I TO WE: THE ROLE OF CONSCIOUSNESS TRANSFORMATION IN COMPASSION AND ALTRUISM

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Abstract.   It is clear that human consciousness can be transformed through spiritual experiences and practices. Little is known, however, about what the predictors, mediators, and outcomes are of such transformations in consciousness. In-depth structured interviews were conducted with forty-seven teachers and scholars from religious and spiritual traditions and modern transformative movements to identify factors common to the transformative process across traditions. Compassion and altruism were almost universally identified as important outcomes of positive consciousness transformation. Results of our analysis suggest that altruism and compassion may arise as natural consequences of experiences of interconnection and oneness. These experiences appear to lead to shifts in perspective and changes in one's sense of self and self in relationship to others. Based on these findings, we suggest several mechanisms by which transformative experiences and practices might influence the development of compassion and altruism.

Keywords: altruism; compassion; consciousness; consciousness transformation; religion; spiritual development; spiritual experience; spiritual practice; spirituality; transformative practice; worldview.

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It was a dazzlingly bright day, and I was facing the dramatic, rocky Big Sur coast-
line. The ocean swells were gentle, seals were at play, and behind me were the
coastal mountains. I was totally immersed in this peaceful scene, but then real-
ized I wasn't simply enjoying the scenery in the normal sense. My consciousness
had shifted. I had no sensation of standing on the balcony, but was fused with all
of nature. I felt totally whole, as waves of joy and a calm inner strength possessed
me. There was no I—only a "we" as I became one with all I saw. I knew in those
few moments that I was living at a level of reality that I had never achieved, or
even believed was possible.

—transformative experience from study participant

Religious and spiritual leaders, sociologists, psychologists, educators, and
neuroscientists are all interested in how compassion, altruism, and other
prosocial emotions and behaviors can be cultivated. Indeed, learning more
about how other-regarding virtues can be fostered is a goal with personal,
societal, and perhaps global implications. What factors are involved in the
cultivation of compassion and altruism? What experiences and practices
support the development of compassion and altruism that extends beyond
one's immediate kinship circle? What contexts support experiences of com-
passion and empathy and facilitate the translation of those emotions into
altruistic behavior? How can dispositional tendencies toward compassion
and altruistic behavior be fostered? Religious, spiritual, and transforma-
tive practice traditions have developed specific methods that are directed
toward cultivation of these virtues, and we may have something to learn
from their approaches about how compassion and altruism are developed.

COMPASSION AND ALTRUISM IN RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

Most religious and spiritual traditions include prescriptions for living that
involve the cultivation of compassion and altruism. In Sikh and Hindu-
derived traditions, the Sanskrit *seva* refers to being of selfless service to the
needs of others. In Christian and other Western spiritual traditions, the
Greek word *agape* (or in Latin, *caritas*) refers to human beings manifesting
God's pure love, or an intentional and unconditional love for others, in-
cluding enemies. In Buddhist traditions *metta* in Pali or *maitri* in Sanskrit
is used to refer to both a quality and a practice of unconditional and unat-
tached lovingkindness, or the strong intention for the happiness of all be-
ings. The Tibetan Buddhist practice of *tonglen* refers to the practice of
taking in suffering and giving out love or blessings. Stephen G. Post points
out that while "one finds rough equivalents of the ideal of divine Unlim-
ited Love across the major spiritual and religious traditions . . . the con-
sensus among religions about the various ways human beings can connect
with this source of love needs to be better understood" (2003, 140).

While evidence suggests that religious affiliation is associated with pro-
pensity for altruism (Lukka and Locke 2000; Youniss, McClellan, and Yates

1997), little is known about which elements of spirituality or religiosity influence compassion and altruistic behavior. In addition, the extent to which religious participation actually results in increased altruism, particularly when it involves significant cost or sacrifice, remains in question (Batson 2002; McCullough and Worthington 1999; Saroglou et al. 2005). Little is known about what factors affect specific qualities of compassion and altruism, such as extensivity beyond in-group members or sensitivity to the needs of the other.

THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF DIRECT EXPERIENCE

Most religious and spiritual traditions have also recognized that overcoming self-interest in the service of others is not easy and have developed methods of encouraging virtues. Religious and spiritual communities encourage these virtues in part through external influences, such as moral education; formal precepts or vows that advocate an ethical lifestyle; opportunities to express compassion or perform acts of community service or social advocacy; peer influence; philanthropic rituals or structures such as the collection plate or tithing; community-supported initiation-like activities such as the Mormon mission; and poems, scriptures, slogans, songs, and symbols that may serve to assist one in internalizing moral goals. These external influences of religion and spirituality may influence the development of compassion and altruism.

   However, it is clear that individuals will not simply conform their consciousness and actions to abstract moral orders but must internalize them through personal transformative experiences (Smith 2003). Although the role of the subjective emotional experience of empathy in compassion and altruism has been studied in depth (Batson 1991; Eisenberg 2002), very few studies have explored how subjective spiritual experiences might affect compassion and altruism. Gregory Fricchione notes that "Religious experience . . . of awe and oneness and heightened perception of the spiritual may be among the most powerful motivators of extraordinary love" (2002, 31). Likewise, Post theorizes that

It may be that the most exemplary altruism is often associated with the agent's personal experience of the utter enormity of the Transcendent, including a sense of overwhelming awe. Overawed, the deeply humbled self is transformed through something like an ego-death to a new self of profound humility, empathy, and regard for all human and other life. This phenomenon can be studied across cultures and time. (2002, 63)

THE TRANSFORMATION PROJECT

Over the past several years, our group has been engaged in a study of the factors that initiate, mediate, and sustain positive transformations in consciousness. To learn more about how consciousness is transformed, we

sought to identify common elements of the transformative process in religions, spiritual traditions, and modern transformative movements. We have employed a qualitative research method with the goals of generating hypotheses and informing definition, selection, and operationalization of relevant predictor, mediator, and outcome variables. Through this process, we are developing a theoretical model of the transformative process that is not specific to any one tradition but is informed by common elements of the transformational process across traditions, without excluding unique contributions from specific traditions. Our thematic analysis suggests that increased compassion and altruism is a common goal of transformative traditions and that there are experiences and practices across traditions that foster increased compassion and altruism through a number of potential pathways.

Exploring the Transformative Terrain.   The overarching goal of our study is to explore the phenomenon of consciousness transformation and to learn more about the various transformative paths that lead to beneficial outcomes for self and community. One metaphor that has guided our work is that we are attempting to describe a terrain of transformation over which many have traveled diverse and intersecting paths with several goals in common. Without being able to travel the entirety of this vast terrain ourselves, we instead attempted to find out more about it by talking to explorers who had spent their lives traveling regions of it and communicating what they have found to others.

Our respondents comprise a panel of experts in various means of cultivating positive transformations in consciousness. We are using a multiple case study approach, in the sense that each respondent speaks from his or her own unique collection of experiences and teachings rather than being asked to represent his or her tradition. We interviewed 47 respondents who were all actively involved in teaching, practicing, and/or studying religions, spiritual traditions, or modern transformative movements. Because our goal was to learn about the transformative process, we intentionally recruited respondents from branches of traditional religions and other spiritual traditions that emphasized transformative practices. We also sampled respondents from more secular and/or eclectic consciousness-oriented transformative movements. Our respondents can be categorized into three overlapping subgroups: religious or spiritual teachers; scholars of religious, spiritual, and consciousness transformation; and communicators/representatives (speakers, authors) of a philosophy of transformation. We focused on interviewing primarily Western teachers, and thus the traditions deriving from Asian religions, for example, are modern Western interpretations of those traditions. Our sample includes representatives of the modern spiritual renaissance sparked by the influence of Eastern, Western, esoteric, and indigenous traditions in America in the latter half of the twenti-

eth century. The thread that connects our respondents is their focus on the experiences, practices, and processes by which people cultivate positive transformations in consciousness.

