

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.

Cognitively, this often involves a shift away from a naïve self-concept based on identifying with a reified body-image, often invested with the entirety of one's primitive narcissism, including denial of death. Affectively, this shift is often accompanied by the memory of a life-altering experience of profound, inexpressible well-being and bliss, which often initiates a fundamental affective shift away from traumatic affects and towards positive feelings like trust, acceptance, and gratitude. For some, this compound cognitive-affective shift leads not just to a lighter, more transparent image and concept of self as part of something larger, but also to a new visceral energy of inspiration and sense of purpose that leave the new self feeling more empathically connected with others and the world at large.

While this model may be limited in terms of the depth of change in self-concept and core affect involved, and in terms of the reactive, biologically based mechanism of change, it does seem to provide an evidence-based paradigm for the scope and direction of self-transformation we might expect from the profound altered-state methods involved in the great perfection stage. While study of this phenomenon is still in its infancy and often obscured by philosophical debates about the nature and status of mind's dependence on matter, as the field evolves, we can expect further clarity about the range of psychological shifts involved as well as the link between phenomenology and neural mechanisms. This, along with further study of advanced process practice, may further clarify the strengths and limits of this comparison.

As for the second basic science model, the situation is similar with the emerging field of research on the euphoric sub-type of TLE. The most common source of partial complex or *petit mal* seizures, which cause internal mental events such as absences, déjà vu experiences or auras as opposed to the gross physical movements of *grand mal* seizures, temporal lobe epilepsy has long been considered related to experiences like religious ecstasies and feelings of intimate communion with all life and the world. A sub-type of these minor seizures called euphoric TLE has long received special interest for causing not disruptive symptoms but euphoric and ecstatic states, as in the celebrated case of Theodor Dostoyevski. Interestingly, in view of the positive experience and often salutary effects of this sub-type, some researchers have argued that it should not be considered a medical disorder but rather an exceptional but healthy variant.⁴⁶ In any case, the phenomenology of these states—a euphoric expansiveness, dissolution of subject-object distinctions and a deep sense of empathic relatedness—has been linked with neural markers like high frequency theta waves which they share with advanced meditation practices similar to great perfection and great seal practice.⁴⁷

Still more important than the similarities linking this remarkable state alteration and the profound altered states called clear light is the potential parallel between the process of long-term trait change and personality change in euphoric TLE and great perfection/great seal practitioners. In effect, the qualities of experience that emerge episodically in people with euphoric TLE are known in many to gradually shift into stable qualities of outlook and temperament that remain between seizure episodes. Although some intriguing mechanisms have been suggested to explain these core changes—including conscious neural “kindling” of positive affect and conscious self-stimulation of euphoric states⁴⁸—the fact remains that the deep, stable shift in consciousness that often comes of euphoric TLE offers a compelling model of how repeated immersion in profound clear light states over time could foster exceptional altruistic development. While here as well the depth and degree of change in euphoric TLE may be far less profound and extensive than that in the perfection stage, and the biologically based mechanism of change here differs—at least in part—from the conscious state-alterations of process practice, the experience and study of this rare condition seems to offer a plausible neurobiological model for the transformative arts of clear light and communion.

Cosmic Narcissism and the Chorion: Inspiration and Clarity in Psychotherapy

Given these analogues from basic science, we can now consider potential models of the achievement of the virtual body and clear light in the clinical context of psychotherapy. The first of these comes from the self-psychology of Kohut, which we explored briefly in chapter 11. Since Kohut sees narcissism as part of the natural symbiosis on which childhood depends, he describes a healthy path for its development that involves the gradual refinement of empathy and intimate bonding and culminates in the optimal expansion he calls cosmic narcissism. In effect, his psychology sees the self-enclosed and self-protective aspects we associate with narcissism as secondary to a more basic and vital capacity to share love. This leads to his optimistic approach to psychotherapy as supporting and modeling the art of separating the delusional and defensive aspects that pollute healthy self-love from the empathic and connective aspects that promote optimal human development.

Seen in this light, Kohut's notion of cosmic narcissism as the most transparent and expansive form of self-love bears some resemblance to the process notion of a virtual body, especially since it sees facing death as the

final touchstone of whether our connection with others and the world is truly objective and inspired by love. While this vision of our potential for a kind of self-love that truly transcends the taints of shame-based self-involvement, reactive self-protectiveness, and self-indulgent attachment may not involve the alchemy of profound state-alterations like those of the perfection stage, it does presume the possibility of a different kind of alchemy. Specifically, that is the alchemy of truly and deeply intimate bonds, both within and beyond psychotherapy. Since some of these may involve the transmuting effect of truly healthy sexual intimacy, however, Kohut's notion of cosmic narcissism may in fact offer a plausible model for the transparent and inspired personification of pure joy and love process science calls the virtual body.

As for analogues of the clear light in modern therapy, these are rare indeed. Part of the back story for this involves Freud's calculated attempt to distance himself entirely from the kinds of unitive experience we moderns have learned to identify with theistic religious traditions. In this vein, his charge that contemplative states like the "oceanic feeling" are mere regressions to infantile narcissism dovetails neatly with his critique of monotheism and his larger effort to align psychoanalysis and psychotherapy with the skeptical stance of modern Cartesian science.

