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ONTOPOIESIS AND UNION IN THE PRAYER OF THE
HEART: CONTRIBUTIONS TO PSYCHOTHERAPY AND
LEARNING

This article was inspired by the effects of phenomenological approach observed in our practice of transformative education and spiritually oriented psychotherapy. Phenomenology based education or healing methods engage the whole person rather than the separate human faculties. When the deep faculties such as the direct intuition, or the foundational processes such as ontopoiesis, become actively and consciously involved in the individual developmental process, education and healing effectiveness skyrocket.

The two central claims of Husserl's program, the gnoseological value of direct intuition, and the possibility to obtain knowledge by explication of the interior contents of consciousness, are indispensable to psychological research. For transformative and emancipating goals of psychology, even of greater value is the idea to positively articulate the ineffable. Phenomenology finds language for the experiences of "unsaying" (Sells, 1994), such as the high degrees of spiritual insight. Those who practice spirituality-oriented psychotherapy know that the truly spiritual experiences can be more transforming, developmental, and more healing for the client than the years of conventional therapy. Powerful transformation happens when people articulate spiritual experiences. In the ineffability of spiritual experience, something always remains incomplete, closed, intentionality devoid of final fulfillment. In this paper, I make a modest attempt to articulate the experience beyond the ego, happening in the practice of the Hesychast Prayer of the Heart. Explication of the dynamics of the direct intuition, Union, and ontopoiesis leads to a better understanding of the psychological system generally called self, and suggests a number of methodological approaches based on the enhancement of the essential elements of self-structure. The term ontopoiesis, coined by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, is used in this article to address the self-creative activity of consciousness manifesting for practitioners of the Prayer of the Heart. It will be shown in the article that this activity unfolds in a series of predictably organized experiences, leading from domains of the ego and individual will to the domains of Union. These experiences unfold

a layered gradient structure, organized as an ontological hierarchy. Actualization of every ontologically situated domain of experience may have specific influences on the process of individual psychological development, whence the term “ontopoiesis” is chosen over the more customary term “autopoiesis”.

In its emphasis on direct intuition, Husserl's Method finds powerful predecessors in systems of thought concerned by the maxim *gnothi seauton* (Greek), “know thyself”. Islamic philosophy of illumination (al-Suhrawardi, 1999; Walbridge, 2000; Yazdi, 1992), Tantra (Louchakova and Warner, 2003), Advaita Vedanta (Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, 1996; Rambachan, 1991) are all based on the phenomenological self-enquiry via knowledge by presence, i.e. direct intuition. The vision of God in the early Christian mystics (Kirk, 1931), or in revelations of Jewish Merkabah (Scholem, 1946), depends on the presence of direct intuition. The Islamic spiritual philosopher al-Junayd qualifies direct intuition as the only valid means of self-knowledge (Abdel-Kader, 1967). The pervasiveness of the direct intuition-based phenomenological method in the human endeavor of self-knowledge leads one to examine the modes of ontological givenness of direct intuition among the contents of life.

What are the mental workings of the mind actualizing direct intuition? For such a mind are relations with life permeated by the ongoing gestalt of the interiority of consciousness. To begin with, direct intuition is differentiated from noesis, the immediate apperception of noemata by awareness. Direct intuition is optional, it develops, rises and subsides, and some people report it more than others do. Noesis, on the contrary, is a constant, rooted in the innate sentiency of consciousness. As Husserl says in *Ideas I*, the noetic “grasping” of noemata is an essential activity of consciousness foundational to all cognition. By noesis, the phenomena of mental life appear sentient, conscious:

Every intentive mental process is precisely noetic ... It is of its essence to include in itself something such as a “sense”, and possibly a manifold sense on the basis of the sense bestowal and, in unity with that, to effect further productions which become “senseful” precisely by this sense bestowal (Husserl, 1999).

Noesis is always there, always in the background, as a known-ness of things within a unified set of cognitions “awareness is” and “awareness of something”. The relationship within the noesis–noemata duo is paradoxical: while noemata are in constant flux, the awareness of them is unchanging. However, mentally differentiated from one another, they present no “gap” between the two. Their existence is indivisible, and they

are distinguished only for the sake of analysis. This unity of phenomenal and pure awareness is implicit in consciousness.

On the contrary, direct intuition is not within this constancy of consciousness. It applies selectively to the particular meanings or activities of consciousness. It is intentional, as a direct intuition of something. The common denominator of all instances of direct intuition is that it makes the noetic activity of consciousness transparent to itself. People differ in regard to direct intuition, i.e. in their awareness of the particular noesis. The rise of direct intuition manifests in widening of internal vistas and deepening of internal landscapes, in the emergence of foundational understandings, in the ability to see directly the essential structures and activities of consciousness. While awareness that is grasping its own phenomenal contents is always an ongoing background of phenomena in man's natural attitude, direct intuition, as the conscious perception of these activities, presupposes reduction. It would be true to say that no one knows exactly what internal process brought to life direct intuition such as in the genius of Husserl. One can only speculate whether it happened in an instance, or developed over the course of time. However, in spiritual traditions and texts such as early Christian Philokalia, there is evidence that people can arrive at “seeing” the interior workings of consciousness via a gradual training of the mind.