Three interviews were conducted with two respondents simultaneously, because of their partnerships as teachers, resulting in 44 coded interviews. Criteria included being at a teacher or master level within the tradition and having taught thousands of students over several years. Potential respondents were identified through literature search and/or nomination from members of the identified traditions. Our opportunistic selection process resulted in a sample of teachers and scholars from diverse spiritually transformative traditions including Buddhism (Vipassana, Zen, and Tibetan), Yoga (Integral, Kundalini, Transcendental, Bhakti, Himalayan), Christianity (Protestant, Roman Catholic, Evangelical), Judaism, Islam, Shamanism (indigenous, cross-cultural, and through use of psychoactive substances), Native American, Non-Dualism (a Hinduism-influenced philosophical tradition that emphasizes lack of separation between consciousness and matter, or subject and object), African Yoruba, Kabbalah, Sufism, Aikido, Johrei, Attitudinal Healing, Transpersonal Psychotherapy, Somatics, Expressive Arts and Movement, Holotropic Breathwork, and other forms of spiritual reflection and self-discovery (such as use of walking the Labyrinth). All but two of our respondents were over the age of fifty, 90 percent were college educated or above, and 38 were Caucasian, 1 African American, 3 Native American, 1 Arab-American, 2 Asian, and 2 East Indian.

Interviews and Analysis.   We developed the semi-structured interview with the primary goal of eliciting information about the transformative process that would assist in hypothesis generation and definition, selection, and development of measures of relevant predictor and outcome variables. We developed the questions through an iterative process, informed by our pilot work, several focus groups, and an extensive literature review. Questions focused on what constitutes a transformation, what initiates transformative experiences, what practices or activities cultivate transformation, how these experiences are translated into lasting shifts in worldview or way of being, what milestones or stages exist along the path of transformation, what factors facilitate or inhibit integration of transformative experiences into everyday life, and what observable outcomes result from these experiences and practices. Respondents were asked to speak from the perspective of their direct personal experience, observations of their students, and teachings of their tradition. Interviewers instructed respondents to limit their responses to actual observed phenomena and outcomes as opposed to ideals or potentials. Analysis involved collapsing similar responses based on keywords and conceptually similar ideas into themes reflecting the most common responses across traditions. *Themes* are defined as clusters of linguistically or conceptually similar factors that

exhibited both high breadth (proportion of respondents contributing a response to that theme) and high frequency (total number of responses contributing to that theme).[1]

Defining the Territory. *Transformation* is a term that has been resistant to consensus definition. Our first interview question asked participants to define it. From thematic analysis of responses to this question, our working definition of consciousness transformation is *a profound shift in one's experience of consciousness resulting in long-lasting shifts in worldview or ways of being, and changes in the general pattern of the way one experiences and relates to oneself, others, and the world*. Spiritual transformation is transformation that occurs in the context of spiritual experience or practice. Because not all transformations in consciousness described by our respondents occurred in a spiritual context, we find the term *consciousness transformation* more adequate to describe the kinds of changes we are describing. We use the term *transformative experience* to refer to an experience that resulted in a change in worldview, as opposed to extraordinary, peak, or spiritual experiences, which are not necessarily translated into long-term changes in one's way of being.

Although we did not ask our participants to define *compassion* and *altruism*, in this article we define compassion as *a recognition of another's suffering, a feeling of sorrow or concern for that suffering, and a desire and intention to end that suffering*. Altruism can be differentiated from compassion by its behavioral emphasis. We define it as *action intended to benefit or to ease the suffering of another, even when that action causes no benefit to, and may require sacrifice from, the one acting*.

"Love with Teeth": The Predominant Outcome of Transformation

When asked about the outcomes of transformative experiences and practices, the most prominent responses by far referred to the development of compassion, love, kindness, generosity, and altruism. These words were used often. Other language used to describe these outcomes included "generous love," "a channel for God's love," "God working through us, guiding our responses," "more capacity for self-sacrifice," and "greater ability to respond, a greater range of responses to draw from." The words used to describe this theme also indicated an increased capacity to be sensitive to the suffering of another: "not totally in the movie of one's own life anymore, but aware of others," "greater capacity for forgiveness, acceptance, caring, concern and empathy," "a sense of empathy, resonance, identification with others." Increases in the capacity for compassionate love, empathy, kindness, and a greater orientation toward helping those in need were the most frequently cited outcomes of spiritual transformation.

