Trusting Desire: A Trans-lineage 'Living Spirituality' that Actually Leads to Action

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Abstract:

In this paper I outline a trans-lineage spirituality rooted in our intrinsic and discovered desires. I begin with a critique of Buddhism and then draw on insights from Saniel Bonder's work developing the contemporary awakening school Waking Down in Mutuality, Bonnitta Roy's Process Model of Integral Theory and her notion of View, Bruce Alderman's and A.H. Almaas's recent trans-lineage reconsiderations of ontology and soteriology respectively, process philosophers such as Charles Hartshorne and Eugene Gendlin to respond to the repeated call for a more impactful integral theory and a concern for those overwhelmed and paralyzed by hyper complexity and uncertainty. This living spirituality begins with a life- and desire-positive worldview and develops ever-increasing trust, creativity, and dynamism in the midst of, in fact empowered by, radical uncertainty. Grounding ethics in both the unavoidability and justifiability of trusting our intrinsic desires, I offer an alternative to "engaged" Buddhisms that continue their history of world-renouncing ascetical ethics and authoritarian structures. My overall intent is to help integral spiritual practitioners struggling with hyper complexity to operate in good faith with their own basic goodness, get out of their own ways, and act creatively to generate a more and more beautiful, diverse, and flourishing world.

"Life wants to live. Even more than living, life wants to make more life."

     -Bonnitta Roy

Acknowledgments

Introduction

     This essay is for people whose "first problem," as Enrique Dussel would say, (Dussel) is that they are drawn to spiritual practice but are dissatisfied with traditional spiritualities' ability

to respond to their anxiety in the midst of the hyper complexity of modern life and their confusion about how best to respond to the existential, multi-systemic challenges we are facing today, including climate change. I began thinking about these ideas in response to my perception that the Buddhist teachings I had studied and my Zen, Theravada, and Tibetan Buddhist teachers were subtly or overtly dogmatic about their ontological and pedagogical views and could not respond to these challenges. At the same time, I recognize great depth and power in the practices and highly developed philosophies of Buddhism and other established spiritual traditions and am wary of the eclecticism, superficiality, and lack of intellectual rigor I experience in many newer, experimental forms of spiritual practice. Of course I am not alone in this; many others (including some Buddhist teachers) are also responding to similar needs to open and modernize mysticism without losing the depth that results from committed practice.

In his essay "Opening Space for Translineage Practice," Bruce Alderman performed a marvelous service by putting into dialogue Integral post-metaphysical spirituality and current movements in theology and religious studies to rehabilitate ontology and sketch a few basic principles for translineage spiritual practice. As Alderman points out, there are potentially many robust translineage views and practices. For example, A.H. Almaas's current view is that the most mature spiritual realization, which he calls the realization of "totality,"[1] is itself a meta-realization that has been forced upon him by the fact that he realized the 'ultimate' goals of several different spiritual traditions and found them all to be equally ultimate, none of them eclipsing or being eclipsed by the others. The realization of totality therefore is that "true nature, in manifesting different views, is not directed toward any ultimate view." Instead of one ultimate realization, Almaas suggests that both reality itself and spiritual practitioners, or perhaps reality itself through and as spiritual practitioners, are capable of manifesting-realizing an infinite number of contemplative goals as ontological 'grounds.' The view of totality is the meta-view required to hold this. In his own words:

> What characterizes the aliveness of this teaching is an ongoing stream of realization, enlightenment, and understanding that continues to grow, deepen, expand, and open up to ever-further ways of experiencing reality. Another interesting characteristic of the living nature of this teaching, which is really a characteristic of all life, is that the discovery of a new way of experiencing does not displace the old way of experiencing…Life…develops more capacities, more richness, more variety, and more creativity in the way it manifests itself. (168)

In the above quote, Almaas says that the character of his teaching mirrors the character of life itself. In my own inquiry into how best to practice a contemporary spirituality I too have found this principle of 'spiritual biomimicry' to be extremely alluring and suggestive, and this essay outlines one, specific translineage spirituality, or perhaps family of spiritualities, which takes life to be its central metaphor and inspiration. I argue that this 'living spirituality' can respond to contemporary needs better than previous spiritualities. Since Buddhism is the established spiritual tradition I know best, I begin by using it as an exemplar of certain tendencies - particularly methods and ethics rooted in world-denial and an ideal of completion -

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[1] While I deeply admire Almaas's view, I think the name he has given it is rather unfortunate because it implies some kind of finality or completeness, while the view itself describes a realization that is, to borrow from Alderman, "undetermined (meaning multiply determinable, not simply indeterminate)." (56)

that the 'living spirituality' critiques and to which it offers alternatives. Then I develop the idea of the living spirituality, drawing out the beginnings of its ontology, methods, and ethics, focusing especially on the necessity of reevaluating our relationship to desire in order to liberate modern spiritual practitioners from overwhelmed stasis or frantic floundering and act with greater confidence and effectiveness. What is emerging is a flexible, sacralized relationship to life which is grounded in and values our innate desires to live and *to make more life*.

