together, to melt in sequence
Then all together into my three points, purging my blocks
Of body, speech, mind and action, recognizing
My fourfold genius and planting the seeds of enlightenment,
Finally sending a miniature double of you who dissolves
Through my crown, throat, and heart, melting my body, speech and mind
Into your blissful openness, where we merge like water in water.
I AM THE SELF WHOSE NATURE IS
THE DIAMOND INTUITION OF OPENNESS!
Immersing myself as one with the singular taste of your
Blissful openness, I feel completely sealed within
The diamond sphere of your unconditional care and love
And the supernova fire of your intuitive wisdom.
I AM SAFE WITHIN THE FIREWALL OF
DIAMOND COMPASSION AND BLAZING WISDOM!”

5a. *Making Death a Way to Embody Pure Openness*

“Now that you and I have dissolved, along with any
Trace of our ordinary bodies, minds, lives, and worlds,
Just as we would in the process of dying, I take this space
Of sheer openness, free from distinctions, as my true body,
In which the clarity of bliss illumines everyone

And everything's ultimate freedom from any non-relative
Being, essence, nature, identity or objectivity.
I EMBODY THE ULTIMATE TRUTH OF SHEER BRILLIANCE!"

5b. *Making Development a Way to Embody Enjoyment*

"In the deep space of blissful openness, my innate intuitive
Wisdom dawns as an orb of brilliance like the rising sun
Mirrored in water, out of which bubbles a 3-D gold
Syllable G of citrine light like a sun-flare sword,
Beaming a rainbow aura through all worlds everywhere,
Purifying all ordinary beings and delighting all
The enlightened, invoking a wave of gratitude and blessings
That returns to melt back into me as the syllable G.
Now shimmering with the citrine gold of *Sheer Brilliance*,
My intuitive genius as G emits a sunrise glow
Out of which my joy assumes the youthful form
Of *Sheer Brilliance*, orange-gold, holding a text and sword.
Lit from the crown, throat, and heart by sun-discs holding
Exclamation points of diamond, ruby, and sapphire light,
My body is filled with the gem-toned clarity of fivefold
Intuitive genius, and glows as if with a rainbow aura.
I EMBODY THE PURE ENJOYMENT OF SHEER BRILLIANCE!"

5c. *Making Life a Way to Embody Compassion*

"Now that I've re-created myself in the nascent form
Of *Sheer Brilliance*, the heroic altruist, it's time to emerge
From the womb of my mentor's blissful openness and be reborn
In mature form, as the master altruist *Sheer Brilliance*.
All around me I hear the five goddesses of *Transcendent Wisdom*
Calling me to remember my commitments and pledges:
To re-enter the world, embodying compassion, and model
The altruist's way—purifying, transforming, and enhancing
The lives and worlds of all beings throughout space and time.
As the sounds of their voices raise goose bumps and the hairs on my neck,
My body and mind melt with compassion into the sun-disc
And G at my heart, which melt in turn into my heart-drop,
Dissolving in blissful openness like water poured in water.
Suddenly out of the womb of openness my intuitive mind
Reemerges with the brilliance of a sunrise mirrored in water,
Out of which my clear voice flares as the light syllable G,
Radiating an aura that becomes my body as *Sheer Brilliance*,
Then beaming lights from my heart invite the five goddesses
Of *Transcendent Wisdom* to join me and seal my integration,
By pouring wisdom-nectar through my crown, filling me
Until it overflows as a *Boundless Life* Buddha-crown.
I EMBODY THE MANIFEST FORM OF SHEER BRILLIANCE!"

6. *Requesting Constancy Through Affirmation*

"Facing you now as an equal, I ask you please to stay
With me as my example while I practice realizing
A master altruist's life of embodying *Sheer Brilliance*.
Thrilled for me, my mentor-archetype, *Sheer Brilliance*, repeats
The affirmation coiled around the sun and G at his heart,
MAY ALL REACH PURE GENIUS!
As he repeats it, the affirmation glows and emits
A duplicate of 3-D citrine light which he exhales
Out his mouth and sends my way to inhale deep into my heart,
Where it coils clockwise around my sun-disc's rim, circling
My heart syllable G as six 3-D citrine syllables

Arrayed equidistant around the sun, facing out:
 MAY ALL REACH PURE GEN-IUS!
 The affirmation wheel stands like a ring of sun-flares at my heart
 That lights, warms, and resonates through my whole body and mind.”



Figure 8.1 The Affirmation Ring of Sheer Brilliance

As you recite the mantra 7, 21, 108 or more times, imagine it Rotating counterclockwise so fast it appears to be standing still, While the sun disc beneath it revolves like an eight-spoke wheel Clockwise in the same invisible way. See the affirmation ring Heating up until it beams rainbow lights through your pores and all Around the world, gathering the knowledge, reflection and intuitive Wisdom of all learned and enlightened beings and retrieving them To dissolve back into itself, making the affirmation wheel glow Even more until it beams to all beings and worlds all around, Purifying all their toxic emotions, traumatic habits and mental Blocks, transforming them all into forms of Sheer Brilliance, and Enhancing their lives and world by unlocking their own Native genius for heroic altruism and altruistic mastery. Then Imagine them all Sending duplicates of themselves as Sheer Brilliance in gratitude back to you, melting like so many citrine Snowflakes of light into your body and heart-drop. To close the Recitation, recite the seed syllable G as much, as softly and as Quickly as you can (up to 108), touching the tip of your tongue to The back of your upper front teeth. After the recitation, immerse Yourself in the resonance and afterglow as deeply and continuously

As you can. Shifting your focus from the affirmation wheel at your Heart to the moon, from the moon to your body as Sheer Brilliance, From your body to the body of Sheer Brilliance before you, and Finally back to your body. Take a deep abdominal breath and gently Hold it as you focus on your sun-gold body, and as you exhale be Mindful that it is empty of any non-relative being, essence, nature, Identity, or objectivity.

6a. *Requesting Constancy as you Practice the Altruist's Life*

“Although your intuitive body of truth lacks both birth and death,
Please stay involved without entering Nirvana, so that
All mother earthlings and I can embody true genius
And this stress-driven world can become a utopia!”
Recognizing this imagery is a mere simulation,
I ask you please to stay with me constantly, every breath
From now until I integrate my true genius,
And my body, speech, and mind become the pure love,
Joy and equanimity which are your true body, speech, and mind.
Moved by affection for me, I see you melt into a drop
Like a rainbow tear for joy, which pours through my crown
And throat to melt into the exclamation point at my heart,
Merging your *Sheer Brilliance* with mine, intensifying
My light, energy and warmth until they fill me as a flame
Fills a lamp and a nectar, a vase, rippling out in my actions
Until all those around me at home and on earth embody
Sheer Brilliance, returning a wave of joy to my heart!
*Now pause to absorb and drink in the warmth and moisture
Of that joy, as long and deeply as you can, and then prepare to
Close the session:*
“Suddenly the world outside, my ideal space, and body
All return to their normal appearance, the firewall outside
And the three suns and points inside all melt into my heart,
Then the exclamation point melts into the dot of my heart-drop.”

