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A Quest for Transpersonal Ways of Knowing in Anthropology of
Religion and Consciousness

Burmese Approaches towards Healing, Salvation and Realization

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*Picture 1: Bagan, Upper Burma
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2007)*

*For Leon and René,
My Beloved Companions*

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¹ For detailed information please refer to our homepage: <http://bewusstseinsforschung.at/>

Introduction: Personal approach towards religion and consciousness and motivation for this dissertation

I warmly welcome you, appreciated reader, and I feel fortunate that you decided to set forth on a journey into the discovery of the human potential and the manifold forms of expression this potential can embrace. In the following introducing lines I want to share with you my innermost, very personal thoughts and the motivation and intention for engaging in this dissertation project. But before that I would like to kindly ask you to at least make an effort to get personally involved in the topics that are being covered in this paper, to open yourself up to discover realms of awareness inside yourself maybe previously unknown, and be always at any moment ready to be sensitive and touchable towards yourself and the miracle that lives within and around you.

It is my conviction that there exists a profound interconnectedness, an undoubted nexus between whatever situation and experience we seemingly encounter or make outside of ourselves and our innermost nature, the nature of our minds. Whatever comes our way has its exact reference within our own mind. Therefore, dear reader, you are now about to enter the opportunity to discover realms of our own mind, maybe not yet known or experienced by you, and I really want to motivate you to engage in the miracle of your own mind and perception. This dissertation is intended to not only be an anthropological work on Burmese religion and traditional medicine, but shall ideally also serve as a threshold to leave behind conventional everyday-consciousness in order to come to know and align with different states of consciousness beyond our ordinary, intellectual, discursive, conceptual thinking.

I am well aware that with this intention I lead myself up the garden path, since orthodox scientific work is not meant to alter consciousness nor to introduce different states of awareness. It is therefore my deep personal wish to make the effort of presenting an alternative way of approaching the study of human experiences and provide us with a research tool kit that goes beyond and even transcends the paradigm of traditional Western science which allows and accepts solely the everyday-rational and

intellectual consciousness as the one and only ‘normal’ state of consciousness. In this context the characteristics of rationality, control, intellectuality and objectivity shape scientific paradigms until today. The dogma of intellectual analysis being the exclusive and most effective recognitional approach, and the fact that all experiences can be expressed in language and should be communicable, seem sometimes to be irrevocable. This dissertation clearly aims to transcend and go beyond these borders.

Since my early youth I have been fascinated and touched by the pure experience of being human, being a human being endowed with seemingly mysterious, enigmatic but all the more manifold, inspiring and multi-coloured facets, characteristics and possibilities of mind and consciousness. Consciousness, the different states of consciousness that we have the opportunity to experience, the variety and pantheon of different mental states that we encounter within the realm of human experience, and the way these different states manifest and express themselves in concrete experiences and situations in life, have been of utmost interest and significance to me ever since. A special focal point has always been the way in which human experiences and the potential of the human mind expresses itself in the forms of different religions, religious ideas, philosophies and practices, and transcendental, spiritual approaches human beings were able to manifest encountering life and coming to know and realize the human mind in its wide spectrum and manifold expressions.

As the Buddha never got tired of reminding us: *“Mind is the Universal Ordering Principle. Happiness, Peace and Freedom depend upon the Mind.”*²

Now we want to take off on a journey through the pantheon of the human consciousness, devoting ourselves fully towards the recognition, understanding and realization of the capacities, powers and potential that we all carry within, and we want to clear a track for approaching this

² Cf. Rinpoche, Sogyal, 2004. Das tibetische Buch vom Leben und vom Sterben. Frankfurt, Fischer Verlag.

realization with a beginner's mind, a mind that is ready and joyful, full of appreciation, wonder and thankfulness.

Background: The Field

The basis of this work is a field research conducted in central Burma between 2006 and 2009, for altogether about 5, 5 months, on four different residencies.

During my stay in Burma I had the opportunity to live in the house of one of the most prominent, famous and powerful healers and shamans of the country, Sayagi U Shein, thus enabling me to be “in the centre of the field” and therefore being gifted to observe and to experience lived and practiced religion, spirituality and various forms of rites and ceremonies from a very near and “emic” point of view. I was also able to meet a couple other healers, alchemists and traditional practitioners, which allowed me to broaden my understanding and permitted comparative insight.

Apart from that, I was fortunate to build a strong and sustainable contact with the Department of Anthropology at Yangon University, especially with the former head of the Department, Prof. U KH ³, who supported this work enormously and helped in building contacts to specialists within the field of religion and traditional medicine. We travelled through the country and conducted fieldwork and research together which was highly inspiring and opened the perspectives of someone being an insider and member of the religion and culture studied.