“Seeing” the interior operations and contents of consciousness is profoundly transforming to all significant aspects of a person (Louchakova, 2004a). For example, it affects the ways people die. Schmitz-Perrin in his study of theological influences on Husserl's thought, indicates that during the last hours of his life, Husserl stated: “God has welcomed me graciously and has allowed me to die ... God is good, yes, God is good, but really ununderstandable, it is a very hard time now for us ... I want him to be with me. But I do not feel that He is close to me ... Pray for me” (as quoted in Schmitz-Perrin, 1996, p. 488, footnotes 29 and 30). Later, 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. What did Edmund Husserl “see”, and what did he want to describe in the last moment when his speech still obeyed his self-transparent consciousness? Evidently, this last “seeing” switched his mood from the prior angst to joy.

Theophanis the Monk, the Hesychast ascetic of the 8th century, indirectly points to the connection between the rise of direct intuition of the structures of the self through Prayer of the heart and the removal of the fear of death. Theophanis says that this is precisely the fear of death that

motivates people to practice the Prayer of the Heart. This esoteric practice comprises complicated mental exercises, leading to the complete restructuring of the intentional consciousness towards the state that the early Desert Fathers knew as Union, Theosis (Chirban, 1986; Theophanis the Monk, 1984). *Apophthegmata* leave us exalted descriptions of the internal steps in the Prayer of the Heart, opening direct intuition by which contemplatives will “see God” (St. Hesychios the Priest, 1979; Theophanis the Monk, 1984).

Spiritual Exercises of the Prayer of the Heart

Prayer of the Heart was transmitted from the early Desert Fathers to Byzantine monks, and was preserved until our days by Russian, Romanian and Greek hermits and pilgrims. Separate contemplatives practice this Prayer in England, the United States and France. The practice is traditionally ascribed to Hesychasm, the esoteric tradition of early Christianity, later absorbed by the Orthodox Church. In Catholicism, it seems to be an individual enterprise of particular monks. The history of Hesychasm contains many disputes concerning the safety and validity of this practice (Pelikan, 1974). As a rule, Prayer of the Heart is considered among the spiritual exercises that are esoteric, complex, and need caution. For the dedicated practitioner, over years Prayer of the Heart turns into a journey of profound inner transformation, affecting all the levels of the self – from perception, to character structure, to the affective sphere and foundational identity (Louchakova and Warner, 2003; *The Way of a Pilgrim*, 1952; Ware, 1974).

Prayer of the Heart opens the interior structure-contents of the self (Ware, 1974). This form of internal contemplation is not unique to Christianity, but is common to all wisdom traditions that posit the ontological value of personhood. Corresponding forms of contemplative worshipful self-enquiry exist in Islam (as *dhikr* of Divine names), in Shakta-Vedanta and Advaita Vedanta (as bodily forms of *atma-vichara*, or self-enquiry). In Christianity, the Prayer of the Heart takes the form of the Jesus Prayer, and is described largely in the collections of *Apophthegmata*. Indications to the various form of the Prayer of the Heart can be traced through the history of all religions of the Mediterranean.

Formally, Prayer of the Heart consists of an uninterrupted repetition of the name of the deity paced with the breath, and accompanied by focusing attention on the sense of self in the chest. As practice matures

over the years, there are shifts of interior states such as a) progression from the verbal prayer to the internal silent prayer, b) movement of the focus of the internal prayer from the head to the chest, c) progression from the volitional repetition of the name to the state where the name is spontaneously emerging from within the very being of the practitioner, – as Kallistos Ware (1974) says, God prays to Himself, d) dissolution of the name into wordless prayer of sustained presence, e) degrees of Union (Dionisius the Areopagite, 1965). Within these roughly defined steps, this is a structured phenomenological introspection into the human person. Introspection happens as the deepening of the reversed flow of attention via the embodied sense of self, taken back to its phenomenological origins in pure subjectivity. A series of spontaneously rising reductions leads to explication of the essential structures of the self.

The esoteric, interior part of practice consist of these spontaneously rising reductions. Eventually, attention is reduced into the focus in Spiritual Heart, a psychospiritual center of embodied consciousness in the interior space of the chest (Louchakova and Warner, 2003; Spidlík, 1986). The Spiritual Heart is generally associated with the mystical experience of I–Thou, and transcendence of the individual I, followed by Union. In this process, the hidden and latent content of the psyche becomes available to awareness. This may include the traces of past trauma, early forms of psychological self and adaptive mechanisms. The difficulties of facing the content of subconscious and unconscious make the Prayer into a psychologically challenging process. Due to this transformative encounter with the psyche, Prayer of the Heart is considered as being among the spiritual disciplines that are difficult to practice (*The Way of a Pilgrim*, 1952; Ware, 1974).

In our study of the effects of spiritual practices (Louchakova, 2004b) Prayer of the Heart stands out for its capacity to advance direct intuition. Consequently, in psychology Prayer of the Heart and similar practices can serve as models for studying and articulating direct intuition, the essential structures of consciousness co-emerging with it, and the overall psychological effects of this process. There is no full description of the practice of the Prayer available in known literature, and it is a part of the oral tradition. To learn this method one needs a living teacher (*The Way of a Pilgrim*, 1952). Mastering the Prayer takes many years. To capture the internal processes happening in the practice of the Prayer, the author phenomenologically analyzed accounts of people who practiced Prayer of the Heart, which allowed describing the longitudinal maturing of the practice of the Prayer of the Heart, and explicating the

essential structures of consciousness associated with the rise of direct intuition.

