

European University Studies

Anthropology / Ethnology



Sonja Lenk

Consciousness in Oscillation

Worldviews and their Transcendence
as Spiritual Practice

Consciousness in Oscillation

Europäische Hochschulschriften

European University Studies

Publications Universitaires Européennes

Reihe XIX **Volkskunde / Ethnologie. Abteilung B:
Ethnologie**

Series XIX Anthropology/Ethnology. Section B:
Ethnology

Série XIX Anthropologie/Ethnologie. Section B:
ethnologie

Volume/Band **81**

Sonja Lenk

Consciousness in Oscillation

Worldviews and their Transcendence
as Spiritual Practice

Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

This book is a revised version of the thesis
'By being human: an anthropological inquiry
into the dimension and potential of human consciousness
in the context of spiritual practice', approved for the PhD degree
at the University of St Andrews, UK, 2009.

Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem,
säurefreiem Papier.

ISSN 0721-3549

ISBN 978-3-631-64275-7 (Print)

E-ISBN 978-3-653-03092-1 (E-Book)

DOI 10.3726/978-3-653-03092-1

© Peter Lang GmbH

Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

Frankfurt am Main 2013

All rights reserved.

Peter Lang Edition is an Imprint of Peter Lang GmbH.

Peter Lang – Frankfurt am Main · Bern · Bruxelles · New York ·
Oxford · Warszawa · Wien

All parts of this publication are protected by copyright. Any
utilisation outside the strict limits of the copyright law, without
the permission of the publisher, is forbidden and liable to
prosecution. This applies in particular to reproductions,
translations, microfilming, and storage and processing in
electronic retrieval systems.

www.peterlang.de

To my mother
Sigrid Ida Lenk

and
my daughter

Olive

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Nigel Rapport for an exceptional quality of supervision: his insightful, meticulous comments and revisions; the rare combination of clear structural and academic guidance with genuine openness to the messy, unsettling and chaotic realm of human existence as it was the subject matter of this research; and his steady, reliable presence throughout all stages of the thesis.

Further I would like to express my gratitude to Barbara Ann Brennan for allowing me so generously, and without restrictions, to carry out fieldwork at her School; to Laurie Keene for her authentic, sincere presence and her ability to listen without judgement; to all my fellow students at the Brennan School of Healing for their comradeship and open hearts, their courage to be truthful, and open-minded support of this research. In particular I would like to thank my main informants for sharing their life-stories with me in such depth, detail and honesty. Their trust and openness was a precious gift, for which I am deeply grateful.

In Heidelberg I would like to thank my friends Marcus Franke and Ralf Rehberger for stimulating anthropological discussions and their delightful sense of humour, helping me through the more tedious stages of this thesis.

Finally I want to thank my mother for her unconditional love and support, her dedication to my daughter Olive, and for believing in me when there really was no good reason for doing so. Without her, this work would have been impossible.

Table of Contents

Introduction	11
Background	11
The study of consciousness	16
The chapters	17
1 Fieldwork setting: the school, teachers, and students	21
1.1 The school.....	21
1.2 Barbara Brennan: her life and her work	31
1.3 The teachers.....	35
1.4 The students.....	39
1.5 Mondsee.....	50
2 Methodology	53
2.1 Research on consciousness: challenges and accomplishments	53
2.2 Methods and perspectives.....	57
2.3 Phenomenology: the study of subjective experience.....	59
2.4 What it is like to be: the practice of ‘becoming aware’ during fieldwork.....	63
2.5 Ethics	70
2.6 Informants.....	71
3 Existence, cosmology and understanding: on the complexity of a relationship with life	73
3.1 Cosmological systems and individual consciousness.....	77
3.2 Interdependency, reincarnation, core essence	79
3.3 The human energy field (HEF).....	84
4 Transformation and the process of embodied learning	91
4.1 Formal relationships	93
4.1.1 Teaching in practice	102
4.2 Informal relationships.....	106
4.2.1 Informal relationships back home	110
5 Belief system territories or the wiping of horizons	115
5.1 Fabrizio: constitutive questions and our orientation in moral space	116
5.2 Theresa: searching beneath the mask of perfection.....	124
6 Turning givenness into choice, while encountering our own hearts	131
6.1 Turning ‘givenness into choice’: the birth and death of a baby	133
6.2 Analysis	138
6.3 Hannah.....	149
7 A Critique.....	151

8	Conclusion.....	155
8.1	Essence, oneness and the question of ontology	155
8.2	Consciousness and the body	160
8.3	Consciousness beyond the body	161
	Epilogue	163
	Appendix	167
	Bibliography	173