A Critique of Buddhism

Buddhism is a vast tradition containing much diversity. Each of its major schools are vast traditions unto themselves. It would be inappropriate for me to attempt a comprehensive or authoritative account of Buddhist doctrine, practice, pedogogy, or community structure. At the same time I want to speak generally about Buddhism and not specifically, for example, about particular lineages. This is important for this project because the modern spiritual view I am proposing has come after personal wrestling with some of the very basic metaphors and intentions of Buddhism and other spiritual traditions as I understand them. Later in the essay I raise the difficult question of whether it is possible for Buddhism and other traditional spiritual systems to helpfully respond to modern needs at all; perhaps there is no baby in that bath water. Without making general claims about the Buddhist tradition as a whole, however, I could not raise this perhaps controversial but nevertheless dramatically important question for our time. And so I will take the risk with the intention that doing so creates generative conversation. There are two tendencies of Buddhism that I will critique and to which I offer alternatives: methods and ethics rooted in world-denial and an ideal of completion.

The first, world-denial, begins with Gautama Buddha, who lived, underwent his own practice, and founded his community within and in response to the larger cultural and religious milieu around him, namely, Brahmanical Hinduism, and in particular, the long stream of contemplatives and ascetics who had renounced jobs and families and societal life to live in the forests and meditate in their attempt to achieve *moksha*, the end of suffering and the cycle of rebirth. Some ideas central to this Brahmanical tradition were rejected or redirected by early Buddhists, but others became central to Buddhism. For us, the most important of these overlapping ideals was *moksha*, which Buddhists would call *nirvana*.

In some ways, the "world" that Buddhism aims to get out of is much vaster than our own. In the Buddha's, and previous yogis', cosmology, people were born and died and born again - as gods, or animals, or humans, or other kinds of beings - forever. No matter the quality of any of these lives all of them were seen to involve some amount of suffering. The only way to end suffering was to end the cycle of rebirth once and for all. This was *moksha/nirvana*. Those contemplative aiming for *moksha* during the Buddha's life were also ascetics intensely critical of desire, especially desire having to do with the body. They attempted to master desire by denying themselves all kinds of sensual pleasures, especially sex and food, and by learning to enter meditative states in which sensory perceptions decreased or were eliminated. Their meditation experiences paralleled their cosmology. As beings could be born as gods, which lived very pleasurable lives in subtler and subtler worlds, so too did the meditators enter subtler and subtler meditation states, called *jhanas,*which were more and more pleasurable and had less and less suffering. However, just as the gods' lives weren't totally free of suffering and in the end had to die and risk being reborn in a less favorable life, so too were all of these meditation experiences

temporary and not quite free of stress. In their lifestyle and their methods, the framework of withdrawal from all things was at the heart of pre-Buddhist contemplative practice.

As the story goes, none of the Buddha's teachers had learned to completely eliminate suffering once and for all. Before achieving *nirvana*, the Buddha was a master ascetic and *jhana* meditator, but, he concluded that these methods were not sufficient. Once he had achieved *nirvana* though, he did not completely reject them either. He still embraced self-restraint and taught that other types of meditation practice were necessary in addition to the *jhana* practice. He also did not overturn the basic cosmological and soteriological framework in which he had lived and practice. Ending suffering was still the goal, all lives still involved suffering, and ending desire was still the key to getting out of the cycle of life and death; he just figured out how to actually do it.

In its 2500 year history, and despite much commentary, refinement, challenge, amendment, extrapolation, addition, and all other changes that occur in a tradition with such a long history, Buddhism's foundational, negative relationship to the world and to desire still has a strong influence on much of its philosophy and practice. It is not that there are not forms of Buddhism which are relatively less world-denying and less desire-averse, but all remain traditions of withdrawal and ending. While it is impossible to draw supportive evidence from all Buddhist schools, we can use the Engaged Buddhism movement as a foil to point out the basic characteristic. Engaged Buddhism, exemplified by Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa, Bernie Glassman, and others, sees itself as a reformulation of the Buddhist tradition insofar as it *engages*, rather than withdraws, from social and political activity. Interestingly, in many places in the world and at many times in history, Buddhism has played a very strong role in social and political life. In Tibet, for example, Buddhism has been the state religion for hundreds of years, with the Dalai Lama has been both the spiritual leader of the Gelugpa school and the head the Tibetan government. In several Southeast and East Asian countries presently or in the past Buddhism has similarly played a very strong role as the state religion. And while monastics have not been simultaneously heads of state as in Tibet, they have been extremely well respected and influential in society and in governmental decision making. And yet, even in light of this history, many self-identified Engaged Buddhists still see themselves as departing from historical Buddhist practice.[2] While the historical Buddha was socially influential enough for regional governors to donate large areas of land for his and his followers' use, his goal was never "worldly" power. He and his disciples were trying to get out of the world. Buddhism's later rise in social and political power could not erase, and in fact was based on, this "spiritual" commitment. In Myanmar, for example, one of the reasons the monks and nuns are so respected and so influential with popular opinion, even in political matters (as 2007-2008's "Saffron Revolution" against the then military government demonstrated), is precisely because they draw a higher moral standing from their withdrawal from worldly life.

