Sacred Uncertainty: Hope, Fear, and the Quest for Transcendence

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Abstract

Myth and religion have historically been driven by a quest for certainty, in the form of understanding, control, or both. This article contrasts the thinking of Ken Wilber and Chögyam Trungpa in examining the origins of this quest in the development of individual consciousness, and in assessing the central role of hope and fear in the pursuit of certainty. In the process, it explores the relationship of hope, fear, and certainty to both the notion of God and the experience of the physical body. Finally, this article locates in the works of both thinkers the establishment and maintenance of an illusory self as grasping at a primal form of certainty, and a link between spiritual transcendence and a relinquishment of hope, fear, and the desire for certainty.

Introduction

From the dawn of recorded history, it seems, human beings have been trying hard to "understand". The two pre-eminent religious theorists of the nineteenth century, E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer, went so far as to ascribe the beginnings of religion itself to this drive (Segal 2004: 340). In their view, people needed an explanation for what otherwise appeared random: weather events, the behaviour of crops and animals, illness and injury, birth and death.

This raises the question: Why? Why was it necessary to understand how and why these events and experiences arise? Why could people not, like animals, simply adapt as necessary and continue about their business without being compelled to investigate the laws governing their affairs? What is it in the human psyche that reaches for the hope of resolution and recoils from the fear of uncertainty? This article will contrast two thinkers' analyses of humanity's quest for certainty, specifically with regard to religious beliefs.

Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa (1940-1987) was a prominent interpreter of traditional Buddhist doctrine into the Western idiom. Born in Tibet and rigorously trained in the traditional disciplines proper to his status as the holder of two venerable Buddhist lineages,[1] Trungpa Rinpoche[2] fled to India following the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. He studied at Oxford University before relocating to the United States in 1970. There, he established both a Buddhist church and an organisation dedicated to secular meditation training. The two streams have merged since Trungpa's death in 1987, and currently operate as Shambhala International, a global network of some 200 meditation centres and groups. In support of Trungpa's view, I also include commentary by one of his primary students, scholar of religion Reginald Ray.

The second thinker I draw into my analysis is integrationist Ken Wilber. Wilber has been called a philosopher, a psychologist, and a spiritual teacher. A prolific author, he has written about the relationship between science and religion since the 1970s. Wilber expresses an affinity with Buddhism — in a reverent foreword to Traleg Kyabgon's *The Practice of Lojong: Cultivating Compassion through Training the Mind*, he all but declares himself a student of this Tibetan Buddhist teacher (Wilber 2007: xi). Wilber is best known, however, for numerous works detailing his four-quadrant model of human evolution, which integrates intentional, behavioural, cultural, and social lines of development.

Both this model and the Buddhist view of selfhood offer prototypes of personal evolution; and both Trungpa and Wilber directly address the predominance of hope, fear, and uncertainty in the quest for spiritual understanding.

Science and Religion

Theistic religions offer believers an ultimate reference point in the notion of a divine being who maintains a stable, permanent, changeless existence beyond the vagaries of the phenomenal world. Even a vengeful, unpredictable God may be preferable to the "chaos" of an unstructured worldview (Maslow 1971: 396). Sigmund Freud suggested that we invent malevolent supernatural

forces so that "we can feel at home in the uncanny and can deal by psychical means with our senseless anxiety". For "if death itself is not something spontaneous but the violent act of an evil Will ... then we can breathe freely", because we can identify with the emotions and behaviours of the forces responsible for our suffering (as quoted in Mandivenga 1980: 88).[3]

It could be argued that institutionalised religion has historically thrived on the human quest for certainty. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, reassures its followers that "Holy Mother Church holds and teaches that God, the first cause *(principium)* and last end of all things, may be known with certainty, by the natural light of the human reason, through the medium of things created" (Vatican Council, Constitut. de Fide Cath., cap. Ii, as quoted in Herbemann *et al*., 1917a).

The *Bhagavad Gita*, a central Hindu text, also promises escape from the unpredictability of earthly existence: "He who sees that the Lord of all is ever the same in all that is, immortal in the field of mortality," the god Krishna tells his devotee Arjuna, "he sees the truth." The one who sees this truth, furthermore, "is no more whirled around by fate" (Mascaró 1962: 101).

Nor is the quest for certainty confined to religious speculation. Scientists continue to seek a so-called Theory of Everything — a theoretical framework that, in reconciling Newtonian physics and quantum mechanics, will make sense of the complete span of human understanding. In concluding his best-seller, *A Brief History of Time,* astrophysicist Stephen Hawking (1988: 175) notes: "If we discover a complete theory ... it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason — for then we should know the mind of God".[4]

Unlike religion, science finds its certainties in manifest, reproducible qualities and quantities. This is not to suggest that believers cannot be scientists or vice versa; but at the level of paradigm, the two realms seem at best to accomplish what Wilber (1998: xi) calls "a strange and grotesque coexistence, with value-free science and value-laden religion deeply distrustful of each other, aggressively attempting to colonize the same small planet".