7. *Dedicating yourself to Embodying Sheer Brilliance*

“With any errors or omissions I've made in this practice
Out of ignorance, misperception, lack of resources or art,
I ask you, my mentor, please be patient and all-forgiving!
Any positive insight or energy I've gained through this practice
I dedicate to being always inspired by your eloquence,
Until I myself fully embody *Sheer Brilliance*,
In this very lifetime, as quickly as possible!
Whenever I study, contemplate or put into practice
Any teaching, profound or magnificent,
Any science or art, from any tradition or time,
May I be inspired by a direct intuition of you!
May we all have well-being, true abundance, and peace,
The good fortune and intelligence to hear
The inseparability of wisdom and unconditional love,
Supreme openness and great bliss, directly from you!
By mastering the arts of imagery and blissful openness,
May I find the true genius to enlighten myself and all life!”

Understanding and Mastering the Art of Narrative Self-Creation

Of course, this in-depth experiment may be too much for daily practice, but I've included it here to illustrate how the art of narrative self-creation works. For our final experiment, we'll balance this with a simpler form,

based on the performance process practice of the feminine archetype of *Transcendent Wisdom*. To clear the way for that final practice, we'll first unpack the art of narrative self-creation laid out in our experiment with *Sheer Brilliance*. Since we're already familiar with the steps of the role-modeling process that frame the narrative imagery of self-transformation, we can simply unpack the eight points that distinguish that art: building positive motivation; cultivating wisdom; establishing full security; converting death into true open-mindedness; converting development into embodied enjoyment; converting life into tangible manifestation; rehearsing the lifestyle of altruistic mastery; and closing dedication.

Peace, Compassion, and Wisdom: Establishing the Foundation for Change

In the first two points—motivation and wisdom—you may recognize the foundational strengths Tsong Khapa prescribed as the common preliminaries needed for effective process practice: the self-healing capacity to renounce unhealthy habits; the socially engaged capacity for genuine empathy, compassion and unconditional love; and the self-transcendent capacity for radical openness also known as the emptiness insight. They are called common because they are foundational strengths which the process-oriented path shares in common with the path of social engagement. In the context of the art of narrative self-creation, the two preliminary points of motivation and wisdom work to prepare the mind for the emotional and cognitive-perceptual challenges of radical self-revision and transformation. If the gateway to freeing the mind from the death-grip of the traumatized self is the double-edged work of disarming stress-emotions on the one hand and de-reifying traumatic memories on the other, we can readily understand why continuing to build these strengths is fundamental to the art of narrative self-transformation.

In terms of modern psychology, the traditional emphasis on these two preliminaries clearly anticipates the emerging methodologies of the affective therapy of trauma and the narrative therapy of childhood trauma, life crises and transitions. New approaches like Diane Fosha's Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Therapy (AEDP) underscore the need for a profound shift in core affective style from the distress affects that bind traumatic experience to what she calls "transformative positive affects" like joy and compassion as a rate-limiting step in healing trauma.¹² As in the self-transformative process of role-modeling, the catalyst of this visceral affective shift is the experience of being seen and known in a safe healing relationship.

On the other hand, the work of narrative therapists like Michael White and David Epston presupposes a contemporary view of the self as a social construction coordinated by language in the evolving context of our relations with others over time.¹³ Key to their work is the critique of sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, who describe our ordinary experience of self and world as revolving around the construction of social roles and forms of life, guided by habits of language, and seemingly set in stone by the process of reification. In describing the social construction of personal narratives, psychologists Jill Freedman and Gene Combs¹⁴ explain how people often seek therapy when their lives get stuck within limiting constructs of self, citing Berger and Luckmann's definition of reification, as

the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something else than human products—such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world.¹⁵

Current therapies based on the contemporary insights of social construction and reification clearly resonate with what Buddhist thinkers see as the crucial deconstructive and de-reifying insight of emptiness. Taken together, the preliminary exercises of building positive motivation and de-reifying ordinary perceptions of self and world set the stage for the art of narrative self-creation that is the hallmark of the process path of insight. In fact, their combined role in making the mentoring bond a crucible for narrative self-transformation is graphically depicted in the last preliminary point: establishing full security.

The Protection Wheel: Establishing the Sphere of Perfect Security

We've already described in chapter 7 the vital importance of the role-modeling bond in establishing an interpersonal space in which the student comes to feel safe enough to disarm and transform with a mentor who holds his/her projected ideal self. There we referred to the mentoring bond in alchemical terms as both a crucible and a catalyst of the self-change we seek, comparing it to Winnicott's view that the healing alliance must foster what he called a "holding environment."¹⁶ This explains why, in this phase of our experiment,

modeled on the traditional *Practice of Mentor-Bonding*, we set the stage for establishing a sphere of security by requesting and receiving the fourfold recognition which rehearses the formation of a mentor-student bond.

The symbolism of this recognition parallels the fourfold rite of initiation or consecration which establishes the mutual contract that defines the mentor-student relationship as a confidential bond dedicated to teaching altruistic self-mastery.¹⁷ That rite—conferring four consecrations called vase, secret, intuitive wisdom, and word—serves as a virtual map of the optimal integral process, which symbolically clears the student’s body, speech, mind, and actions of mental and emotional blocks to full mastery, by binding both parties to teach and learn the wisdom and arts appropriate to all stages of the optimal process path.¹⁸

In terms of the imagery of narrative self-creation, the transformational space opened up by the role-modeling bond is depicted by a wide range of images of containment the tradition calls *mandalas*. While we are all vaguely familiar with the art of the *mandala*, which Jung saw as an image of psychic wholeness, the richly colorful healing environment we think of as the *mandala*—like all spaces—is first and foremost defined by the boundary that demarcates it from the outer world.¹⁹ In fact, the iconography of protection and security in this tradition revolves around the graphic depiction of a boundary that shuts out otherwise uncontrollable stresses and threats from the ordinary world.²⁰ This much is clear from the protective shields and firewall envisioned in our experiments with the practices of the *Healing Mother* and *Sheer Brilliance*. In most optimal process practices, this is made even clearer by the convention of envisioning cremation grounds outside the firewall, typically featuring the worst nightmares of anticipating our vulnerability to illness, aging, death and decomposition.²¹

