

On Advantages of the Clear Mind: Spiritual Practices in the Training of a Phenomenological Researcher

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“In the course of human knowledge man must
first make his inquiry into his awareness of himself...”
Suhrawardi, 12th century (as quoted in Yazdi, 1992. p.94).

Metascience suggests that in order to understand how knowledge is produced, one should also study the researcher (Radnitzky, 1973). In the field of natural science, this applies mainly to the social contexts of a researcher. Within psychological qualitative research, other, more intimately human aspects take precedence. Here, the researcher’s mind is the only “tool” for an obtaining new knowledge. It has to penetrate the delicate interiority of consciousness and find structures in the intricate fabric of psychological processes. The adequacy and effectiveness of the mind as a tool provide for the capability of the researcher to perform the mental operations prescribed in the research procedure. Meditators (Shapiro & Walsh, 2003) and philosophers (SenSharma, 1990; Stuart, 1999) also use their minds as tools. While the focus of the philosopher may be on “disciplined thought” (Giorgi, 1990, p.64), and the focus of the meditator may be on decreasing the random activity of the mind, both engage in special training procedures to change the quality of their mental processes. Such training may also benefit the phenomenological researcher. Through a comparative analysis of ways of knowing implied in phenomenological research and in spiritual training, this article suggests that successful qualitative, and especially phenomenological, research in psychology requires special psychological faculties. Training of these faculties optimizes the preparation of graduate students doing qualitative research in psychology. Particular mental exercises, carefully chosen among other spiritual practices, increase the mental “fitness” of the phenomenological researcher. This article offers a detailed description of these procedures, suitable for use in graduate education.

Phenomenological enquiry takes as its point of departure descriptions of ordinary, everyday reality, variously referred to in philosophy as ordinary language, everyday life, the main reality, the

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natural attitude, common sense, and the everyday world. Psychological phenomenological method singles out the psychological dimension in this description. Knowledge of psychological structures is obtained through a series of reductions carried by the researcher in a process of imaginative variations (Giorgi, 1990; Mohanty, 1997; Sokolowski, 2000). To do this, the researcher absorbs the meaning units of naive description, enters the reductions and explicates the psychological meanings contained in the description. Then follow a series of shuttle-like mental moves between interior contemplation involving eidetic intuition, and re-readings of the description. In the process, the researcher experiments with various discovered meanings, seeking both a maximum explication and coherence with the original description. This step-by-step alignment of the discovered meanings with the original description uncovers the essential invariable constituents of its interior psychological fabric. For this knowledge to be adequate and true, the researcher also brackets his/her own theory-laden assumptions, and tries to identify and “ground” the unconscious process leading to the positing of those assumptions (Giorgi, 1992, p.127).

Obviously, the philosophical core and the language of phenomenology contradict those of positivist philosophy. The degree of this contradiction, and the depth to which the assumptions of the latter are generally embodied by researchers, only become evident in teaching the method of phenomenological enquiry. Students find themselves in emotionally charged cognitive conflict. In addition to the dazzling intellectual focus, phenomenology indirectly necessitates self-enquiry, thus involving the “whole being” of the student. If this passes un-reflected, the subtleties of the method get “high jacked” by intellectual defenses and unexamined personal agendas; this effect seems to be quite common in teaching the depth-phenomenological research method. By the time the crucial “Aha!” is reached, half of the class may be caught in a state of deep frustration and conflict between their intuition of the possibilities of the method and their personal inability to grasp it.

However, the promise of an epistemological rigor in properly performed phenomenological research ensures its attractiveness for serious students. This article draws upon the author’s experience in research and dissertation guidance using the phenomenological method in transpersonal psychology. Examples of the topics covered by such research include psychosomatic mysticism (Louchakova & Warner, 2003), spiritual experiences induced by cultural trauma (Wall & Louchakova, 2002), dream yoga (Stefik, 1999), non-ordinary states of consciousness in multigenerational family patterns (Little, 2004), science as a path to God (Kuhar, 2004), and the meditative practices of selflessness (Carey, 2004). Transpersonal topics and descriptions that fall into the category of “transpersonal” (Valle, 1989) aggravate the complexity of phenomenological analysis by three factors. First, they integrate the highest levels of consciousness (spirit) into the psychological analysis, thus contradicting the general tendency of psychology to separate the former from the human psyche. Secondly, the naïve description of spontaneous spiritual experiences — happening, for example, in cases of spiritual emergence — naturally contain elements of spontaneous transcendental or eidetic reduction. Consequently, an analysis of the descriptions of spiritual experience also includes reductions of all levels, integrated into the procedure of psychological phenomenological research in such a manner that the order of original meanings are kept intact. Third, in case descriptions that incorporate altered states of consciousness, the researcher faces the necessity of explicating not only meaning contents, but the structures of spiritual perception as well. Though several authors in phenomenology have emphasized the necessity of studying structure versus contents (Shapiro, 1985), there is no well-articulated “method” so far which addresses this problem in regard to spiritual experience.

Multiple tensions between the analysis of the ego and the analysis of the transcendental ego (Mohanty, 1997), and the *terra incognita* existing in the structural analysis of spiritual perception, result in the absence of a defined phenomenological method regarding transpersonal matters. The training procedures, described in this article, are a step towards such a method. The success of the phenomenological method applied to transpersonal psychology entirely depends on the mental discipline

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of the researcher and rigor in identifying of individual presuppositions. Together with the typical use of multiple epistemologies in transpersonal research, the interplay of theoretical and applied modalities, and a deep intimacy with the research subject, phenomenological research challenges the very sense of identity of the student and can lead to personal transformation. Adding spiritual practices to the training of transpersonal researchers thus becomes an aid, and a container for this transformation to occur safely.

The educational technique described below helps build an aptitude for the phenomenological research method. It was tested in teaching phenomenological research to three cohorts (30 students) of graduate students at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. It was also used in teaching Culture and Consciousness and Diversity Research in transpersonal psychology to six cohorts (about 150 students) of graduate and one cohort (total of 12) of undergraduate students. Both Culture and Consciousness study and Diversity Research have their foundation in phenomenological enquiry (Benson, 2001), are very complex, and have high personal relevance. Frequently, associations with past cultural traumas would slow down the absorption of the material and adversely affect the educational outcome. The “aptitude of the researcher training”, described in this article, helped overcome this by allowing students to cope with personal difficulties and to successfully incorporate the phenomenological perspective in their dissertation process. This suggests that qualitative research in general, in addition to learning the actual procedures, requires certain mental qualities on the part of the researcher, which can be mastered in the process of special training.

