

- Jordan, J. V., Kaplan, A. G., Miller, J. B., Stiver, I. P., & Surrey, J. L. (Eds.). (1991). *Women's growth in connection: Writings from the Stone Center*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- McNiff, S. (1998). *Art-based research*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley.
- Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Sarbin, T. R. (Ed.). (1986). *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. New York: Praeger.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1960). *Process and reality: An essay in cosmology*. New York: MacMillan. (Original work published 1929)

Author's Note

Sharon Hoffman, Ph.D. is a storiographer, photographer, and first time filmmaker of *On Bodies*, a documentary that gives voice to women about body image. She also teaches Couples Communication at Kaiser Permanente. Her interests include collaborative models of personal storytelling through creative arts and media; and applications in film, television, and community. Her goal is to transform the way we interact with each other by creating deeper understanding and awakening compassion. Sharon Hoffman can be reached at P.O. Box 410711, San Francisco, CA 94141-0711. Email: sharon@livingstories.com Website: www.livingstories.com.

The Union of Flesh and Spirit in Women Mystics

Institute of Transpersonal Psychology
Vipassana Esbjörn-Hargens

ABSTRACT: This study¹ explores the experience of the body for contemporary female mystics. It is an exploration in how women mystics of today—those who have devoted most of their lifetime to prayer, meditation, and spiritual service—make sense of the body. What is the relationship between spirit and body, God and flesh, for such women? Is it a relationship of tension or even opposition, and how does it evolve over time? These are some of the questions that guided my investigation. The impulse to understand how the body is experienced and understood by such women was felt by me as both a longing to challenge, deepen, and refine my awareness and understanding of spirit and the body, specifically for women mystics. I also felt this as a burning in the heart, an urgent desire to connect and bridge the larger world of matter and that of spirit, to inquire into that dimension where flesh and spirit are not two, but one. I believe that this impulse to understand the relationship between body and spirit is both personal and quite possibly collective. My hope is that this research will serve as one step to further our collective understanding of human embodiment.

My vehicle for this exploration was a qualitative research method developed by Rosemarie Anderson (1998,

¹ This report is based upon dissertation research (Esbjörn, 2003) supervised by Rosemarie Anderson, Paul Roy, and Kaisa Puhakka.

2000, 2004) called intuitive inquiry. Intuitive inquiry is a method of research that invites the researcher to explore a chosen topic, often one that has personal meaning, through entering into several cycles of interpretation or engagement with texts that are relevant to the topic of inquiry. As I wove my way through literature on the body—Continental philosophy to poststructuralism, Christian mysticism to Vajrayana Buddhism, feminist theology to conscious embodiment, my own views on the body expanded, deconstructed, and continually became more nuanced. Through this research process I entered into a hermeneutic dialogue with the mystics and scholars who have for centuries reflected on human corporeality.

Literature Review

Since at least as early as Plato in the 5th Century B.C., Western philosophy has long grappled with the tenuous mind-body relationship, a dialogue that is intertwined within the tendrils of Christian theology. In the seventeenth century Descartes' legacy of the body as separate from and inferior to the mind was birthed, one that epitomized Western Cartesian positivism and shapes views of the body for the next 300 years. Friedrich Nietzsche (1885/1982) presented a radical challenge to the ideas that Descartes had put forth. Nietzsche instead suggests that knowledge is borne from corporeal reality. He proposes the radical notion that knowledge springs forth from our fleshly existence.

Other essential philosophers who helped shape our current understandings about the body are Edmund Husserl (1913/1962), Martin Heidegger (1962), and most notably, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962). It was Husserl who first constructed the presentation of *Leib*, the lived-body, and posed it as an alternative and in opposition to *Körper*, the purely physical body. A student of Husserl, Heidegger argues that it is not possible to separate the mind from the body. Heidegger's position is that the world, including our bodies, is a product of our mind and mental projections. In

Being and Time, Heidegger (1962) attempts to shift the phenomenological approach to the body that Husserl presented into an ontology that is concerned with *being* in the world. An important contemporary figure who elaborates on the work of Heidegger is David Levin (1999) who explores the constituents that make up *Dasein*, most notably the "seasons" of embodiment.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) expands upon the later work of Husserl, while drawing on aspects of Heidegger's presentation of being-in-the-world, to form his notion of *flesh*. We know the body through reason and cognition. Reason is not disembodied; it is an outgrowth of our embodied experience. Therefore, consciousness is always married to blood and bones, the lived reality of tissue and flesh. Expounding his theory of the lived body, Merleau-Ponty suggests,

Consciousness is being towards the thing through the intermediary of the body. A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its "world", and to move one's body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it independently of any representation. Motility, then, is not, as it were, a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand. (as cited in Welton, 1999, pp. 154-55)

To Merleau-Ponty, the notion of flesh is understood as an element, such as earth, fire, water, or air. Flesh is the root, the principal, the *general* through which the *particular* springs forth. Merleau-Ponty's elaborations on flesh describe a non dual perspective on body and spirit that privileges neither, but instead mixes being with flesh in a matrix that is both subject and object.