Phenomenological Method in the Study of Prayer of the Heart

The author uses the comparative historical and the psychological phenomenological methods. The details of this approach to the analysis of the self are available directly from the author (Louchakova, 2005). The historical accounts were obtained from *Philokalia*, an extremely complex Hesychast text consisting of first person reports of introspection and spiritual experiences, comments on the experiences of others, reflections on Christian doctrine, personal letters, allusions to Scripture and interpretations of passages from Christian texts. Because of this diversity, it is hard to ascribe a literary genre to *Philokalia*. It is a multidimensional representation of the life world of a mystic, a “snapshot” of a lived reality of the early Christian contemplative in the pursuit of self-knowledge. Within this complex textual fabric, one can observe how the live intentional consciousness seamlessly shifts the modes of reduction and planes of reality. Modalities of experience flow into one another, movements towards apophysis are immediately complemented by sweeping cataphatic expressions. In the phenomenological analysis of *Philokalia*, one flows within the Escher-like worlds of infinitely unfolding meanings, navigating consciousness in its dazzling never-ending interiority.

The author analysed the texts and the descriptions provided by others, using his/her own mind as a tool to perform reductions and imaginative variations on the contents of descriptions. Since in this method the researcher analysed somebody else’s account, to obtaining the accurate data there was a need to control the interpretive, hermeneutic part of the analysis. This was controlled by extensive bracketing of researcher’s presuppositions. Within this framework, some areas of text in *Philokalia* came through as the general structures of experience, or even essences seminal to the whole class of experiences.

In addition, the author used the interviews, instructions and commentaries provided by living experts in the tradition, as well as field observations, self-observations, and interviews with active practitioners. The longitudinal part of the study included the analysis of the experience of people in the guided Prayer of the Heart groups, as well as focus groups of people interested in self-inquiry. In working with groups of people, the explication of the essential structures of experience frequently happened in a specially developed dialogical procedure, sometimes during, and

sometimes after the process of introspection. Practitioners provided the in-depth descriptions of their introspective experiences, sometimes self-identifying the essential structures. Dialogue aimed at explication of both the psychological (meaningful, content-related) and perceptual (cognitive, precognitive, structures of awareness related) elements of experience. As the understanding of the essential structures emerged, it sponsored the new hermeneutic cycles of guidance of the Prayer practice, which in turn served the more precise explication to follow. This article presents observations based on the dialogical interviewing of practitioners over the period of 10 years, with the total number of people exceeding 300.

Research also included the self-study using the traditional Husserl’s method.

Prayer and Ontopoiesis

The principal initial movement of attention in Prayer of the Heart consists in focusing attention on the embodied sense of self in the chest. Attention is established in (not “on”) the current of the “I-sense”. A majority of people identify it as situated slightly to the right side of the chest bone. More rarely, it is in the center of the chest or on the left. The oral tradition suggests focusing initially on the right side. Experientially, when the focus is on the right side, it is easier to distinguish the essential structures of experience, and to integrate the insights of the interior contents of consciousness with everyday life.

One begins by associating the repetition of the Divine Name (the name of Jesus in the Jesus prayer which is a subtype of Prayer of the Heart) with the somatic sense of self in the chest. In the older, traditional forms of Prayer, when the practitioner develops the practice over the course of decades, the connection between the invocation and the self-sense arises spontaneously due to connotations of “human subject”, “son of God”, “God within” and the like, associated with the Name. In the contemporary grass-root, “accelerated” forms of Prayer, from the very beginning attention is fixed in the chest, in order to access the Gnostic “mind of the heart” (Louchakova, 2004a; Louchakova and Warner, 2003; Ware, 1974). Whence, the phenomenological analysis of the Prayer of the Heart uncovers the interior structures of consciousness within this “mind of the Heart”, as opposed to “mind of the head”. Data from the focus groups show that intentional consciousness associated with the head usually consists of self-reflective, analytic/synthetic, logic based constructs, as opposed to the immediacy of the lived experience in the chest. The processes leading to

the rise of direct intuition of the primal lived experience of intentional consciousness happen only in association with the focus of attention in the chest.

The focus in the felt sense of self in the chest corresponds to the rise of egological, self-referencing experience. As attention becomes more focused, this sense of self strengthens and turns into an uninterrupted current. Following Edith Stein, De Monticelli emphasizes the importance of discrimination between the “egological” and “non-egological” lived experiences as the entrance into the “inner being” and a tool to serious epistemology of *personal knowledge* (De Monticelli, 2002). Our analysis of the accounts of the participants of the focus groups shows that the egological experience always involves the spontaneous focus in the body. In Prayer of the Heart, or in the similar practice of self-enquiry of the Indian saint Sri Ramana Maharshi (Ramana, 1996), focusing on the right side of the chest aids sorting the sense-thought of self out of the general flow of intentional consciousness. The structure of egological experience associated with the chest is different from the one associated with the head and other areas of the body: in the chest the sustained self-sense becomes subject to spontaneously rising reduction. In that sense, one may speak about the ontologically primary and secondary egological experience, primary being associated with the focus in the chest, and secondary being associated with the focus in the head and possibly other body zones.