The other major aspect of Buddhism which undermines its present usefulness is nirvana's connotation of completion. As Tom Murray points out, (Murray 16) this problem is human more than it is Buddhist, but many Buddhists, even masters, do not succeed in avoiding it. For

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[2]Engaged Buddhism's attempt to reframe the Buddhist project is rooted in Buddhism's ultimate foundation, deeper even than its world-denying and desire-denying methodology and ethic, which is its commitment to ending suffering. This gives Buddhists interested in social justice, in political reform, in economic reform, in climate change, etc. the means to look at these issues from a Buddhist lens. Engaged Buddhism is thus, not so revolutionary as to be a contradiction in terms, but it is still a dramatic pivot.

example, the modern Tibetan master Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche describes the path of meditating on emptiness as progressing "through increasingly subtle and more refined stages until one arrives at complete and perfect understanding." (Gyamtso Back Cover) In no other human endeavor do we ever reach a completion or perfection, except when set arbitrarily by human judges, for example scoring a perfecting ten in a diving competition. This, too, stems from the original cosmological aspect of *nirvana's* definition as that which removes us from the otherwise endless cycle of birth-death-rebirth *once and for all*. Since this original cosmology was predicated on an infinity - an infinity of lives in a universe without beginning or ending - and all lives were seen to be full of suffering, then the ending of suffering could only make sense not just as a termination, but as a final termination in juxtaposition to this default infinity.

There are at least two big problems with this sense of existential finality. First, if you reinvent Buddhism so that it does not include multiple lives, then the basic goal of practice needs reconsideration, otherwise it starts to look like the easiest and quickest way to get to the end of suffering is to commit suicide. If life is full of suffering then to end one's suffering would simply mean to die.[3] This would especially be true in Buddhist schools that do not have a tradition of the bodhisattva vow: the compassionate desire to help end the suffering of all beings and not just one's own. Schools that do take this vow would argue against suicide because it prevents you from helping others in this life. But even these schools might hold that the only way for everyone's suffering to end is for everyone to die. If the mass extinction of all sentient beings is not an attractive feature of our spiritual path, then we are forced to discover or to create something that makes life worth living in the first place, whether we are enlightened or not, whether we have eliminated suffering or not. This is a major task and it will require reframing spiritual development as 1. not fundamentally otherworldly and 2. one goal among many worthy goals within this larger worthwhileness. We'll make inroads into both of these in the following sections of this essay.

Another problem with existential finality, combined with the anti-desire, anti-life foundations we've discussed, is that it can give rise to a kind of subtle arrogance and over-certainty even from those who are at the same time very modern, and very altruistic, people. This is a shame, and weakens otherwise important arguments. The French Tibetan Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard has written: "Buddhism's form of knowledge is the final antidote to suffering. In this sense, it seems that knowing the brightness of stars or the distance between them may be very interesting in itself, but it cannot teach us how to become better people." (Ricard) Underlying this statement is the old dichotomy between worldly and spiritual endeavors, with the spiritual given much precedence over the material, and especially the economic. This kind of thinking is still widespread in contemporary spirituality, but its a terrible hubris that prevents nuanced inquiries into the holistic conditions that lead to well being. What kinds of pursuits generate happiness, when, and for whom? What are the social, cultural, and economic contexts necessary for contemplative pursuits to be effective? What are the indirect effects of those pursuits? Are those pursuits scalable or are they so intensive as to only be

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[3] This point depends, however, on whether the version of Buddhism you are operating under sees suffering as completely eliminable during life, or whether it is only fully extinguished once an awakened being passes away. Put another way: whether whether life *has* suffering or life *is* suffering. If life only has suffering and it can be completely ended before death, then there might be room to make a Buddhist argument for enjoying life after suffering. However, I have pointed out intractable ambivalences on this question in the writings of Buddhaghosa, an influential Theravada commentator from the fifth century, in an my undergraduate thesis. (Schlosser) Other Buddhist traditions may be hold clearer positions.

implementable by a few? The methods which lead to *nirvana,* just as in all endeavors, require bringing together internal and external conditions to achieve a certain result. Likewise, the rise of rationality, empirical methodologies, and increased techno-economic development that has gone along with astronomical discovery, as well the awe which motivated it and which it inspires, have all contributed to human happiness and various other spiritual goals. To think this way, though, requires seeing spiritual knowledge and method as just one category of knowledge, without fundamentally privileging it over other knowledge endeavors, all of which can be directed toward happiness.

It is an old teaching in Buddhism says that all beings are the same in that we all desire happiness and avoid suffering. This universality may be true, but it can lead to a kind of closure based on 1. believing that you know the methods that lead to 2. the complete end of suffering and highest human development 3. for everyone and that 4. there is nothing else in life worth pursuing. Instead, in the rest of this essay, I'll sketch a view which both opens more dynamism and is itself more dynamic, undetermined, mutable through and through, and likely without a final or highest goal. As self-reflective living beings we can *make* ending suffering our highest goal, but this is a creative act which does not negate other possibilities. In this view a fundamental distinction between spiritual and material does not arise and the world does not become our enemy. Because of this we can re-honor desire as our basic and necessarily and justifiably trustable navigational guide and all of life can be taken on as an infinite, sacred endeavor.

Trusting Desire

"The whales do not sing because they have an answer. They sing, because they have a song."