Interestingly, some respondents spoke of the quality of this caring and concern being, as one respondent put it, "love with teeth"—the kind of love that is not passive but actively acts to remedy suffering. One respondent stated, "while there is a nobility, a generosity, this is not the same as being "nice" necessarily . . . there can be a generosity with detachment."

Another commonly mentioned outcome of transformation was a different perspective on pain and suffering. One respondent reported recognizing that "when we are able to experience the connection between pain and other forms of existence—when we recognize that pain and suffering have their place—it is not an isolating and dehumanizing experience." Another noted that "the relationship to suffering changes, their own and others.'" Similarly, another stated that transformation "elevates their relationship to suffering from emotional to spiritual," another reporting "an elevated response to suffering, emotionally and spiritually—increased compassion." Respondents also noted less fear in response to being presented with pain and suffering, such as "I can be with people in pain, accompany them, I'm afraid of a lot less," "lovingkindness, generosity, compassion—I can take the time to see someone more clearly and this is where compassion can arise," and "I've replaced fear with a more steady state of love, I don't feel so threatened, not apart from others." A common description of those who had experienced a transformation is represented by the response "You can feel they care, that they are not relating from a point of fear."

Respondents also pointed to a greater capacity for relatedness: "because of relatedness, there is a sense of responsiveness," "this practice has opened my heart so I can deal with people, any people," "I see differences as interesting rather than threatening," "monastery life is about developing compassion, about connecting with others—new people react to situations with fear or anger; those who have practiced longer react with sadness and ask, how can I help?" One respondent shared that

Up until that point in my life—honestly I was mainly concerned with myself, and through the practice, I could gradually make the transformation into having a bigger consciousness. . . . I could really begin to see the importance of serving mankind through serving others, and through sharing the great blessings I had received—freely and openly and as often as possible with others. That was a real transformation for me.

Respondents also pointed to less isolation and a greater sense of community. This theme is reflected in responses such as "coming out of feeling like 'I'm a victim of my life' into 'I am working with nature, community, and spirit to improve *our* lives," "being with people and finding some way to be helpful," "seeing each other as teachers and students to one another, so that you improve whatever community you are in," "wisdom and compassion arise when we drop the illusion of the separate self," and "the final step is service, to be of service."

These results inspired us to explore how these loving and compassionate outcomes could be cultivated. How do people transform their consciousness in ways that are beneficial to themselves and others? What factors are involved in the shift to a more compassionate and altruistic orientation toward life? How and why does this process work? Across our interviews, a model emerged in which profound experiences of oneness or interconnection led to shifts in one's perspective and in one's sense of self in relation to others, resulting in a natural emergence of compassion and altruism.

Experiences of Oneness and Interconnection.   Most of our respondents noted that subjective experiences were essential to stimulation and sustenance of consciousness transformation. Cognitive realizations alone could initiate or support transformation, but direct experience was emphasized as a necessary, though in itself not sufficient, element of true and long-lasting transformation. Whether spontaneous, discrete and dramatic (the aha! moment or peak experience), or a series of more subtle realizations through practice and contemplation, it was generally agreed that the degree to which someone's thinking and behavior changed was mediated by having deeply personal subjective experiences, often affect-laden, that either confirmed the teachings of one's spiritual or religious tradition, brought them into question, or stimulated seeking for explanations that might help one give words to and integrate the experience.

The descriptions of subjective transformative experiences varied greatly, but throughout there were several common themes. Particularly relevant to the cultivation of compassion and altruism, respondents often described experiences of oneness or interconnection. Across widely varying traditions, respondents characterized this type of transformative experience using similar terms. They described experiences of "recognition that we are all connected," "being deeply connected to all life," "a realization of the interconnectedness of all beings," "a dissolving of the boundary between self and other," "right here is the whole universe and each of us is Buddha," "an abiding personal relationship with God—the same God in all the world," "a sense of community at a global level," realization that "I am you—truly—I am consciousness as you are consciousness," "there isn't any separation." Although not all of our respondents chose the word *oneness* to best describe this experience, the common element was a sense of unity, shared identity, belonging, universal divinity in all people or all of life.