Different from the perspective of De Monticelli (2002), the reports of the participants in self-enquiry focus groups show that egological experiences, rather than being purely affective or volitional, have a more complicated structure including cognition. The notion of the self within this experience can be either inferential, associated with the focus in the head, or immediate, lived, associated with the focus in the chest. The cognitive element common to both experiences will be the “I am” thought, which creates the clusters with other cognitions in the process of constructing identity. Self-referencing may happen within both modes, resulting in the different understandings of human consciousness. However, the direct intuition of ontopoiesis rises through the “mind of the Heart”, not so through the “mind of the head”. The self-experience within the “mind of the head” always remains within the delimiter “I am an individual”. As shown below, the transcendence of individual identity, necessary for the rise of the direct intuition of ontopoiesis (see below), happens only via reduction of the egological experience associated with the focus of attention in the chest. Consequently, the instructions of the 10th century

Hesychast St. Simeon the New Theologian for the practice of the Prayer say, “Search inside yourself with your intellect so as to find the place of the heart ...” (*St. Simeon the New Theologian*, 1995, p. 73).

More precisely, the egological experience which rises in fixing attention on the sense of self on the right side of the chest contains the blend of fields of meaning such as “I am”, “I am the person, the self”, “I am the body” and the narrative connotations of one’s history. Experience also involves sensing the specific tactility of “personhood”, a sort of warm effulgence of personal sentience, which can be associated with affect, interpretation, image and thought. St. Simeon the New Theologian possibly refers to this experience as finding “the place where all the powers of the soul reside” (*St. Simeon the New Theologian*, 1995, p. 73), while the Indian saint Sri Ramana Maharshi calls it *aham-sphurana* (Sanskrit), the radiance of the “I”.

This thought/sense experience of personhood can be navigated inwards to its phenomenological origins. Ibn al’-Arabi, the Andalusian philosopher of the XII century, calls the current of this body-related self-awareness back to its source “the river of Jesus”. The practitioner locates the Divine Name, paced with breath, within flow of this reversed intentionality. The current is spatially represented in the introspective space inside the chest, and goes back to the subtle center of the embodied awareness called the Spiritual Heart. The Spiritual Heart is the spatial bodily correspondent to the innermost core of both self-sense and cognitive self (Ibn al-Arabi, 1978). It is known in Hesychasm as a junction of self-transcendence (Spidlik, 1986), where the individual I–Thou eternally falls into and emerges from the I–I, the Union.

As the concentration deepens, the flow of intentionality attempting to grasp its own origin, effortful initially, becomes spontaneous, as though it were “pulled” from within. In Indian Tantra, the power providing the possibility of the reverse flow of awareness is personified as Goddess Kundalini. Simultaneously with being viewed as a power of awareness to grasp its origins, Kundalini is viewed as an evolutionary power of consciousness, bringing to life the multiplicity of phenomena (Louchakova, 2004c). This keen conclusion regarding the double agency of Kundalini captures the phenomenological observation that in deep meditation the full collapse of awareness onto itself is preceded by the increase of the internal flow of phenomena. In this simultaneity, the inward return of awareness to its source and the outward deployment of the latent content of consciousness, are in fact two sides of one process. As will be shown

later, this manifests as the increase of onto-poiesis under the presence of direct intuition in the Prayer of the Heart.

The “pull” inward is personified as Goddess Uma. In different Tantric systems, both Kundalini and Uma are the consorts to the Lord Shiva, the personification of the principle of pure consciousness. In the beginning, navigation towards the source of self-awareness is volitional, but at the time of the actualization of the “pull”, the impetus for this flow is recognized as coming from beyond the individual will. Sufism accommodates for this fact by a common statement that the rise of intuition of God happens “by invitation [from within, from Deity] only”.

There is the invariability of these specific details across traditions. As the stable factors in this process, they are the part of the essential structure of the body-based introspection into the self. What provides this shift from the individual effort to the effortlessness of the inward flow of attention? The mere reduction of the meditating I to transcendental ego by a phenomenological epoché does not show this effect. The process of Prayer differs from the Cartesian reduction or existential self-enquiry not only by the bodily focus, but also by the overall relational setting containing the introspective process.

The worshipful repetition of the Divine Name in the spatial interiority of the sense of self supports the polarity of I–Thou. The practitioner of the Prayer intends, invites, and opens to the presence of the Other, the great prototype of all others. Reduction within the self is accompanied by the sense of the open unknown potentiality, the possibility of the encounter with the sacred. One releases any claim to ownership of consciousness, assuming that the source of the givenness of awareness-existence maybe beyond individual reach. Having this as an operating assumption opens the awareness for receiving of the disowned intentionality. In contrast to the existential self-inquiry, which locks the person into the infinitely regressive monolog of self-transcending me–I, Prayer of the Heart is implicitly a dialog. The epoché happens in the contexts of increasing intimacy, in between the two affectively animated principles, ascending (known, owned, individual) and descending (transcendental, unknown, disowned, inferred, Divine). As De Monticelli (2002, p. 72) notices, our loves are what get us closer to ourselves.

Prayer of the Heart encourages the practitioner to love beyond the object, to conceive an open-ended intentionality with the affect directed into the Unknown, and to cultivate opening into pure potentiality. The systematic reduction of cognitions associated with the embodied sense of self, and the absorption of awareness towards its origin, is paralleled by

worshipful receptivity to the Unknown. The inward motion continues in the direction of an increasing sense of intimacy. In that, the gradual changes of perception begin. As awareness comes closer and closer to turning onto itself, the rise of direct intuition opens the inward fecundity of consciousness and transcendence into the greater Self, to which the egological experience is but the door.