In the course of my field travels and afterwards back at university surrounded by colleagues I came to realize what anthropologist Edward M. Bruner accurately puts in a nutshell when he says that “*field experience is indeed a personal voyage of self-discovery.*” (Bruner, in: Turner/Bruner, 1986: 15) Therefore, I find it necessary to emphasize my point of view that the recognition and analysis of personal experience is ultimately at the core of anthropology.

As anthropologist Victor W. Turner puts it: “*Of all human sciences and studies anthropology is most deeply rooted in the social and subjective experience of the inquirer. Everything is brought to the test of self;*

³ The names of all my informants have been anonymised. The only exception is U Shein.

everything observed is learned ultimately on his or her pulses." (Turner,
in: Turner/Bruner, 1986: 33)

Along the Way...

The first chapter of my dissertation is fully devoted to a clarification and elucidation of my very personal approach towards the chosen topic, towards science and research of religion and the variety of religious phenomena. It is my deep personal wish to make fully transparent and visible not only the living sentient being behind this work, but also the different stages of development and transformation that the person of the researcher was living through in the course of the research. I am deeply convinced that the person of the researcher, the chosen research topic and consequently the findings and results of the research are deeply intertwined and interwoven and that it is necessary and indispensable to not only shed light on the results of a given research but to especially devote oneself towards the sincere and genuine illumination, clarification and transparency of the person, her state of mind in the different stages of researching, her intuitive and sensitive insights and her personal, spiritual motivation and intention besides the scientific fascination and results.

As Norman Denzin puts it strikingly: *“We are our own subjects. How our subjectivity becomes entangled in the lives of others is and has always been our topic.”* (Denzin, 1997: 27)

In the course of this work I was fortunate to come to realize that, besides the conventional recognized scientific set of methodological tools, there exists a sheer variety of different perspectives and angles of vision that one can adopt in order to lighten up previously obscure and enigmatic facets of a given phenomenon.

It is my hope to be able - in the context of this first chapter - to trace my personal development process, my individual findings and insights that I was able to uncover and realize in the course of my research, and *connect the personal intuitive, receptive, spiritual transformation with the concrete research results.*

To give the appreciated reader a thought along the way, I want to call to our mind that science as a holistic approach towards knowledge and understanding has the potential to fully devote itself towards the

understanding and recognition of humanity's highest potential in terms of transcendence and realization of the capacity, power and seemingly infinite possibilities of the human mind. Honouring the full measure and different varieties of human experience is essential to conducting transpersonal research and scientific inquiry consequentially, which I was able to realize at least rudimentarily. Honouring human experience asks the researcher to incorporate, advocate and verify the full and expansive measure of any human experience studied, and approach each research topic with a beginner's mind - an attitude that feels wonder, enjoyment, surprise, awe and deep appreciation. (cf. Braud/Anderson, 1998: XXVII) I personally find the transpersonal, state-specific research-approach highly inspiring and of deep value for social scientists, especially those working in the field of anthropology of religion and consciousness and the studies of religion.

1 Central Questions, Methods, Theories and State of Research

1.1 Orientation in the Field

The majority of my time in Burma ⁴ I was able to spend at the house and healing centre of Sayagyi U Shein at Rangoon's outskirts, providing a unique opportunity to be fully integrated in daily prayers and healing rituals. Ethnographic data was accumulated through participant observation, participation in rituals and prayers and through narrative, semi-structured interviews. ⁵ My main interlocutor and informant in U Shein's house had been AM, one of U Shein's oldest and closest disciples since more than 35 years. Interviews had been either conducted in the temple itself, in the garden of U Shein's house or in a small room which is primarily used for meetings and conversations that do demand some privacy. Interviews in other Burmese towns and villages had been conducted in the houses, gardens or workshops of the practitioners.

Altogether I conducted 58 interviews with 31 interviewees, totalling approx. 71 hours. All interviews have been recorded and transcribed. ⁶ The main geographical areas of research were Rangoon, Mandalay, Sagaing, Bagan, Taunggyi and Pyin Oo Lwin in the Shan State and Mebegon in Magway Division. My interview partners had been practitioners of the different branches of Burmese traditional medicine including Weikza practitioners and alchemists, Weikza followers and devotees, medical doctors, as well as patients and clients.