Rationale for this Approach

The rationale for this approach originates from an analysis of the methods of knowing in Vedanta, Shakta-Vedanta, Sufism, and Hesychasm (the early mystical tradition within Christianity). It is based on a phenomenological analysis of texts, and field studies of practicing groups in Russia, Estonia, India, Turkey, and France. It is also supported by interviews with living teachers acknowledged as experts in their respective traditions. The brief overview of the various spiritual traditions summarizes many observations, and shows how spiritual practices are traditionally used for training better faculties of knowing. Indeed, spiritual traditions can be viewed as phenomenological knowledge systems (Louchakova & Warner, 2003). Insofar as they focus on an investigation of a conscious subject, they can be compared with human science. Spiritual traditions sum up centuries of experience in the use of special practices to refine perception and improve cognitive processes. We hypothesized that the use of such spiritual practices would train the researcher’s mind, facilitating a proficiency in the particular qualitative research method. To be able to accomplish a cross-disciplinary “borrowing” of spiritual practices, the following questions needed to be answered: does the emergence of a particular type of knowledge require a particular internal preparation by the researcher? To what degree do the specifics of the researcher’s mind affect the effectiveness of this or that qualitative method? Do people have an inborn predisposition to one kind of knowing or another, and would this affect the success of phenomenological research? The argument leading to answers to these questions consists of a) an analysis of spiritual traditions as knowledge producing systems, b) an explication of the faculties necessary for knowledge, c) a comparison of the ways of knowing in spiritual traditions and phenomenological research, d) the application of spiritual training of the mind to phenomenological research, and e) an examination of the results of such training.

Spiritual Traditions as Knowledge Producing Systems

Spiritual philosophies are generally interested in the various ways of knowing as applied to the commonplace maxim, *gnothi seauton* (Greek), “know thyself.” Self-knowledge fructifies in happiness and human fulfillment (Vidyaranya, 14th century/1967). The stakes are high, so the methodology should not fail. Besides theoretical tenets, traditions emphasize practical attainments and the implementation of

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knowledge in one's own life. They point to dialectical, dialogical, and hermeneutic relationships, connecting the ability to exercise a particular type of knowledge and the state of consciousness, mental and emotional qualities, and even the constitution of the practitioner (Heer, 1993). Spiritual practices enhance one's ability to engage in certain ways of knowing. In the western philosophical schools of antiquity, practices of self-awareness and discernment were always directed towards the attainment of the qualifications necessary for self-knowledge (Stewart, 1999). The geniuses of Hebrew, Egyptian, Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman thought alike emphasized that the self-improvement practice of the philosopher is necessary for knowledge, as condensed in the famous phrase of Horace "*Aequam... servare mentem*" (1997, ii.3) (keep the clear/steady mind - Latin). Merkabah (early Jewish mysticism) (Scholem, 1946) and Hesychasm (early Christian mysticism) (St. Simeon the new Theologian, 8th century/1995), were specifically concerned with direct apprehension of God, and suggested a special set of attitudinal and ascetic purification practices which prepared the mind for such contemplation. In Sufism, the process of personal transformation (Frager, 1999), augmented by the use of the practices of "sobriety" and "intoxication" (Abdel-Kader, 1976), preceded and increased the probability of the attainment of the knowledge of consciousness via a phenomenological approach (Dahnhardt, 2002; Schimmel, 1994).

Similar attitudes pervade the history of traditions concerned with self-knowledge in the East. In the practice-oriented Indian philosophies of sadhana, such as Vedanta, Shakta-Vedanta (SenSharma, 1990) or Sankhya (Larson, 1979), knowledge is inseparable from transformative practice. This manifests in concrete methodological instructions and exercises, directed at developing the mental and characterological prerequisites for knowledge¹. Vedanta, whose objective is non-dual self-knowledge, emphasizes that the successful seeker should possess certain prerequisites making self-knowledge possible (Rambachan, 1999; Shankaracharya, 8th century/1947). These requirements include a harmonious character structure, an orderly life-style, and a "clear mind" (Akarta, 1994). The "clear mind," or, to be exact, "clear internal instrument" (*antahkarana shuddhi* – Sanskrit), is a term having no direct analogies in the western vocabulary. It implies the "transparency" of the psyche to its own internal process. In the dialectical cycle, self-knowledge, available to this "clear mind," causes the further transformation of the mind in the direction of greater clarity and aptitude for knowledge. "Through repeated practice, Knowledge purifies the embodied soul stained by ignorance..." (Shankaracharya, 8th century/1947, p.129). According to Shankaracharya, whom Indian historians consider to be a genius akin to Leonardo, Shakespeare, and Hegel taken together (Bharati, 1991), the gestalt of true non-dual Self consciousness is possible only if the seeker's mind and character achieve certain qualities (Tandavaraya, 15th century/1993; Karapatra, 1990). Akin to a reflection of the sun that is clear in a bucket with clean calm water, and is distorted in a bucket with muddy disturbed water, the gestalt of the essential nature of consciousness happens only in a "clear" mind.

The emergence of knowledge corresponds with spiritual practice and character development. While Advaita [non-dual] Vedanta lists four qualifications necessary for such self-knowledge (Rambachan, 1991), more developmentally oriented Shakta-Vedanta (a.k.a. Kundalini Tantra) specifies a more complicated developmental map. Similar to Sufism, the levels of personal transformation in Shakta-Vedanta parallel the levels of emerging philosophical and spiritual insight (Louchakova & Warner, 2003). Various types of knowledge in Shakta-Vedanta include the indirect conceptual knowledge resulting from the logical processes; the knowledge obtained through external senses; the direct apprehension of phenomena in the interiority of consciousness such as symbols, meaning, and imagination; and the self-knowledge of pure consciousness which is neither direct nor indirect (Shankaracharya, 8th century/1993). Though all these ways of knowing are ontologically implicit, the Shakta-Vedanta training actualizes these

¹ The emphasis is on uncovering and purification, similar to "sifting gold nuggets", rather than on constructing new qualities.