Lest their perceived freedom from enslavement to religious values mislead them, Daniel B. Botkin (2011) cautions scientists, as the title of his *Wall Street Journal* article proclaims, that "Absolute Certainty Is Not Scientific". Botkin concludes with a light-hearted reminder from Nobel laureate and physicist Richard Feynman: "If you think that science is certain — well that's just an error on your part." Thus, in the matter of Holy Mother Church versus Richard Feynman, we have the interesting contrast of religious certainty versus scientific uncertainty.

Both Trungpa and Wilber have sought to harmonise religion and science. Trungpa pioneered the presentation of esoteric Tibetan Buddhism in the

language of Western psychology (Gimian 2005: xxvi). Wilber, for his part, has devoted considerable intellectual exertion to achieving agreement between the two paradigms. We need only consider the subtitle of his 1998 work, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul: "Integrating Science and Religion"*. Wilber (1998: 3) opens this investigation with the assertion that "[t]here is arguably no more important and pressing topic than the relation of science and religion in the modern world".

Trungpa located the foundational paradigm for individual human development — what he calls "the birth of ego" (Trungpa 2005: 78-83) — in the Buddhist *abhidharma*.[5] According to this view, the "self" with which we identify is in fact nothing more than a confluence of experiences, traditionally known as the five *skandhas*, or aggregates: Form, Feeling, Impulse-Perception, Intellect, and Consciousness.[6]

Wilber's model incorporates a dizzying array of developmental theories, ranging from the psychological (Piaget, Erikson, Maslow) through the philosophical (Plotinus, Schopenhauer, Habermas) to the spiritual (Sri Aurobindo, Ibn' Arabi, St. Teresa), with side trips into sociology, anthropology, gender analysis, and just about every other discipline relating to human experience (Wilber 2000: 197-217). What makes Wilber an integrationist, rather than an exclusively psychological or social theorist, is his insistence that all development in any of his four quadrants is inseparably linked to concomitant and simultaneous development in each of the other three (Wilber 1995: 205).

The relevance of Wilber's model for the purposes of this discussion is that any movement in an individual's relationship to hope, fear, and certainty will necessarily manifest in both her inner and outer experience, as well as in all her interactions with others. This helps clarify Wilber's (2001: 175) notion of the highest existential level (which he calls *the centaur*) where "you are no longer egocentric or ethnocentric. You have moved deeply into a worldcentric space." Personal identification, in other words, is no longer individual; it has incorporated all the elements of both individual and collective worldviews in a non-dual awareness that admits of no separation between subject and object, perceiver and perceived. Thus Wilber's (2001: 207) developmental model moves from a primal identification with matter to a level of consciousness unconstrained by the certainty that "I" exists as a separate, autonomous entity. Such certainty, from this perspective, is neither relevant nor desirable.

As can be seen, Trungpa uses the *abhidharma* to describe a delusional process that culminates in an egocentric worldview. Wilber, by contrast, takes the egocentric stance as his starting point, and tracks the way out of it. Nonetheless, both thinkers consider the egoic worldview an existential

dead end.[7] Central to both models is the notion of an imaginary, changeless reference point — the belief in an enduring self or ego — against which we measure our worth, plot our path, and plumb the meaning of existence altogether. Using the *abhidharma* as his text, Trungpa tracks our compulsive attempts to establish this reference point and, by implication, the path back to a state of undeluded being. Wilber, starting from the opposite end, elaborates a process of relinquishing the self-referential worldview.

The Quest for Certainty

The human craving for certainty has been well documented. The Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1983: 56), for example, stated flatly that "civilized man ... wants to be able to count on something certain". The quest for certainty emerges as a consistent trope throughout Robert E. Segal's presentation of scholarship on the origins and functions of myth from the nineteenth century to the present. "For [J.G.] Frazer," Segal (2006: 340) reports, "the knowledge that myth provides is a means to an end, which is control over the physical world." Claude Lévi-Strauss (as quoted in Segal 2006: 351) believes that primitive peoples create myths "moved by a need or desire to understand the world around them [and] proceed by intellectual means, exactly as a philosopher, or even to some extent a scientist, can and would do".[8] Maslow (1971: 395) and Días-Guerrero express this drive to establish a definitive explanation of where we come from, why we are here, and what to do about it as "the ordered demand for a conceptual grip on the universe and its meaning for us".