As the inner space opens, one

... will find there darkness and an impenetrable density. Later ... you will find, as though miraculously, an unceasing joy. For as soon as intellect attains the place of the heart, at once [notice the characteristic suddenness of this transition – the interior space is quantum structured] it sees things of which it previously knew nothing. It sees the open space within the heart and it beholds it entirely luminous and full of discrimination. From then on, from whatever side a distractive thought may appear, before it has come to a completion and assumed a form, the intellect immediately drives it away and destroys it with the invocation of Jesus Christ ... the rest you will learn for yourself (St. Simeon, 1995, p. 73).

Examination of this phenomenon of interior darkness and the sense of impenetrable density is relevant to the analysis of the rise of direct intuition. Metaphorically, this is the first encounter with the “veil” that obscures the interiority of consciousness. The vector of intentionality is turned in a direction that it never explored before, and the faculty of seeing is initially unavailable. Psychologically speaking, the interior cognitive schemas, which provide for the discernment of a particular phenomenal world, are not developed. In turning onto itself, awareness “clashes” with the outward vector of its own intentionality, resulting in the temporary “arrest” of intentional processes. Yet, if the focus is sustained, before long the concentration is established in the Spiritual Heart. This leads to activation of the new type of intentionality. Consciousness begins to intensely deploy its own contents. Upon the touch of awareness, the initially dark space of introspection breaks open with meanings and images, analogous to the dark fertile ground sprouting under water and sunlight. In that, awareness both manifests as a noesis/noemata duo, and as a catalyst of the discharge of its own latent interior contents. The repetition of the Name removes distracting thoughts and assumptions that could construct the experience, and keeps the focus on the reverse flow of self-sense. The practitioner enters the observatory of the inner workings of the Logos, and sees how from within itself it produces phenomena that engage in the activity of the temporal weaving of the intentional networks.

Gradually, the interior space of consciousness opens up as luminous (fully available to awareness) and full of discrimination. The very process of the rising of the meaning is witnessed, initially as thoughts and images deployed by impenetrable darkness, and in its mature form – immediately, as the rising of phenomena from pure consciousness on the divide between subject and object. Metaphorically, it is akin to the removal of the overcast and the rise of the sun. Awareness perceives its own self-luminous nature. The relationship between pure and phenomenal consciousness is observed as a triad “awareness is – awareness is aware of itself – awareness is aware of the meanings arising from awareness”. This opens the intuition of the origins of intentionality itself, beyond the contents of meaning, as a sheer dynamic creative force, simultaneously the same and yet different from the unchanging substratum that it deploys.

This deployment of the interior content of consciousness, and the beginning of ontopoietic intuition initially happens in the context of the individual self. Maturing ontopoietic intuition loses the qualifier of the individual “I”, and opens up the vistas of trans-spatial and trans-temporal meanings emerging from the “field” of the unqualified and indescribable potentiality of pure reason. The meanings, rising from within, are woven into cognitive schemas, logical chains and the inner tapestry of discursive thinking. Two processes, identified by Tymieniecka (2002) as the horizontal and vertical lines of the unfolding of the intentional constructive system in its manifestation of objectivity, complement each other in the construction of the self.

Direct intuition, which is the awareness of these happenings, and the deployment of latent meaning, are mutually enhancing. In fact, this is one continuum of logocic expression, described from the two different vistas, interior and external, or those of releasing and receiving, taken together. The process unfolds in stages gradually progressing from the bodily impressions to full logocic expression. Theophanis the Monk, who practiced Prayer of the Heart in the 8th century, described the process of Jesus Prayer in the following verses:

... The first step is that of purest prayer,
From this there comes warmth of heart,
And then a strange, a holy energy,
Then tears wrung from the heart, God-given.
Then peace from thoughts of every kind.
From this arises purging of the intellect,
And next the vision of heavenly mysteries.
Unheard of light is born from this ineffably,

And thence, beyond all telling, the hearts illumination.
Last comes – a step that has no limit
Though compassed in a single line –
Perfection that is endless ...

(Theophanis the Monk, 1994, p. 67)

These experiences, like beads, are “sitting on” the thread of central cognition, which is the reverse flow of the sense of personhood. This is an essential structure as explicated by Theophanis. Remarkably, the same structure emerges over a period of several decades, as well as within a single set of introspection. The self-initiated practitioners, who never received instructions, also arrive at this internal order due to the actualization of direct intuition. Indeed, the latter remains the “gift of the gods” (Tymieniecka, 2002, p. 8). The explication of this structure happens repeatedly in self-enquiry focus groups, and groups that practice the Prayer of the Heart. In a single act of introspection, these are states, and over decades of practice, these are stations. It is a stable phenomenon, pertinent to the internal architecture of self-awareness in the Spiritual Heart. The analogous structures are reported in phenomenological philosophy of Shakta-Vedanta as “coverings of the Self” (Siddharameshwar, 1998). The invariability of this structure points to the ontological nature of it. When the introspective process constructs this experience, then the construction invariably resolves into the hierarchies of being.

