

Transformation of Consciousness: Becoming Prayer

By Mary Rees

I am sitting in the middle of a difficult experience—between two impossible circumstances, beyond any hope of resolving issues myself. At some points I'm burning in anger or puffing up and righteous. At other points I'm collapsing into inconsolable grief.

Every cell in my body is passing through the same range of experience, from rigid contractions to puddles of uselessness.

Even the environment mirrors my struggle. Cold Canadian fronts are clashing with warm moist air from the Gulf. The wind is blowing fiercely from multiple directions, temperatures are shifting, trees are bending one way and then the other. Clouds race and swirl.

The sensations come to focus in my belly as fear and dread. Doing all there really is to do, I let myself open mentally and physically to the whole of the turbulence, surrendering to what is. Looking up, I see that, of course, despite these strong currents, the billowing dark and white clouds, the sky remains blue, its clarity apparent through all else.

But something else catches my attention—large birds, hawks, to keep from being battered by competing forces are cruising with wings held still, spiraling higher and higher within the updrafts created by the colliding fronts. They are not struggling, not avoiding, not escaping or collapsing, not even just coping, but are instead delighting in the experience!

The tension in my body releases; fear and dread, the angst in my belly, turn to joy. In the midst of distress, actually in openness to it, in this present moment, anxiety becomes exhilaration. I am free.

This experience of freedom is simple yet deeply profound. It is a living example of opportunity that may be available to us at any moment, the space from which a wise and compassionate heart can naturally arise. Learning to intentionally take small turns, to make small surrenders without compromising personal integrity, is the way to transform consciousness, to come to realize what is true and real, to live every moment as prayer.

Transformational experiences are always at hand, requiring only a reorientation, a surrendering of ego control and solid sense of self in any moment. We let go, without collapsing. We learn to hold the discomfort of even small and immediate losses. Though the initial experience of holding and surrender may feel like suffering as the ordinary mind struggles for resolution, the ability to hold experience and not allow the ego to preemptively dissipate the discomfort results in not only the ending of suffering but also the arising of vitality, joy, and greater freedom to love!

These are moments of realization, of enlightenment, of knowing, and of being the kingdom now. Though we cannot produce unitive experience or mystical states on command, we can intentionally foster circumstances that open us to contact with gifts of grace and to a great unity that already exists. We do this through our choices, in even simple daily occurrences and in momentary events. We learn to create a holding for all our experience rather than escaping. We learn to be fully present to what is—surrendering to life just as it is.

It is actually easiest to make this transformation in our most difficult situations, when the only thing we can do is surrender. Through challenging or desperate circumstances, we can come to understand how to release our own agendas and our own viewpoints or positions in even the most ordinary daily events, making surrender a way of life.

About Consciousness

Transforming consciousness may seem difficult to talk about, but it really is not if we accept the limitations of the medium of language. Language can only point to the truth of our experience; words and concepts do not become the truth. The only truth we can touch is what we know in this moment through our current experience, not what we have been told or what we have read about.

The experience we open to is the knowing that arises beyond (above or beneath) our gift of language, through our direct experience as an organism, from sensations or qualities arising from within our immediate experience, information that we encounter through all our senses, including mind. We could name this heart-mind or *citta*. *Citta* is a Pali word for mind (*chitta* in Sanskrit) that is much more encompassing than what we generally think of as mind. It includes body, mind, heart, and consciousness; sensations, thoughts, emotions, feeling tones, processes and also spaciousness or emptiness, the context from which everything arises.

Everything separated from direct experience is conceptual. A primary task of spiritual growth is to mature into trusting an expanded understanding and experience of mind or of consciousness, something we can quite readily do through physicality, through phenomenological investigations.

In working with mind, it is helpful to think of consciousness as having two primary aspects—remembering that ultimately consciousness cannot be separated into parts. Traditional ways of thinking of the delineation are described by pairs of terms such as *conditioned-unconditioned*, *relative-real*, *conventional-ultimate*, *dependent origination-emptiness*, *branches-vine*, *ego mind-God mind*, and *ordinary mind-ground consciousness*. I will use primarily *ordinary mind-ground consciousness*.