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predispositions to knowing. For example, one can be trained to use logic as a mathematician, or use the refined senses as a skillful craftsman, etc. Or, one can become a jnani (the person of knowledge - Sanskrit), who enjoys a direct insight into the nature of consciousness. “Jnana is not only a process at cognitive level but involves the transformation of will and emotion...cognitive change alone is inadequate for the commitment to a new understanding of oneself.” (Rambachan, 1991, p.87).

All spiritual systems begin the process of enquiry with the natural condition of the human being, a term similar to the phenomenological life world, i.e., is the world of everyday perception. The life world of spiritual practitioners consists of intentional worlds (Benson, 2001), defined by the philosophy of their particular tradition, culture and historical environment, as well as their level of spiritual development accompanied by perceptual changes (Louchakova, 2003). Within these life worlds, spiritual systems unanimously take a phenomenological stance. They posit an aesthetic (a.k.a. observing, witnessing, receptive, “sobriety,” “watchfulness,” mindfulness, “guarding” of senses, etc.) attitude towards phenomena. They agree that self-knowledge requires the development of introspective attention, the phenomenological explication of the structures and contents of consciousness, and a direct recognition of the nature of awareness by awareness itself. According to the living oral tradition of Advaita Vedanta, an explication of the structures of consciousness happens naturally in the condition of an “open mind” (Sri Ranjit Maharaj, personal communication, May 4, 1996). Though self-enquiry may begin on the logical and symbolic levels, at its core it is a phenomenological exploration (Ramana, 1996; Rambachan, 1991). “It is only the experience which contemplation (*nididhyasana*, Sanskrit- direct perception of non-dual contents of consciousness) affords that conclusively informs us about Brahman (non-dual self-consciousness)” (Rambachan, 1991, p. 14). The foundational data are perceptual, but not sensory. The theory of “Knowledge by Presence”, shared by Hindu and Muslim spiritual philosophies, applies itself to all levels of consciousness including non-dual. Knowledge by presence is the knowledge of something which is present in the mind and whose very existence is inseparable from the knowledge of it, as opposed to knowledge based on the concept of mind of something that itself is absent from the mind (Yazdi, 1992). In considering the data rendered through knowledge by presence, various spiritual philosophies will differ in their semiotic or interpretive handling of the phenomenological data. This leads to differences in ontological hierarchies, different functional groupings such as the five basic elements, different perspectives on spatiality, temporality, archetypal, and symbolic contents. Nevertheless, all spiritual systems, which are rooted in a phenomenological approach to consciousness via knowledge by presence, feature similar demands on the faculties of the mind and character as prerequisites to enquiry. All of them require from the aspirant faculties such as: a) a capacity for introspection, b) a capacity to directly apprehend the interiority of consciousness, and to directly apprehend pure consciousness, and c) the control of the random activity of the mind — and all provide the practices which allow these faculties to be developed (Buddhananda, 1971). Classic Patanjali or Kashmiri Shaiva Yoga are examples of a systematic application of practices which train the mind (Bangali, 1990; Vijnanabhairava, 1979).

To build a foundation for the training of researchers, we compared traditional qualifications for seekers of knowledge in spiritual traditions and their western psychological counterparts. The comparative analysis of cross-disciplines and cultures requires much caution in order to avoid the seduction of oversimplified direct analogies. On the one hand, the types of knowledge underlying phenomenological analysis and spiritual pursuit are the same; on the other hand, their respective goals are different (Scheler as described in Mohanty, 1997). Spiritual traditions have a salvatory goal, knowledge being the means to fulfillment; phenomenological analysis in psychology, by contrast, is intended to render knowledge separate from the researcher, in order to, for instance, assist practical domination and transformation of the world. Both, however, imply the development of the knower – many researchers report that using the phenomenological method also helps their personal development. To compare matters further, psychology explains humans via personality theory; spiritual systems describe the whole human being including the embodied psyche and use the category of character. The main methodological contradiction is that the

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faculties and traits that are foundational for personality theory have a very limited application in spiritual systems, which take human being in a developmental and environmental context and see emotions and consciousness as associated with the whole body (Louchakova & Warner, 2003). Nevertheless, as we will show later, the character of knowledge in both approaches allows comparison and becomes a foundation for the development of the training of the phenomenological researcher.

Traditional Requirements for the Mind of the Seeker and Their Western Psychological Equivalents

Vedanta establishes several prerequisites to knowledge of the Self. *Viveka* (discrimination - Sanskrit), is the capacity of intuitive discernment between cognitions of real (that which is) and unreal (that which is not). Then follows *vairagya* (dispassion - Sanskrit); the six qualities such as control of mind, control of senses, cessation of social activity, control of passions and endurance, settling down to reflect on the nature of consciousness, and faith; and *mumukshutvam* (Sanskrit), the passionate desire for liberation (Tandavaraya, 15th century/1947). Dispassion and other qualities correspond to the integrated personality structure, which copes well with frustration and has a characterological and existential maturity where the satisfied lower needs of Maslow's hierarchy have developed into the higher needs.

Shakta-Vedanta emphasizes humility, modesty, non-violence, endurance, simplicity, purity, persistence, self-control, etc. (*Srimad Bhagavat Gita*, 1983, p.425-429). These qualities also correspond to the higher ranks in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, low levels of narcissism, and a high degree of personal integration.

Sufism states that for the most beings, the mind is "veiled". Removing the veils in order to advance in understanding requires great efforts in study, contemplation, spiritual discipline and exercise (Heer, 1993). The main request is to develop an understanding from the heart, i.e., a knowledge by presence, versus knowledge from the head by conceptualization, and to purify the heart in order for this understanding to happen.

In early Christian mysticism, the final goal is to attain the perception of Godhead (Kirk, 1931) through the "heart...purified through watchfulness" (St. Simeon, 10th century/1995, p. 75). Stages of purification of the heart include watching over the heart and curtailing the passions rising from it, repulsing temptations to external senses, and detaching entirely and giving oneself to God. More explicitly than Sufism, Christianity suggests applying mindfulness to the sensations, emotions and thoughts; developing the inward vector of attention; and developing a focus on the phenomenological origins of consciousness.