Shifts in Perspective.   Experiences of oneness or interconnection often led to or were accompanied by a shift in perspective. This shift was seen by many as the essence of the transformative process, underlying the kinds of long-lasting, dramatic, and generalized changes that are described in the spiritual transformation literature (Miller and C'de Baca 2001). Although "transformation" is often used synonymously with "change," many

respondents noted that although transformation results in changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, the actual process of transformation does not require changing these things directly but instead involves a change in perception or perspective, resulting in an alteration in one's fundamental assumptions. Respondents described this shift in perspective as "a broader perspective," "shifting the way you see the world," "a new way of seeing things," "capacity to hold different perspectives," "a change in one's frame of reference, in their inner posture," "a whole new door opens up, a whole new world," "the locus of transformation is seeing one's experience, first of all seeing what is really there . . . cleaning the windows is the real work," "seeing with new eyes," "it's a change in perspective, not a change in consciousness," "there is a new sense of possibility—of having options," "a change in scope, from fixation to a whole new way of seeing the world," "an expanded awareness," "an abiding sense of the sacred." The descriptions often included elements of broadening, widening, opening, or stepping back to see a more inclusive and all-encompassing view.

   Changes in Sense of Self and Self in Relationship to Others.   Respondents reported that in response to this shift in perspective or expanded worldview there is also often an alteration of one's sense of self—a sort of decentering from or widening of one's personal identity. It is as though, once the landscape changes dramatically, the next step is to come back and reorient oneself to the new perspective, to find one's place relative to the new environment, analogous to a finding a *You Are Here* arrow on a new map of the world. Words to describe this theme included "shifting the way you see the world, and yourself," "a shift in sense of self," "seeing self in a completely different way," "redefining ourselves as spiritual beings," "leaving behind ego and becoming soul," "letting go of who you think you are and therefore becoming who you really are," "a deepening into the self," and realization that "who I think I am does not exist."
   This shifted sense of self often involved a movement from seeing oneself as fundamentally a separate, particular, personal identity (the *I*) to a greater sense of self as inextricably connected to others and belonging to a larger whole (the *We*). Other words used to describe this were "a deep connection with all of life," "feeling aligned with a greater force," "less feeling of fragmentation and isolation," "integration into a larger reality," "a feeling of not being separate, of being interconnected," "a realization that 'I am a part of a consciousness that is so much bigger," "feeling connected to everything, a part of everything," "you go from a 'me' to an 'us'," "an ability to perceive and initiate kinship." This sense of belonging and the capacity for connection where one had previously felt isolated, as well as having one's personal path be aligned with a collective path toward wholeness, was an overarching theme throughout our interviews.

PATHWAYS TO COMPASSION

How might these deeply subjective and often transitory experiences result in changes in capacity for compassion and altruism? C. Daniel Batson, Jim Fultz, and Patricia A. Schoenrade have noted that individual differences in the capacity for empathy may be the product of

(a) different experience with the particular situation (e.g., having previously suffered in the same way),
(b) different perception of the situation due to proximity or focus of attention,
(c) different relationship to the person whose welfare is in question, or
(d) transsituational dispositional differences either in general emotionality or in the ability and readiness to experience empathic emotion. (1987, 21)

Transformative experiences may not provide a direct experience with a similar situation as described in (a). However, we propose that through a shifted perspective and an altered sense of self and self in relation to others, transformative experiences do have the potential to alter, when confronted with another's suffering, one's perception and focus of attention with respect to the situation (b), one's perceived relationship to the person experiencing suffering (c), and one's dispositional ability to experience empathic emotion (d). Our findings suggest several pathways through which transformative experiences may lead to alterations in perception, relationship to others, and increases in empathy, leading to compassion and altruism.

   Decentralization of the Self.   One way that subjective experiences of oneness or interconnection and an altered sense of perspective and sense of self may lead to greater compassion and altruism is through a movement away from the sense of self as central. As one moves from being the protagonist of the primary narrative through which one lives to a decentered sense of self or a sense of self as a part of a larger We, one is more inclined to work toward the greater good. The Russian philosopher of love Vladimir Solovyov stated,

The meaning and worth of love, as a feeling, is that it really forces us, with all our being, to acknowledge for another the same absolute central significance which, because of the power of our egoism, we are conscious of only in our own selves. Love is important not as one of our feelings, but as the transfer of all our interest in life from ourselves to another, as the shifting of the very center of our personal lives. ([1894] 1985, 43)