A few of many other names specifically referring to ground consciousness yet not having identical meaning are *fullness*, *emptiness*, *potentiality*, *silence*, *stillness*, *deathless*, *void*, *mystery*, or even *God* (if not a false image of God and if not limited to or less than immediate experience). Ground consciousness is really all-inclusive.) It does not refer to something like a bottom line, but to a multi-dimensional field that has a quality of aliveness or vibrancy and vitality. Nothing is separate from it; all arises within it. Ordinary mind, on the other hand, is

part of and emanates from within ground consciousness, and could also be thought of as *ego*, *ego-mind*, *personality*, or *linear mind*. It may appear constant, but is actually in continuous flux and flow within ground consciousness.

So consciousness is much bigger than what we normally think of as mind, including all our experience and concepts. Mind includes all sensual consciousness, direct experience from all sense doors including the mind, but is not limited to these. The self-knowledge that Christian mystics speak of includes all aspects of consciousness, both sides of these two ways to view mind—including all our limitations and our vastness.

In these discussions and in experiential investigations of transformational process, it is important not to demonize the ego or the ordinary mind, or isolate it as separate. The ego has been extremely helpful in getting us through life to this point. It is what we use to make sense of our worldly experience within a space-time continuum. More important, this personality is a great gift, the rare human opportunity to flourish into fullness, potentially manifesting the deepest reality in ordinary life.

In knowing the heart-mind, we come to a direct experience of the fullness, breadth, and depth of consciousness, particularly the lack of substantiality of existence, as we understand it. We look closely at mind, finding that what we ordinarily think of as mind is ego or linear mind and that experientially we can find more inclusive and more profound aspects of consciousness. The experience of mind or consciousness as basically insubstantial is consonant with current scientific knowledge that the smallest particles of matter are apparently not findable.

Scientific investigations are also showing that mind and body are not separate.¹ This is especially important for our discussion here, since I am proposing the possibility of the body's being the locus of spiritual practice.

In freeing the mind, we intercede in the ordinary mind's processes releasing ourselves from hindrances and from suffering. In the last ten or fifteen years we have found that the brain can restructure itself. This restructuring can be done intentionally through volitional interventions and through meditation or prayer that incorporates body, mind, and heart. The process of restructuring the mind through meditation skills is not passive but dynamic and receptive.

When knowing the mind and freeing it do not come

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easily, we can turn to specific tools for dealing with especially difficult or stubborn qualities of mind. Through use of such tools we can actually reshape human consciousness, shaping the mind.

Primary Tools

The primary tools for coming to a transformed consciousness are knowing, freeing, and shaping the mind.

- 1) First we must come to know the mind, especially coming to awareness of insubstantiality of existence as we understand it. We go through a process of deconstructing ordinary, misguided mind, which takes itself too seriously, and
- 2) open to deeper and broader understanding, thus freeing mind. Finally we employ tools for molding and refining human consciousness, thus shaping the ordinary mind.

Knowing the Mind

The most direct way of transforming our consciousness is simply to recognize and experience the breadth and depth of consciousness, to become experientially familiar with what the mind is in all its manifestations and its potential. We come to experiential understanding of the all-inclusive nature of consciousness by first becoming familiar with the body and developing intimacy with all its experiences. Through this sensual awareness, we can actually come to direct knowledge of the most sophisticated philosophical and theological teachings. By simply becoming directly aware of our own experience we discover freedom, not as an idea but as a felt experience. We discover freedom to see through the illusion of things. We might even use the experience of reading this article as an opportunity and challenge to investigate our own experience.

Consider a little experiment: After reading this paragraph, close your eyes and bring attention to the experience of being a body from the inside. Explore various parts of the body, scanning it, noticing where there are

contractions, where muscles are relaxed. Then turn your attention particularly to the hands, noticing whatever sensations there are in your hands. With your eyes still closed, notice if you can feel a clear line separating hands from the surrounding air.