Growing out of Merleau-Ponty's work are contemporary thinkers such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson

(1999) who write extensively about "embodied flesh." Lakoff and Johnson expand upon latent ideas within Merleau-Ponty's work that speak to an emphasis on language. Challenging the traditional view of metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson suggest that it is through our embodied experience that we form metaphors—up, down, high, low—and that how we interact with the world then arises out of these metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson claim: "Reason and conceptual structure are shaped by our bodies, brains, and modes of functioning in the world. Reason and concepts are therefore not transcendent, that is, not utterly independent of the body" (p. 128). From this perspective, one could say that language grows out of the body, given that metaphor is the substratum between body and reason. This is an inverted perspective from that of the postmodernists who argue that the body is a text that requires interpretation. For Lakoff and Johnson, as was the case for Merleau-Ponty, the body is foundational.

Our notions about the body are also religiously and culturally informed. Christianity reminds us that "we are indeed made in the image and likeness of God, a likeness most perfectly manifested in the humanity of Christ" (Milos, 1993, p. 194). At the same time, it is widely recognized that a spirit-flesh dualism has long permeated the Christian culture, particularly where sexuality, and often where women (who are likened to flesh, while men are associated with spirit) are concerned. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel (1986) reminds us that "Augustine put this very aptly: for him emotionalism is flesh, rationality spirit; woman is the embodiment of the spirit, and the relationship between the two reflects the Christian world order" (p. 85). Christian perspectives that critique the spirit-flesh dualism embedded in Christianity and aim to recognize our fleshly embodiment arise from a number of often overlapping fields—body, sexual, feminist, ecofeminist, and incarnational theologies; Creation spirituality; Pauline theology; and Christology (e.g., Chavez-Garcia & Helminiak, 1985;

Donnelly, 1982; Fox, 1983, 1999; Haughton, 1969, 1981; McFague, 1987, 1993; Milos, 1993; Moltmann-Wendel, 1986, 1994; Nelson, 1978, 1995; Ruether, 1993; Robinson, 1952).

Examining the Buddhist Pali texts, the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha*, Kathryn Blackstone (1998) illustrates how deeply imbedded in ancient Buddhist scripture is the belief in transcending or denying the flesh. She explains: "the body poses a powerful obstacle for those seeking the Buddhist goal of liberation from all ties, from a delusory perception of permanence and stability, and above all, from a false conception of self as real and abiding in any tangible sense" (pp. 59-60). Throughout these texts the "foul" body is described as a heap of blood, flesh, bones, and pus. It is said to be impure, stinking of urine, and food for worms and vultures. This starkly contrasts with writings that celebrate our human enfleshment, like those found in Christian body theology (Nelson, 1978, 1995), women's spirituality (e.g., Noble, 1991; Tomm, 1995), and Buddhist and Hindu schools of Tantra (e.g., Feuerstein, 1998; Shaw, 1994). Miranda Shaw's (1994) extensive research on women in Tantric Buddhism illustrates an example of a full-bodied celebration of God through blood, bones, and flesh. Shaw especially articulates the necessity of bridging the split between soul and body, and argues that Tantric Buddhism addresses these issues successfully.

Method

Intuitive inquiry was developed by Rosemarie Anderson (1998) initially as a qualitative research method especially intended for the study of transformative experiences. Since the time she first envisioned and articulated intuitive inquiry, Anderson (2000) has revised and refined the method to include a systematic process of interpretation that is informed largely by hermeneutics. Further refinements to intuitive inquiry are found in the Introduction to the issue of the *Humanistic Psychologist* that includes this article

(Anderson, 2004). Providing a context for our discussion involving hermeneutics, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (1991) outline the evolution of hermeneutics:

The term *hermeneutics* originally referred to the discipline of interpreting ancient texts, but it has been extended to denote the entire phenomenon of interpretation, understood as *enactment* or *bringing forth* of meaning from a background of understanding. In general, Continental philosophers, even when they explicitly contest many of the assumptions underlying hermeneutics, have continued to produce detailed discussions that show how knowledge depends on being in a world that is inseparable from our bodies, our language, and our social history—in short, from our *embodiment*. (p. 149)

Varela et al. (1991) describe the recursive hermeneutical circle as an open-ended inquiry that takes place in the context of our embodiment and cultural embeddedness. In his book, *The Body in the Mind*, Mark Johnson (1987) also stresses the importance of meaning as a fluid “event of understanding” (p. 175). Johnson suggests that meaning is only fixed in that “fixed meanings are merely sedimented or stabilized structures that emerge as recurring patterns in our understanding” (p. 175). The recursive hermeneutical circle is in a constant state of flux; it is an event of understanding taking place between subject and object, in the context of body, culture, language, and history. It is useful to consider intuitive inquiry as a research method that aims to know meaning as a changing event of understanding, rather than a fixed and solid reality.

Cycle 1: Clarifying the Research Topic

I began this research process with a general topic in mind: spirit and the body. To hone and clarify my research topic, I

began to work with two texts that repeatedly drew me. First, I worked with a text called *Chöd* by Machig Labdrön (Edou, 1996) daily, for 14 days. During that period, each day I spent 30 minutes reading the text aloud, noting thoughts, images, associations, beliefs, feelings, and sensations that arose within me. I recorded them in a notebook. Through the practice of engaging with this particular text I primarily became aware of the importance of, and my belief in, transcendence from the body as an important aspect of spiritual development.

During this first cycle, I also worked with a portion of a poem by William Everson (1978), one that highlighted a different aspect of embodiment. I recorded myself reading Everson's words, and then alternated between reading the poem, and listening to the poem daily, for 14 days. In addition to all the variety of types of responses (thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc.) outlined with the previous text, during this stage I especially became aware of sensual and sexual feelings that arose with the readings. These were usually intertwined with what might be called a holy or sublime longing, an ache that was sometimes felt in my heart, and in other moments experienced throughout my entire body. All of these responses were recorded in a notebook. After I completed working with these two texts, my research topic was clarified in a broad sense. It involved spirit and the body, transcendence and embodiment, sexuality, and women. I was then ready to move into the second cycle of interpretation.

Cycle 2: Developing the Preliminary Lenses

During Cycle 2 of interpretation, I worked with two additional texts. This cycle lasted six weeks. First, for one month I worked with excerpts from a book by the contemporary mystic, dancer, and teacher of Authentic movement, Janet Adler (1995). Daily, I engaged Adler's text in a similar fashion as in Cycle 1. I documented my responses in a notebook. I then worked for 14 days with a Sufi song per-

formed by a female artist Zuleikha (Undated), the lyrics of which came originally from a poem by the Sufi woman mystic, Rabia. This stage included 30-minute sessions over 14 days. Each session consisted of engaging the music—the text—through listening to the song, singing, prayer, and movement. During and after each session, I recorded my responses in a notebook. Throughout Cycle 1, my primary intention was to clarify my research topic, while in Cycle 2, I began to look for emerging themes, values, assumptions—all of which would eventually become my preliminary lenses.

The next phase, generating my preliminary lenses, occurred over the next three months. During the first month of this three month period, I spent one full day immersing myself in the various notes I had taken thus far, including my notes from both Cycles 1 and 2. On this particular day, I sat on the floor of my office loft and spread my notes around me in a circle on the floor. I then read out loud everything I had written, to get a sense of the whole picture up until this point. After spending a few hours engaging the notes I had made to myself, I was ready to generate a preliminary list of lenses about my understanding of this whole vast area we call *body*. This included my thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, assumptions, and ideas about the body. I then worked with this list over another few hours, omitting repetitive ideas, looking for themes, and refining my words. This whole process was done quickly as it seemed important at this early stage of the research to not edit myself too closely, nor get tight in my thinking. While I wanted to refine my ideas, I also wanted to continue to expand them. In working rapidly, I had a better chance of accessing my unconscious, rather than merely my conscious mind.