   Our respondents echoed this notion, many pointing to transcendence of the narcissistic or self-centered worldview as a fundamental building block of spiritual development. One respondent summarized this notion by saying, "the shift from ego consciousness to soul consciousness is the only work we have to do."
   Drawing upon Cynthia K. Chandler's work, Patrick Love and Donna Talbot propose as one of five elements defining spiritual development "the process of continually transcending one's current locus of centricity" (1999,

365). Chandler provided a range from an "unhealthy" (self-centered or narcissistic) locus of centricity to a "healthy" locus of centricity (enlightened self-interest), to humancentric (all of humanity), to geocentric (all beings), to cosmocentric (universal) (Chandler et al. 1992). While only respondents in our sample from more transcendent traditions (Buddhist, some yogic, and non-dual traditions) in particular emphasized an eventual transcendence over *any* identification with a personal self-concept, almost all mentioned a need to overcome self-interest as a primary motivating force. Our work suggests that through a sense of self as not necessarily central to each story but instead connected to a larger central collective sense of self, there was less personal reactivity and greater capacity for empathy, compassion, and altruism.

Increased Kinship with Others. Along with this sense of a shifted center of experience there was often described a strong feeling of belonging to a larger community—a shift in one's perception of both where one locates oneself in the experiential world and where one stands in relation to others. Respondents commonly noted that a result of transformative experiences was feeling a part of a larger whole, of being connected to all of humanity or all beings, and reduced feelings of isolation and alienation.

Kristin R. Monroe proposes that the psychological explanation for altruism is the "altruistic perspective," particularly of oneself in relation to others. Her research participants "saw themselves as strongly linked to others through a shared humanity," leading to spontaneous altruistic acts. Her participants reported a sense of having "no choice" but to react altruistically, and she views them as acting from a new sense of self rather than religion or reason (2002, 109). Like Monroe's participants, our respondents saw the development of compassion and altruism naturally arising from a sense of self in relation to others that was expansive and inclusive, resulting from profoundly subjective experiences of interconnection, interdependence, and recognition of the inherent sacredness or divinity in all things. One of our interviewees from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition stated that "when you are able to quiet the mind, to stop and rest in the actuality of things as they are, the nature of the interconnectedness of all things, the next thing that arises quite naturally is compassion for fellow beings—a wish to ease the suffering of others."

More than Just Empathy. Monroe notes that the perspective taking that occurs in empathy is not sufficient to cause altruism and proposes that instead it is the perception of a shared humanity becoming part of one's identity that is the critical factor in altruism. This idea is supported by a series of experiments in which Robert Cialdini and colleagues have shown that the impact of empathic concern on willingness to help was eliminated when *oneness,* defined as "a sense of interpersonal unity, wherein the conceptions of self and other are not distinct but are merged to some

degree" (Cialdini et al. 1997, 490), was considered. In addition, their analyses indicate that empathic concern increased helping only through its relation to perceived oneness, or self-other overlap, from which they conclude, "one can doubt whether those helpful acts reflect the selflessness required of true altruism" (p. 490).

Experiences of oneness and interconnection leading to altruism may present a problem for the traditional altruism literature, in which some definitions require for true altruism that there be no benefit to self. Although the term implies a distinction between self and other, from an interconnected worldview, benefit to other and benefit to self are difficult to disentangle. There is some evidence that mutual altruistic cooperation in large groups (outside of kinship circles) activates the brain's reward system, but little is known about these processes (Fehr and Fischbacher 2003). Some have questioned whether a concept corresponding to true altruism (that is, without benefit to the self) appears in certain religious traditions because the teachings rarely mention altruism outside of the context of eventual benefit to self (Oord 2005).

It may also be that prevailing models of altruism are ethnocentric. Eunice Yi and colleagues (2005) found cultural variations in altruistic motivations in which altruism toward friends, family, and strangers was related to guilt and empathy in European Americans but not in Asian Americans. Similarly, Keishin Inaba (2003) found differential motivations across cultures in two different new religious movements, in which a Christian-based movement's altruistic acts were motivated by duty and obligation whereas a Buddhist-based movement's altruism did not exclude reciprocity as a truly altruistic motivation.