- From the movie Ashes and Snow

Postmodernity is generally associated with relativism and an associated distrust of ontology, ideology, and truth. Relatedly we hear more and more about people being overwhelmed by too much information and having a difficult time knowing what is right or how best to act in a hypercomplex, globally-oriented society where some of our biggest problems, such as climate-change, are systemic or multi-systemic issues. In their recent announcement about upcoming semester programming, the School for Designing a Society (SDaS) summed up this situation well:

> Some acute social problems at first glance seem simple to understand, but on closer look reveal their social complexity. Such problems may then appear slippery, circular, unsolvable– and even the words available to describe these problems become problematic. The Fall program is for those people, like ourselves, who feel 'stuck' in un-caring systems, and who want time, tools and new ideas to figure out 'what next'. (School for Designing a Society)

In fact, the complexity of our global problems is so great that it can feel that potential solutions are not only not actionable, but not envisionable. For example, Frederic Jameson, Max Haiven (Haiven b.), David Graeber, and others who critique capitalism have all argued that we have difficulty imagining utopia generally and difficulty imagining a system other than capitalism

specifically. As Jameson put it succinctly: "it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." (Jameson)

All of this contributes to the common search amongst people today, especially young Westerners, for their "purpose." And often it seems that the high ideals of contemplative traditions can provide such a purpose, in a parallel way to when young, politically and existentially alienated Westerners went to "find themselves" in the East in the 1960s and 70s. However, these problems can sometimes be papered over or even exacerbated by engagement with contemplative practice. Following a traditional teacher's authority might feel like a safer and more certain way to live, yet disillusionment with spiritual teachers once held in great esteem, spiritual bypassing, and certain interpretations of Buddhist emptiness or not-self teachings or the 'ultimate' teachings of other traditions can also lead to an even greater sense of unmooring. It has certainly been the case that in my own life I have felt all of these types of floating, paralysis, and confusion. The research that led to this paper was in part an attempt to find a way to live with radical not knowing, to not be paralyzed by it, but be resilient and active in the midst of it, or as it. How, then, can we proceed?

One key piece of assistance comes from the philosopher of language and inventor of the Focusing technique Eugene Gendlin. In his Philosophy of the Implicit, he argues that both language and truth are implicit, embodied, and operational. The meanings of words are not stuck in or limited to their explicit definitions; they are fluid and situational. When we do not know how to say something, and even when we do not know what we are trying to say, still there is an "intricate felt sense" which moves us from below and which already contains our intended meaning even more specifically and concretely than the logical or explicit words we eventually find to describe it. This intricate felt sense underlying our outward expressions "carries forward" the complex and emergent combination of our past experiences, including that which has just been said to us, into our new thoughts and feelings spontaneously, effortlessly, and continuously, without any work on our part required. He says: "Do not surrender speech to the forms from the start and in principle. Do not reduce the living process to a vanishing wisp." (Gendlin 300)

Gendlin calls speech a "living process," and I began to see that one way of addressing complex paralysis and confusion lies in the same insight applied to action in general. I began to see action itself as a living process - a process which cannot, in fact, be stopped even when one feels paralyzed. With this insight came the confidence to look for the implicit movements, the implicit intricate felt senses of action already occurring beneath my own fear, confusion, and apparent stasis. And indeed there was such a thing, actually many. The attempts at action that I took to be signs of failure: initial fits of interest in various topics, internet probings, long nights of thinking, asking unanswerable or obvious questions of my mentors, all of these were already actions. So the problem was not that I was literally stuck - I didn't lack movement or action - I lacked trust and safety and the relaxation, commitment, and follow through that would come from those. Yet, in the realization that I was already moving, already on my way, a new self-trust, or trust in the living process of action, began to emerge.

I also realized that the intricate felt senses at the heart of action are what we normally call desires. What we mean by 'action' is usually external, behavioral, and implies physical movement. However, a wider definition of action would have to include the physical processes we don't have full control over such as digestion and heartbeat, consciously chosen interior processes such as reflecting, considering, and intending as well as interior actions that we have variable control over, like desire. Desires, it turns out, are not only feelings that lead to action; they are themselves implicit actions. Thinking about action in this way helps us discover where

we *already want to go*. Following a similar path towards a solution, the School for Designing a Society trains students to: "focus on desire and design–an education not only in knowing but in desiring and doing. Starting from where you are at, the focus is on your articulation and creation of projects of contemporary relevance." (School for Designing a Society)

To find action again, we must learn to *trust desire*, without knowing for sure where we are all going or how we are going to get there. If we do not know how to analyze our complex problems from the outside, then we must start from where we are - grounded in unknowing. If we do not know the right way to go, then we must start with what we happen to find ourselves wanting now. Especially after exhausting the present usefulness of mere intellectual analysis, we must trust ourselves to go back to the origin of intellectual analysis and trust whatever next emerges from there as well. We can judge our desires' worthiness, in fact it is important to do so. But it is literally impossible to discount desire completely because even the impulses to question, judge, and doubt are desires that comes from the bottom up and without full self-knowledge of their own potential results. Learning to trust these intricate felt senses requires getting back in touch with the place where desire and action are simultaneous.