Introduction

Background

The origin of this research is based on an encounter with Buddhist culture in Thailand and its particular understanding of the human potential embodied in the person of the Buddha. The very first encounter was in 1990, which aroused a strong curiosity and a wish to know more about this particular belief system. The Buddhist way of conceiving the human being and its potential was strikingly different to any Western European understanding I had ever come across, most certainly in terms of religious culture where the contrast between the symbol of Jesus being nailed to the cross and the Buddha sitting in the lotus position, serenely smiling was indeed perplexing. From this first encounter followed frequent journeys to South-East Asia, in particular Thailand and Laos, over the next twelve years, and an engagement with Buddhist scriptures.

The story of the Buddha was that he had been a man, a human being, not a god, or son of a god, or any other kind of deity, who had by his own powers gained deep insight into the human condition and the inevitable nature of suffering connected with it. The philosophy he developed from his insights is based on the so-called 'Four Noble Truths': 1) Life is suffering; 2) There are discernable causes for suffering, namely craving and attachment; 3) The cessation of suffering is possible; 4) The actual cure for suffering: The Noble Eightfold Path, or Middle Way. The good news from the Buddha's teaching was that 'enlightenment' - reaching the end of suffering - is possible for everyone. It is considered part of the human potential and is referred to as 'Buddha-nature'¹. The possibly not-so-good news was that everyone needs to do the work by themselves: there is no saviour, no God or deity that can do it for us. And the path towards 'enlightenment' is considered a long and hazardous one. Nevertheless, the human being, in fact every sentient being, has the inherent potential to reach enlightenment due to their own powers and therefore is conceptualised in a strikingly different way to the Christian Tradition and the idea of 'original sin' where we can only be forgiven for what and who we are.

1 The Sanskrit term for Buddha-nature is *tathagata-garbha*, which translates something like 'embryonic perfect one' or 'matrix of the perfect one', indicating that however defiled or defiled human beings are, they can mature into Buddhas. There are two different ways of conceiving this Buddha-nature: one model regards it as something pure that has been polluted and the path as a developmental process of purification from defilements; the other one states that Buddhahood is always already fully present in each being and only needs to be recognised. See for example Lopez, D.S. (ed): *Buddhism in Practice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995.

This encounter with Buddhist culture opened up questions and possibilities about the human potential, consciousness, transformation and existential power in a way that had seemed inconceivable to me before. In a way it started, to borrow a phrase, ‘A Search for the Good after Auschwitz’²: after having been used to rather gloomy accounts of the human being and its potential for hatred, ‘sin’ and destruction it was inspiring to hear and see something more optimistic that balanced the picture. When coming across the *Barbara Brennan School of Healing* several years later this curiosity about the human potential was reinforced. The School, which might be classified as a spiritual educational institution, had a similar understanding about the human being and the possibility of transforming the self such as to allow human flourishing and ‘enlightenment’. Being human in the eyes of the School was not conceptualised as a fixed set of socio-cultural complexities and determinants but by an endless potential for growth, creativity, the capacity to love. And it was also about learning to become fully responsible for one’s own life and happiness. The human being was seen as essentially and inherently ‘good’, regardless and despite the fact that the socio-cultural history in Europe, or probably the world for that matter, indicated something quite different. This ‘innate goodness’ was referred to as our ‘essence’ and was very similar to the idea of ‘Buddha-nature’. Again, though, as in the Buddhist philosophy, the emphasis was on the individual and its inherent existential power to transform and transcend limitations or delusions: everyone was considered to have the innate potential for enlightenment and happiness, but everyone also had to do the work themselves, according to their own wishes and determination. Although the School was talking about a ‘benign’ universe, as will be discussed in the Chapter on cosmology, here too was no saviour in the sense of an almighty God. It was much more about learning to trust one’s own inner authority and truth and claiming the life one was longing to live.