Not Selfless.   However, most of our respondents rejected the notion that selflessness in the context of service, or the movement from I to We, involved dissolution of the self or the requirement that the self be subjugated to the needs of others. Instead, there was a strong emphasis on the newly recognized and placed self being strengthened through sometimes instant and sometimes gradual revealing of an "authentic self" whose true nature was loving, compassionate, divine, or aligned with the highest virtues or values.

Among the many paradoxes our respondents described, many reported that the more people feel their connection to others and lack of separation, the more they are able to be authentic and appreciate their unique self and set of circumstances. Perhaps the most reflective description came from the respondent who stated that students experiencing transformation "at once realize that they are a heart connected to many hearts, and also become more of who they uniquely are." Another noted that as much as the journey was about I to We, it is also about We to Me. Another stated, "we are strengthened and deepened when our personal story merges into the

larger story." One said that through spiritual transformation he became "more of who I already am." In a sense, compassion and altruism require the recognition of another *as* other and, in particular, as a unique and valued individual worthy of attention and care. Experience of the authentic self as inherently valuable as connected to a larger whole, by extension implies the inherent worthiness of others.

Our respondents most often agreed with Post:

"Love thy neighbor" and thereby discover the paradox of happiness in the forgetting of self. The self who has forgotten self-centeredness and lives close to Unlimited Love will take care of self, motivated not by self-interest but by a *totally different level of being*. Those who approach Unlimited Love will never be self-indulgent, yet they will be good stewards of their minds and bodies as instruments. (2002, 42)

Enhancement of a Natural Capacity for Compassionate Love. Along with a revealing of an authentic self through transformation, respondents described transformation as a process of both becoming more aware of and enhancing one's natural capacities and tendencies toward compassionate love and a desire to ease others' suffering. There are almost certainly inherent drives for affiliation, empathy, and prosociality (Preston and de Waal 2002; Lewis, Amini, and Lannon 2000; Keltner 2003). Abraham Maslow (1943) pointed out that when physiological and safety needs are basically met, there will emerge needs for love, affection, and belongingness, and he emphasized that love needs involve both receiving and giving love. Lynne E. O'Connor (2003) calls altruism a "fundamental unconscious motivation."

Our analysis suggests the possibility that transformative experience and practice may function to make one aware of and enhance already existing inherent inclinations toward compassion and altruism. Similarly, Jean Kristeller and Thomas Johnson have theorized that the practice of meditation might augment empathy, compassion, and altruism by two mechanisms: a shift in the sense of self (similar to what we have described earlier) and a "focused engagement with a universal human capacity for empathy, compassion, and altruistic behavior" (2005, 401).

Personal Distress and Empathic Concern. The empathy-altruism hypothesis states that two types of emotions with different accompanying motivations can arise from perceiving another in distress: (1) personal distress, resulting in a egoistic desire to reduce one's own personal distress by helping (egoistic), and (2) empathic concern, accompanied by a truly altruistic desire to ease the distress of another (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987). Our respondents almost invariably mentioned an increased capacity for empathy as a result of transformation and also often mentioned a decrease in personal reactivity or tendency to "take things personally." Spiritual transformation and the shifted sense of self may work to promote

compassion and altruism through reducing the personal distress caused by others' suffering, and increasing empathic concern.

Some even described the kind of generosity and altruism that results from spiritual practice as "detached." Jocelyn Sze and Margaret Kemeny state that compassion is "a state *beyond* sadness or sympathy, where one is not only feeling sorrow or concern for the suffering of another but more critically feels energized and enabled to combat that suffering" (2004). Our respondents, particularly those for whom environmental and human-rights activism had become a part of their spiritual lives, spoke often about spiritual experience and practice warding off despair or immobilizing personal distress that can prevent constructive, altruistic action. One offered a unique interpretation of the purpose of spiritual practice, stating that "spiritual practice is not so much for having blissful spiritual experiences, it's more to keep you on an even keel as you increasingly become aware of the vast suffering on the planet, to give you some context in which that suffering is not just completely overwhelming." Our findings suggest that spiritual experience and practice may increase one's capacity to have concern for the suffering of another without being overwhelmed by personal distress so that one remains energized to help.