For Trungpa, the operative response to this demand is the question, *who wants to know?* Who is this "I" that is "moved by a need or desire to understand the world"; who is issuing this "ordered demand"; and who constitutes the "us" for whom meaning is such a compelling imperative? Trungpa (1978: 29) suggests that merely posing these questions typically provokes "the fear of not having a solid situation anymore. Solidified space is hope. It is hopeful in that you manage to solidify the space as something to hang onto."

Hope and fear are well established in this view — typically, as a paired set. Trungpa (1992: 17) establishes the pair as inseparable from, if not actually synonymous with, ego. "[E]go is that which is constantly involved with some kind of paranoia, some kind of panic — in other words, hope and fear. That is to say, as you operate there is a constant reference back to yourself ... then a criterion of reference develops in terms of hope and fear: gaining something or losing one's identity." In this model, the fear that a solid identity is lacking is inseparable from the hope that it is not. This hope, in Trungpa's view, is powerful enough to project itself into the world as an illusory "solidified

space", or personal territory. "This establishment of territory in relation to a central reference point seems to be the general pattern of the development of ego", he observes (1978: 29).

Wilber (2000: 240) is wary of the word *ego*, for it "is used in a thousand different ways by different theorists, which makes it very difficult to assign a definition". His use of the term *identity*, however, approximates Trungpa's use of *ego*, in that it describes individual consciousness engaged in a developmental process. In Wilber's model, the evolving individual's "identity expands from ... egocentric to sociocentric to worldcentric" (ibid.). This process leads, not to a loss of ego, but to what Wilber calls "a very mature ego", which is no longer identified with the narrow territory of its own hopes, fears, and preferences. The worldcentric person "will still act in his own self-interest where that is appropriate", but "his own self-interest will increasingly include the interests of others, since they fall into the orbit of his own expanded identity" (2000: 36).

The Certainty of Self

According to the Buddhist *abhidharma*, our sense of ourselves as separate, unitary, independent beings is mistaken. Ray (2000: 373) explains: "If we examine our experience, we discover five different kinds of experiential events (*dharmas*), but no solid, stable 'I' or 'self.'" These experiential events are encoded in the so-called aggregates (*skandhas*) mentioned above.

At the first *skandha*, the aggregate of Form, human beings attain their initial apprehension of self and other. For Trungpa (1978: 1), the subject-object distinction is established at the outset, for "[f]undamental experience begins with relativity, with the notion of comparison, which means ego and its projections. You cannot experience anything without a somebody to experience it and that is the starting point."

Ray (2000: 373) describes the first *skandha* as referring to "those momentary events that we experience as 'physical'". This description coincides with the stages of self-realisation Wilber (2000: 104) calls "early fulcrums", or developmental pivot points. He summarises these as an "early mental self [that] is at first a simple name self, then a rudimentary self-concept, but ... soon expands into a full-fledged *role self* (or persona)" (ibid.; emphasis original).

Following child development theory, Wilber (2000: 102) posits a primal mental stage prior to his "simple name self", where "the self is still largely undifferentiated from the material world". It is not until the "full-fledged role self" is established that we find the equivalent of the first *skandha*: a solid, separate "I" that apprehends solid, separate "others": a "newly internalized superego".

Both Trungpa and Wilber contest the material existence of an ego or identity. For Wilber (2001: 207), in the fully evolved individual "the separate self is nowhere to be found". Trungpa (1992: 55) describes ego as nothing more than a "basic makeup [that] consists of paranoia and confusion". Or, as Ray (2000: 231) puts it, "[e]go is basically a bad idea with no future".

The belief in the existence of "a solid, separate 'I'" is nonetheless strongly entrenched, giving rise to the conventional dualistic worldview. As the unchanging subject of perception, ego makes objects of all perceived phenomena. "You cannot have criteria, notions of comparison, without ego", Trungpa argues. Therefore, "ego is the ultimate relative, the source of all the relative concepts in the whole samsaric world" (2005: 96).[9]

This understanding has been reflected by mystics of various traditions. T.M. McFadden (1979: 2447) notes that "the mystic is characterized by a type of consciousness in which the subject-object polarity is not sharply perceived".[10] From the perspective of this consciousness, the fundamental reference point of self and other is at least blurred, if not entirely absent.

Yet this understanding is difficult to attain, according to Trungpa, who submits that the ego — the belief in a separate self — works hard to maintain the illusion of its own solidity. Nonetheless, "there is a tendency for the coherency of that occasionally to break down. Therefore one needs to find all sorts of means of confirmation, of confirming a coherent, consistent me, a solid me" (1978: 50).

