



The SMN and the Alef Trust: Nurturing Paradigm Change through Online Learning

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From 19th November 2015 to 28th February 2016 the Wellcome Trust in London hosted 'Tibet's Secret Temple,' an exhibition which explored Tibetan Buddhist yogic and meditational practices and their connections to physical and mental wellbeing. As we perused the exquisite displays of scroll paintings, ritual artefacts and 17th century murals from the private meditation chamber of Tibet's Dalai Lamas in Lhasa's Lukhang Temple, we were struck by a short film, revealing the ancient secrets of *trul khor*, a series of yogic exercises, intended "to clear hindrances to the flow of energy and awareness and to expand the body and mind's capacity for unitary experience, or 'Great Perfection'" (Laird, in Garde & Baker, 2015). These exercises, concealed and preserved for an initiated few over most of their history, were here on public display for all to see.

We are living at a time of seismic shifts. Insights and practices associated with the world's wisdom traditions, long hidden and accessible only to a select group of disciples, are now widely available for us to explore. As the reach of the world wide web expands, websites and social media pages concerned with the proliferation of esoteric knowledge abound. Yet the discourse on many of these pages appears superficial or distorted, dislocating deep-rooted practices and reframing them in emaciated forms for contemporary purposes in education, health, economics, and politics. The spiritual supermarket booms, drawing upon profound teachings to offer solutions to personal and social quandaries. The dangers of spiritual materialism lurk in the virtual shadows of many online learning courses which focus on offering self-improvement programmes.

Yet when we come to reflect on the contemporary (online) proliferation of practices from the world's religions and indigenous traditions, not all paths lead to spiritual tourism and New Age pseudo science. In this age of information and online connectivity, new possibilities are emerging, combining spiritual practices with modern communication technologies for personal and societal good. Within the field of higher education we are experiencing, as Otto Scharmer (2014) puts it, "a profound moment of disruption" as online learning environments offer us ways to reshape and reinvent how university programmes operate. Constructive approaches for the future of education are exemplified by the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) concerning transformation in business, society and self, that have been developed by the *Presencing Institute* at MIT, of which Scharmer is founding Chair (<https://www.presencing.com>). Inspired by encounters with The Chinese Zen master Nan Huai-Chin and the late Francisco Varela, Scharmer and colleagues have forged a social and organisational change framework that projects principles of mindfulness and compassion in broader educational contexts.

Following considerable experience with online teaching at Liverpool John Moores University and many years at the forefront of international developments in transpersonal psychology, we wanted to move beyond the constraints imposed by the generally conservative frameworks that dominate in our universities. In 2012 we founded the *Alef Trust* (www.aleftrust.org), a not-for-profit enterprise which aims to provide educational and cultural programmes for personal and societal change that engage with both the frontiers of modern science and our rich spiritual heritage. Recognising the synergies between our vision and that of the SMN, we built—and continue to expand—links with the Network, for example enabling our students to work with the SMN archives. Operating through online learning environments, the Alef Trust provides frameworks for personal and professional development in postgraduate programmes combining consciousness studies, contemporary spirituality, and transpersonal psychology. In addition, the Alef Trust has a growing community of Open Learners, who can join many of the courses without working towards university accreditation.

A central thrust of the Alef Trust's educational approach is to nurture learning through multiple ways of knowing, embracing creative, spiritual and somatic practices alongside intellectual study. Exploring the ideas of writers, such as Leonard and Murphy (1995/2005), Ferrer (2003), and Wilber (e.g., Wilber, Patten, Leonard & Morelli, 2008), students have the opportunity to design their own programme of Integral Practice, establishing a schedule of practices intended to deepen awareness and exercise the full spectrum of the body-mind across physical, mental, emotional, interpersonal and spiritual domains of being. On their experiential journey with us students engage with live webinars and online forums, examining the underpinning frameworks of integral practice approaches, their origins, value, potential and pitfalls. Working online, aiming to foster experiential opportunities alongside intellectual engagement, is not without its challenges. Webcams and microphones can inhibit full immersion in a meditative practice, a faltering broadband connection may disrupt a flowing discussion, yet surprisingly in this virtual space much vital immersion, exchange, and creative play can happen, if the space is held with presence and compassion.

Back at the Wellcome Trust exhibition, watching the film of Tibetan monks perform the *trul khor*, the series of secret yoga exercises, we appreciate that spiritual practices are not a tool for quick self-improvement, but a lifelong dedication to the pursuit of refinement and to that quintessential sense of service to the Other beyond ourselves. The perennial search for an approach that does justice to the cultivation and dissemination of wisdom leads many back to the great traditions. And the efforts of those—such as the Wellcome Trust in this example—in making the past accessible in the



present is of huge value. But something more is needed. The dialogue between science and the wisdom traditions has certainly progressed in recent years. But, with very rare exceptions, the 'progress' has come on terms dictated by contemporary science. 'Mindfulness', for example, is studied in ways that focus only on those aspects that fit with the dominant paradigm—aspects that bring about quantifiable physical changes, but leave out more transcendent qualities.

We believe that a paradigm shift will open our culture to increasing possibilities. Science will evolve into *sacred science*, a term that hints at the merging of past and present to generate an emergent future. Education will grow beyond

our “moment of disruption” to encourage unification globally. And psychology will retrieve that small word that the twentieth century squeezed practically into oblivion: *soul*. Since its inception the Alef Trust has been attracting an international constituency of learners who are motivated to apply their learning in their personal and professional lives, working in education, business, coaching, therapy and counselling, medicine, journalism, ecology and sustainability, and many other professions. More than this, we have been building a community of those who share our vision of an extended paradigm, and who recognise the importance of research and scholarship in fostering this enrichment of our culture. We welcome all who may wish to join us.

References

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