Of course, the protection wheel, shield, or firewall delimiting and guarding the space of purification and transformation in this tradition is no mere exercise in wishful thinking, but a representation of the protective influence of a wise and caring human mentor. Yet that sphere of influence itself is not seen as a kind of magic spell or hypnotic power exerted by the mentor. Just as the *Healing Mother’s* firewall weaves five intuitive wisdom shells with five lotus-like modes of empathy, the firewall of *Sheer Brilliance* likewise sandwiches a “diamond” layer of unconditional compassion with a “supernova” layer of fivefold wisdom fire. So it’s not the mere presence of the mentor which protects, but rather the potential of the mentoring bond to model and catalyze the student’s development of social-emotional intelligence and de-reifying insight. So the third preliminary point of establishing full security boils down to marshaling and deploying the combined strengths cultivated in the first two points, as the final stage-setting or sealing of the crucible for the work of self-creation to follow.

In terms of sociobiology, the imagery of a firewall protecting both mentor and student from the destructive forces of nature suggests the adaptive advantage set up by our capacity to forge bonds of social cooperation and learning that set us apart from more primitive life. In terms of anthropology, the traditional imagery of the protection wheel—typically involving shields, fences, firewalls, blade-wheels, and manned security posts—recalls the psychological inheritance of ancestral memories and archetypal images of primordial human dwellings, featuring our cultural mastery of protective devices from fire to fences and tents to weapons. Of course, the specific imagery here is less important than the general symbolism of establishing a protective space of social collaboration and cultural technology, the twin pillars of the workspace of human civilization. The intention here is to depict the work of civilization, understood in the psychotherapeutic sense: as the collaborative work of unleashing and harnessing the creative power of love and compassion by fully disarming the self-protective instincts of stress and trauma. This final preliminary point clears the way for the main act of narrative self-creation to begin, starting with taking on the limiting case of this work: disarming our reification and defensive reaction to the natural process of death.

The First Node of Narrative Self-Creation: Making Death a Path to Openness

Since the first translation of what Western scholars called the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*,²² a classic which featured a psychological introduction by Jung,²³ modern audiences have grown increasingly aware of the process-oriented contemplative science of death and dying preserved by Tibetans in the Nalanda tradition. While our recent experiment with *Sheer Brilliance* approached the opening move of the art of narrative self-creation as a psychological death, not a biological one, the fact is that the process-oriented path of insight employs the same science of death used in Tibetan medicine and spirituality for the sake of speeding the work of self-change.

As Robert Thurman's translation of the classic explains, the esoteric mind/ body arts of the optimal integral process are considered the original source of the science of death popularized in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and related teachings.²⁴ Just as contemplating death serves as basic training for renunciation and compassion on the paths of self-healing and social engagement, so envisioning death is used as basic training for self-transformation on the process path as well. Although our experiment with *Sheer Brilliance* seems to gloss over that process by describing the reframing of death as a simple melting or dissolution, in fact this is a well-known shorthand for a more elaborate art of rehearsing death that is a mainstay of most if not all process practice. In what follows, I'll review that art, framed by a schema called the eightfold process of dissolution, to help flesh out the way this powerful simulation training works.

According to that schema, the process of dying is mapped into eight stages, each involving the progressive loss of various modes of embodied experience, specific mind/body system, sensory media, and basic cognitive faculties, and each coordinated with particular objective and subjective signs of dissolution.²⁵ In the first stage, our physical system and experience of solidity dissolve into our sensory system and experience of fluidity, causing a diminution of vision, loss of recognition of the external world, the objective sign of physical weakness and the subjective sign of appearances wavering like a mirage. In the second stage, our sensory system and experience of fluidity dissolve into our discursive system and experience of bodily heat, causing a diminution of hearing, loss of sensations of pleasure and pain, the objective sign of the drying of mucous membranes and the subjective sign of perceptions growing hazy and insubstantial like dark clouds of smoke. In the third stage, our discursive system and experience of bodily heat dissolve into our emotional system and experience of breath gasses, causing a diminution of smell, loss of our capacity for naming, the objective sign of decreased temperature and metabolism and the subjective sign of perceptions splintering into sparks like a bunch of fireflies. In the fourth stage, our emotional system and experience of breath gases dissolve into our consciousness system and experience of space, causing a diminution of taste, touch, and mental imagery, loss of our capacity for planning and executive action, the objective sign of the fading of breath and the subjective sign of perceptions stilling like a candle flame.

With these first four stages, our ordinary sense of having a physical body located within a material world has gradually dissolved, immersing us in an interior space of mind. In terms of Buddhist medical science, this gradual dissolution is seen as ushered in by a coalescence of the ten neural energies and drops that normally support the functioning of our bodily organs, peripheral nervous system and senses deeper and deeper into the central nervous system, until they gather at the extremely subtle core neural complexes mapped at the heart. From here on the remaining stages of dissolution occur within the consciousness system itself, supported only by the subtle neural energy and chemistry of the core layers of the central nervous system.²⁶

While it may seem impossible to imagine this complex process of bodily dissolution with all its experiential function and neurological process, in practice it may be rehearsed in much simplified form. We can imagine our flesh and bones, bodily fluids, body heat, and breath gases as concentric layers of our body, each dissolving into the next, along with the neural energy and chemistry supporting them, until all that's left is the subtle mind and energy within the core neural complex at the heart. Or, we might imagine our solidity dissolving from the crown to the throat, our fluidity from our feet to our navel, our heat energy from our throat to our heart and our breath gases from our navel into our heart, again along with the neural energies and chemistry supporting them, until all is coalesced into the core complex at the heart. In either case, each dissolution would give rise to the subjective signs—mirage, smoke, sparks, flame.