Drawn by the idea of ‘self-transformation’ as offered by the School, I enrolled as a student in September 2003 when the European branch opened in Mondsee, without any idea of doing research. The latter only occurred to me half way through the first year. This meant that I was a student first before also taking on a role as researcher, a point I believe was crucial for the nature of the research as will be discussed in the chapter on methodology. The guiding question was the human potential in terms of transformation, transcendence and ‘enlightenment’. After having looked at the dark side of the human potential for

2 Jonas, H.: *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, Evanston III: Northwestern University Press, 1996. Although the original title of the paper is “Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz” – “The concept of God after Auschwitz” which was not my interest at all, the English translation exactly matches my query at the time.

hatred, and cruelty, the focus of curiosity was now on this ‘other part’, the potential for ‘oneness’, or ‘love’ as encountered in the idea of ‘Buddha-nature’ as well as the School’s philosophy. The particular interest was how individuals transcend limiting personal, social and cultural circumstances, step into their existential power and become what Nietzsche called ‘the poet of one’s life’. As Rapport writes:

I want to elucidate an existential power that individuals possess over and against an impersonal, social-structural or institutional power that I feel schools of social science have had a tendency almost exclusively to focus upon. This leads me to consider who or what determines the lives individuals lead...The hypothesis offered [...] is that individuals who see their life in terms of pursuit of a certain life-project, who see the meaning of their lives significantly in terms of the achievement of a particular goal or goals, can succeed in giving their actions a certain robustness, power and independence such that they escape the influence of external forces and of other individuals who might have wished to have directed them in other ways.³

The ‘life-project’ of the individuals portrayed in this research is self-transformation: that is, transcending the self that was moulded according to circumstances and learn to claim their existential power in order to create a life true to their own heart, or ‘essence’ as the School referred to it.

It is important to note that the Brennan School is only one organisation in a sea of spiritual traditions and establishments classified under terms like mind-body-spirit, esoteric teachings, New Age, shamanism or holism to name but a few. It is by no means unique in that sense. It has developed its own teaching style, language and ‘classification system’ for example regarding the so-called ‘Human-Energy-Consciousness-System’ but on the whole the concepts used, e.g. the idea of reincarnation, a conscious universe, oneness etc., can be found across many spiritual traditions and contemporary schools. There have been a variety of interesting anthropological studies on other spiritual communities or practices: for example Sutcliffe on the Findhorn community in northern Scotland, Heelas on New Age movements in Britain, Prince and Riches on Glastonbury, Csordas on the Catholic Pentecostals community the US, and Luhrman on ritual magic and ‘New Age’ in Britain, and Evangelists in the US.⁴

3 Rapport, N.: *I am Dynamite. An Alternative Anthropology of Power*, London: Routledge 2003; p.5

4 Sutcliffe, S.: *Children of the New Age. A history of Spiritual Practices*, London: Routledge 2003; Heelas, P.: *The New Age Movement. The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1996; Prince, R. & Riches, D.: *The New Age in Glastonbury. The Construction of a Religious Movement*, New York & Oxford: Berghahn 2000; Csordas, T.: *The Sacred Self. A Cultural Phenomenology of charismatic Healing*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1994;

Modern spirituality, as it might be called, has been an emerging trend in Western society concerned with personal wellbeing and quality of life, offering both a philosophy of life and a wide variety of therapeutic practices.⁵ In *The Spiritual Revolution*, an anthropological study about spirituality in Britain and the US, Heelas and Woodhead are looking at the claim of a spiritual revolution happening within Western popular culture, in particular in relation to a perceived decline of religion and religious institutions. Their conclusion is that there has indeed been a significant turn towards spirituality, albeit not in the sense that would make it possible to speak of a 'revolution'.⁶ This turn towards spirituality Heelas et. al., refer to as a 'subjective turn', thereby leaning on Charles Taylor's statement about a 'massive subjective turn of modern culture'.⁷ The subjective turn is: "a turn away from life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties, obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to ones' own subjective experiences".⁸ While religion is often associated with a certain dogma, duty, sacrificing, discipline and external authority (e.g., God), spirituality is more concerned with the inner state of an individual: states and stages of consciousness, feelings, passions, longings and sentiments, including moral sentiments like compassion. "The subjective turn", Heelas et al explain, "is thus a turn away from 'life-as' (life lived as a dutiful wife, father, husband, strong leader, self-made man etc.) to 'subjective-life' (life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation)."⁹ The source of authority is the self, truth and meaning need to be found within, rather than being something external. The key value for subjective life is authentic connection with the self, while the key value for the mode of 'life-as' is conformity to external authority.¹⁰

Luhrman, T.: *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft. Ritual Magic in Contemporary Healing*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press 1989.