At the second *skandha*, Feeling, one "reach[es] out and feel[s] the qualities of 'other.' By doing this, the ego-self reassures itself of its existence. 'If I can feel that out there, then I must be here'" (Trungpa 1973: 126). Wilber describes this dynamic in terms of the self as locus of identity engaging in "an annexing of various elements to create a self-sense" (2000: 226, n. 3).

Perception-Impulse, the third *skandha*, identifies and assigns desirability, undesirability, or ignorance (literally, ignoring) to perceived phenomena. Trungpa explains:

> Form creates the ego ... and feeling brings the spiky quality or sharpness within that, of something trying to maintain itself. The perception comes as extending ego's territory and trying to define its position even much more. There is in perception a lot of referring back to the central headquarters of ego, and then extending and exploring further and further always in relation back to it. (1978: 29)

Wilber's description of the perceptual sequence somewhat approximates Trungpa's model, albeit as occurring in a different order:

> There is the sensation of the tree, which leads to perception, and an image of the tree forms; affective factors color this image (pleasant/unpleasant), and the person searches for a series of words (symbols and concepts) with which to label the tree; these concepts arise within the cognitive space ..., and the preconscious high-speed memory scan for appropriate words occurs within the given cultural background (the language is English, say, and not Italian), driven in part by a desire for intersubjective communication and mutual understanding. All of this summates in the person saying to me, "I see a tree." (2000: 250, n. 36)

At the fourth *skandha*, Intellect, more sophisticated attitudes toward the perceived other emerge. These span the spectrum from helpful or aspirational (for example equanimity, discipline, and humbleness) to harmful or degraded (aggression, dogmatism, greed, etcetera). These attitudes or orientations — traditionally called *samskaras*, or mental formations — continue the project of establishing certainty. Trungpa elaborates:

> The general tendency of ego is uncertain at the beginning how to establish its link with the world, its identity, its individuality. As it gradually develops more certainty, it finds new ways of evolving; it becomes more and more brave and daring in stepping out and exploring new areas of possible territory. (1978: 40)

Finally, Consciousness occurs as the fifth *skandha*. Trungpa (1978: 63) describes consciousness in this context as "that sort of fundamental creepy quality that runs behind the actual living thoughts, behind the *samskaras*". Functioning as such, "consciousness constitutes an immediately available source of occupation for the momentum of the *skandhas* to feed on" (ibid.). Wilber's model of "integral psychology" echoes this construction in asserting "broad states of consciousness, within which there exist various structures of consciousness, within which there exist various states of mind" (2000: 287).

It should be noted that the fifth *skandha*, Consciousness, is not the same as the awareness prized by spiritual aspirants; nor can it be compared to Wilber's (2000: 1) elaborate psychological construction of mental functions, structures, states, modes, and development. Like *ego*, *consciousness* is a term requiring cautious and specific application. In the context of the fifth *skandha*,

it refers to a limited, self-referential form of cognition whose primary task is to determine whether incoming perceptions are likely to confirm or threaten the fundamental, isolationist position central to the Buddhist rendering of ego (Trungpa 1973: 123).

From the *abhidharma* point of view, then, the craving for certainty springs from an intuitive recognition that one's most basic existential assumption, one's central ontological axiom, rests on shaky ground. Not only is the self questionable; equally debatable is the existence of its objects of perception and consciousness. Trungpa (1978: 7) notes: "Once we have dealt with the projections of ego and seen their transitory and transparent nature, then ego has no reference point, nothing to relate to."

God and Death

The Buddha famously declined to pronounce on the existence or otherwise of a supreme being. "Buddhism is nontheistic", Ray (2000: 77) explains, "in that it affirms that what is ultimately good and true does not reside outside, in an external deity, but exists within, at our core." The notion of God, from this perspective, falls into the category of "projections of ego".

Numerous religious texts depict God as an anthropomorphic super-being. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, for example, Krishna-Vishnu reveals himself to Arjuna as possessing everything we humans have, only vastly more of it: "numberless arms, bellies, faces and eyes" (Radhakrishnan 1948: 275). As James L. Crenshaw (2001: 330) contends, "[w]e do fashion God in our own image and look on this figure whom we have projected into the heavens as the answer to human hunger for wholeness".

God is more powerful than we; he[11] is wiser than any mortal; his sensory equipment is free of humanity's spatial and temporal limitations. If God is understood as a projection of ego, it seems reasonable to trace this projection back to a human longing for omniscience and omniprescience. A particularly crucial attribute of a God created to hold such projections — arguably, the quality to which human beings most poignantly aspire — would be permanence.