Discrimination between knowledge by concept and knowledge by presence via engagement of bodily concentration in the chest has no parallels in psychology. However, if one tracks the "eidetic intuition" of phenomenology (Mohanty, 1997) to its origins in Greek thought, the connection with the Gnostic "mind of the heart" becomes apparent.

Along with the qualities of the mind that are essential for gnosis, there are mental obstacles or deficiencies, which inhibit the attainment of knowledge. Islam mentions more than a thousand veils, such as disturbing emotions, false unexamined intellectual assumptions, dissociation with the actual experience, etc., as well as an immature character structure that can interfere with the clarity of direct perception. According to spiritual philosophies of Hinduism, the mind has a threefold constitution, that of *sattva* (transparency, clarity, positivity, subtlety – Sanskrit), *rajas* (activity, dynamism – Sanskrit), and *tamas* (inertia, sloth, dissociation – Sanskrit). For the mind to become the tool of knowledge, *tamas* has to be transmuted into *rajas*, and the latter into *sattva*.

A psychological interpretation of practices that lead to the formation of prerequisites for

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knowledge, presents additional difficulties. To what degree is a particular spiritual practice woven into the socio-cultural context of its particular tradition, and what elements cannot be transmitted in the current globalization of spirituality? To what degree does practice condition particular ways of perception? Gurdjieff (Ouspenski, 1949/1976), Antonov (2003), Antonov and Vaver (1989), Louchakova (1990), Torchinov (1997) and Walsh (1999) have shown that the spiritual practices of different traditions have common generalizable structures, which can be creatively adapted in cross-cultural transmission. Traditions unanimously consider the initial “raw” state of the person as unfit for knowledge by presence. Preparation for knowledge consists of two aspects: character transformation and the training of the perceptual faculties. Specific methods of transformation, especially body-based focusing practices, are usually transmitted orally (Louchakova & Warner, 2003). A comparison of modes of knowing in spirituality and phenomenological research helped us to identify the practices suitable for phenomenological training.

Relevance of Mind Training to Phenomenological Research

Husserl’s description of intentional consciousness, which in the process of knowledge “grasps” its own phenomena, assumes the direct apprehension of consciousness by consciousness, prior to the involvement of physical senses or reasoning. Phenomenological psychological research is the study of intentional consciousness, which both “see[s] and seize[s] upon” (Kersten as quoted in Mohanty, 1997, p.9), and in which the function of “seeing” is not different from knowledge by presence in Islamic mystical philosophies (Yazdi, 1992).² Phenomenological eidetic intuition resonates with the Islamic intuition of existence, the fundamental phenomenological basis of Islamic metaphysics (Al-Attas, 1990). The differences pertain not to the character of knowing, but to the applications and focus of enquiry. Spiritual enquiry has to remove the fear of death, alleviate existential suffering, and render a sense of satisfaction and fullness through recognition of the nature of the self; psychological enquiry leads only as far as the knowledge of the psyche. Nevertheless, the character of knowing is the same, by presence not by logical processes.

Moreover, the procedures of knowing are the same as well. Epoche, in its stage-by-stage absorption of the vector of attention in the direction of pure subjectivity, is reminiscent of classic Patanjali Yoga with its inward direction of attention, focus on interiority of consciousness, examination of assumptions, and eventually focus of the attention on pure subjective consciousness. The phenomenological attitude (Giorgi, 1990) resembles the foundational practice found in all types of esotericism, i.e. witnessing phenomena in the process of their rising and subsiding. Certainly, the similarity of knowledge-related protocols does not imply the similarity of interpretive frames or an identity between the systems. Phenomenology does not make ontological claims; spiritual systems do. Interpretations in spiritual systems are frequently considered to be revelations, and will not be subject to bracketing until the very last step of the enquiry. For example, in the process of self-knowledge in Vedanta, phenomenological self-examination is accompanied by the application of Vedanta *pramana* (Sanskrit - special logic allowing recognition of non-dual consciousness). The latter continues until the last step, *manollasa* (Sanskrit - dissolution of the mind, or the ego principle), when the mental processes subside in contemplation of non-duality (Karapatra, 1990). Phenomenology, on the contrary, begins and ends with the bare data of one’s experience of living. Therefore, in our analysis the correlations apply strictly to the pre-reflective perception, not to how the latter may be structured by the assumptions and

² The other function, “to seize upon,” is generally interpreted in spiritual traditions as a mode of identification by which pure subjective “I” consciousness is conditioned by the perceived phenomena. For example, In Vedanta this mode of mind is known as *ahamkara* (Sanskrit), the “I-body-maker”.

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logic, and whether the systems on the whole are similar or dissimilar.

Other differences arise concerning the questions of essences. Theorists in phenomenology argue whether Husserlian essences are subject to direct apprehension and have a phenomenological nature, or whether the process is more complex and involves secondary thought forms such as reflections, etc. (Mohanty, 1997). By comparison, the spiritual epistemology of Islam considers that human essence, i.e., the primal relationship between man and God, is available only to “knowledge by presence”. The many aspects of this primal relationship (which correspond to the levels of interpretation in Koran) bear an interesting similarity to the structures of consciousness discovered in phenomenological analysis (Mohanty, 1997, p.6). Another interesting similarity between spiritual philosophies and phenomenology of the self (Wiley, 1995) is that the spiritual philosophies of Islam and Hinduism always consider the structures within consciousness as *sui generis*. Essential structures of consciousness in Islamic philosophy are characterized by principial autonomy, or ontological and logical primacy (Ibn al-Arabi, 1975), and cannot be reduced to either cultural or personal contexts.

Both the Islamic approach to *marifat* (Arabic), knowledge, and the *gnosis* of Christian mysticism (Andrae, 1987), consider imagination as a cognitive organ by which consciousness knows itself (Corbin, 1969, 1995). In phenomenological enquiry, imagination is involved in the process of imaginative variations, as an essential tool that allows stripping off the accidental parts of the description and explication of the essential parts. The phenomenological researcher performs the imaginary removal of the elements of the description, checking whether the meaning remains the same (Mohanty, 1997). The functioning of imagination, and the direct apprehension of the phenomena in imaginal realms by awareness without an intermediary, resemble the method of the Islamic philosopher Suhrawardi, one of the founders of the approach of knowledge by presence (Suhrawardi, 1185/1999).