- 5 For a conglomerate of New Age philosophy and ideas see e.g. Berg, M.C.: "New age advise: ticket to happiness?"; in: *Journal of Happiness Studies*, Springer Netherlands, online, Vol 9 (2008); p. 361-77.
- 6 Heelas, P. & Woodhead, L.: *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is giving Way to Spirituality*, Malden, Mass.: Blackwell 2005; p.67.
- 7 Taylor, C.: *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989; p. 25ff.
- 8 Heelas & Woodhead 2005, p. 2f.
- 9 Ibid, p. 3.
- 10 See also Sutcliffe 2003. In his research Sutcliffe also found people engaged in spiritual practice clearly seeing themselves as spiritual people, not having anything to do with religion. The latter, so Sutcliffe, "was associated with ideas like 'the system', 'dogma', 'organised belief', and 'narrow' outlooks, whereas spirituality was linked to 'living experience' and to 'open', 'inner', 'inclusive', and 'natural' discourse; p. 214f.

The Brennan School was basically teaching about the ‘subjective life’: a life lived in congruence with the soul’s longing and by doing so, according to the School, releasing the vast innate creative potential which otherwise would be blocked or at least limited. This attitude might sound rather selfish or even ego-centric, and I think that at least in the beginning of the transformation process there was indeed a lot of this going on, an aspect I will discuss in more detail in the conclusion. But it also had an ethical dimension: the underlying belief was that once you allowed yourself to be fulfilled by living your soul’s longing, you were much less likely to create or co-create conflict. The idea was once your heart and mind were at peace you were likely to be in peace with the people and the world around you.

One interesting aspect Heelas encountered throughout his many years of research within the spiritual movement and which coincided with my own findings, was the distinct lack of *intellectual* engagement with spiritual concepts and teachings. Writes Heelas:

From the point of view of the New Ager, the academic frame of inquiry – with the importance attached to intellectually-informed distinctions and other modes of analysis – is likely to be seen as doing more harm than good. The objection, quite simply, is that the ‘ego-operations’ of the academic cannot do justice to what the New Age is all about – the wisdom of the experiential.¹¹

This is an intriguing feature of modern spirituality where the focus is on inner experience and the process of embodiment of spiritual laws rather than intellectual discussion or philosophical debates of concepts. Luhrmann makes a similar point in *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*. Her informants, whom she describes as “sophisticated, educated people”, are more interested in “spiritual experience rather than... theory-laden science”¹². From my observations at the Brennan School the students did not quarrel with the philosophical background of the School’s teachings: transcendent concepts like essence, oneness or interdependency were more or less taken at face value, bearing in mind that these were simply names to define what could only be understood through experience. People were aware that there was an abundance of spiritual teachings out there, may be using a different language but ultimately very similar concepts. I rarely encounter students who engaged in debates regarding the truth of oneness or interdependency as such. The same attitude I encountered in Findhorn, a spiritual community in the north of Scotland, where I was living for five years. There too, the emphasis was on experience, not thought, let alone ‘logical’ thought. My impression at the Brennan School was that people took from the philosophical

11 Heelas 1996; p. 9.

12 Luhrmann 1989, p.10.

teachings whatever they felt to be most true or seemed most meaningful for themselves. This doesn't mean that for example the idea of oneness was never questioned but it clearly wasn't a major concern for most people whether or not it could be empirically proven. Critical engagement with concept was minimal and at the Brennan School for example concentrated much more on administrative issues, modes of teaching, e.g. whether or not a certain style of teaching was useful for the process of learning to embody these concepts, or money matters as the School was an expensive place to be.

The Brennan School conceived of itself as investigating and teaching about human consciousness, the so-called 'Human-Energy-Consciousness-System', and the related aspects of transformation and healing. In the context of spiritual practice consciousness and the development of consciousness is often linked to the ideas of 'transformation' and 'healing', and to what is considered as deeper insights into ultimate reality, gradually leading towards 'enlightenment'. Learning about this 'ultimate reality' and integrating it into one's quotidian existence was a vital aspect of the learning process at the School. Consciousness as understood by the School was the coming together of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual capacities of the individual, and in this togetherness, the reaching of a level that transcends and stretches beyond the single capacities. It did not refer to some particular kind of mental faculty only but embraced the whole individual and its position in the world and the universe. So in the context of spiritual practice ideas of consciousness evolve mainly around the interrelated facets of transformation, healing and worldview, and consequently are the aspects of consciousness this research is focusing on.

The study of consciousness

Our consciousness discloses the world to us. Through our consciousness we experience both the world around us - our natural, cultural and social environment - and ourselves, our own subjectivity and sense of individual uniqueness. Our consciousness contains our feelings, thoughts, touches, smells and sights. It defines our awareness and perception, our personal experiences and ground of being. Consciousness is at once intensely individual and private and at the same time an aspect of, and in fact essentially conditioned by, larger socio-cultural processes of the environment we grow up and live in. Despite its personal character it is very much a cultural phenomenon: our dominant worldviews inform and structure our awareness and perceptions, and through this the way we experience the world.