It has been said that death is the only certainty life has to offer (although Benjamin Franklin added that *taxes*, too, are inevitable,[12] while Marvin Gaye appended a third certainty in the form of *trouble*.)[13] Ironically, in the context of the quest for certainty, most Western people, at least, reflexively reject this one sure thing. To perform its function in allaying fears and fulfilling hopes, a projected God would have to be deathless, permitting a humanity fearful of death to steal back its projection in a preferred form. God is like us; God is permanent; therefore we are deathless.

It could be argued that this dynamic is evident in the many religious doctrines that posit an enduring personal essence: a soul or *atman* that survives death and continues its existence in an afterlife, typically by either inhabiting a new body or taking up residence in some version of heaven, hell, or purgatory. Such beliefs support the notion of ego's permanence, and allow believers to reject the certainty of their own death.

In confronting the necessity of death, human beings face what is probably our most personally challenging uncertainty; for although death itself is certain, what follows it is radically uncertain. The complete absence of certainty regarding post-death experience — either its existence or its putative nature — provides fertile ground for speculation. Here the physical sciences desert us, for no mechanism has yet been devised that will enable us to measure or qualify what follows death.

Ray (2000: 245) spells out our conundrum: "All people ... no matter how powerful, famous, or wealthy they may now be ... will die, and none will be able to take anything of what they are, what they own, or what they have accomplished with them." This is so unsettling to most people that "in modern cultures, we are conditioned not to think about or even notice death ... After we die, people will quickly forget about us, and in a short period of time no one will even remember that we ever existed" (ibid.). Based on Trungpa's view, this state of affairs can be said to represent the ultimate insult to ego.

By and large, religion is popularly expected to assure us of post-mortem certainty. Thus, the online *Catholic Encyclopedia* submits that

> "eternal life" is a term sometimes applied to the state and life of grace, even before death; this being the initial stage or seed, as it were, or [sic] the never-ending life of bliss in heaven ... This, if we are true to ourselves and to God, *is sure to* pass into the second stage, the life eternal. (Herbemann *et al*., 1917b; emphasis added).

The question of belief in an afterlife aside, death is more than an exclusively biological event. Psychologist Stanislav Grof (1998: 42-43) proposes that suicidal tendencies "represent a fundamental confusion between suicide and egocide". In his view, the desire for death is actually a longing to transcend an identity mired in an erroneous view of self and world.

In his model of the individual's advance through progressive levels of consciousness, Wilber concurs. The boundary between each level and the next is marked by a "fulcrum": "the momentous process of differentiation and integration as it occurs in human growth and development" (2001: 131).

At each of Wilber's fulcrums, the individual experiences a "death-terror or death-seizure" reflecting the dis-identification with the lower level that is necessary for identification with the higher (Wilber 1980: 110). What makes this process terrifying, he contends, is our insistence on clinging to a separate sense of self. "In order to transcend the death-terror," Wilber submits, "one must transcend the self. That is, there is *nothing* the separate self can do to *actually* get rid of the death terror, since the separate self is that death-terror — they come into existence together and they only disappear together" (1980: 105; emphases original).

The Body

The body, as both originator and object of sensory perception, can always be reliably invoked to challenge existential uncertainty. We speak of pinching ourselves, for example, to ensure that we are not dreaming. A Buddhist teacher counselled me during a distressing life passage to "come back to my senses" — that is, to ground myself in the manifest reality of all that my physical senses were registering in any given moment. As Trungpa (1978: 99) explains, "[i]f you ask a person, 'How do you know that you are what you are?' the only simple way of explaining it is because, 'I see myself in the mirror. I am what I am. I have a body'".

For Wilber this identification with the body is rooted in an infantile level of consciousness[14] he calls "the typhonic self", or "body ego", to which he roughly attributes the lowest in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, "the physiological and the safety" (1980: 21). Nonetheless, Wilber (2001: 148) stresses the importance of being able to identify the boundaries of one's own body. "With psychosis", he elaborates, "there is severe reality distortion, marked especially by ... the incapacity to establish even the physical boundaries of the self ... consciousness fails to seat in the physical body."

Yet according to Trungpa (1978: 37), our experience of this physical body is itself questionable. "We say 'body' and we say 'mind,'" he proposes, "but we have our own interpretation of them, our own concept of them, which constantly separates us from the reality of the body and mind, the bodyness, mindness, the thingness of things as they are". The actual quality of "things as they are", Trungpa continues, "is what is called 'emptiness'". Ray explains that this "emptiness" does not imply the meaninglessness of non-existence, as it is frequently misconstrued. "The teachings on emptiness reveal that it is our own ego-centered, self-serving versions of reality that are empty of validity, not reality itself" (Ray 2000: 76). In the doctrine on emptiness, therefore, ego is once again threatened with the eradication of its reference points.