From Structure to Process to the Unknown[4]

We are now moving toward the question: what kind of system of spiritual practice and interpretation could be developed from this foundational view of the importance and value of trusting desire. What specific practices would cultivate this trust? What ethical system would encourage it and follow from it? What appropriately honest and rigorous post-metaphysical ontologies and interpretative strategies could hold the experiences of these practitioners and answer their further questions? Of course, given that we are asking such large questions, in this one paper it is only possible to point in the direction such a spiritual system, or systems, might take. To begin, I think it will be helpful to follow the path I took to come to these questions, a path that reflects a progression from a more static orientation to reality and spiritual practice, through a process orientation, and toward this living spirituality. Doing so will let the subtle ideas of a living spirituality fall out more easily.

Not long into my initial study of Buddhism, as I was dedicating more and more of my time and energy and hopes and values to practice, I became preoccupied with gaining some certainty that the radical goal that the tradition promised, ending suffering completely, was indeed possible. I was not confident that Buddhism did not over promise and under deliver. After more practice and study I no longer felt that Buddhism was a viable path for me because its self-presentation seemed rather fantastical, I had an intuition that the practices I was doing did not and would not help me achieve my goals, and because I had become uncomfortable with its life-denying values. Inspired by an advertisement in Andrew Cohen and team's *EnlightenNext* magazine, I reached out to a teacher of the contemporary and eclectic school of non-dual awakening Waking Down in Mutuality. I was drawn to Waking Down because of its emphasis on the inclusion of "worldly" activities and desires in the spiritual path, the clarity and grounded common sense with which the teachers wrote about awakening which immediately and happily disillusioned me of some of the unrealistic ideals I was holding, and founder Saniel Bonder's bold but forthright and perhaps falsifiable claim of having stably awakened hundreds of

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[4]An allusion to Mark Dekay's chapter "The Shift from Structure to Process to Unfolding" in his book *Integral Sustainable Design*, which I reference again further on.

individuals. I stayed involved because in only a few short months of working with Ted Strauss, my main teacher at the time, I was having a lot of fun and very interesting experiences which seemed like classically good signs of progress and which were starting to satisfy the intrinsic desires which got me interested in awakening in the first place.

One of Bonder's basic motivations in developing this school was to break from what he perceived to be a general tendency in traditional "Eastern" spirituality to negate the value or even reality of conventional reality, including duality-based experience. His critique is that this attitude is neither true nor necessary for guiding people in the process of waking up to the nondual character of experience. It is not true in that experiences characterized by duality are just as real as non-dual experience, are necessary for any experience to occur, do not cease even after awakening (despite idealistic claims to the contrary in some traditional spiritual systems), and exist either in dynamic relation or simultaneously with nondual experience. Nor is the negation of duality necessary because Bonder and some of the other Waking Down teachers believe they have found a quicker way to help people recognize nonduality which involves fully permitting all types of experiences in the context of a teacher-student relationship in which the student feels that the teacher truly does see and feel that all types of experience have an equal, basic existential value. This practice, called greenlighting, would be antithetical to a dismissive or aggressive attitude toward duality-based experience by previous spiritualities. Moreover, while such an attitude may have been helpful in the past it now has many negative secondary consequences for modern practitioners, including leading them to devalue their regular lives and especially to devalue relationships, emotions, women, and the Earth, all of which contributes to beliefs and behaviors destructive to ourselves, others, and the environment on which we all depend. Thus, Bonder's understanding of nonduality includes both dual and non-dual experiences. Recognizing that things are "non-separate," another term Bonder frequently uses to make this distinction clearer, no matter what eases one's ability to have nondual experiences, to not resist dual experiences, and to see that both both types of experiences, and our own identities, are included together in a larger totality, which he usually calls the Heart. This recognition of one's own identity as part of the totality of what is, what Bonder calls Heart-realization. (Bonder a.,b.,c.)

This critique of previous spiritual systems, the more inclusive and accurate reformulation of what a nondual ontology must by necessity mean, and the ethical revaluation of relationship, community, emotions, worldly life, worldly desires, the body, women, the Earth, and so on have been very important in my own philosophical and experiential formation. The living spirituality I am discussing here draws a great deal from time studying and practicing within the Waking Down Community. After some years, however, I began to move on for many reasons, one of which was that I became more inspired by Bonnitta Roy's 2006 paper "A Process Model of Integral Theory." Looking back, this introduction to process thought was attractive because it made my view of reality more subtle, more complex, and less static than it had been through studying inside Waking Down. Perhaps this is in part because Saniel's terms for the basic constituents of reality are all nouns: he talks about the Heart, about the Conscious Principle and Matter. In this way there is an easy tendency to think of these things as fundamental facets of reality, and meaning that they themselves are unchanging or unchangeable.[5] Roy's model,

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[5] I do not know whether Bonder would agree with this characterization. This point is primarily speculation about the effects of the teaching on my own own experience, rather than Bonder's views, in order to draw the reader along through this progression of ideas.

however, pointing to a similar structural rigidity in the Integral AQAL chart, seemed both resonant with Bonder's motivation and perhaps more technically accurate.