Through U Shein being the gatekeeper and intermediary, access to the various fields had been opened and facilitated by him or his followers. I have been received warmly and confidently throughout the whole fieldwork and conversations concerning the topics of religion and traditional medicine had always been easily possible. Since my knowledge

⁴ In 1989 the government of Burma officially changed the transcription of many names of places. Burma has become the 'Union of Myanmar' and Rangoon has become Yangon. In this work the former names Burma and Rangoon will be maintained since they are better known in the West.

⁵ For the complete questionnaires, please see the Appendix.

⁶ For an overview of the interviews, please see the Appendix.

of the Burmese language is very small, I was fortunate to encounter different capable translators at different places who also happened to be Weikza followers and believers which had been very fruitful for the understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover I was able to build a relationship with the Austrian Burmese community, and my understanding of the studied phenomenon could increase further through inspiring discussions and valuable advices with members of the community.

1.2 Clarification of Terms, Central Research Questions and Structure of the Dissertation

1.2.1 ‘Religion’ and its manifold dimensions

Subsequently I will give definitions of terms that are relevant for the topic of this dissertation, highlighting my own understanding and how this understanding was modified and extended in the course of participating actively in the field.

Since this dissertation aims to describe and illuminate the religious and spiritual worldview in the context of traditional medicine in contemporary Burma, a **definition of religion** has to be put forward.

Starting with Melford E. Spiro, I want to explain his particular reflections on the problems and challenges in defining the term “religion” in the first place. In his work *“Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation”* Spiro argues that there is considerable disagreement concerning the phenomena to which the word “religion” ought to apply. He mentions the French sociologist Emile Durkheim who rejects the belief in supernatural beings as a legitimate referent of “religion” on the grounds that this would deny religion to “primitive peoples” who do not distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. (cf. Banton, 1966: 88) Similarly, Durkheim rejects the belief in Gods as a distinguishing characteristic of “religion” because Buddhism, as he interprets it, contains no such belief.

This discussion reminds me of Dorothy Lee’s article “Religious Perspectives in Anthropology” (Lehmann et al., 2006: 20 ff.) where she

holds the view that we have to consider that we find ethnic groups who do not so much seek communion with the environing nature as they find themselves in this particular communion naturally. She argues that *“mysticism presupposes a prior separation of man from nature; and communion is achieved through loss of self and subsequent merging with that which is beyond; but for many cultures there is no such distinct separation between self and other, which must be overcome. Here, man is in nature already, and we cannot speak properly of man and nature.”* (Lee, in: Lehman et al., 2006: 21)

Still, Spiro defends his point of view and states clearly that for him the belief in superhuman beings and in their power to assist or to harm people approaches universal distribution, and this belief, he insists, is the core variable which ought to be designated by any definition of religion. Subsequently he defines religion as an *“institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.”* (Spiro, in: Banton, 1966: 96)

Clifford Geertz' definition of religion should be mentioned in this context as well. He defines religion as *“a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in human beings by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”* (Geertz, in: Banton, 1966: 4)

Likewise, Edward B. Tylor, considered to be the father of modern anthropology, discusses that the *“elementary form out of which all else developed was spirit worship: animism; the minimal definition of religion was a belief in spiritual beings.”* (Geertz, in: Lehman et al., 2006: 7) According to Tylor, the belief in spirits can be perceived as a rational effort to explain unexplainable and at times disturbing phenomena such as death, dreams and possession and that consequently the idea of a soul was used to explain previously inexplicable natural occurrences. He *“reasoned that if a belief recurred again and again in virtually all times and places, it could not be a product of mere fantasy. Rather, it must have grounding*

in evidence and in experiences that were equally recurrent and universal.” (Harris, in: Lehman et al., 2006: 17)

It was Tylor’s conviction that altered states of consciousness, such as dreams, trances, visions, or experiences connected with dying should be taken to serve as evidence or proof for the existence of the human self on a transcendental dimension. According to Harris *“the concept of an inner being - a soul - makes sense to all this.”* (Harris, in: Lehmann et al., 2006:18)

I personally wish to formulate *my very own working-definition of “religion”*, based on my empirical observations and my personal experiences, in order to allow myself to be able to make proper reference to the aspects and topics I am working on.

I want to emphasize on a multidimensional definition of religion, which permits to integrate several approaches and dimensions. Religion constitutes a cultural system which emphasizes on experiential and spiritual phenomena concerning realms and perspectives which go beyond the sphere of rationality, intellect and conceptual, dualistic understanding of the world. Religion embraces all those beliefs and ideas referring to the superhuman, magical, mystic and, in terms of logic, unexplainable realms, which, though invisible but not inexperienceable, constitute an existing, real part of human life and experience. Religion therefore comprises various ideas and belief-systems including conceptions of God, mystic beings, superhuman and supernatural entities, ghosts, fairies, spirits of all kinds, ghosts of nature and natural phenomena, and so on.