Hope and Fear

Hope and fear have long featured in the history of religion. The eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume (1976: 26; 31-33) identified the pair as a "primary human experience" that is responsible for stimulating the religious impulse. Spinoza cautioned that hope and fear "cause us to accept a kind of secondary bondage, as hope for eternal reward (in heaven) and fear of eternal punishment (in hell) lead us to submit ourselves to ecclesiastical authority and engage in the superstitious rituals that constitute organized religion" (as quoted in Nadler 2007: 30).

The Buddhist perspective agrees with Hume's in designating hope and fear as fundamental to human experience. The *abhidharma* describes the human realm as one of six "realms of existence",[15] and the only one specifically characterised by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Ray (2000: 270) explains that "hope and fear play a central role in the psychology of the human realm: hope for further pleasure, possessions, and security, and fear of losing what we have and of experiencing greater suffering".

But Buddhism is far from alone in positing the hegemony of these twinned experiences in human affairs. Moses Mendelssohn (1983: 62) noted the dangers of employing them to motivate moral behaviour. Summarising Spinoza's views on the subject, Steven Nadler (2007: 30) notes, "Hope and fear, in particular, direct our behavior as we strive after the things we desire and flee those objects that we believe will bring us harm. These two passions and the subsidiary affects that they ground constitute the greatest natural obstacle to our freedom, well-being, and true happiness." Accordingly, Spinoza believed that abolishing the religious doctrine of the eternal soul would liberate us from hope and fear. "Only if one believes that, after bodily death, the soul survives in a robust and personal sense and that the self is the subject of a postmortem divine reward and punishment is one likely to be governed by hopes and fears over its eventual fate" (as quoted in Nadler 2007: 30).

For Spinoza, then, abandoning any pretence of certainty with respect to our fate after death was central to our personal evolution as rational beings. However, Spinoza was unable to resist transferring his own quest for certainty to another object: for him, there were "eternal aspects of the human mind" (Nadler 2007: 30). We can, therefore, avoid death through the intellect, rather than through a putative soul. "When a person dies," Nadler explains, "all those aspects of the mind that are dependent on the body's durational existence — its sensations, memories, imaginations, and so on — come to an end. The part of the mind constituted by the idea of the body's extended essence, however, persists eternally" (ibid.). Nadler is at pains to point out that this everlasting life is impersonal. "Spinoza's doctrine of the

eternity of the mind is not a doctrine of immortality", he cautions. "There is nothing personal about what remains of a person after death. It is not a self ... It is simply a body of ideas and knowledge" (2007: 31).

Whatever Spinoza's speculations regarding continuation after physical death, they would have served to mitigate any anxiety regarding complete annihilation. "The essence of the mind consists in knowledge", Nadler cites the philosopher as proclaiming (ibid.). Having devoted his life to philosophical labour, Spinoza might have drawn some comfort from the notion that "the human mind can be of such a nature that the part of it that we have shown to perish with the body is of no account compared with that part of it that survives" (ibid.).

This raises an interesting contrast between physical and conceptual realities. On the physical plane, we are haunted by "the impermanence of life and the ever-present possibility of death" (Ray 2000: 278). Concepts are more enduring. The physical brain will inevitably deteriorate, making clear thinking difficult or even impossible, but the idea itself can live eternally, unchanging. For those in search of certainty, this makes concepts an attractive alternative to experience.

Tibetan Buddhism offers the models of *trangdön* (literal meaning) and *ngedön* (actual meaning) to distinguish between conceptual and visceral understanding. Ray (2000: 363) explains: "Trangdön is like the *idea* of an ice-cream cone, while ngedön is the *actual experience* of eating that ice cream cone" (emphases original). Obviously, the experience is over in minutes, but one can mentally construct one's ideal ice-cream cone and maintain it for a lifetime. Loss of enjoyment in the actual experience is compensated by the endurance of the fantasy.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that in Western culture the mind (as synecdoche for concepts, ideas, and abstractions) routinely declares its triumph over the body. The mantra "mind over matter" is invoked in enterprises as disparate as dieting and surviving cancer. As Wilber (2000: 180) puts it, "[a]lmost every rational adult has a sense ... that the mind can, on a good day, control the body and its desires". Where little, if any, certainty can be found in the impermanence of material reality, the life of the mind flourishes independent of physical robustness (as in the case of the brilliant, prolific, and paralysed Stephen Hawking); or even, if Spinoza is to be invoked, independent of physical survival itself.