The following is a list of initial lenses that arose out of this second cycle of interpretation:

1. Inquiring into the tension between spirit and the body enlivens one's felt sense of living as a body.

2. Transcendence or disidentification from one's body (or the realization of the body as impermanent) can produce the experience of freedom and liberation.
3. I am not the body.
4. The body is impermanent; form, flesh is temporal.
5. Spirit, that which animates our fleshly form, is eternal; this awareness or spirit exists after death.
6. Spirit transcends flesh, meaning spirit encompasses flesh.
7. Part of being human includes fear of the death of this physical form, the body.
8. There is a felt sense that at times awareness expands beyond the boundaries of my body, though it includes my body.
9. Sometimes it feels like spirit, or awareness, is located outside my body, usually behind my head.
10. It is useful (as a spiritual practice) to contemplate death, the eventual end of our physical form; evolution of consciousness includes facing our mortality.
11. Energy animates our physical body.
12. Physical sensations of energy bring up a fear response (kundalini rising).
13. Energy that animates the body is benign and even has healing capacities.
14. Sexuality is body bound.
15. Transcendence is preferred over the body realm.

16. Women are more embodied than men.

Once my initial lenses were generated, I was ready to begin Cycle 3 of the intuitive inquiry research.

Cycle 3: Collecting Data and Preparing Summary Reports

The participants for my study were 12 contemporary female spiritual leaders, teachers, and healers who are viewed by their communities as such. The women who participated in the study represent mystical traditions and spiritual paths that include Christianity, Sufism, Tibetan Buddhism, African Spirituality, Yoga, Indian Tantra, Authentic Movement, and Diamond Logos. All of the participants live in Northern California. Their ages range from 40 to 76. One participant is Chinese-American, one is African-American, and the others are European-American. Pseudonyms are used to identify all participants in this article.

With each participant I conducted an in-depth semi-structured interview that ranged from 50 minutes to 3 hours. The interview process spanned over a six-month period. I tape-recorded all interviews. My interview questions were as follows:

1. As a woman deeply embedded in the spiritual life, could you talk about how you experience and give meaning to your body?
2. Is there a tradition that informs your perspective? How so?
3. How has your experience of sexuality transformed, if at all, throughout your spiritual life?
4. Has your physical body changed as you have developed or awakened spiritually? How so?

5. Do you experience your sense of 'I' or self as having a location, a reference point in or including your body?
6. Could you talk about your relationship to death and the body?

Because the interviews were semi-structured in nature and they varied in length, I chose to create a portrait of each woman by editing down the original interview for greater clarity, precision, grammatical accuracy, and sense of flow. The interpretation began, therefore, through the process of deciding what to include and what to leave out from the original transcript. In addition to sending each participant a copy of the entire transcribed interview, I then later sent an edited transcript for review along with a letter. In this letter I asked participants to make changes, omissions, additions, or clarifications to the edited transcript.

Cycle 4: Transforming and Refining Lenses

The process of identifying Cycle 4 lenses was both long and immediate. As intuitive inquiry recommends, while I worked with the transcripts over the course of one year I noted significant themes, insights, intuitions, dreams, and especially sympathetic resonance with the text. This was the long part of the research process. It was as if over the course of this year I was noting all sorts of various themes and insights, but keeping at bay or postponing formulating any conclusions. I wanted to allow the themes to gestate in me at an unconscious or semi-conscious level for as long as possible, until I was ready to bring my analytical mind into the process. It was not until I began to draft the discussion chapter that my final lenses came into being. When I finally sat down to tackle this task, I found that the lenses in many ways were already living in me. The task at this point was more a matter of languaging what I had been discovering over the course of my engagement with the text, as opposed to creating or generating lenses that were altogether new or

unformulated. I spent about one weekend articulating my final lenses, which emerged from me with relative fluidity. Generally speaking, I have found that my lenses—my understanding of the topic—have changed significantly, sometimes modestly, and sometimes dramatically, since my first articulation of the lenses in Cycle 2.

The ways in which my new understandings (Cycle 4 lenses) are in relationship to my initial ones (Cycle 2 lenses) could be understood as falling into three categories: *new*, *change*, and *seed lenses*. First, certain present understandings or lenses appear to be entirely new, not directly in relationship to any of my specific earlier intuitions or assumptions. At least on a conscious level, I had not anticipated these findings during Cycles 1 and 2. As these insights began to emerge, it often felt like the trickster (Anderson, 2000) was at play with me—catching me off guard, confusing me at times, and presenting to me surprising and unexpected results. I am calling these interpretations *new lenses*. Second, there are those lenses that came into being through earlier assumptions and understandings being challenged, changed, or transformed throughout the duration of the study. In these cases, there is a direct relationship between certain lenses in Cycle 2 and those found in Cycle 4—a progression or change can be seen in my thinking. In many ways, it was in these instances that I grew the most, because as my assumptions and beliefs were being challenged and changed, I was transforming through the process. I am calling these interpretations *change lenses*. Third, there are those lenses that seem to have their seeds embedded in an earlier lens, or combination of a few lenses. Then through a process of being stretched, expanded, combined, and deepened, those earlier intuitions or rudimentary understandings came into a full, nuanced expression in Cycle 4, one that might be traced back to earlier seeds from Cycle 2. I am calling these interpretations *seed lenses*.