The layers are discretely perceived by the practitioner as ontologically “prior” and “posterior”. The innermost layers of this interior architecture of self-awareness carry the sense of deep intimacy, immediacy and primacy. They also carry the sense of deeper authenticity and independence than the outer layers. The outer layers are experienced as more “inert”, and less “real” than the inner. Spatiality and layers (spheres, domains) then are the primary structural principles of the self, pervasive to the whole internal organization. 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 “nothing”, forms the easily identifiable phenomenological clusters within the egological experience.

The interior switching of the direct intuition from layer to layer is discrete, quantum. In that, two aspects can be distinguished – spontaneous reduction by perception (structure) versus reduction by image/meaning (contents). Both become actualized in the Prayer of the Heart, and com-

plement each other; however, they open up two different vistas in regards to the onto-poiesis and Union.

Reduction by perception, bouncing back to the subjectivity of pure awareness against the observed objects, leads one to regress into the I abstracted from the world, spatial forms and temporal flow. There is nothing concrete left, except for pure sentiency, slightly conditioned by the “I”-thought. The negation, leading to this absorption, happens in the context of the natural attitude (Bello, 2002). The thought moves on the level of the pre-given world rather than within the area prescribed by Prayer of the Heart. This process allows the insights into simultaneity and sameness of awareness and being, and can show that selfhood extends beyond the existence of the body. However, the mere reduction into the subject does not open the fullness of onto-poiesis or the understanding of Union. This is the existential “cul-de-sac” – the practitioner will either finish in the “nothing” or will be caught in the process of infinite regression.

The unceasing repetition of the Name, recommended in the process of Prayer, initiates a reduction by meaning. The focusing on the Name neutralizes the “horizontal” (Tymieniecka, 2002) networks of consciousness, and brackets the assumptions of multiplicity of existences implicit to ordinary thinking. This continuous bracketing, accompanied by the affective flow in the direction of inwardness and intimacy with the unknown Other, intends on the origins of things. The essential ethical moment in this ascent consists in “giving greetings”. In Prayer of the Heart, greetings are implicit to the repetition of the name. Instructions to meditation on the self in both Ibn al’-Arabi’s (1978) written teaching, and in the oral tradition of Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta that the author was exposed to, suggest that one should pause and give internal greetings. This engagement with the unknown Other is a pivotal moment. In giving greetings, consciousness, fluctuating into and out of self-absorption, opens into the direct intuition of limitless presence. The affect of love loses its vector and instead becomes a continuum, a field.

In this epiphany of the I–Thou, the shift of identification happens. The otherness disappears, and the former Other becomes the only One that Is. Awareness/am-ness drops the qualifier of the individual I, and is recognized as the attribute of the previously unknown Other. This shift ends the egological experience. The incoming experience can be described as “I am not, but He is, and in that somehow I am” (Sri Ranjit Maharaj, personal communication, Encinitas, California, 1997). The transition from the ego to the larger Self, also known as Union, happens not by reduction

or unification, but by a quantum shift of identity. Without this shift, the experience remains locked within the individual I, acquires the feeling of inertness and is prompted to return to the corporeal otherness.

Egological experience, and the experience of dissolution of the ego into the larger Self, differ in regard to the affect of fear. “Existential dread” is pertinent to the condition of the individual, while fearlessness of death is characteristic of the condition of the Other, Union, state of annihilation of individual. It opens in the Prayer of the Heart (Theophanis the Monk, 1984), or properly conducted Vedantic self-inquiry (Avadhūta Gītā, 1981). This shift of identification is also captured in the descriptions given by other contemplatives such as Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, or our contemporary Kallistos Ware (1986).

Practitioners of the Prayer of the Heart reported at least two variants of Union, different in regard to the transformation of the mode of identification. One mode results in the opening of the onto-poietic expression with the direct intuition of the fecundity of the Self; the other – in a rather indescribable sense of the static transcendentality of the Self encompassing all the present, past and future phenomena. The latter mode is more effective in reducing fear; the former seems to be more effective in sponsoring individuation. It seems that the process of Prayer of the Heart described by Theophanis the Monk also relates more to the second, static variant of Union. In our research of the contemporary practitioners of Prayer, the first mode seems to be prevalent. The educational outcomes described at the end of this article are connected with the onto-poietic mode.

To summarize, the explication of self-experience in the Prayer of the Heart happens in several steps: first, singling out the egological experience out of the mixture of egological/non-egological experience corresponding to the natural attitude. Then, continuous bracketing of non-egological cognitions and reduction of egological experience to the stream self-awareness directed at the internal Other. As the reduction deepens, the shift of identification switches the egological experience to the non-egological, but with a quality that is radically different from the non-egological experiences in the natural attitude. In the natural attitude, non-egologically “I” does not exist, and things just happen. There is no center, consciousness itself is not the psychic reality of the individual (De Monticelli, 2002). The experience is unified by a narrative “horizontal” meaning making, and by the implicit identification with the body. In the Prayer of the Heart, when the individual I stops to exist, consciousness itself is the psychic reality of the individual. The whole fullness of life,

previously veiled and constricted within the domain of the individual I, gets augmented, expanded and absorbed into the prior Other. As John the Baptist says, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

The awareness and existence, liberated from the constraint of the individual I, attain limitlessness within the larger transcendental identity. The individual I turns into an empty shadow of the prior egological identity, annihilated in the transcendental Self. It is reduced to being a mere locator, the locus of Self-Encounter in which Transcendental Self directly intuits its own meaning and meanings. The display of this encounter is not blank or homogenous; phenomena are present; the perception continues to function; direct intuition applied to the source of phenomenal consciousness continues its fertilizing effect on ontopoietic expression; intentionality continues – and the practitioner becomes aware of the innermost mystery of the ontopoietic process. The prayed-to, inferred unknown possibility is actualized as the ontopoietic fullness of the Transcendental Ego. The interior meanings of things become available and dynamically unfold, things are seen "as they are" – the practitioner witnesses the "lights" or presences of things emerging from the "darkness" of the sacred indescribable field of One presence.