This exercise is uncomplicated yet potentially quite powerful. You may not be used to scanning the body; in fact, we have often been discouraged from paying attention to our bodies at all. But no matter what your level of body awareness, it is unlikely that you could find a clear separation between your hands and the surrounding air. Trying to feel a separation is like trying to find the boundary lines of states or countries that we see on maps as opposed to our experience of the actual physical places. The boundary lines on maps are useful for designating entities, but they aren't ultimately true. We can see the separation between our hands and the air, but generally we can't feel it, because the lack of separation may be more real than the separation our mind believes to be true.

The body and the space around it aren't totally separate. Remembering that the smallest particles are unfindable and that atoms and molecules are mostly empty space, do you find it logical that the separation between hands and space is not a clear, sharp line—and that it may be possible that no line exists at all?

Further, by closing our eyes, as we often do in prayer or meditation, we close off the visual clues that separate us into apparently disconnected, self-sustaining entities. We find that our experience is in constant flow. We may also find that the pervasive stillness, potentiality, and spaciousness that we experience in this silence are more real and more reliable than the sense of entity that we have learned, through the interaction of brain, senses, and the environment, to take ourselves and the world to be.

ORDINARY MIND

What we usually think of as mind is the ordinary mind.

Ayya Khema, a respected and articulate Buddhist nun, describes ordinary mind quite simply and clearly:

When we sit down to meditate, we are trying to transcend our everyday consciousness: the consciousness used to transact ordinary business, the one used in the world's marketplace as we go shopping, bring up our children, work in an office or in our business, clean the house, check our bank statements, and all the rest of daily living. That kind of consciousness is known to everyone and without it we can't function. It is our survival consciousness and we need it for that...our everyday consciousness is neither unique nor profound, it's just utilitarian. (p. 15)

She says that this kind of consciousness is not deep enough to reach the breadth of who we are, to get to the most profound truths. But we can get to deeper consciousness through meditation. "Meditation is therefore a means, and not an end in itself. It is a means to change the mind's capacity in such a way that we can perceive entirely different realities from the ones we are used to" (p. 15).

Through practices of meditation, particularly mindfulness and insight meditation, this description of ordinary mind will expand to include ordinary consciousness of all the sense doors. The sense doors include information from the sense organs, including automatic or functional thinking, feeling tones, and qualities of mind. As we explore these multiple aspects of ordinary consciousness and go through a deconstructive process in our understanding of their substantiality, the ground consciousness can shine through. Wisdom and insight become possible.

BASIC MEDITATION PRACTICES: INSIGHT AND MINDFULNESS

Insight and mindfulness include practices for coming to different ways of knowing and to greater consciousness or awareness through direct contact with current experience, unmediated by language or concepts. These experiences and ways of knowing are grounded in physicality. We begin, with eyes closed and in a still, stable posture. After settling into the experience of just being a body and being aware of being a body, we turn attention to the breath. We let the breath become our primary meditation object but remain open to all bodily experience, neither shutting out any events, nor striving to be in touch with them.. After

stabilizing attention at an anchor point in the breath, we bring bare attention, just being present to what is, without overlay of concepts, to information at each of the sense doors (all usual senses as well as mind). We also become attentive to experience in any physical activity, beginning with walking and eventually including all movement.

In stillness, we may then become aware of the mind's processes and its more subtle qualities such as tightness or looseness, grasping for objects arising through the various sense doors, aversion to these objects and experience, or even ignorance of or blindness toward them. We may notice as well pervasive qualities of mind and the changing nature of all experience. We can play with our quality of attention and with our choice of objects of attention. We become aware of experiences from sense doors with increasing clarity noticing experiences well after they have arisen, as they are arising, or just as they are getting ready to arise.

All this is a kind of coming to know the mind and also becomes a process that challenges who we think we are. We begin to recognize our component parts, our automatic responses our incessant thinking, our memories, and our hidden emotions. This process prepares us to open to what is more true: our connectedness, the web of life, what doesn't change, and what is lasting—the greater mind or ground consciousness that includes all of our experience.