The interface between phenomenology and spirituality may be even more direct than analytic parallels. The recently published letters of Husserl indicate that the founder of phenomenology was fundamentally inspired by religious motivation (Schmitz-Perrin, 1996). He wanted the new type of philosophy to help contemplatives in their search for “God.” Edmund Husserl himself characterized his research as an a-religious search for God and for real life. The rigorous unbiased investigation of lived intentional consciousness, while analyzing its horizon of transcendence, lead him to say in 1935 to one of his students: “The life of man is nothing but a path toward God. I am trying to reach this goal without theological proofs, methods and any theological grounding; I am looking forward to reaching God without God. I have to eliminate God from my scientific life in order to clear a path toward God for the ones who do not have the certitude of believing what the Church is claiming”. (Schmitz-Perrin, 1996).

In the last days of his life, Husserl stated: “God has welcomed me graciously, he is allowing me OF [sic! – caps mine] dying...God is good, but impenetrable, it is a hard time for both of us...I want him to be with me. But I do not feel that he is close to me...Pray for me...” The minutes before he died, he said: “I have seen something wonderful. Hurry up, and write!” But when the nurse came back, he had already passed away (Schmitz-Perrin, 1996). This requires no comment.

Environment for the Training

Phenomenological researchers are likely to agree that the enquiry requires patience, receptivity, sustained focused attention, emotional harmony, inspiration regarding the subject matter, and some degree of characterological maturity. As noted by a colleague, to research phenomenologically one “has to love people” (Barbro Giorgi, personal communication, fall 2002). Similarly, epistemology in Islamic philosophy concludes that great intellectual power has to be necessarily combined with a heart full of love. Resulting knowledge is “not simply cerebral, but belongs to the realms of heart-intellect” (Nasr,

1992, p.xiii).

This specific preparedness of the mind and the availability of the “heart-intellect” are especially important for research in transpersonal psychology. In the natural attitude, consciousness uninterruptedly and spontaneously shifts and combines the levels and ways of knowledge (Giorgi, 1990). In the deep phenomenological enquiry into the nature of consciousness, knowledge by presence is cultivated as the predominant, and maybe the only means of knowledge. While the life world makes use of all the ways of knowing, the structures of awareness, experiences of altered states of consciousness and of essences are exclusively available to knowledge by presence. Whence, transpersonal psychology with its consideration for the breadth of human experience requires a particularly well prepared mind for the research. Research themes in transpersonal psychology may include the differentiation between the true and false experiences of pure consciousness, the effects that experiences of pure consciousness have on overall mental health, the phenomenological nature of faith or receptivity, etc. In transpersonal hermeneutics, one has to shuttle between the levels of interpretations, logic, and the interior structures of awareness. The researcher matures through degrees of rising awareness. However, while it feels as if awareness sharpens and deepens, and presence is growing, this is a perceptual illusion. Presence remains the same, but the mind changes its quality. What is “growing” is the spectrum and differentiation of the interior phenomena available to presence.

Pilot Studies for the Mind Training

In the preliminary studies 1992-1999, we used the spectrum of concentration practices of psychosomatic mysticism, related to the development of knowledge (Antonov & Vaver, 1989; Antonov, 2003). The sets of practices were approbated in the classes in philosophy and religion at the California Institute of Integral Studies, training of ministers in the StarrKing School for the ministry, and training of the psychologists of both PhD and Masters levels in several schools in California. Pilot studies showed that psychosomatic practices such as the well known “microcosmic orbit”, or chakra practices, produce different effects on the condition of the mind, and are specific to training or transforming this or that psychological or cognitive faculty.

It was evident that the focus should be on practices specifically increasing internal presence. These increase the availability of inner life phenomena to awareness, i.e., in common terms, they “raise the level of consciousness” and cause “the expansion of awareness.” Specific focus was made on practices involving concentration in the chest, work with an embodied sense of the self, and potentially opening a perception of the interior space of the body containing psychological phenomena.

In contrast to the common interest in Buddhism among researchers of consciousness, these practices belong to Shakta -Vedanta schools of Indian tantrism, Hesychasm and Sufism (Louchakova & Warner, 2003). Some of these practices are included in the practice of contemporary eclectic schools of spirituality (Kungurtsev & Luchakova, 1997). All of them work with the “felt” sense of self, and open the interior maps of consciousness with spatial representation of phenomena. Spiritual psychologies, associated with these practices, group the various phenomena of inner life in ways similar to the categorization of psychological functions in contemporary psychology such as perception, cognition or motivation. The spatiality of the maps and the embodied nature of the practices express themselves in models such as chakras or centers of subtle consciousness. Tantrik practices combine awareness with directing attention to particular zones of interior space. According to several co-researchers, these practices provide a faster maturation of awareness and a better aptitude to knowledge than traditional types of Buddhist mindfulness. The payoff may consist of a rapid opening of unconscious, known as spiritual emergence. Avoiding complications associated with this phenomenon was a matter of special concern in our construction of the training.

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Also, the spatial, body-based maps of the psyche, such as coverings (*kosha*- Sanskrit) of the Self (Siddharameshwar, 1998), accommodate the vectors of interrelatedness and intrasubjectivity, while the body-less maps such as Abhidhamma, having many other advantages, only emphasize intersubjective consciousness. Consequently, we used the spatial, body-based approaches to the training of an aptitude for “knowledge by presence”.

Description of the Training

The training consists of three stages provided at: 1) the introduction to qualitative research; 2) during participation in a research group focused on a particular research topic; and 3) within the advanced methods seminar. The overview of the process below is followed by a detailed description of methods.

As always in meditative training (Goleman, 1977), mindfulness practice forms the foundation. The particular types of mindfulness used here differentiated the modalities of awareness, such as sensory, emotional, intellectual, and imaginal, and also discriminated between the subjective I-consciousness and the activities of “seeing” or “feeling”. This specific type of mindfulness is a synthetic adaptation of the Christian practice of “sobriety” (St. Hesychios the Priest, 5th century/1979; St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, 18th century/1989), in conjunction with Malamatia Sufi practices, and instructions of the contemporary spiritual master Jean Klein (Klein, 1994, p.94). As indicated in his writings, Klein, a western initiate into Shakta -Vedanta and Yoga, was strongly influenced by western phenomenology.