A summary of Cycle 4 lenses, in relationship to each of the three categories previously outlined, is as follows:

Table 1. Cycle 4 Lenses

New Lenses: Tricksters and Surprise Bring Unexpected Understandings

1. (a) Childhood experiences, from visions to trauma, serve as a catalyst for spiritual sensitivity in the body.
2. (b) The body serves as a barometer, where intuition becomes physicalized.
3. (c) Transformation of the body occurs on a cellular level.
4. (d) Being embodied is a choiceful act.

Change Lenses: Challenged Assumptions Result in a Changed Perspective

1. Central Interpretation: Women who have devoted their lives to God, to a path of spiritual inquiry, tend to go through a process of disidentification and re-identification with the body, taking place over and over again, deepening throughout one's lifetime.
2. (e) Sexuality is integral to embodiment.
3. (f) Bringing spirit into matter is purposeful.

Seed Lenses: Refined and Nuanced Understandings

1. (g) Spiritual maturation includes an energetic awakening of the body.
2. (h) Boundaries—between you and me, world and self—are experienced as permeable.
3. (i) Self reference, or awareness of 'I,' is fluid and flexible and is not fixed in the body.

Table 1. Continued

4. (j) The contemplation of death brings into focus the immediacy of life.
5. (k) Women are teachers of conscious embodiment.
6. (l) Inquiring into the relationship between body and spirit deepens and enlivens one's experience of living as a body.

A further explanation of these research findings is available in Esbjörn (2003).

Example of a New Lens: Transformation of the Body Occurs on a Cellular Level

For the purpose of this article, it is not possible to elaborate on the evolution of each of the various lenses. The following is an example that illustrates a discussion on one of the 13 Cycle 4 lenses, a *new lens*.

What exactly it means to transform on a cellular level I am still discovering. What is clear though, is that an energetic transformation that is felt to have physical components—a cellular transformation—does seem to accompany the awakening process for most women in this study. For several women this process was described as a movement from density to light or spaciousness. This cellular transformation often is felt as a release of blockages in the body, or energies being released in the body. This process sometimes unfolds with ease, yet in other instances it is described as a difficult and often harsh process, especially where the immune and nervous system are concerned. There appear to be a variety of types of changes that occur at a cellular level, some more dramatic and others more subtle. Some participants described looking younger or simply different as they went through such a transformation. For others, changes may be less apparent to the outside observer as they are oc-

curing at a subtle or energetic level, with little or no external correlates.

In this study, Arline described how blockages that were previously interfering with intelligence pouring through her body began to dissolve: "Feeling cellular experiences. Having memories flood up, or feelings of rightness and normality in the particular area. This was information and intelligence that was blocked to me before." Rose reflected, too, on the ways in which the body opens and relaxes. She said, "Somebody recently said to me, you just keep getting younger every year. I think there is something of the relaxation, of the not taking on an image of aging. I think it's that aliveness that begins to enter the body, to stay in the body, and it becomes magnetic not from youth but from consciousness." Yeshe echoed this when she said, "I believe that in spiritual development there's actually a transformation that happens in the body, in terms of the whole cellular structure; and in the subtle body, the whole system of subtle channels and chakras." Yeshe elaborated on how this happens:

The integration of emptiness into the body is actually a whole process. It's hard to kind of remember and put it in perspective, when you've been doing intense spiritual practice a long time. I realize that it's been like that for me for so long, that I don't even think about it, that is: thinking of my body *as* light, experiencing it as light and space, rather than as a dense kind of form.

As a Tibetan Buddhist, Yeshe did a traditional 3-year retreat and she commented on how that impacted her on a body level. Yeshe used words such as "reborn" and "glowing" and "lighter" to describe how her body changed throughout the extended period of meditation.

Reflecting on her body at the completion of the 3-year Tibetan retreat, Yeshe reported, "My body felt like I was 3 years old again. I could run like I was 3 years old again.

Literally, my body felt—now I didn't notice any of this until I was out of the retreat—my body felt very, very different than it had, much lighter. It actually felt glowing." Changes in the body such as the experience of light opening up in the body was a common description among the women in this study, as a way of pointing to how awakening takes place on a cellular level.