To experience this greater mind, the ground consciousness, we can do a figure ground shift with our attention. Instead of focusing on the various objects in our experience, we attend to the space around and containing them, to the ground or field from which everything arises, the ground consciousness. In doing this, we may lose any sense of separation; we may feel one with vast consciousness. As well as being in space, the objects are part of space—not separate from the ground consciousness, but manifestations of it—so again, in using language, we are creating a dichotomy that does not in truth exist. We can think of the objects as waves in the ocean, or as particles or waves in physics, arising from and within the implicit order of matter and energy.

GROUND CONSCIOUSNESS AS CLARITY AND KNOWING

Coming to recognize ground consciousness is a foundational experience of most spiritual practices. Ground

consciousness is constant, yet it also includes change, manifesting constantly in various forms. It contains everything and is everything. All phenomena arise from within it.

The Dalai Lama describes what I am calling ground consciousness as follows:

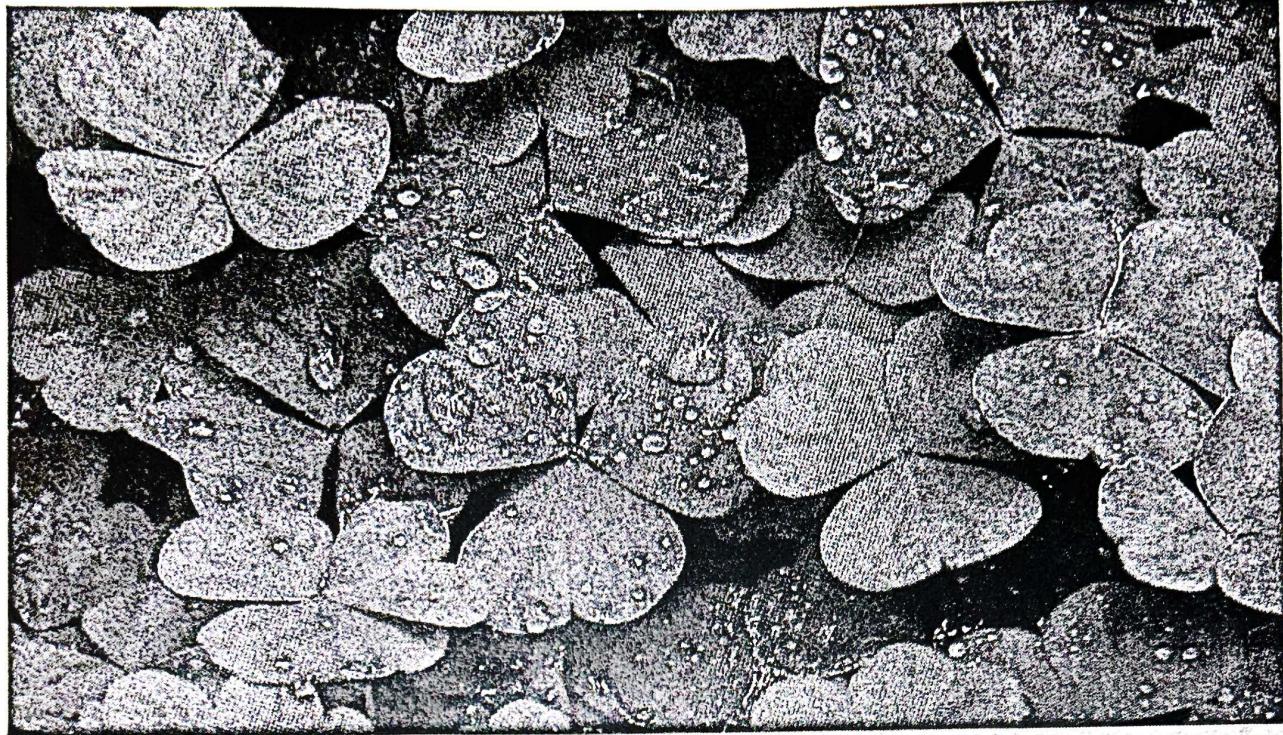
With persistent practice, consciousness may eventually be perceived or felt as an entity of mere luminosity and knowing, to which anything is capable of appearing and which, when appropriate conditions arise, can be generated in the image of whatsoever object. As long as the mind does not encounter the external circumstance of conceptuality, it will abide empty without anything appearing in it, like clear water. Its very entity is that of mere experience. Let the mind flow of its own accord without conceptual overlay. Let the mind rest in its natural state, and observe it...in time the mind appears like clear water. (p. 77)