The specifics of ontopoietic intuition, then, consists in positioning the awareness so that it can simultaneously receive the undifferentiated "womb" of consciousness, the great divide between the manifest and unmanifest, and the completely manifested cascades of meaning. An even subtler perception allows immersion into the functioning of the creative force itself, which conceives phenomena and endows them with existence. There lies the origin of intentionality, will, desire, knowledge and the like. Within the deployed ontopoietic structures, available to the direct intuition in the process of Prayer, one can also differentiate several domains, such as the domain of essential relations, or the domain of accidental thoughts. Our preliminary data show that the actualization of a particular ontopoietic domain provides different effects on psychological life. Understanding the specifics of these influences in future research may provide keys to understanding the interior mechanisms of human transformation. Meanwhile, the current data lead to the conclusion that the overall opening of the ontopoietic intuition at large causes the general characterological transformation.

Ontopoiesis and Individual Development

As longitudinal observations show, the rise of the direct ontopoietic intuition has profound effects on perception, identity, motivational sphere,

i.e. all significant psychological aspects of one's being (Louchakova, 2004a). They contribute to one's characterological transformation, which seems to be a specific psychological outcome of the direct intuition of the ontopoiesis. In the practitioners of the Prayer of the Heart, characterological transformation happens roughly in two consecutive stages: a) acquiring of a healthy character structure, b) changing the character structure towards an increase of positive traits. While the possibility of character change is still disputed by psychology, this effect is clearly indicated in the writings of Christian (Behr-Sigel, 1992), Islamic (Murata, 1992) and Hindu saints (Bader, 1992; Louchakova and Warner, 2003, Louchakova, 2004a), and observed in our participants. The above-mentioned phenomenon of the deployment of the latent content of consciousness upon the application of the reverse flow of awareness speeds up the evolutionary unfolding of one's own latencies. Fluctuations of the states of separateness, and the states of intimacy, proximity and Union, actualize the deployment of positive characterological traits such as virtues. In fact, the practitioner of the Prayer finds him/herself to be on the fast developmental track, rapidly confronting the contents of subconscious and opening up of the unconscious. Repetition of the Name brackets the negative contents, and the reverse intentionality within the flow of the self-sense brings more wholesome alternatives to the negative or destructive aspects of the psyche.

Affects such as fear or anger in their fully manifested form belong to the psychological boundary setting mechanism. However, in the ontopoietic field of the Logos, the internal polarities of these affects manifest themselves as soteriological sentiments, such as bliss or compassion. Intuition of the interior essences of emotions leads to the transmutation of the emotional sphere, where anger, sadness, loneliness, fear and desperation gets transmuted into their wholesome counterparts such as compassion, tranquility, fullness, joy, and hope. Sovatsky (1998) suggests that the experience of these feelings has a healing effect on prior psychological trauma. Then, the psyche of the practitioner of the Prayer over the course of years finds the resource of healing within itself.

The powerful source of character change consists in the transformation of the spectrum of the Divine Names, the foundational attributes of deity (Dionisius the Areopagite, 1965), functioning in the individual psyche. The choice of the name, such as the nouns Good, Love, or Beauty, personal names such as Jesus, nouns such as Guide or Protector, is usually reflective of the archetypal constituency of the individual psyche. Jungian psychology views the dynamics of the archetypal contents as a

defining factor in one's individuation. Prayer of the Heart brings up the awareness of the archetypal contents of the psyche, and transformation within the archetype towards its positive polarity. In the process of the Prayer of the Heart, the archetypal level is actively engaged. The unfolding of the archetypes happens in the direction of actualization of the inner meanings. For example, the archetype of Betrayal may be transmuted into the understanding of the illusory nature of phenomena, or the metaphor of veils concealing the true nature of things. When the archetypal contents of one field is fully actualized or exhausted, the ontopoietic process may provide the "descent" of a different, new archetype, accompanied by the emergence of the new qualities in the psyche.

Interestingly, characterological change seems to be connected to the dynamics of the focus in the body. As our prior research has shown, the domains of intentional consciousness are tied to the particular areas of the body-schema (Louchakova and Warner, 2003). In spiritual traditions, this phenomenon corresponds to the concept of *chakras* or centers of embodied consciousness. The focus of awareness in certain areas of the body is associated with the necessary arousal of particular groups of meaning. In our research, the change of archetypal contents was predominant if the practitioner over the years spontaneously gravitated to the focus on the left side of the chest. The psychodynamic change (reframing and healing of the individual's history) was more associated with the focus on the right. The overall opening up of the ontopoietic intuition happens initially with the activation of the core center of Spiritual Heart, and in its developed forms transcends any connection with the spatiality of the body.