This type of mindfulness differs from Buddhist mindfulness practice in its rigor of disidentification with the phenomena. In comparison with popular Theravada mindfulness systems such as Goenka’s Vipassana, this approach provides faster access to subconscious material and to the experience of pure witnessing consciousness (according to the accounts of practitioners proficient in both systems). It proved to be more effective than the regular sensory experience-based Vipassana practice in the identification of basic assumptions, and in differentiating the phenomenologically available structures of the psyche — qualities useful both in personal growth and for successful phenomenological psychological research.

A self-reflective questionnaire helped identify the developed awareness of mental processes and assumptions in order to discover which research paradigm best suited each researcher (the second stage of training). The third stage of training, offered as the part of the advanced methods seminar, consisted of the technique of focused introspection on the sense of self in the chest. This technique opens the interior map of the psyche, and refines the awareness of its subtle elements. Overall, this succession reflects the naturally occurring cycle of spiritual practice, from elementary forms of awareness to self-reflection, to and then more advanced forms of self-awareness.

The training, described below, increased the ability to bracket one’s own assumptions, and to be mindful of emotions. Decreased random activity of the mind helped handle complexity and enhanced imaginative responses to interaction and dialog between researchers. In some cases, the training increased sensitivity towards parapsychological phenomena, and opened perceptions of interior light. Besides enhancing the skills in phenomenological method, “opening the eyes of the heart” helps students, initially “immune” to phenomenology, to gain the necessary qualifications and a consequent appreciation for the method. This article was written in response to the request of students to have a description of the practice.

Training Stage 1: Four Modalities of Awareness

At the *Stage 1* of training, students were advised to practice daily for 30 minutes for the period of

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10 weeks. The following instructions were given: “Assume a convenient posture. Draw attention inward (if necessary, close eyes), and become aware of the inner space of the body. Then, establish an attitude of “welcoming” towards the rising experiences. Be alert, yet relaxed. After inner presence and clarity are established, identify the four modalities of spontaneously rising inner experiences: sensing, feeling, imagining, and thinking.”

Further introspection consists of observing the flow of spontaneously rising inner experience, and commenting on the rising modalities: “I sense,” “I feel,” “I think,” “I imagine.”

Labeling of the rising interior modalities develops the habit of identification and bracketing of assumptions, and frees the phenomenal field of inner experience from a dependency on learned attitudes. The internal “naming” of modalities makes this practice different from a simple witnessing of inner experience. Although difficult in the beginning, “naming” increases alertness, causes the faster opening of the deep psyche, and facilitates processing of the rising contents. This commenting acknowledges both sides of the equation contained in statements like “I sense,” such as the subject “I” and the activity directed at the objects. Whence, attention becomes accustomed to identifying both nodes of the perceptual field, thus restructuring awareness and training it to notice its own origin. This last element, returning attention to its source, has a beneficial “purification” effect on the mind of the practitioner (Bader, 1990). Over time, this internal “naming” can be cancelled, since all the elements of internal experience become highly differentiated and noticeable.

The students are requested to describe the results of the process phenomenologically with the use of structured feedback forms with sections such as name and date, duration and contents of practice, highlights of practice, “what did I learn?”, and requests and questions for the instructor.

Training Stage 2: Identifying the Research Paradigm

Stage 2 of the training consisted of work with the self-reflective multiple-choice questionnaire of the researcher, which leads to identification of the paradigmatic “predisposition” of one’s mind. As awareness of one’s assumptions is established (*Stage 1*), students become progressively more aware of the conflict between the conscious desire to use the qualitative methods, and the internalized positivist thinking inherent in the whole culture of higher education. The questionnaire is based on the Handbook of Qualitative Research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), and helps to identify and bracket the unconscious identification with the natural scientific approach to human research, and helps curb the tendency to logical *a priori* theory building. The current questionnaire was used for cultural studies, but can be adjusted to any area of enquiry. An example of the questions is “What is the nature of knowledge I want to obtain?” with the following three response choices: 1) “I want to come up with a hypothesis (verified or nonfalsified) that will be regarded as probable facts or laws. This knowledge should allow later formulating a theory, maybe a new paradigm; in other words, it should be able to be summed up” (*positivism/postpositivism*). 2) “I want to come up with insights that may be transformed in the future, as ignorance and misapprehension give way to more enlightened insights. This knowledge will grow and change as consciousness develops in the course of history, and can be generalized when historical and cultural circumstances are similar across settings” (*critical theory*). 3) “I want to come up with the understanding that would serve achieving a consensus. My research may result in multiple ‘knowledges,’ which can coexist when equally informed interpreters disagree, or when ethnic, cultural and other diverse circumstances may differentiate the interpreters. I want to obtain knowledge which would allow the emergence of continuous revisions in a dialectical context (non-violent confrontations reaching synthesis) with changes likely to occur when consciousness develops. This knowledge can not be generalized, but the approach to receiving this knowledge should work again and again in situations with different experience” (*constructivism*).”

The full questionnaire consists of nine questions, which cover the stages of research such as formulating the pilot study, clarifying research questions, style of engagement with the material, outcomes, etc. — the full

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procedure for qualitative research. (The full text of the questionnaire is available from the author at the email address at the end of the article).

Training Stage 3: Accessing Knowledge by Presence

Stage 3 consisted of body-based focusing, which opens the Gnostic “mind of the heart”. The concept of the “mind of the heart” originates from the phenomenological discoveries of the ancients that the emergence of meaning and other mental/psychological phenomena are empirically associated with the inner space of the chest (Spidlik, 1986). Introspection into the “inner space of the chest” leads one to apprehend the layers of the psychological and spiritual life, organized as concentric circles around the central phenomenon of the subjective consciousness-self. Mind (a.k.a. psyche, soul, intellect, etc.) then acquires spatial representation, and its different manifestations can be mapped through the layers of absorption of consciousness in the inner space of the chest. The “inner space of the chest” is described by researchers as the domain of knowledge by presence, i.e. direct apprehension of the contents and structures of consciousness, bypassing the functioning of physical senses or workings of the intellect. This area in the inner space of the body is known in Hesychasm, Sufism and Shakta - Vedanta as Spiritual Heart, the subtle center of embodied consciousness (Louchakova & Warner, 2003). The focusing techniques of meditation on the Spiritual Heart enhance the awareness of the interiority of the psyche, and lift the habitual identifications with unexamined concepts, thus facilitating “bracketing” in phenomenological enquiry.