We can think of ground consciousness as clarity and knowing. The clarity aspect we can reach through meditative practices of concentration, focusing closely on one object—the breath, a word, a chant, or a visual image. These concentration practices still the mind through their use as an alternative focus, bringing us to rest, to stopping, to relief, to freedom, to spaciousness and clarity, to "luminosity and knowing."

The breath is especially valuable as a concentration tool for several reasons. It is easily accessible and can be used at any time in any circumstance. The breath has spiritual connotations in virtually every tradition yet can remain content neutral. Most importantly, attention to the breath centers concentration in the body creating the possibility of coming into direct contact with experience. In fact, through attention to breath we can facilitate awareness emanating from the body itself, proprioceptive knowing.

Breath as a meditation object is even more important in working with knowing, the second aspect of ground consciousness. Knowing is equally as important as the clarity aspect of consciousness, but it is predicated on clarity (and also not really separate from it). We come to knowing, to insight, through observing our experiences—at first as object and then from the subjective mode, from within experiences. Observing objectively from outside the experiences, we let go of identification with our ordinary experience of self, our embeddedness in events and our automatic responses. Having thus moved to a space of relative detachment, we are able to participate subjectively, consciously observing from within the experiences. In the process we come to know ourselves as breath as we observe the breath; we are the body as we notice its experiences. We relate to our physical experience from the inside, not as bystanders (though the bystander role is a natural step in the process), not by visualizing or seeing it, but by consciously being the experience and holding it in the spaciousness of emptiness or clarity of consciousness. Objects become flows, or dynamism, that are not separate from, but one with experience. Breath has an added benefit in this exploration because

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of its fluid nature, because of its lack of permanence and its simultaneous reliability or constancy. As with life and life experiences we can influence the breath but not completely control it. It repeatedly arises and passes away.

Because the foundation is clarity and spaciousness, there is possibility for flow within the ground consciousness. Change is possible. Without this spaciousness, there would be only one object, no separation, no flow, and no potentiality.

The ground consciousness is also not void, as in neutral or indifferent. It can be depicted as the source, the base of any wholesome quality of mind. In fact, there are Buddhist scriptures that delineate the natural arising of these wholesome qualities that occur as we surrender and break through spirals of illusion.

When we do this, when we simply stop, when we drop compulsive thought, wholesome qualities arise in predictable sequence—first faith, then joy, to even greater qualities of sublime contentment, including compassion. Every time we have such a release to freedom, faith deepens, supporting further our ability to stay with our future experience and be transformed by the process.

Often, experiencing clarity is enough. However, clarity does not always spontaneously occur, and it is not a one-time event. This sudden path, this rotation in perspective, must be chosen again and again. The ability to do so is a capability that is developed in meditation practice.

Freeing the Mind

It is possible to be oriented more toward ground consciousness than toward the ordinary mind. To be so, we have to separate some from the ego, or ordinary mind, disentangling ourselves from it; once we have done that, we can help ordinary mind evolve and manifest our greater fullness and depth. The ego is not as important as it takes itself to be, but its power can stand in the way of our wholeness, freedom, and joy. It is its nature to get anxious when we begin to be free and fuller.

Anxiety is the natural response of the ego in opening to the greater experience of what it is to be a human being. This ego response often feels like fear. If we can learn to be open to the fear, not identifying it too closely with the experience as fear or suffering, we can move beyond its limitations.