In a later paper Roy considered the development of AQAL in relationship to Gebser's stages of consciousness, pointing out what she considered Wilber's late-stage Mental structure of consciousness enactment of the AQAL map and distinguishing this from a properly Gebserian Integral way of thinking and theorizing. To do this, she drew on other writers, including pre-Buddhist Bon Dzogchen philosophers, Herbert Guenther, Charles Hartshorne, and Eugene Gendlin to develop the concept of View. View is a generic term for a generative process "of becoming presence, feeling, image, body, self, concept, time, space … perspectival multiplicity." (Roy b.) Individual views, she says, are where you are coming from:

> Everything that can be seen, thought, felt, imagined, or conceived, in singles or multiples, wholes or parts, interiors or exteriors, subject, objects, the real and the surreal—are other than this view. This view is that which is like the subtle push of wind at your back; what is there below, behind, beneath everything else. Here is a story I like to tell that helps illustrate view:

> The knife cannot cut itself. A knife takes up a life-long search to discover his real nature. He cuts cheese, and reasons, "I am not cheese." He cuts meat and reasons "I must not be meat, either." He tries to cut a rock and discovers its resistance and reasons "Hmmm, I guess I am not rock."… etc. The knife exhausts himself scouring all the lands searching for who he really is by cutting everything he encounters, and ends up thinking "I am none of these." And then he gets his breakthrough "Ah ha! I am that which cuts!"

Strangely, so far this sounds a lot like old descriptions of Advaita Vedanta's method of *neti neti* and resulting realization of Witness consciousness. So why is this unique, and why is this interesting in our narrative of developing new spiritual views? Roy continues with the story:

> Except right at that moment, the knife is no longer that which cuts—the knife has become that which knows he is that which cuts. (Except he doesn't know it!) So this is what I mean by view. *View is simultaneously the ground of your being and the horizon of your own becoming*. (Roy a.)

According to Roy, views are themselves mutable, in a way that concepts of the Witness, Primiordial Awareness, and the like, are not. And for us this is a profound move because it shakes the apparent stability that comes from structural spiritual ontological categories. Moreover, this move doesn't just "heal" the spirit-matter split, as Bonder aims to do, it turns it into a non-problem by unravelling from the very beginning the tendency toward structural category making that would split spirit from matter in the first place!

From Roy's process view, the root issue here is in fact the view that reality itself is singular and statically organized. As Roy says "the problem situation is that we have concretized the evolving products of a generative process into self-made cages, by believing that this world of duality is a necessary property of *being*, rather than a rolling transformation in a continuum of *becoming*." (Roy b.) To make a similar conceptual movement, think back to when you learned about cosmological constants, those ratios and measurements such as Planck's constant and the proton-to-electron mass ratio, which are said to be constant parameters, throughout space and

time, which give shape to the unfolding processes of our universe.[6] Now consider the moment when you learned (and it may be now) that those same physical constants may not actually be constant (Lee, Wolff). The debate continues, but the conceptual shift is the same: that which was thought to be constant by definition is shown not to be. In the physics example, this is happening experimentally, in Roy's example, it happens because we recognize that it was only a certain view that gave rise to static categories in the first place and that such a view can change. Roy's view turns the Witness into a verb. So now, not only do objects of perception change, but the observational process itself changes as well.

But isn't this what the Buddha said so long ago? In certain ways yes. One of his big critiques of the Upanishadic contemplative ontologies that came before him was that they posited a fixed Consciousness, whereas he saw various consciousnesses arising in dependence upon that of which they were conscious. So for example, eye-consciousness arises in dependence upon a visual perception, mind-consciousness in dependence upon the perception of a mental event, and so on. (Thompson 23-26) Unfortunately, the Buddha then resorted to a paradox by positing nirvana, the final release from all change. The contemplative consequences of taking on Roy's "pure process" view are that we cannot necessarily hold out for a release from change. We don't know whether there will or will not be a final conclusion at any time. All we know is that the whole mass of what is becoming, is becoming.

We have not exactly lost the benefits we were originally seeking in spiritual practice, but we ended up somewhere completely other than we expected. Bonder showed us that we can be all of who we are, including having dualistic experiences, and still participate in the fundamental non-separateness of reality and reap the benefits in confidence and freedom that such a recognition entails. But with Roy we have taken an orthogonal turn. She's shown us that if we have a view that gives rise to duality it also give rise to nonduality. But this view is not necessary. We can have a view which does not need even the complex, paradoxical opposites of dual and non-dual. For those of us looking for an end, for a conclusion, to get out of here once-and-for-all, for a final solution, we are left perhaps a bit disquieted if not completely bereft. On the other hand this can be immensely liberating because even the structures within which we operate and view spiritual progress are open to change. We have options we never had before.

A Living Spirituality

Particular cosmologies are dispensable, not the affirmation of worth that is life itself. The idea that the universe is absurd or meaningless is itself absurd or meaningless. It expresses a living creature trying to deny its aliveness.