From a Buddhist perspective, the only certainty available to humanity lies in our present and direct experience. Trungpa (1973: 84) explains: "The philosophical or intellectual understanding of pain is not enough ... The only way to get to the heart of the matter is to actually experience it for yourself." The nature of experience, however, is fleeting, incommunicable,

and irreproducible. The certainty to be found here cannot be sustained or confirmed by an external authority. Not even consciousness can be counted on to provide a stable reference point. According to Trungpa (1992: 134-5), "complete consciousness" is a dynamic "play or ... dance". Ego's "one-track-mind consciousness", by contrast, reflects an impoverished attempt to solidify that which is by nature evanescent.

Its emphasis on the primacy of experience notwithstanding, Buddhist doctrine does reserve a place of honour for concepts. "Everything that we do, however simple and nonconceptual it may seem, always implies some kind of conceptual understanding", Ray (2000: 230) points out. This includes the study of Buddhism itself, for "the first step on the Buddhist path is hearing and learning the teachings", otherwise "we will simply fall back upon our preconceptions and patterns of habitual thought" (2000: 232-233).

This conceptual initiative is only a first step, however; in order to fully assimilate the content of Buddhist teachings, students must go on to contemplate them (i.e., compare them to their own experience) and finally, to meditate. At this third stage, "one looks directly at one's mind, one's experience, to see how and what it really is, apart from expectations, fear, and wishful thinking" (Ray 2000: 234). At this point, the student practises to release familiar reference points, abandon hope and fear, and enter the unknown territory of direct, unmediated experience. The culmination of this practice is "insight ... into the emptiness or illusoriness of self and of our habitual patterns" (Gimian 2005: xxvi) — what Trungpa calls *egolessness*.

Dying to the Self

It should be noted that neither Wilber nor Trungpa regards our reflexive attachment to recognisable reference points as pathological or regressive; rather, it is understood as a necessary stage in spiritual and psychological growth. For Trungpa, "you begin with the dirty work, but that in itself becomes a stepping stone". He explains that beginning at the level of transcendence makes the student reluctant to take the necessary plunge into the depths of unattractive habitual patterns. Thus, "starting from the bottom, the whole structure is fundamentally sound" (1978: 100).

Wilber (2001: 132) uses the metaphor of a ladder, on which the early stages of the journey are, again, not only inevitable, but indispensable.[16] "Just as you must have words before you can have sentences, and you must have sentences before you can have paragraphs, so these basic holons build upon and incorporate their predecessors ... the higher rungs rest on the lower" (2001: 129).

At each rung of Wilber's ladder, the previous subject transforms into an

object. "*The 'I' of one stage becomes a 'me' at the next*" (Wilber 2000: 34; emphasis original). Further, "you get a different type of *self-identity*" (Wilber 2001: 132; emphasis original). Expanding one's awareness by proceeding to the next rung means that the climber "has to step off its present rung, or dis-identify with it ... and then *identify* with the next-higher rung" (2001: 134; emphasis original). "Essentially, this means that consciousness abandons its exclusive identity with the lower structure — *it 'dies' to it* ... by *accepting the death* of the lower-level, it *transcends* that level" (Wilber 1980: 110; emphases original).

Thus, Wilber's evolutionary journey, in terms of both psychology and spirituality,[17] consists in a series of existential surrenders. Each such "death" is painful, frightening, and reflexively resisted. As in Trungpa's (1978: 50) model, where "the basic notion of ego is ... trying to maintain oneself as 'I am'" , the loss of identification with an imagined, solid self is experienced as a threat to survival itself.

Another way to describe the process of dis-identification with ego is as a progressive relinquishing of certainties. From an *abhidharma* perspective, the most fundamental certainty we wish to maintain is that of our unitary, independent existence; but this certainty cannot be established because the supposition on which it is based is fundamentally in error. In my reading of both Trungpa and Wilber, it is precisely because the quest for certainty is intrinsically doomed that no personal evolution is possible except to the extent that such a quest is abandoned.

Wilber (2001: 142) likens the ultimate transcendence to free fall. "As Zen would say," he proposes, "you're at the top of a hundred-foot pole, and yet you must take one more step. How do you step off a hundred-foot pole? You take that step, and where are you?" The answer is that

> you are no longer "in here" looking at the world "out there." You are not looking at the Kosmos, you are the Kosmos.[18] The universe of One Taste[19] announces itself, bright and obvious, radiant and clear, with nothing outside, nothing inside, an unending gesture of great perfection, spontaneously accomplished. (ibid.)

And yet "it is all the most ordinary thing in the world, and so you think nothing of it" (ibid.).