Once we've dissolved our experience of having a gross physical body in a material world, the dissolution process continues into the mental energy realm. This part of the process involves four more stages, each representing the dissolution of progressively subtler layers of mind, energy, and function into the subtlest, core layer known as the extremely subtle mind, neural energy, and chemistry. For the sake of clarity, what follows is a simplified version of the traditional map, which I believe streamlines the system without changing its intent.²⁷ In our streamlined mapping, in the fifth stage, the coarse layer of primal consciousness and neural energy dissolves into the first subtle layer, bringing with it the release of thirty-three positive and negative attachment-oriented instinctive patterns and the dawning of an attachment-free luminous intuition with the subjective sign of a cool, spacious clarity like a moonlit autumn sky. In the sixth stage, the first subtle layer of primal consciousness and neural energy dissolve into the second subtle layer, bringing with it the release of forty positive and negative aggression-oriented instinctive patterns and the dawning of an aggression-free radiant intuition with the subjective sign of a warm, spacious clarity like a twilight autumn sky. In the seventh stage, the second subtle layer of primal consciousness and neural energy dissolves into the third subtle layer, bringing with it the release of seven positive and negative delusion-oriented instinctive patterns and the dawning of a delusion-free immanent intuition with the subjective sign of a still, spacious clarity like a

midnight autumn sky. Finally, in the eighth stage, the third subtle layer of primal consciousness and neural energy dissolves into the extremely subtle layer, bringing with it the release of all instinctive patterns and the dawning of an instinct-free translucent intuition with the subjective sign of a crystal clear, spacious openness like a pre-dawn autumn sky with no hint of moonlight, sunlight, or darkness.

The Dissolution Process: A Phenomenology of Near-Death Experience

If envisioning these dissolutions in detail feels too complex, simply imagining your mind gradually melting into a spacious openness pervaded by different qualities of light can be enough. Some teach that these stages may be envisioned as a series of concentric circles of luminous awareness coalescing into a drop of translucent clarity at the heart.²⁸ As a final step in the process, that single-pointed sense of pure clarity, understood as an “indestructible drop,” which merges our subtlest awareness and neural energy with the chemistry of bliss, melts in turn into a selfless, universal clarity called the clear light of death or the objective clear light.

This final immersion, rather than the fading of coarse waking awareness and neural activity, is understood as the moment of death. Or, when we practice the eight dissolutions in the form of a heroic altruist archetype, we might envision the first four stages as the body dissolving from above and below into the seed-syllable at the heart, and envision the last four as the gradual dissolution of that syllable into a single dot or drop, which finally melts into the clear light of death. In some practices, we first envision our archetypal form coalescing into the seed-syllable at the heart, and then rehearse the whole dissolution process as the syllable, melting in eight successive stages into the clear light of death, until it's fully immersed, like water in water.²⁹

From the vantage of modern psychotherapy, we can see in this imaginative rehearsal a gradual and systematic desensitization to the ultimate uncontrollable stress: letting go of our instinctive, self-protective clinging to a separate physical body or sense of discrete mental identity. While all human adults are aware in principle of the certainty of death, that awareness tends to be a mere abstraction, which we routinely bracket, deny, or repress. This epidemic denial of death led psychoanalyst Otto Rank to comment that most humans are effectively delusional.³⁰ Of course, as we can see from case reports of near death experiences and our own first or second hand brushes with death, it is quite a different matter to have a concrete visceral experience of the end of life. Predictably, such experiences have the effect of radically altering our frame of reference on our own daily lives, often acting as a wake-up call, which gives us fresh clarity and information about the preciousness, quality, and direction of our existence.³¹

Death-Rehearsal and the Deconstruction of Self-Centered Death

The neurobiology of this process overlaps enough with that of vivid imagery states to suggest how the imaginative rehearsal of dissolution can amount to far more than a simple reframing of some supposedly objective event called death.³² If we perceive death as the end of a self we imagine as an independent, objective entity, but later learn that that sense of self is in fact a complex construction of our minds, then ordinary death, as we imagine it, cannot really occur. The profound shift in sense of self that takes place in the course of any real encounter with death means that, to the extent that this practice succeeds, we may opt to identify less with our habitual self-sense and more with something akin to “the self of selflessness” defined by the affirmation of enlightened pride, “*I am the self whose nature is the diamond of intuitive openness!*”

In this sense, the conversion of death into the first node of a whole new life-narrative may not be just a matter of changing the narrative frame we put around one and the same thing, but may in fact be a matter of eliminating death as we know it and replacing it with an experience that feels less like an end or death than an awakening or openness to the new. This may be especially true if we understand the imagery of our subjective clear light mind merging into an objective clear light that is selfless, universal, or impersonal as an illustration or narrative enactment of the truth of emptiness. More than any mere thought exercise, that enactment teaches us that we are empty of any non-relative being or essence which could anchor our sense of standing alone, apart from each other and the world. The exercise of purging our primal mind of alienating self-constructs and allowing it to return home to an objective gene-pool of pure, natural mind should help us climb outside our self-enclosed mind and have an ecstatic experience of fully belonging to the natural world in a truly objective and irrevocable way.³³

Setting the Stage: Bridging Death Dissolution and Developmental

Emergence

Before we move on, traditionally the conversion of death does not end with our final immersion into objective clear light. Instead, this signals the start of a coda or bridge phase which sets the stage for the second conversion. Without understanding the way the rehearsal of death helps transport us to a more objective clarity about our place in the world, this phase might seem oddly redundant or out of place. Yet before we begin developing a heroic new self through the second conversion, the imagery of converting death challenges us to envision a basic fact of life we often deny: the continuity of lives does not end with any personal death, but moves on. The way this imagery unfolds is that, out of the clear light of death, our minds begin to perceive the objective conditions for the re-creation of life, only now from the vantage of the self of selflessness which has just exposed our prior, ordinary life and death as largely imagined.

This bridging imagery takes various forms in various practices, typically involving the reemergence of the ordinary world with its natural elements, habitats, and forms of stress-driven life, as well as the extraordinary world inside the protective sphere of the *mandala*. The natural world is usually envisioned as reemerging out of the elemental states of matter, symbolized by orbs of elemental gaseous, radiant, liquid, and solid matter, supporting the naturalistic landscape of cremation grounds in the cardinal and ordinal directions, each of which also has vertical levels: underworld, ground level and heavens.³⁴ The grounds are filled with the usual features—mountains, lakes, rivers, trees, fires—and inhabited by the whole food-chain of unenlightened life forms, from predators, scavengers, and their prey to ordinary humans, struggling, dying, and decomposing alongside their local hermits and sages, nature spirits, and mountain gods.³⁵