Translating Momentary Experiences into Long-term Shifts. Our respondents reported that these kinds of subjective spiritual experiences could initiate and support the transformative process. However, they were clear and almost universal that the kinds of experiences described above, without additional factors that helped to integrate the experience, were rarely by themselves enough to create lasting cognitive and behavioral results. We and others have pointed out that there is a difference between having an extraordinary experience and having that experience result in long-lasting changes in thinking patterns and behavior (Killoran and Schlitz 1999).

In the themes derived from responses to the question "What factors help one to integrate a potentially transformative experience into long-term shifts in way of being?" we found six specific factors across traditions that facilitated a short-term experience into a long-term change: (1) being a part of a like-minded social network or community, (2) having a language and context for the experience, (3) continuing to access new information or teachings, (4) a daily mind-body practice to both reinforce/ reconnect with the experience and condition the mind and body to tolerate the cognitive and behavioral changes, (5) engaging in ways of creatively expressing or manifesting the experience through action, and (6) daily reminders such as wearing a cross or mala beads or intentionally placing symbols in one's environment. These factors appeared to both mobilize intention to embrace the new perspective and create fertile conditions for growth and healing to take place in the face of a sometimes hostile, tempting, or distracting external environment. Our findings suggest that direct

experiences interact with these factors in a reciprocally reinforcing way to result in long-term shifts in worldview or way of being, including compassion and altruism.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are several limitations to the present study. The respondents in our sample, while carefully selected for their scholarship and/or experience studying and teaching transformative practices, reflect a sample of convenience rather than being chosen to be representative of the world's religions. There is an oversampling of Asian-inspired traditions in our sample, which likely influenced our results. The emphasis on transformative branches of religions and spiritual traditions may slant our findings toward a more liberal and less mainstream view and thereby limit generalizability of our findings to the vast majority of U.S. citizens who are members of a mainstream religion. In addition, while our respondents were uniquely qualified to address the questions because of their experience and scholarship, most had dedicated their lives to not only practicing the concepts but to teaching, writing, and speaking in public about them. Respondents with less social and spiritual capital might have different experiences and viewpoints. We were limited geographically to interviewing those who were residents of or visitors to the Northern California area. Our sample is not as ethnically diverse as we would hope for. Finally, our own biases toward fostering what we consider to be positive transformation (movement to a more loving, compassionate, and balanced way of life) likely affected the design of our methods, our analysis, and thus our findings.

One strength is that the present study is one of the few that have examined views of consciousness transformation and the development of compassion and altruism across religious, spiritual, and modern/eclectic transformative traditions. This pluralistic approach yields the potential for results to be applicable to people regardless of their specific spiritual or religious orientation. The broad diversity in spiritual and religious traditions of the sample provides for a unique perspective in that the commonalities among experiences and processes may reflect truly common factors. The painstaking qualitative approach yielded a rich data set and offers empirically derived hypotheses about the role of consciousness transformation in the development of compassion and altruism.

AN EMERGING MODEL

Trappist monk Thomas Merton is quoted as saying "The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, and all involved in one another" (Padovano 1984). The model arising out of the results of our

study is that altruism and compassion may arise as a natural consequence of experiences of interconnection and oneness, an altered worldview, and a resulting shift in the sense of self and self in relationship to others.   We propose that these subjective experiences may lead to increased compassion and altruism through several pathways: (1) decentralization of the self, (2) an increased sense of belonging, and extension of one's kinship circle, (3) connection with an authentic compassionate self, and enhancement of one's natural capacity for compassion, altruism, affiliation and cooperation, and (4) less tendency toward personal distress, and a corresponding increase in the capacity for genuine empathy, in response to the suffering of another. This process is supported through a reciprocally reinforcing interplay between subjective spiritual experience and a context, often provided by religions, spiritual traditions, and modern transformative movements but also through other social systems. Subjective experiences allow one to internalize what previously have been externally influenced morals, while a context ideally provides conditions in which subjective transformative experiences can be translated into long-lasting shifts in one's way of being.

NOTES

   1.   For the interview schedule and detailed analysis methodology, please contact the authors.

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