While interest in contemplative states is clearly on the rise among researchers and clinicians, a general suspicion of formless states remains ingrained in our received worldview and scientific tradition. Of course, surprising or not, Buddhist contemplative science shares that suspicion, while at the same time valuing formless states as purgatives for our self-limiting instincts for reifying and clinging to forms of all kinds. In any case, this background may explain why a search for models of the selfless communion of clear light has taken me far off the beaten trail of modern therapy, to the compelling thought of the feminist linguist and Lacanian Julia Kristeva.⁴⁹

Assuming Lacan's radically critical deconstructive view that the unconscious is merely a shadow of the reification of the language of self-ascription, Kristeva takes an exceptional view of our potential to deconstruct the self-object symbols that create the unconscious and to directly experience a conscious immersion in the real. A Lacanian take on Hartmann's "regression in the service of the ego," Kristeva's view of our potential to consciously access and integrate the formless clarity and creative openness of the normally unconscious depths assumes that recovering this primal layer of mind can have truly progressive effects on our ability to heal, grow, and commune with the other and the real. In a decidedly feminist twist that turns Freud's critique of any return to the womb on its head, Kristeva calls this hidden source of selfless clarity and connective openness "the chorion," borrowing the Greek term for the uterine tissue that creates the placental matrix for new life. In essence, her provocative move parallels Kohut's challenge to conventional notions of narcissism, insisting that there is within us all a state of selfless, formless openness that is the eternally generative source of our own self-love as well as our ability to truly love others and the objective reality they represent.

Again, this intriguing conception may seem far removed from the profound altered-states involved in the process attainment of objective clear light. Yet if we consider that Kristeva's insights and word-choice may reflect the profoundly connective state-alterations of pregnancy and childrearing, as seen from a mother's viewpoint rather than a child's, the apparent discrepancy seems to resolve. In short, her notion of the primal mind as a *chorion*, a transparent medium of connectivity to other life, we not only have a plausible model of the objective clear light, but also come full circle to reverse Freud's dated dismissal of states of "oceanic" communion. At a time when our historic rejection of emotional intelligence, along with the feminine perspective and the powerful chemistry of connective states like love, is no longer scientifically tenable, it seems high time that psychotherapy open itself to insights like Kristeva's and the intuition of the clear light.

Something For Everyone: The Public Health Impact of the Great Perfection

With that said, however exceptional the intuitions and arts of the perfection stage, as we come to the end of our journey together it is vital that we resist relegating them to the "ancient religion" museum shelf as exotic mysteries or the anthropology museum as pristine cultural artifacts. I believe the scientific and therapeutic models of even the most advanced stages of the optimal integral path help to locate this practice within the larger terrain of exceptional mind/brain integration and optimal human development.

While we may find it hard to relate to the profound alterations in states of mind, subjectivity, and sense of reality involved in this most advanced phase of process practice, the four models mentioned above make it clear that these alterations are not just for Asians or contemplative elites. In fact, in light of current research and contemporary psychotherapy, such profound shifts in personhood and consciousness are organic outgrowths of life-altering experiences that happen naturally to some if not all of us. Surviving a cardiac arrest, living with epilepsy, having a generative response to aging, a successful intimacy and the experience of childbirth—while such remarkable events and processes are hardly exotic or pristine, they do predictably

catalyze dramatic shifts in our selves and lives on the same order as the inner and outer journey of the great perfection stage. What is different about the optimal integral process path is that it does not leave such radical maturing shifts to chance or the unpredictable impact of external events.

Though I've made efforts to share the genuine flavor and living context of this truly uncommon and unexcelled system of exceptional inspiration and altruistic development, the effective practice of its intuitions and methods for most requires years of building a firm foundation and mastering preliminary practices. Yet the historic transmission of this rare tradition into Tibet shows that even its most advanced methods have always been seen as vitally relevant and potentially accessible to all. As remarkable as this rigorous and profound contemplative system may be, the ways in which it was and has been made widely accessible to a largely illiterate populace is still more remarkable. The popular teachings on death and dying presented in the so-called "Tibetan Book of the Dead" are one example,⁵⁰ and the related popular teachings of the great seal⁵¹ and great perfection practice are others.⁵² Each of these traditions in its own way offers novices and lay practitioners direct access to some of the most advanced intuitions and arts of the optimal integral process. In this, they make good on the mentor's ethical obligation to meet interested students at their level and try to prepare them to progress at their own pace towards the highest levels of process practice. In addition, they also anticipate the modern tradition of the *Wheel of Time*, which tries to make optimal integral practices a transparent science which can be taught to all to guide and support a larger cultural shift towards cultivating altruism and contemplative ways of living.

Given the growing dialogue between Buddhist contemplative science and modern neuropsychology, and the unprecedented pressures on all of us to find paths to sustainable well-being, altruism, inspiration, and happiness, it seems inevitable that we too will need to find ways of raising awareness about the contemplative power tools of the great perfection stage. It's in this spirit that I've tried to guide you through the brave new world of process science and its arts of core mind/body change. In the brief conclusion that follows, I'll share my experience teaching a mainstream audience the step-by-step path that leads to this stage, by combining group classes in the old, new science of contemplative living with the individual counseling and mentoring of psychotherapy.