Due to its essentially private and elusive nature studies on human consciousness have been widely ignored in human science until the beginning of the Nineties, largely due to methodological difficulties. Recently though, research

into consciousness, including the question what actually *is* consciousness, has become very prominent in subject areas as different as neuroscience, quantum physics, psychology, psychobiology, anthropology or philosophy, the latter of course being the subject which has traditionally dealt with the mind and consciousness. In Anthropology in particular, the study of consciousness was until recently neglected. Much of the anthropological research that was undertaken centred on so-called altered states of consciousness like trance possession, psychedelics, or other paranormal phenomena. In this present research the focus is on consciousness as it manifests in everyday life: as it finds expression in the individual's mental and emotional life and how it unfolds in the individual's social relations. The aspect of consciousness as focused on in this study relates to the individual's growing awareness of personal, social and cultural belief patterns about what it means to be human – the personal as well as cultural world-views - and their gradual transcendence. A leading question throughout the thesis is concerning the relationship between cosmology and the experience of life, how they mutually influence each other and what happens in the process of transformation when both are challenged.

The chapters

The fieldwork over a period of 20 months, carried out at the European branch of the *Barbara Brennan School of Healing* was an in-depth phenomenological study of individuals who consciously follow what might be called a 'spiritual path' and the challenges they face in trying to implement this knowledge in practice, or to *embody* it.

In the first chapter the structure and purpose of this School, its founder, teachers and students will be introduced.

The second chapter is concerned with methodology. In order to gain a deeper understanding of consciousness, which after all is an essentially subjective phenomenon, it was important to employ a research method which addressed and acknowledged this 'indefinable' and 'elusive' dimension. This meant: using an epistemology that was radically empirical and phenomenological, including subjective experience as primary data and addressing the 'totality of human experience' as opposed to only discussing experience approved by scientific laws; to recognize the presence of the researcher's consciousness as inescapable, and intimately connected with the process and outcome of the research, thereby using subjective experience as a tool for deeper understanding, rather than as something that needed to be eliminated from the research proc-

ess¹³. In undertaking the training at the school myself, that is using the method of ‘observant participation’ rather than ‘participant observation’, I was hoping to gain this ‘deeper understanding’, at least more so than I would have been able to by restricting the research to purely cognitive processes, e.g. being the detached observer. In this vein, the approach aimed to do justice to the complexity of lived experience.

Chapter 3 addresses the concept of worldviews and their impact on the life of the individual – the impact of cosmological systems on individual consciousness. It discusses the idea of existential frameworks as ontological necessity, as ‘inescapable’, to use an expression of Charles Taylor. It introduces the School’s particular cosmology and belief system and the idea of shifting or transforming worldviews as spiritual practice.

Chapter 4 discusses important theoretical concepts that were used at the School as well as the way these were combined with practical experience, forming the structural boundaries of the students’ particular transformational processes. The process of learning to embody spiritual teachings and concepts will be looked at within the particular teaching style and language of the School. The focus is on the student community, both on a formal level as peers and informal level as friends outside the School structure, followed by a brief discussion regarding relationships between students and their social relations back home.

Chapter 5 explores the question of human goodness as it is understood and worked with at School. This belief in an innate goodness was – I think - the bedrock of the School’s philosophy or belief system. It will be examined through the narratives of two of my main informants: how this belief has impacted on, or changed their lives. The focus is on two of the concepts used at the School and how my informants were working with them in order to shift their previous beliefs.

Chapter 6 describes the birth and death of my friend’s baby and the way she was dealing with the pain of this loss, using the skills she had learned during her

13 Harman, W.: “Towards a Science of Consciousness: Do We Need a New Epistemology?”; in: Lorimer, D.: *Thinking Beyond the Brain. A Wider Science of Consciousness*, Edinburgh: Medical and Scientific Network 2001; p.23-33; Cohen, A.: *Self-Consciousness. An Alternative Anthropology of Identity*, London: Routledge 1994; Cohen, A. & Rapport, N.: *Questions of Consciousness*, London: Routledge 1995; Kohn, T.: “She came out of the field and into my home. Reflections, dreams, and a search for consciousness in anthropological method”; in: Cohen & Rapport 1995, p. 41-59; Watson, C.W.: “The Novelist’s Consciousness”; in: Cohen & Rapport 1995, p. 77-98; Rapport, N.: *Transcendent Individual. Towards a Literary and Liberal Anthropology*, London: Routledge 1997.