The phenomenological discovery of the heart as a seat of mind sweeps across spiritual traditions (Cutsinger, 2002), as reflected in scriptures, language, arts and artifacts. A terracotta Persephone (4th century B.C.) in the Syracuse museum in Sicily has a small human head located within her chest. The Demeter-Persephone myth links Greece to ancient Egypt and proto-African cultures (Bernal, 1987). Heart is the principal anthropological concept in Hebrew Scriptures, occurring more than eight hundred times to describe human states and actions (O’Rourke Boyle, 2001). In Christian iconography, one of the eight canonized images of the Virgin, the Mother of the Sign, depicts the Virgin with the head of Christ in her chest.

In Hinduism, in the *Atma Vichara* (meditative self-enquiry) of the great Indian saint Sri Ramana Maharshi, absorption of consciousness into the sense of self in the right side of the chest pierces the layers of psychological experiences and leads to a gestalt of non-dual consciousness (Ramana, 1996). Every system of psychosomatic mysticism contains the methods of introspection, which allow accessing the depth phenomenological map of consciousness via focusing in the chest. Consequently, this group of practices seemed to be the natural choice for deepening the capacities of phenomenological researchers.

As mentioned before, the focusing techniques of psychosomatic mysticism require caution in order to avoid the rapid opening of subconscious material known as spiritual emergence. Our adaptation of the practices provides gentle and satisfying opening of the levels of perception accompanied by slow and manageable psychospiritual transformation. The main benefit of the phenomenological method training consists of opening an awareness of the interior phenomenological maps of consciousness.

The training of this level, opening the Gnostic “mind of the heart”, consists of two practices. The first practice, “Opening the Eyes of the Heart”, trains the relocation of the center of awareness into the chest. The second practice, “Heart-Mind, Researcher’s Mind”, encourages the deep mapping of the introspective space through knowledge by presence.

A. Opening the eyes of the Heart

Relocation of the focus of awareness from the head into the interior space of the chest was repeated once or twice a week for a period of 4-6 weeks, until accessing the introspective space in the

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chest got easier. The resulting focus of attention in the chest has to be “in,” not “on,” the interior space; therefore, the attention cannot be merely “dropped” into the chest. To attain this concentration “in the object” rather than “on the object”, focus has to be gradually relocated through the particular body “pathways” described in yoga as a system of subtle energy meridians (Louchakova & Warner, 2003; Poortman, 1978). In this exercise, the practitioner imagines and senses that the eyes are moving from the eye sockets back down, to the region of the medulla at the base of the skull. This movement, difficult initially, becomes progressively easier with training, and corresponds to the notion of “opening the meridians” in the practice of yoga. Then, “eyes”, i.e., the concentration, is moved down through the spine to the space in between the shoulder blades, and forward into the inner space of the chest. After concentration is relocated into this region, the practitioner “opens” these imaginary eyes inside the chest, gradually developing an awareness of the interiority of consciousness (Louchakova based on Antonov & Vaver, 1989).

B.Heart-mind, researcher’s mind

After the “inner space of the chest” is accessed, the gradual deepening of awareness towards the direct apprehension of the deep contents of consciousness is attained through guided introspection on the sense of self. This exercise is based on the analysis of the two spiritual practices. One is the body-based phenomenological enquiry into the nature of the self, known as *Atma Vichara* from the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi (Ramana, 1996). The author was exposed to a similar practice in the oral tradition, from an Indian saint of the Hinchgiri lineage of Shakta –Vedanta, Sri Ranjit Maharaj (personal communication, 1996). The other related practice is from the Hesychastic Prayer of the Heart (St. Simeon the New Theologian, 1995; Fr. Leonid Vodolazski, personal communication, January 1989). Our adaptation consisted in focusing in the sense of self on the right side of the chest and the gradual absorption of the focus backwards towards the spine, and into the inner space of the chest. Focusing on the right side of the chest versus a left size is very important to avoid the rapid opening of subconscious material in the process of introspection.

This process was guided four to five times during the 10-week period of the graduate seminar. The length of introspections varied from 20 to 40 minutes. Students were also encouraged, but not required, to practice on their own, one to three times per week. The following instructions were given:

“Start with the focusing of attention in the sense of self in the right side of the body. Connect your breath with this area, and identify the warm, tangible sense of individual “I,” slightly to the right of the chest bone, in the area of your third rib. Using the skills of focusing “in,” developed in the previous exercise, try to be inside the felt sense rather than observing it from the outside. Slowly, start the motion towards the back of the body, absorbing attention through this distinct “current” of the sense of self. The latter intensifies as one deepens attention.”

As the absorption deepened, the experience shifted from the complete physicality of the body perceived through the sense of touch, to the layers of psychological phenomena, emerging in the strictly organized and predictable order. The layer of sensory experience was followed by the layer of emotions, then by verbal thoughts, then images, opening of darkness and “nothing,” followed by the rise of meanings and deep understandings. Practitioners mentally “backed up” through these experiences, following the current of “I-sense” in the direction of an increasing sense of intimacy and on into pure subjectivity. This process is, in reality, very alive and personal, filled with insights and experience of the sacred.

This layered phenomenological map of the psyche emerges only during the introspection in the chest, and not in focusing in any other part of the body-schema. Gradual disidentification with emerging experiences and the

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deepening of concentration leads to the opening of the deeper layers of the embodied psyche, resulting in absorption in the subjectivity of pure consciousness. In this mental motion, concentration, like a bead on a thread, is glides on the current of the sense of self-existent-awareness through the right side of the chest backwards. This is the movement towards the phenomenological origin of the sense of self. This meditation is initially guided by the instructor, and then taken into individual practice by the students. In the final stage of training, students get to verbalize the process of their own contemplation. This verbalization helps the maturation of the practice.