As compared to the direct intuition of ontopoiesis, absorption in pure subjectivity also changes the qualities of the mind in the direction of explication of the latencies and dealings with the subconscious. Contrary to the full practice of Prayer, the consequences of this process can be very dramatic and difficult to integrate, due to the actualization of archaic emotions such as rage or terror associated with the early developmental stages of the self. In the full practice of the Prayer of the Heart, the integration of the subconscious and the transformation of the psyche are more harmonious and faster acting. Indeed, things are different if consciousness is seen as alive and the creative Logos as supporting its own evolutionary process, rather than as a mere depository. The internal transformation frequently corresponds to the tangible change of life circumstances, making a full circle integrating the ontopoietic and the life

world networks, and supporting the ancient alchemical dictum "as above, so below".

Applications to Therapy and Learning

Once marginalized in the wake of a limited empiricism, the notion of self now enters the center of psychological discourse (Benson, 2001; Misra, 2001; Schweder, 1991). The current typology of the self does not accommodate all the evidence (Matsumoto, 1999), and needs more research. The depth-phenomenological knowledge of the structure of the self, acquired in the study of the Prayer of the Heart, served to develop the techniques for learning and psychotherapy, based on enhancement of the essential elements of self-structure.

The psychological focus of phenomenological analysis uncovers the inner, essential structural groupings, such as self-concept/self-sense, interiority/exteriority, constancy/changeability (subjectivity/objectivity), self-hood/transcendentality, and body-schema relatedness/unrelatedness. 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 the transpersonal psychological dimensions of experience such as "larger-than-self" or "no self", and body schema relatedness refers to the psychological phenomena that emerge in connection with particular locations within the body schema. These modalities were used as the avenues of self-explorations and guided meditation for people diagnosed as having a "religious or spiritual problem" (DSM-IV category V-code 62.89), also known as a spiritual emergency (Grof and Grof, 1989). This condition can imitate psychosis, depression, existential crisis and therefore occasionally gets misdiagnosed and medicated. The structured, guided phenomenological self-exploration, based on the analysis of the Prayer of the Heart, helps clients to understand the interior structure of their condition, and establish the more congruent sense of self.

The "I am"-sense, a persistent subjective component of self-awareness, can be easily differentiated from its changing objectifiable components in guided open-eyed introspection. After some initial training, the "I am"-sense becomes available for the continuous fixing of voluntary attention. This brings about a sense of well-being and an increase in reflection about the self. The increase of these secondary reflective thoughts corresponds

to the human experience of becoming more conscious. Focusing on the “I am”-sense was also used in therapy with clients diagnosed as having a “religious or spiritual problem” (DSM-IV category V-code 62.89) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). This technique helped to neutralize depersonalization by reestablishing the normal structure of self-experience.

A spiritual, non-denominational body-based self-enquiry, leading to the rise of direct intuition, was used in the training of phenomenological researchers in psychology (Louchakova, 2004a). In psychological phenomenological research, the researcher’s mind is the only “tool” used by the researcher. Consequently, the quality of this tool defines the effectiveness of the research. Training of the mind to make it into a good tool for phenomenological research was based on practices opening up direct intuition, such as the Prayer of the Heart. It was applied in teaching phenomenological research to four teams (40 students) of graduate students at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. As a result, students felt more at ease with the method and started using it in their dissertation research.

Training of direct intuition was also used in teaching Culture and Consciousness and Diversity Research in transpersonal psychology to seven teams (about 190 students) of graduate and one cohort (total of 12) of undergraduate students. Frequently, associations of the topics with personal cultural traumas would slow down the absorption of the material and adversely affect the educational outcome. The direct intuition training provides for better assimilation of complexity and fuller integration of trauma traces, and increases educational effectiveness.

Since knowledge about the self is typically remembered better than other types of semantic information (Kelley et al., 2002), the focusing on the “I am”-sense was used as an educational mnemonic technique with graduate students ($n > 100$) in psychology seminars. Students reported that the voluntary focus of attention on the constant aspect of the self in the process of learning decreases performance anxiety and enhances learning. The phenomenological map of the spatial components of the self resonates with the *in situ* distribution of neuromediators and neuropeptides, challenging the belief in the exclusive neurocentricity of consciousness (Louchakova and Warner, 2003). Research suggests that the positive effects of focusing on the “I am”-sense may have a biological basis connected with changes in the chemistry of the body.

The phenomenological explication of the self in the Prayer of the Heart allowed a glimpse of the interior workings of the direct intuition of

ontopoiesis. The transformative impacts of the rise of direct intuition, applied to ontopoiesis and Union, improve the human constitution and assist self-understanding. Identifying the deployment of the interiority of consciousness as an ontopoietic process provides a cognitive paradigmatic shift, which may have powerful consequences in terms of understanding and of further research into human transformation and development. While the multiple applications of this knowledge in all areas of human activity are yet to be explored, it is certain that direct intuition of ontopoiesis rejuvenates one’s life and appreciation of what it means to be human. I would like to acknowledge with deep gratitude my teachers, Carol Radha Whitfield, Ph.D., Sri Ranjit Maharaj, and Amedeo Giorgi, Ph.D., who creatively adapted the phenomenological method to psychological studies.

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