The *Mandala* Mansion: Recognizing the Mind-Body as a Matrix of Enlightenment

Our awareness now turns to what's inside the *mandala*: the conditions for new life within the protective sphere set up by the wise and compassionate mind of clear light. Typically, this begins with what is known as a reality-source, emerging from a diamond light syllable THUS, envisioned as an inverted pyramidal cone, white outside and red inside, symbolizing the womb-like fertility of the state of blissful openness, in which our night and day energy, male and female chemistry, subjective bliss and objective lucidity co-mingle in our visceral realization of the clear light of death. Within this womb, out of a diamond light syllable AH, grows the stem of a giant lotus whose rainbow light petals eventually open at the mouth of the reality-source, symbolizing the plasticity or flow which emerges out of the clear light state of blissful openness. Then from a sapphire light syllable HUM bubbling up in the midst of the lotus comes a great, rainbow colored horizontal cross made of two gigantic scepters fused like a plus sign and oriented in the cardinal directions, symbolizing the strong force of indivisible wisdom and compassion that binds our minds and nervous systems together in unbreakable collaborative bonds. Based on the foundation of this strong social force comes the *mandala* residence, typically depicted as a holographic mansion made of gem-toned light, symbolizing the architecture of enlightened life: the subtle microstructure of our minds and nervous systems, crystallized out of the seeds of teaching planted in the womb of blissful openness through our dialogue with the mentor-archetype.³⁶

Here again, though I've abbreviated and simplified the imagery, it may seem too mythological or intricate to speak to us as moderns. So it will come as a relief to know that traditionally this detailed stage-setting is edited out of all but the advanced, optimal integral practices, and even there is drastically simplified in the “starter-practices” with which most novices begin.³⁷ For our purposes, for the natural imagery we can substitute our own familiar cosmology, by envisioning outside our firewall the earth's continents and oceans, forests and mountains, arrayed in all directions, and inhabited by the whole range of plant life, wildlife, and human societies, with their respective social systems and ancestral mythologies.

As for the internal conditions of new life within the firewall, we can substitute our own modern vision of the objective internal conditions for recreating our human agency. For example, we may begin by planting inside the firewall a diamond light seed-letter B, which transforms into an inverted cone made of moonlight outside and sunlight inside, symbolizing our brainstem supporting our state of blissful openness. Within that, we can then plant a diamond light seed-letter C, growing a stem that blossoms over the mouth of the cone as a broad water-lily of rainbow light, symbolizing the full unfolding of our core-brain systems of blissful plasticity. Atop that, we can next plant a sapphire light seed-letter L, which transforms into a huge, rainbow light horizontal cross-beam like a gem-toned plus sign oriented in the cardinal directions, symbolizing the strong force of limbic resonance which attunes our development to the proactive social-emotional tone of our

mentoring bond. And finally, on that foundation, we can plant a diamond light seed-letter N, which generates the gem-toned holographic architecture of our new life residence, symbolizing our neocortex restructured to support the conscious regulation and integration of mind/body systems and processes we need to live the life of a master altruist. While not indispensable, this kind of internal stage-setting does orient our minds toward the emergence of a new life. With this, we turn to the next node in the art of narrative self-creation.

The Second Node of Self-Creation: Making Development a Path to Enjoyment

According to the basic life science of the process tradition, the normal emergence from the objective translucency of mind, also called the “mother clear light,” involves revisiting the same eight stages we encountered in the dissolution process, except in reverse sequence.³⁸ Yet once we’ve chosen the path of narrative self-creation, whenever we rehearse the process of re-emergence from the clear light after simulating death or actually undergo that process, say after a near-death experience, the eight stages of emergence are replaced by a process of voluntary self-creation that involves what are known as the five pure enlightenments.³⁹

Although these are understood in different ways by various commentarial traditions, for our purposes it makes sense to follow the reading that these five are equivalent with the emergence of the five pure intuitions we discussed in chapter 7.⁴⁰ Once, in the course of dissolving into the objective clear light of death, our mind/body systems have been purified of the distortions of ordinary perception and the stress-emotions they maintain, they are free to re-emerge in their enlightened form, guided by the five intuitions. What this second phase of narrative self-creation does is to locate the alchemy of self-transformation within the new life narrative defined by the conversions, as the work of the development phase, that is, re-creating ourselves as nascent heroic altruists.

We begin the process immersed within the objective clear light of death, out of which emerges a diamond light seed-syllable OM (or OH if you like), like a fish leaping out of water, which becomes a luminous orb of awareness like a full moon’s reflection in water, symbolizing the emergence of reflective intuition which guides the enlightened development of the physical system. In the next stage, out of the moon leaps a ruby light syllable AH, which becomes a luminous orb of awareness like a rising sun’s reflection in water, symbolizing the equality intuition which guides the enlightened development of the sensory system. In the next stage, out of the sun flares a sapphire light syllable HUM (or UM, or in *Sheer Brilliance*, a citrine gold light syllable G), which becomes an upright sword like a sun-flare light saber, symbolizing the discriminating intuition which guides the enlightened development of the cognitive system. In the next stage, the light saber beams a rainbow aura of gem-toned lights in all directions, purifying all ordinary beings and delighting all the enlightened, who all assume the form of *Sheer Brilliance* (or other archetype) and return to dissolve back into the sword, all of which activity symbolizes the executive intuition that guides the enlightened development of the emotional system. In the final stage, the newly intensified light saber glows and radiates a rainbow aura that manifests the sunrise form of the nascent heroic altruist, *Sheer Brilliance*, complete with light saber, text, physical marks and signs, symbolizing the dawning of the ultimate reality intuition which guides the enlightened development of the perceptual system. The fully developed form of the nascent heroic altruist, lit from within by the sun and sapphire seed syllable at his heart, is also known as the intuition hero or intuitive altruist, since he personifies the joyful cultivation of our altruistic genius, guided by the five pure intuitions.

The Poetics of Self-Regulation: Developing a “Body” of Neural Energy and Speech

While it makes obvious sense that the development of our newly recreated self embodies and is guided by the five forms of intuitive genius involved in higher mind/body self-regulation, we should also take note of the conspicuous absence of the material elements of the gross physical body which dissolved in the ordinary process of death. Of course, the omission is no accident, but a tacit admission of the fact that the new body to be developed in this phase of our enlightened life story is not a gross physical body at all, but rather “a body made of mind.” This is consistent with all we’ve learned about the way developmental or transitional mind/body states—such as embryonic states, dream states, or meditative states—are seen in Buddhist psychology and contemplative neuroscience.⁴¹ And it is further unpacked in some of the finer points of imagery and symbolism associated with this phase of the art of narrative self-creation.