- Charles Hartshorne (317)

Now we begin to make the shift into a living spirituality. And our gateway will be the same radical unknowing that we started with. If we know our view can change in such basic ways, if even the previously constant abstract structures shaping experience and interpretation are mutable, what is left that is real, consistent, reliable? Is Roy even right? How would we know for sure? These kinds of questions open the door to a more radical not-knowing than we may

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[6] These constants gained more publicly exposure in recent years due to debates about whether the universe is "fine-tuned" for life - debates which contributed to the multiverse hypotheses.

have yet experienced. It is not simply a mental quiet or a sense of wonder or mystery. It is an apparent, though not certain knowledge, that all things may only be reliable in specific contexts or at certain times. It is the *possibility* that even Truth spelled with a capital 'T' is conditional. It is not a complete absence of knowledge, but a deep and conscious reformulation of what it means to 'know' something. *It is uncertainty through and through and through and through and through…* However, while we have arrived at deep unknowing, we have also arrived at perhaps the only kind of knowledge that is certain: the recognition of our actions as undeniable, spontaneous, and unstoppable. Actions are undeniable in the existential sense that it is undeniable that something is happening. They are spontaneous in the sense that they happen before our reflections, even when they are influenced by past reflections. And they are unstoppable in that the effects of our actions will continue forever. From these basic qualities of actions, especially their undeniability, we can draw a kind of basic trust and confidence. This confidence precedes doubt or uncertainty, no matter how strong the doubt. Even if our doubt grows, it will be because our always-greater sense of confidence has enabled it to. This automatic confidence in desire and action is foundational to function properly in a hyper-complex world.

We have also given ourselves a profound opportunity for creativity and have opened up potentially infinite new possibilities for what spiritual practice is for, what it looks like, what it feels like. We have arrived at the field of 'living' spiritualities: spiritual systems that self-consciously foster novelty and growth in expression and experience without their creators - us - knowing for sure where that growth is going, and in a way that, even when such growth closes down some possibilities, retains an openness to potentially infinite new possibilities. Further, just as architect Mark Dekay asks of building design, "How can we design systems of built form that adapt over time as the processes that they guide change over time?" (288) we should ask ourselves how we can design living spiritual systems that consciously adapt over time to new circumstances and new needs.

Trusting desires continues to be important when we are talking about specifically spiritual desires. When our spiritual goals "out there" are no longer certain, we must again turn to the implicit. Why? Because we find that even the goals we thought were out there were tied to our implicit desires. Returning to Gendlin, our implicit desires are more concrete and more specific than the explicit goals we believe will satisfy them. The implicit desires comes first, and it is our implicit desire that either confirms or denies that what we thought we wanted was indeed what we actually wanted. Consider that Buddhist scholar and former Buddhist meditation teacher Ken McLeod[7] says that the most productive question he has ever asked himself is "What am I looking for?" (McLeod b.)

> Rather than trying to receive an accepted truth, and that is a traditional way of approaching things, I encourage people to consider "what are your questions about life" and how do you want to answer them? And then I will draw on my own training and experience to provide them with the tools and perspectives and whatever, so that they become aware of the

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[7] Ken McLeod is a Buddhist scholar and former Buddhist teacher. He spent twenty years studying under the late Tibetan meditation master Kalu Rinpoche, including as one of the first Westerners to complete a traditional 3-year retreat (and then complete a second), about twenty years teaching, and has now stopped teaching and returned to writing and learning, as he says (McLeod a.). McLeod stopped teaching because he no longer felt that he knew anything about Buddhism in general or about what people needed in order to move on in their own practices. (McLeod b.)

possibilities, develop some of the skills that they need, and are able to progress towards the answers to their questions, rather than "this is what the Buddha taught." (McLeod c.)

We have the ability to imagine possible solutions to our intrinsic needs and to attempt to build what we imagine. The same can be said of spiritual practices. In fact, it's becoming a bit of a global movement to invent religious and spiritual systems that call to our unanswered needs and unsatisfied desires. Speaking generally, the San Francisco Bay Area in the United States is well-known as a fertile ground for this kind of creative spiritual experimentation. More specifically, we see this attempt in examples such as Alain de Botton's School of Life and the Syntheism movement started by Alexander Bard. As Bard says so poetically while speaking to atheists, though the same forceful reminder applies to us as well, "When you as a modern atheist enter a beautiful cathedral: What makes you so castrated it prevents you from building something similar?" (Bard) Of course wielding our creative power may not cover up our uncertainty.

Not long into my initial study of Buddhism, when I was practicing primarily in the Korean Zen tradition, I came to the conclusion that the essence of Zen was: Do whatever you want, but you had better know what that really is. I am not sure how accurate my early assessment of Zen was, but it certainly foretold some of the ideas we are working with here. It seems then that one possible foundational practice of a living spirituality is motivational inquiry: the deep work of looking for what we want. The burden and freedom of doing so may never end, but without a sense of necessary finality, such inquiry naturally induces processes of self-understanding, identity questioning, dissolution, and reformation, healing, and creative action. However, motivational inquiry can take different forms. "Knowing" what you want might involve "figuring out," thinking rationally, and coming to conceptual or strategic clarity. Or it could mean becoming more sensitive to emotional needs and physical impulses. It could mean harmonizing and contextualizing short term desires with long-term desires. Or, it could mean seeing your own desire as emerging from a community's collective needs or desires, or in the relationship between you and your physical environment. It might include incorporating old contemplative realizations about identity and reality so that even the phenomenological qualities of "I" and "wanting" change dramatically. Motivational inquiry can become a broad, deep, and nuanced practice. As a result, each individual's spiritual practice would thoroughly contain his or her needs, and would reflect his or her development. Rather than, or as an alternative to, individuals trying to fit themselves into established practice traditions, we might be able to hear the voice and feel the desire of each individual in their own practice, revealing spiritual life as creative art.