For several women in the study, cellular transformation initially happened in a dramatic and difficult fashion. Cara described how an enormous amount of energy opened her and that as a result of this extreme shift in consciousness, her body and nervous system was "fairly destroyed." She said, "Given that I was unprepared for the opening and the immensity of the energy that was set loose in my organism, it fairly destroyed my body, my nervous system, as well as my organ energy." After this immense opening, Cara went through a very long healing journey. Anna described how it is the Mother, Divine spirit, who also performs the healing of the body on a cellular level. Anna articulated how this process occurs:

There is a cellular cleansing. It's a very palpable experience. It feels like a knitting between, an enmeshment, an intertwining between the etheric body, and when spirit finds that, it's a done deal. Because then the physical body can be healed, as well as the energy bodies. The cells start to wash and cleanse. You can feel proings. It's the energy of light literally probing through the brain, through the cellular structure, and the bones, muscles, organs—the flesh.

It is inspiring to consider the healing that is possible if only, as Anna suggests, we open to the Divine and let her probe and cleanse our entire being which includes our bones, muscles, fleshy tissue, and even etheric or energy body. One way to think about transformation and healing on a cellular level—a process many of these women are proposing—is to

consider the implications of bringing presence into our bodies, enlightening our very cellular structure.

Challenges and Contributions of Intuitive Inquiry

After exploring this topic of spirit and flesh for over 3 years, with my vehicle for exploration being intuitive inquiry, I will now reflect further on the research method itself. First, intuitive inquiry is a participatory methodology that has the potential to transform the researcher, the reader, and the text. Second, it is a method that models a dialectic, which in turn, invites the researcher into this significant developmental achievement. That is, the researcher is asked to participate in a dialectical process that by its nature calls forth the ability to simultaneously hold within oneself two opposing forces. Third, I will reflect on the method's inevitable subjectivity, as potentially a limitation and a gift. Lastly, I will suggest that while the researcher, the reader, and the text are transforming through intuitive inquiry, so too, is the method.

Intuitive inquiry is a participatory methodology that has the potential to transform the researcher, the reader, and the text. In intuitive inquiry the researcher is in constant dialogue, mutual conversation with the text. This creates an inter-subjective space between the researcher and that which is being studied, the text. Therefore, there is the possibility for transformation of the researcher throughout this process in all the variety of ways I have discussed previously.

At times the hermeneutical circle of interpretation can be dizzying in that it constitutes an endless process of change for all subjects and objects involved in the encounter. While the researcher is being changed by the text she encounters, so too, is the reader of this article quite possibly being changed by the reading of *this* text. In an elaboration on mystical hermeneutics, Jeffrey Kripal (2001) outlines how an "invisible hermeneutical community" (p. 9) is made up of the mystic, the mystical experiences of the scholar studying the mystic, and the readers of the scholar's work.

In this intuitive inquiry, our hermeneutical community consists of our mystics, the contemporary women in this study; my hermeneutical-mystical experiences as researcher; and your hermeneutical responses to this text as reader.

Intuitive inquiry is participatory in that in addition to the possibility for the researcher and reader to be changed through this study, the text itself is also changing. One of the gifts of the postmodern movement is the notion that there is no single, objective text. The text only exists in relationship with the subject who is encountering the text. The Goethean scholar, Henri Bortoft (1996) explains this phenomenon: "We see that the phenomenon itself comes into a higher stage of manifestation in the very act of knowing, without it becoming, thereby, something which is only subjective" (p. 273). It is only from onlooker consciousness—the objective observer who is outside of the inter-subjective space—that one could argue that the text does not change along with us. Reflecting on Goethe's methodology of conscious participation in nature, Bortoft (1996) states, "Subject and object are born together, so that a change in the mode of one necessarily entails a change in the mode of the other" (p. 111). Intuitive inquiry is a participatory methodology in part because we bring ourselves as change instruments to the research process. The research of intuitive inquiry has the potential to change us as we are being used as instruments through which to study a phenomenon, and also we are the very instrument that transforms—as our senses do—through the interpretive process. In this way, intuitive inquiry has the potential to be a powerful spiritual practice.