So beyond their identification with the first two intuitions, the moon and sun discs which start the reemergence process are also identified with the expression of the subjective and objective aspects of the unitive experience of blissful openness. And this added symbolic sense is further unpacked in the traditional association of these two discs with the two main components of the alphabet, vowels and consonants. This sense is often graphically depicted by envisioning the vowels circling the moon and the consonants circling the sun, or simply implied by describing the moon as having the nature of the vowels, and the sun, of the consonants. This intriguing bit of iconography gives new meaning to the formulation of the process-oriented path as a poetic or neurolinguistic path of self-creation. This reading is very much in line with our contemporary understanding of human life as a social construction in and through language. Consider these passages (quoted by Freedman and Coombs) from Berger and Luckman:

Everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with (other people) ... Language is capable of becoming an objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations. Language is capable of “making present” a variety of objects that are spatially, temporally, and socially absent from the “here and now.” ... Through language an entire world can be actualized.⁴²

And this one from narrative therapist Kathy Weingarten:

In the social constructionist view, the experience of self exists in the ongoing interchange with others. The self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into these narratives.⁴³

In fact, the imagery of re-emergence seems to suggest that the art of the development phase involves reshaping of our symbolic mind and neural processing in the image of the mentor-archetype's. This reading clearly resonates with Allen Grossman's view of the work of poetry as “the conservation of the human image;” and of its most fundamental and profound transmission as “the image of the person that is encoded in the (poem's) very language-matter.” Borrowing his evocative phrase, then, we can read the symbolism of the vowel-moon and consonant-sun as suggesting the transmission of the language-matter of the mentor-archetype from master to apprentice, and from one generation to the next. And, given this reading, we're ready to take on two further aspects of the symbolism of the social construction of our emergent new self.

First, the vowels and consonants are not simply arrayed on the moon and sun just as they are found in the Sanskrit alphabet. Instead, both the vowels and consonants are expanded and then doubled, to support several other highly intriguing forms of symbolic sense and reference. In the case of the vowels, the usual list of thirteen vowels is expanded to sixteen and then doubled to symbolize the doubling of genders.⁴⁴ This expanded and doubled number can then be aligned with two bodily features that help describe the subtle material—neurobiological—structure of the emerging altruist's mind-made body, namely: the sixteen erogenous zones on the left, “feminine” side of the body, plus the sixteen on the right, “masculine” side; which together give rise to the thirty-two physiognomic signs of superhuman altruism. As for the consonants, the usual thirty-four are also expanded and doubled, to symbolize the dual aspects of male and female energy, as well as the dual aspects of intuitive wisdom and blissful art. Finally, the expanded and doubled consonants are then aligned with the elementary material states: earth (solidity); water (fluidity), fire (energy); wind (gas); and space.

The Mirroring and Equalizing Intuitions: Sublimation and the Language-Matter of Altruism

We can unpack this complex symbolism in two ways, specific and general. If the moonlight of the vowels symbolizes the subjective enjoyment of a blissfully open body guided by the mirroring intuition, its link with the male and female erogenous zones suggests that the development of heroic altruism involves the sublimation of sexual energy. And if the sunlight of the consonants symbolizes the objective enjoyment of a sensitivity guided by the equalizing intuition, its link with the fivefold physicality of male bliss-energy and female openness-energy suggests that the sensory development of heroic altruism depends on the capacity to equalize and attune sensitivity to our own visceral sensations with sensitivity to the sensations of others.

Generally, the fact that the emergence of these two prime intuitions is symbolized by the commingling of luminous awareness with sublimated sexual energy, doubled phonemes, and an impartial sensitivity to the raw

feel of all life, suggests that the emergence of heroic altruism reflects the joyful mastery of our human genius for social-emotional attunement, dialogue, and cooperation. The fact that this emergence involves assuming an embodiment not of gross physical matter, but of sublimated sexual energy and language-matter, is also consistent with the idea that the emergence of heroic altruism depends on a body made of mind, more specifically, “love’s body.” Finally, the expansion of the alphabet of enlightenment further specifies the form of that embodiment in two ways. First, the doubling of both its linguistic and material elements specifies its form as one that is entirely socially constructed in its nature and origin. And second, the sequence of its language-DNA, with thirty-two vowels and eighty consonants, encodes for the replication of a body image that maps the physiognomy of a super altruist, further specifying the form of love to be embodied as the fully evolved and developed genius of human altruism.

The Discerning Intuition: Our Discursive Mind Joins Love’s Body

The symbolism of the third enlightenment takes us from the basic constitution of our new altruistic self to its full conception and individuation. If we read the first two stages of the emergence process as the language-matter of the mentor archetype recombining into the embryonic form of heroic altruism, the moon and sun that represent the reconstitution of life take on yet another level of sense. Specifically, they come to symbolize the male and female germ cells—the sperm and egg—which come together to form the zygote or fertilized egg which is the physical substrate of our new life. In terms of the pregnant symbolism of the process tradition, both the ordinary sperm and egg and the extraordinary germ cells of the mirroring and equalizing intuitions with their sexual energy and language-matter, are understood as the male and female spirits of enlightenment, identified with the twin altruistic spirits on the engaged path. So given the life science of Buddhism, it would only be natural to assume that—for conception to be complete—once these two constituents of our new altruistic life converge, they require the confluence of a third line of inheritance: the continuity of consciousness from our previous life.

Against this background, we can readily see the most straightforward way to unpack the symbolism of the third stage of the emergence of our altruistic life. When the seed-syllable of sapphire light emerges from the conjoined moon and sun, it symbolizes nothing more or less than the entry of our discursive awareness into the zygote formed by the combination of our sublimated energy and language-matter from the first two enlightenments. In effect, the entry of the seed-syllable UM or G represents the third and final moment in the conception of our altruistic life: the formation of a viable embryo, sealing our voluntary reincarnation as a budding heroic altruist in the lineage of our mentor-archetype. In terms of the symbolism of engaged path of altruism, this moment corresponds to the conception of the actual spirit of enlightenment which galvanizes the union of the conventional and ultimate faces of compassionate openness. As on the ordinary engaged path, so on this extraordinary path, that general conception is particularized by the specific commitments and inclinations of the budding altruist; and begins the gradual process of gestation which comes to fruition in the birth of a master altruist.

The Executive Intuition: Mastering the Altruist’s Expertise

The next turn in the imagery of the third stage of our enlightened development—the transformation of the seed-syllable into a hand implement—may be read as the process tradition’s take on the conception of a particular form of altruistic genius. In the case of *Sheer Brilliance*, the implement is the flaming sword or light saber of impeccable wisdom, signifying our commitment to a life of objective analysis, healing insight, and genuine intuition, as part of the lotus family of discerning genius. In this light, the third move on this stage, in which we inscribe the hilt of the light saber with the seed-syllable UM or G represents our discursive mind’s conscious identification with the civilizing work of cultivating wisdom.