Outcomes of the Training: Phenomenological Structure of the Gnostic Heart

Structured introspection opens awareness of the phenomenological architecture of the self. The self appears as a complex system constituted of many structural levels. Spatiality is seen as the primary organizational principle for this self-awareness, pervasive to the whole internal self-structure. The components of the self are organized in the “internal space” of introspection as layers around the central experience of the “I am”-consciousness. “I am” in association with sensations, emotions and feelings, images, verbal thoughts, deeper non-verbal understandings, mental states such as torpor or confusion, and with the experience of “nothingness” formed the easily identifiable clusters of experience. Starting from the sense of self, predominantly identified on the right side of the chest, students described the layers of introspective experiences as emerging in the following succession: a) sense of personal self of the right side of the chest; b) sensory experiences; c) layer of rising emotions, subtler sensations of energy and breath; d) layer of “talking” mind; e) layer of images; f) stillness, nothing, unknowing, like in a deep sleep. This layer (f) and the following layer — g) layer of sheer intellect, meanings, and vast space and subtle mental states, archetypes, and essential relations — commonly interpenetrate each other. Finally, an eighth layer might be reached: h) absorption of awareness in pure subjective consciousness. These levels of internal self-organization correspond to the phenomenological descriptions of Hesychasm (Theophanis the Monk, 1984), Sufism (Dahnhardt, 2002), and Vedanta (Berliner, 1990; Misra, 2001; Sadananda, 1974).

Students, in the course of the training, learn to differentiate between the various manifestations of consciousness. Their experiences resonate closely with the account of St. Simeon the New Theologian, an acknowledged authority in Hesychasm. He describes the process of opening into inner space as a transition from the “darkness and impenetrable density” to a condition where “intellect... sees things of which it previously knew nothing” (St. Simeon the New Theologian, 1995, p.73), i.e., interior workings of consciousness. This direct knowledge of the structures of the psyche “by presence” rather than by conceptualization provides very tangible help in learning the skills of phenomenological analysis. It allows correlating the maxims of phenomenology and one’s own inner experience. Phenomenology stops being perceived as an abstract philosophical system and becomes a practical guide to self-understanding and interior transformation. Students find internal correspondents to different types of Husserlian intentionality — thetic, operational, of act — and learn to discern the hierarchies of meaning and relationship between signifiers and the signified (Husserl, 1999, pp.26-51). On a personal level, they report a decrease of impatience and anxiety, and an increase of self-acceptance and self-appreciation.

Students reported the shifts in their sense of identity and attitudes toward the world. The following statements come from the feedback forms. “I am much more than body and my conditioning...I am not able to articulate the sense of greater awareness and connection.” (A.H.). “I can see where phenomenology can be very useful for inner development” (L.F.). “How do we go from explaining to understanding? The wisdom that lies in the lived experience is infinite...I learned that what unites the two [opposing] views (the aha!) is the transformation we are looking for...Therefore, our opponents are our allies rather than enemies.” (S.F.). “I began to see where I fit into the ‘world’ of perspectives. I’ve never thought seriously about it before”. (B.K.).

The navigation through one’s own system of inner experience facilitates the faculty of epoche, the backward motion through the layers of experience towards the explication of ontologically deeper structures. The

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training facilitates the process of imaginative variations and enhances the intuitive explication of the essential structures potentially present in the analyzed description when working in research with the descriptive phenomenological method. However, we can only hypothesize the mechanisms of this effect. The introspection used in the training is conducted on the metaphysical seat of consciousness, the subtle center of consciousness called “spiritual heart.” In the traditions we have discussed, it is known that introspection on the spiritual heart center deepens the awareness of the spatially associated structures of meaning, such as divine names (archetypes). Focusing attention within the layer of deep meanings may facilitate the eidetic reduction. However, the method can also open early memories, archaic emotions, so their application requires careful discernment and an individualized approach.

Directions of Future Research

Deeper analysis, using the modification of the phenomenological method applied to the structures of knowledge, uncovers the inner, essential structural groupings, such as self-concept/self-sense, interiority/exteriority, constancy/changeability (subjectivity/objectivity), selfhood/transcendentality, and body-schema relatedness/unrelatedness. The self-concept/self-sense axis includes the polarity of self-related concepts versus the body-based, spatial sense of one’s own self. Interiority/exteriority includes the polarity of meaning and verbal expression, constancy-changeability relates to the subject (constancy)-object (changeability) relationship within the introspective field. Transcendentality accommodates transpersonal psychological dimensions of experience such as “larger-than-self” or “no self”, and body schema relatedness refers to the psychological phenomena, which emerge in connection with particular locations within the body schema. These groupings resonate with the phenomenological map of the “cosmic man”, developed by the Islamic philosophers Ibn-al’Arabi (1980) and al-Jili (1995).

Several directions of future work may follow. Some of our pilot findings are listed below. For example, research suggests that the “I am”-sense, a constant component of self-awareness, can be easily differentiated from the changing components by subjects in guided open-eyed introspection. After some initial training, the “I am”-sense becomes available for the continuous fixing of voluntary attention, causing various changes such as a sense of well-being, and an increase of secondary self-reflective thoughts. In prior studies, the increase of these secondary reflective thoughts was reported to correspond to the human experience of becoming more conscious (Williford, 2002). Since knowledge about the self is typically remembered better than other types of semantic information (Kelley et al., 2002), the author hypothesized that the sustained focus on I-sense can enhance the understanding of complex concepts. The focusing on “I am”-sense was used as an educational mnemonic technique with graduate students (a total of more than 70) in psychology seminars. Students reported that the voluntary focus of attention on the constant aspect of the self in the process of learning leads to the decrease of performance anxiety and to the enhancement of learning.

The focusing on “I am”-sense was also used in therapy with clients (total of 7) diagnosed as having a *DSM-IV* category *Religious or Spiritual Problem*, V-Code 62.89, in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). This technique helped to neutralize the core feature of depersonalization, the “virtuality” of the self (Bezzubova, 2002), thus helping to reestablish the normal structure of self-experience.

Conclusions

Research shows that the spiritual practices, enhancing “knowledge by presence,” can be effectively used in preparation of the phenomenological researcher. A phenomenological approach in transpersonal psychology attracts an increasing number of students interested in a meaningful, authentic, present mode of living and enquiry. Phenomenological research, augmented by the special training of the mind which opens the “knowledge by presence,” can be viewed as a transformative educational practice, contributing to both personal development

and professional training of future psychologists.

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