If we consider the text in this hermeneutic intuitive inquiry to be sacred—the wisdom springing forth from the hearts of contemporary female mystics—the study of this text can be understood as a spiritual encounter or practice. This process could be likened to mystical hermeneutics whereby the scholar, the divine, and mystical text are co-arising. In his discussion on mystical hermeneutics, Kripal (2001) describes the scholarly study of sacred text as "a tri-

adic process of self, divine other, and text, none of which appear to exist in any independent objective fashion" (p. 7). It is useful to consider the ways in which intuitive inquiry as it is used in this study could be understood as both a triadic process between researcher, the divine other, and mystical text, as well as a dialectic one. If we understand a dialectic process in the Hegelian sense to be one of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, we might view Kripal's triadic notion of self, divine other, and text as each being a part of what constitutes a true dialectic. In other words, self is the thesis in which our claims are stated; the text is the antithesis by which our claims are challenged; and the divine other is where we unite with the text to create a synthesis which then becomes our new thesis, through which to engage the text anew. Therefore, like mystical hermeneutics, intuitive inquiry is both a triadic process of self, divine other, and sacred text, and a dialectic process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

Intuitive inquiry is a method that models a dialectic, which in turn, invites the researcher into the process of "holding" or entering into that dialectic. Psychotherapists might recognize here the transformational possibilities inherent in a process that invites the researcher to hold a dialectic, which by its nature requires one to resist the ever-so-common human tendency to "split" (between good and bad, love and hate, subject and object, spirit and flesh). Drawing on Hegel and Kojève, the psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden (1990) defines a dialectic:

A dialectic is a process in which each of two opposing concepts creates, informs, preserves, and negates the other, each standing in a dynamic (ever-changing) relationship with the other (Hegel, 1807; Kojève, 1934-1935). The dialectical process moves toward integration, but integration is never complete. Each integration creates a new dialectical opposition and a new dynamic tension. (p. 208)

If we assume, then, that part of the intuitive inquiry process for the researcher might include practice in holding a dialectic, what this also suggests is that by doing this, the researcher is strengthening her capacity for what Object Relationalists call a *whole object relationship* (Ogden, 1990; Winnicott, 1958/1992). For the purpose of this discussion, the aspect of a whole object relationship that is being considered here, is the capacity to tolerate opposing forces within oneself. A number of developmentalists point to this stage of being and knowing through a variety of names including Robert Kegan's (1994) *fourth order of consciousness*, Ken Wilber's (1995) *vision logic stage*, and Jean Gebser's (1985) *integral-aperspectival* stage of development. As these theorists suggest, it is no small developmental task to tolerate opposing forces within oneself. A far more primitive response to life—and what is commonly understood as *splitting* in the psychoanalytic literature (e.g., Ogden, 1990)—is one where we collapse into spirit or body, good or bad, love or hate, subject or object. Through engaging the intuitive inquiry research process, we are invited into the profound human possibility of not collapsing into subject or object, but instead living in the dynamic space that is the dance between the two.

Intuitive inquiry's inevitable subjectivity is both a limitation and a gift. Because I as the researcher can only see through that which is my life experience, which creates the initial lenses through which I view the data, I am limited in that I cannot see that which lies outside the parameters of my perception. Quite possibly, another person with a different set of lenses will come into contact with the data gathered and find entirely new interpretations. However, while this may be a limitation in the method, I also believe that virtually all modes of knowing are subjective. It is actually by acknowledging our embeddedness in the knower-known complex that more objectivity becomes available. The unique subjectivity the researcher brings to intuitive inquiry is both the gift and possibly the challenge of the method.

Subjectivity brings richness and dimension, but if unchecked, it could collapse into a form of solipsism or narcissism.

I propose that while the researcher is transforming, along with the reader and the text, so too, is the method itself. The very nature of intuitive inquiry includes an organic impulse toward change. This means that the method will always be transforming through the relationship with each researcher. It is not a static structure but a fluid one. Embedded in the method of intuitive inquiry is this dialectical dance, a reciprocal, spiraling process that changes the researcher and the method. Therefore, while there are objective aspects that we may point to in this method, in many ways intuitive inquiry as a research method will never be the same twice, for it is shaped each time by the researcher who is engaging the text anew, which in this case is also the method itself, intuitive inquiry.

References

- Adler, J. (1995). *Arching backward: The mystical initiation of a contemporary woman*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
- Anderson, R. (1998). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson, *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 69-94). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Anderson, R. (2000). Intuitive inquiry: Interpreting objective and subjective data. *ReVision: Journal of Consciousness and Transformation*, 22(4), 31-39.
- Anderson, R. (2004). Intuitive inquiry: An epistemology of the heart for scientific inquiry. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 32(4).
- Blackstone, K. (1998). *Women in the footsteps of the Buddha*. Surrey, Great Britain: Curzon Press.