Once we’ve chosen to insert our discursive awareness, generally and specifically, into the developmental narrative of an emerging altruist, we’ve also committed ourselves to an extraordinary process of incarnation. Thanks to that process, the unfolding of the ten stages on the engaged path of altruism is compressed from the span of three incalculable eons not just into the (symbolic) ten months of a normal pregnancy but—incredibly enough—into the relative eye-blink depicted in our virtual gestation. In effect, the narrative imagery of conception on this stage reveals the metaphor behind the whole second conversion: cultural reproduction though role-modeling recapitulates the social evolution of altruism, in the same way that individual development in the womb recapitulates the development of species.

This metaphor is even more explicit in some practices which depict the act of our altruistic self-conception as a still more transparent displacement of nature by culture. In such practices, instead of entering the moon

and sun discs set within an architectural *mandala*—the developing mind/body process seen as a mansion of light—the seed syllable of our discursive mind enters the bodies of a mother and father altruist in sexual union, in a replay of the Buddhist primal scene. In this case, the mind-syllable enters through the mouth of one of the parents or else through the mother’s vaginal canal or father’s crown, finding its way to a vowel moon and consonant sun placed within a biological *mandala*—the sperm and egg joined in a single drop at the tip of the father’s penis, inside the mother’s womb.

Consistent with the *karmic* view of psychobiological development as an active self-creation, the next stage in the emergence process compresses the maturation of our new social and cultural agency as heroic altruists into a single wave-like transaction combining both active expression and receptive passion. As the light saber inscribed with the G of our verbal mind beams lights all around, it rehearses the basic altruistic acts of gathering those who can help and benefitting those who need help. As it receives lights of solidarity from the enlightened and gratitude from the distressed, it rehearses the basic altruistic acts of receiving validation or guidance from other altruists and feedback from those in need. This double-edged rehearsal effectively enacts the emergence of enlightened motivation and execution, guided by the abundant emotional intelligence of the executive intuition.

The Ultimate Reality Intuition: Assuming the Nascent Form of a Heroic Altruist

This brings us to the fifth and final stage in the emergence process and the final act in the narrative conversion of development. In this act, receiving the validation of the enlightened and the gratitude of the distressed seals the development of our chosen mode of altruistic agency, at least in its nascent form. This transition is symbolized by the intensified glow that radiates from the hand implement—in this case the light saber—which represents the growth of that agency. So it is that that glow eventually manifests our full embodiment of the nascent form of heroic altruism, in the image of the sunrise-colored body of *Sheer Brilliance*. Finally reaching the dramatic climax of recreating our embodied self-image in the image and likeness of our mentor-archetype symbolizes our development of an enlightened perceptual system, guided by the ultimate truth intuition. To seal this, we envision our new body-image as lit from within by sun-discs and seed-syllables at the crown, throat, and heart, symbolizing our choice to make it a home address for our emerging self-regulation of an altruist’s selfless body, speech, and mind.

In this final emergence of our development, we come to embody in nascent form the integration of an altruist’s body, speech, and mind, guided by the pure genius of the five intuitions. Within this form, the basic constitution of the mirroring and equalizing intuitions—the fertile dialogue of bliss and openness—is symbolized by the fused moon and sun discs at our heart; our harnessing of that constitution to the cultivation of genius with the discerning intuition is symbolized by the radiant G at our heart; our budding mastery of the art of cultivating true genius through executive intuition is symbolized by the light saber we wield; and our ability to bring that self-creation to fruition with the reality intuition is symbolized by our vivid appearance as *Sheer Brilliance* being sealed with the self-transcendent identity of radical openness.

The Psychology and Neurobiology of Altruistic Development

In terms of conventional psychotherapy, this phase of our narrative self-creation reflects the social construction of a preferred self and life, in and through the transformative dialogue of the healing alliance. The first enlightenment corresponds to the shift in core affect from aversive to positive, which mobilizes the social emotional energy to conceive of a more proactive life in the world.⁴⁵ The second corresponds to the growth of objective empathy, which allows for development of realistic mutual sensitivity and trust, opening the door to a truly open dialogue with the world.⁴⁶ Third comes the shift in self-concept and self-image that allows us to truly identify with our emerging ideal self, harnessing the passion and openness mobilized in the prior two stages to inhabiting a prosocial new self.⁴⁷ Fourth comes the work of reshaping our social roles and lifestyle around our newly empowered and impassioned self.⁴⁸ And finally, the fifth enlightenment corresponds to the fruition of that positive self and life as a fully integrated, preferred way of being, that has only to be finally fleshed out in the world.⁴⁹

In terms of neurobiology, I believe this phase in the art of narrative self-creation can be correlated with the development of our full human potential for proactive social and cultural agency, based on the exercise of the prefrontal cortex through mindful attention and positive imagery. A hypothetical alignment of the stages in

the emergence of a proactive self with the self-regulation and integration of regions within the uniquely human prefrontal cortex seems possible based on the overview of current research and thought of Dan Siegel.⁵⁰

In particular, the first stage may be aligned with the development of the medial prefrontal and cingulate cortex which support bodily self-regulation and the growth of a new body map. The second stage may be aligned with the development of the dorsolateral and medial prefrontal cortex which support our full capacity for empathy and our ability to map the inner states of others. The third may be aligned with the development of the orbitofrontal cortex which supports our capacity for insight and narrative, which allows us to revise our present identity in light of our personal history. The fourth may be aligned with the development of the ventral prefrontal cortex which supports emotional attunement and morality in our interactions with others, based on a vision of our place in the world Siegel calls a “we-map.” Finally, the fifth may be aligned with the development of the cingulate and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex which support the regulation of attention and response, and, with the help of the insular region, integrate all the functions of our neocortex, limbic system and core brain.

The Third Node of Self-Creation: Making Life a Path to Manifesting Compassion

Having arrived at a state of developmental fruition, our nascent altruistic self is ripe for the third and final phase in our narrative self-creation: setting out on our new life as a master altruist, to transform the world outside our mentor’s sphere of influence. In discussing the node of converting life into a path, Tsong Khapa reviews the traditional imagery that ushers in this new phase: in which the budding altruist hears the call of wisdom muses and melts out of impassioned concern for the world. The symbolism here seems clear. In order to reach the final node of our narrative self-creation, we need to be moved by the call of true compassion for the world, and ready to let go of the last vestiges of childhood dependency which would keep us from assuming the full freedom and responsibility of a master altruist.