As spiritual life opens up and becomes more creative, it will likely need new language. The metaphors we use to give it expression and direction are themselves a method for enacting in ourselves and in others the experiences we are having. Thus, older forms of spiritual language will be constricting in certain situations, or no longer relevant or descriptive, whereas new language will allow more room for experimentation and invention. In particular, language that draws on, however implicitly, rigid, structural ontologies or fixed ways of viewing 'Reality,' may have to be abandoned, or at least reinterpreted in the context of the implicit process of the living spirituality. Moreover, just as the living spirituality should open itself to change, so its language should suggest and encourage dynamism and mutability. It should also help practitioners successfully create the lives they want, rather than put up barriers to desire in general. These words: *implicit*, *living*, and *uncertain* fit into one family of these new languages; *liminal* would work in similar ways. Others we have already emphasized include *desire*, *need*, and *trust*. We

hinted at an *organic*, or *organismic*,[8] spirituality. Similarly, the metaphor of the spiritual *path* remains important, but perhaps is widened. Whereas the spiritual path in some cases is seen as something well trodden, definite, with a more or less clear map and set of directions. Now perhaps the spiritual life itself may be more like the entire forest. *More* and *better* will work better than *most* and *best,* because the former leave open the possibility for infinity whereas the latter suggest closure. If we accept what Bruce Alderman suggests when he says that "we can take up ontological reflection again as a worthy, if admittedly speculative, endeavor." (Alderman 54) We will have to understand that these ontologies will be *operational* and *imaginative*. The whole spiritual life should call to each individual's aesthetic sensibilities and so the practices and ontologies that get developed should be *beautiful* and the deep confrontation with uncertainty should give the path the flavor of *maturity*. In fact, it requires a higher level of maturity and resilience from the very beginning, and, rather than negating desire, we could see the entire spiritual path instead as a process of maturing desire. Taken together, all of these words suggest a new way to relate to spiritual practice.

Lastly, let's take a first look at what the ethics of the living spirituality might be like. As I see it, the foundational principle is that *navigation trumps integration,* and by integration I mean the integration of previous levels of development, psychological shadow, historical and contemporary knowledge systems, and capacities and skill sets. In a world of uncertainty, hyper complexity, and possibility without any absolute frameworks, all of these types of integration are infinite projects secondary to learning how to function successfully and find your way forward in each moment. We will probably never have all the information relevant to any situation. We will likely never be able to integrate all our shadow, so we must learn to make the wisest possible decisions we can, starting from where we are. A second principle comes back to desire. The living ethics must somehow be viewed as occurring in and originating from the the implicit desires that each practitioner already has. Again, we see the usefulness of motivational inquiry to reveal our caring desires for our own well-being as well as, almost certainly, the well-being of others. In this way, our ethics are discovered rather than than delivered, taught, or suggested from without and above. Because of this, I think it's likely that spontaneous empathy will play a large role in people's acknowledgement of their own intrinsic goodwill towards others. And since empathy is generally experienced as a feeling in the body, the motivational inquiry will tend toward an ethic of embodiment and a valuing of 'hereness.' Finally, since the motivational inquiry is a process of discovering the ethics we already have, the process will tend toward an ethic of honesty and transparency.

Conclusion: Imagining

I want to frame the radical imagination not as a thing some people possess, but as something we do together…the imagination is a process of collective doing.

  - Max Haiven (Haiven a.)

We are fluid, morphing creatures in a fluid, morphing world. As yet unmade discoveries abound all around, in, and through us. Staring into the not-knowing, and waiting, watching, or

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[8] This term important is important to Saniel Bonder, which is where I learned it, though it predates him considerably.

digging into what has yet to emerge sounds to me like the most exciting activity there is, and full of spiritual wonder. Throughout the paper I never defined what I mean by the word spiritual, I preferred to simply let it imply something broad. But, if I had to define it, I would say that this practice of staring into the unknown is spirituality. We can go exploring in new fields if we want. We can invent ourselves, our relationships, our social structures, and our economy. And I think we are, and should, because many of these are not serving us anymore. We can do better, but we don't yet know what that looks like.

My journey from spiritualities of anti-desire, anti-worldliness, and fixed ontologies, to a process spirituality, to something more uncertain and more alive has led me to an open space. This openness terrifies me. I do not know where the journey is going. However, one saving grace may be that I do not have to know on my own, because you will help me carry forward. You will help show me what comes next. Max Haiven's description of radical imagination is evocative of the kinds of processes that will give rise to the living spiritualities. We are beginning to realize how creative we can be. Our experiences, our perceptions, our theories, our actions… our world is a plenitude. It seems that all our words are poetry and more. Coherence, effectiveness, accuracy: theories used to rely on these for judgment, and we still should, but it seems that our love of accuracy has given birth to a new kind of accuracy, a more playful one. It's not just, as mystics have said for so long, that words cannot exhaustively represent the mystery of being, it's that nothing can, not our established practices, nor our established views. New views and new practices may bear fruit in ways that extend further than even our most radical imaginations.

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