Perhaps this is because, as Trungpa (1978: 87) puts it, "the discovery of wisdom has nothing to do with the centralized quality of ego. It is not actually a discovery at all because *you* cannot see that you are discovering. You become part of wisdom" (emphasis original). Trungpa adds a mystical dimension to this realisation: "While drinking your cup of tea, you might

discover that you are drinking tea in a vacuum ... So while doing any ordinary thing, that reference point might bring an experience of non-reference point" (2009: 74).

This raises the interesting possibility that the quest for certainty might itself lead to the realisation of uncertainty. Be that as it may, both Trungpa's and Wilber's versions of transcendence invoke a state of consciousness in which certainty is no longer relevant. Both ultimately envision the possibility of existence free of solid reference points, leaving nothing to hope for or to fear.

Notes

1 Chögyam Trungpa was a lineage holder in the Kagyü and Nyingma schools of Tibetan Buddhism.
2 *Rinpoche* ("precious jewel") is an honorific title accorded to *tulkus*, or ostensibly reincarnated teachers. Chögyam Trungpa is believed to have been the Eleventh Trungpa Tulku.
3 Mandivenga is quoting Freud in *The Future of an Illusion* (1962: 11-12).
4 Interestingly, Hawking does not question the existence of a divine entity — at least, not in this instance. He does, however, conflate the "triumph of human reason" with Godhood, echoing the understanding of God as the perfection of human faculties.
5 The *abhidharma* is one of the so-called "three baskets" of teachings attributed to Gautama Buddha, circa 5th century BCE. The *abhidharma* teachings detail the Buddhist view of the development of ego.
6 These are Trungpa's names for the five *skandhas*. Ray (2000: 373) translates the third as simply "Perception" and the fourth as "Karmic formations".
7 It should be noted that Wilber (2000: 226, n. 10) explicitly rejects the *abhidharma's* construction of selfhood.
8 Segal is quoting Lévi-Strauss from *Myth and Meaning* (1978: 16).
9 *Samsara* is translated literally as "cyclic existence" (Ray 2000: 18). It refers to the phenomenal world as perceived by ego.
10 Curiously, McFadden goes on to contend that "strictly speaking, there are no mystics among the Buddhists since they do not acknowledge an Absolute". I would argue that here McFadden has confused the pre- and trans-egoic stages of consciousness, as in Wilber's construction (1980: 50).
11 "He" it seems God must be, for until quite recently in human history, it has been almost exclusively a male prerogative to pronounce on the nature of a supreme being. The overwhelming preponderance of masculine forenames in the historical literature of religious studies speaks for itself. In adding gender to the qualities projected onto the divine being, this phenomenon could be understood as supporting the contention that the God of the monotheistic and monistic traditions is a projection of his worshippers.
12 Benjamin Franklin in a letter to Jean-Baptist Leroy, 1789, reprinted in *The Works of Dr. Benjamin Franklin* (1818).
13 Marvin Gaye, from the lyrics to "Trouble Man," released by Tamla Records on 21 November 1972.

14 Wilber describes his evolutionary levels of consciousness, especially the early ones, in the language of individual physiological, psychological, and cognitive development. Nonetheless, he offers parallels for all of them in various spiritual systems. The typhonic self, for example, is an analogue of the three lower chakras (Yoga psychology), the *malkuth* and *yesod* (Kabbalah), and so forth. These parallels suggest that the lower levels of consciousness are not confined to literal infancy, but also reflect undeveloped capacities in people of all ages. Wilber (2001: 141) reinforces this notion in his description of the consequences of dissociation at any level of consciousness: "By the time the self reaches adulthood, it might have lost 40 percent of its potential, as split-off or dissociated little selves ... [which] tend to remain at the level of development that they had when they were split off."

15 Ray notes that "[w]hile affirming their objective reality, [Trungpa] tended to present [the realms] to his students primarily as states of mind that human beings can experience and that predominate in different kinds of people" (2000: 261).

16 Wilber is at pains to correct the misconception that his model is linear, however. He describes his "ladder" as "one slice of that concentric pie" comprising "nested spheres, with each higher level transcending and including its predecessor". This construction is central to Wilber's "*actualization holarchy*, each stage of which *unfolds* and then *enfolds* its predecessors in a nested fashion" (Wilber 2001: 128; emphases original).

17 Wilber's model may also be applied to social and cultural evolutionary trajectories, exploration of which lies beyond the scope of this paper.

18 Wilber uses the Greek word for "whole" to describe an ultimate, all-inclusive reality.

19 "One taste" is Wilber's synonym for unitary consciousness. He describes the experience of one taste as follows: "[T]he real world is given to you *once*, immediately ... it is not severed into seer and seen, subject and object" (2001: 207; emphasis original).

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