If we recall that the prior phase of development took place symbolically and psychologically within the crucible of the mentor’s blissful openness, in some cases graphically seen as the sexual union of the mentor—as father *and* mother—inside the womb, we can readily see how our journey of self-creation is not yet complete, despite the fullness of our development. Yet we may be struck nonetheless by Tsong Khapa’s insistence that the pull on our heart strings which draws us out into the world comes in the form of hearing the call of the five wisdom muses.⁵¹ It should come as no surprise that the strongest possible force to call us into action is the voice of another—a *mother* or *father*—representing the needs of the outside world. As members of a species that cooperates with speech, the sounds of adult voices, especially our mother’s, may be the most tangible clue we have in the womb of the existence of an outside world. And, in a real sense, that first hint of love as a force that binds us to a social world is also part of the altruistic lifeline that gradually transitions us out into a separate life in the world, once our umbilical cord is cut.

Given this view of the muses’ call as the force that sets in motion our final entry into altruistic life, the sequence of symbolic events that makes up the narrative of taking birth as a path seems to follow quite naturally. The next step—melting into clear light—powerfully evokes the dissolution of self-other distinctions in the spontaneous experience of unconditional compassion. At the same time, following the counter-narrative that displaces ordinary birth with the extraordinary birth of altruism, the instantaneous dissolution sparked by hearing our wisdom mothers’ voices also clearly symbolizes the displacement of our ordinary birth-trauma with the voluntary dissolution into clear light and final emergence into altruistic life. So in place of the ordinary birth-experience of being thrust into life in the world by forces beyond our ken and control, the imagery of melting and emergence symbolize the enlightened experience of choosing life as a spontaneous manifestation of compassion and heroic altruism.

As for the next steps in the imagery of self-creation, the process of instantaneous emergence quickly moves through the (compressed) stages of sunrise, sun-flare G, rainbow aura, and fully embodied *Sheer Brilliance*, at which point the G at our heart beams lights all around to invite the five wisdom mothers.

Now that our fully developed new self has finally emerged in the mature form of a master altruist, the symbolic significance of the wisdom mothers has shifted given our new phase of life. Instead of invoking them from a child’s point of view, as mothers, we now invite them as muses or equal partners to validate and seal our full emergence as master altruists. In this case, if our chosen archetype is feminine, we may invite our muses in male form, as geniuses or wisdom heroes. Finally, we may also invite both male and female altruists as enlightened couples to validate and seal our emergence with their shared blissful openness. In effect, this

shift in perspective involves the compression of the biography of the life cycle into a single eye-blink that combines birth, separation, psychosexual maturity, and adult agency all in one. At a deeper level of symbolism, the invitation and visitation of the wisdom mothers reflects our ultimate reliance on the integrated genius of our own five intuitive wisdoms, as opposed to our prior, temporary reliance on the wisdom of the mentor.

Invoking the Wisdom Muses: Sealing Our Altruistic New Life

The gathering of our new community of altruists, represented by the wisdom muses, also sets the stage for the final act of this third phase of narrative conversion: requesting and receiving the consecration that recognizes our new station as fully integrated master altruists. In particular, when we beam lights to the five wisdom muses at this point in the practice, it's with the intent of asking them to validate and seal our mature self-creation with the five intuitions they personify. And when they oblige us by pouring wisdom-nectars through our crown to fill our whole body-mind, they are effectively acknowledging our (virtual) completion of the path of transformation mapped out by the initiation rehearsed at the point of establishing security. In effect, then, this last point in the phase of converting life symbolizes the final act of intimate collaboration between mentor and student which sets the interpersonal stage for our narrative self-creation: the act of simply acknowledging or pronouncing done what has already been accomplished.

On another level of symbolism, the nectar pouring through our crown, throat, and heart reflects the convergence of our body, speech and mind with the genius of all enlightened altruists, and seals our identification with that larger community. This threefold identification is often sealed by envisioning ourselves as a triune embodiment of heroic altruism. In this context, our outward appearance as a mature master *Sheer Brilliance* represents our heroic commitment to embodying compassion; at our heart, we envision a thumb-nail sized miniature version of our speech as a nascent *Sheer Brilliance*, representing our heroic intuition; and at his heart, we envision a sun disc and citrine gold G, representing our heroic concentration. Our integrated mastery of these three forms of heroic altruism reflects the fruition of the three conversions, and corresponds to the threefold embodiment of emanation, enjoyment and truth (respectively) realized on the Cloud of Truth stage of the engaged path of altruism. At a still deeper level of symbolism cultivated on the subtle creation stage, the rush of nectar filling us from crown to toe and back up again previews the experience of the release and sublimation of four levels of bliss within the central channel, which lays the foundation for mastering the art of blissful openness on the perfection stage, to be explored in part 4.

As this final conversion phase corresponds to the maturation phase of the ordinary life-cycle, it also corresponds to the phase of successful termination of an insight-oriented therapy focused on deep affective healing and character change. All three of these transitions involve a similar shift from an intimate dependence to a relative autonomy, with a corresponding move towards full integration of what has been learned and a new role of relative equality between parent and adult child, therapist and client, experienced master and new master. And these more or less congruent shifts in life narrative are clearly reminiscent of the perspective shift that takes place in integration phase of the role modeling process. Here again, this congruence establishes the creation stage and transformational therapy as parallel practices that, in varied ways and to varying degrees, recapitulate the ordinary process of human development with an extraordinary process aimed at consciously revising and restructuring our way of being and life. So the triune form of our new self-mastery may be read as reflecting a complete self-transformation at the level of behavior (body), cognition (speech) and affective-perceptual experience (mind). With the narrative creation of our proactive new self complete, we turn now to the final application of our new way of being to create a whole new way of life in the world.

Action Triumph: Rehearsing the Life and Work of a Master Altruist

Though our first meditative experiment condensed this phase of self-creation to the acts of requesting, receiving and sharing the affirmation of *Sheer Brilliance*, we should briefly survey the range of elements that make up the imagery at this climactic point. While condensation is common in introductory practices, the optimal creation stage expands the three key elements of imagery on this phase to include: gathering a community of altruists; enjoying a master altruist's life; and enacting the triumph of our new altruistic community in helping all living beings.

As for the first element, gathering a community of altruists, the traditional imagery is in keeping with the counter-narrative of cultural self-creation meant to displace the ordinary narrative of the biological life cycle. Specifically, it takes the place which ordinary sexual maturity, biological reproduction and childrearing have in our ordinary life narrative, by guiding us to envision ourselves as finding a congenial soul-mate, then