Some practices that may free the mind are volitional intervention and dynamic receptivity. These are ways of creating without overtly acting, of letting skillful action arise by working with attention yet with little ego activity, by participating with the personality but not relying on ego intervention.

VOLITIONAL INTERVENTION

Volitional intervention is a direct way of freeing the mind by recognizing and dropping dysfunctional thinking. Labeling our experience as it arises may help us do



this—most simply, labeling *thinking* or *sensing*. Dropping dysfunctional thinking does not mean ignoring it or disassociating ourselves from it. In the long run, there is really not much chance of our doing that anyway, because what needs attention usually keeps demanding attention and if not recognized expresses itself in more and more persistent means. It is important not to ignore the experience or to respond reactively, but rather to address only what is demanding attention.

This type of intervention can occur at various levels. In listening prayer or in a formal meditation practice we can see very subtle experience arising, arisen, and passing away from any and all sense doors. In such formal practice, as opposed to the busyness and multiplicity of daily life, we have a greater opportunity to notice our automatic responses and intervene with our experience at discrete levels. In daily life, we may also notice these processes, but we usually notice them at a more gross level—as anger or jealousy, for example—when they are already fully arisen and operative.

A mnemonic device that I have found helpful with especially difficult experiences in both formal practice (while meditating) and informal practice (while participating in daily life) is *RAIN*.² The *R* in *RAIN* is a reminder to “recognize” what is happening in our experience. We can do this by naming or labeling it. We might also recognize our experience without labeling through the knowing that comes before conceptual thinking. However, the act of naming or conceptualizing allows disidentification with experience so that experience can be observed with objectivity.

The *A* is a reminder to “accept” the experience, rather than pushing it away, hanging on to it, or trying to make it different than it is. This does not mean that there is no place for action, but skillful action comes out of learning to hold the difficult experience and waiting until an appropriate response or action is apparent.

The *I* is a reminder to be “interested” in whatever is arising. Interest can have different degrees of intensity. I’m not suggesting interest at the level of investigation, though there is a place for investigation, even highly intense investigation. I think of intense investigation generally as the province of therapy rather than spiritual direction. It is important to learn to recognize the patterns that arise in our life experience and to break unhealthy bonds, to

recognize the ego dynamics, the early childhood patterns that structure our personality. However, at this point, we are considering the possibility of freedom from redundant, repetitive cycles. For this task, interest may be enough. “Oh, yes; there I go again, engaging in compulsive criticizing” or self-criticizing, or compulsive aversions, or whatever our compulsive patterns. We all have such unskillful patterns. They are where our personalities come from, the ego dynamics from which our personalities are structured. We can learn to recognize these patterns and choose not to be dominated by them.

Finally, we come to *N*. Often the most skillful thing to do is simply “not identify” with the experience. We are responsible for our behaviors, but we don’t have to own every thought or inclination that arises as defining who we are. We are much bigger than and much less than anything that arises, skillful or unskillful.

DYNAMIC RECEPTIVITY

A powerful way of practicing freedom is becoming a container for dichotomies. I think of this as a way that receptive prayer moves from being passive to being active. We choose dynamic receptivity.

Dichotomies might exist between two impossible circumstances or between how things are and how we would like them to be. By being aware of these opposing movements and holding them in our experience, by not running away from them, by not taking preemptive action, we can make space for insight to arise, for grace to manifest. Of course, we can’t control the outcome (the insight or the grace), but we can hold the space and create opportunity for new possibilities.

Life presents many opportunities to practice this holding because it involves so much that we cannot control (i.e., life itself is a koan). Holding dichotomies is a way of surrendering without shutting down or escaping. We make life a way to pray by staying in touch with the suffering (or the exhilaration) especially through body awareness, sense contact, the actual dichotomies – our intentions and whatever current reality is, but we let go of outcomes. We realize that the ego mind is not enough, that ego mind may even have brought us to this crossing. We hold the discomfort, letting it cook. The struggle may just burn away. Sometimes grace or insight arises. Sometimes miraculously so.