- Bortoft, H. (1996). *Wholeness and nature: Goethe's way toward a science of conscious participation in nature*. New York: Lindisfarne Press.
- Chavez-Garcia, S. & Helminiak, D. (1985). Sexuality and spirituality: Friends not foes. *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 39, 151-163.
- Donnelly, D. H. (1982). The sexual mystic: Embodied spirituality. In M. E. Giles (Ed.), *The feminist mystic and other essays on women and spirituality* (pp. 120-141). New York: Crossroad.
- Edou, J. (1996). *Machig Labdrön and the foundations of chöd*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion.
- Esbjörn, V. C. (2003). Spirited flesh: An intuitive inquiry exploring the body in contemporary female mystics. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 64 (06), 2899B. (UMI No. 3095409)
- Everson, W. (1978). *The veritable years: 1949-1966*. Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press.
- Feuerstein, G. (1998). *Tantra: The path of ecstasy*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Fox, M. (1983). *Original blessing: A primer in creation spirituality*. Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Company.
- Fox, M. (1999). *Sins of the spirit, blessings of the flesh*. New York: Harmony Books.
- Gebser, J. (1985). *The ever-present origin*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Haighton, R. (1969). *Beginning life in Christ*. Westminster, MD: The Newman Press.
- Haighton, R. (1981). *The passionate God*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Husserl, E. (1962). *Ideas*. New York: Collier. (Original work published 1913)
- Johnson, M. (1987). *The body in the mind: The bodily basis of meaning, imagination, and reason*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kripal, J. J. (2001). *Roads of excess, palaces of wisdom: Eroticism and reflexivity in the study of mysticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy of the flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Levin, D. (1999). The ontological dimension of embodiment: Heidegger's thinking of being. In D. Welton (Ed.), *The body: Classic and contemporary readings* (pp. 122-149). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- McFague, S. (1987). *Models of God: Theology for an ecological, nuclear age*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- McFague, S. (1993). *The body of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). New York: Routledge.
- Milos, J. (1993). Rosemary Haughton on spirituality and sexuality. In M. Tilley & S. Ross (Eds.), *Broken and whole: Essays on religion and the body* (pp. 189-205). New York: Annual Publication of the College Theology Society.
- Moltmann-Wendel, E. (1986). *A land flowing with milk and honey: Perspectives on feminist theology*. New York: Crossroad.
- Moltmann-Wendel, E. (1994). Having broken camp, we're now on the open road. *Theology Today*, 51, 68-74.
- Nelson, J. (1978). *Embodiment: An approach to sexuality and Christian theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

- Nelson, J. (1995). On doing body theology. *Theology and Sexuality*, 2, 38-60.
- Nietzsche, F. (1982). Thus spoke Zarathustra. In W. Kaufmann (Ed. & Trans.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (pp. 103-442). New York: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1885)
- Noble, V. (1991). *Shakti woman-feeling our fire, healing our world: The new female shamanism*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Ogden, T. H. (1990). *The matrix of the mind: Object relations and the psychoanalytic dialogue*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Robinson, J. A. T. (1952). *The body: A study in Pauline theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Ruether, R. (1993). *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a feminist theology*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Shaw, M. (1994). *Passionate enlightenment: Women in tantric Buddhism*. Princeton, MA: Princeton University Press.
- Tomm, W. (1995). *Bodied mindfulness: Women's spirits, bodies, and places*. Waterloo, Ontario: Winfrid Laurier University Press.
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991). *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Welton, D. (Ed.). (1999). *The body: Classic and contemporary readings*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Wilber, K. (1995). *Sex, ecology, and spirituality*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1992). *Through paediatrics to psychoanalysis*. New York: Brunner-Routledge. (Original work published 1958)
- Zuleikha. (Undated). *Rabia's Song. On Robe of Love* [CD]. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

Author's Note

Vipassana Esbjörn-Hargens, Ph.D., is adjunct faculty at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, a psychological assistant in private practice, and a Hospice counselor. She is a Vajrayana Buddhist practitioner who researches the intersection of embodiment and transcendence, as well as the field of death and dying. Vipassana is a contributing author to *Radical Spirit: Spiritual Writings from the Voices of Tomorrow*, edited by Stephen Dinan; and has co-edited *The Simple Feeling of Being*, by Ken Wilber. Vipassana lives in the hills of Sebastopol, near the Northern California coast. She can be reached at vipassanaesbjorn@yahoo.com, or 817 Jonive Rd., Sebastopol, CA 95472.