Since this dissertation is a study of the practical dimensions inherent in any religious belief system, I want to highlight the importance of experiencing aspects of the religious worldview and cosmology. Interaction and communication with spiritual entities is crucial in understanding the particular characteristics of Burmese religious pluralism, always involving transpersonal experiences of the individual or the collective, as in a ritual or ceremony. Particular emphasise and interest will therefore be laid on concrete experiences in spiritual contexts, describing and trying to

interpret not only the experiences of informants and hosts in the field, but also my very own experiences of the spiritual realm while performing this research.



*Picture 2: The Buddha, Northern Thailand
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2007)*

1.2.2 Aim of the Dissertation ‘in a nutshell’ and Central Research Questions

Since it should be, more or less, clear now, what I mean and understand when referring to the term “religion”, we can turn towards the topic and the major questions of this dissertation.

Before I formulate a concrete and substantial research-question, I would like to define the aim of this dissertation in a broader, associating and more elaborate way.

My special concern, prior personal interest and main goals are to determine the current state and structure of Theravada Buddhist religious life and especially its interdependence and interaction with pre-Buddhist, animistic beliefs and worldviews. In the course of this dissertation we want to gain - at least a partial - insight into the beliefs and practices associated with Theravada Buddhism, and, especially interesting, to learn about the

syncretism of Buddhism and the beliefs in spirits and supernatural entities.

A special and outstanding emphasise will be on the philosophy and worldviews of traditional Burmese medicine, on its status and importance in contemporary Burma, and furthermore particularly on the ideas and concepts of the practice of alchemy which still characterizes an important part in present-day ways and approaches towards healing. In this particular context of the philosophy and practice of alchemy I will necessarily be also discussing the pantheon of current supernatural and spiritual beliefs, starting from the ancient, pre-Buddhist *Nat*-spirit belief through to the various realms and plains inhabited by Buddhist Devas to the faith in “*Weikzas*”, magicians and wise men. The specific concept of “*Weikza*” in the Burmese context has to be worked out in order to align this idea with the pantheon of alchemical beliefs and practices.

Since I acquired a transpersonal research approach for a holistic study of above the mentioned phenomena, my own insights, experiences, transformation and expansion of consciousness will not be excluded when presenting ethnographic findings and results. Instead, it will be shown that the generation of ethnographic data, and the mental and spiritual growing and transformation of the researcher accumulating this data, is intimately connected and linked. For an encompassing understanding of the Burmese religious and spiritual life world I consider it necessary to make transparent and reveal the circumstances - may they be hindrances, challenges, consternation or joy, delight and bliss - under which my ethnographic findings were collected.

The overall goal of this dissertation is therefore to present and propose transpersonal, state-specific research-approaches to the above mentioned complex of topics. I wish to introduce methods of research, which transcend and expand conventional social-scientific research methods, and demonstrate and reveal them by the example of the Burmese religious pluralism.

Keeping these different claims and aspirations in mind, the following overriding and fundamental **research-question** can be formulated:

What are the characteristics and advantages of a transpersonal approach in anthropology of religion and consciousness, and how may these methodologies benefit and contribute to a multidimensional, holistic understanding of the Burmese spiritual worldview and related practices?

Deriving from this major question I can pose further questions which illuminate the topic from a different angle and specify the latter one. Furthermore, the below mentioned questions form in some way the underlining corpus of understanding the main research question:

Questions referring to theory and method:

What are the main concepts, ideas and perspectives of Transpersonal Psychology and Transpersonal Anthropology?

How can applied anthropological field research be enriched and enlivened by adopting a transpersonal approach?

What is the necessity and benefit of exposing the Self in the ethnographic endeavour and make personal experiences and findings transparent?

In how far can the methods of Auto-Ethnography contribute to an understanding of lived religious and spiritual practice in the Burmese context?

Questions concerning ethnographic facts about religion and worldview:

What philosophical, religious, spiritual and practical ideas form the corpus of traditional medicine in Burma, especially the art of alchemy?

How is the contemporary cosmos of supernatural and spiritual beliefs and ideas in Burma constituted, expressed by its devotees and embodied by its practitioners, such as shamans and healers?

What is the concrete role of Theravada Buddhism and how far can an interaction between Buddhism and the local, pre-Buddhist, “animistic” *Nat*-cult be observed?

In how far are local spirits and *Nats* of importance and relevance for the religious life of the people of central Burma?

Where in this pantheon of different deities and spiritual, celestial beings, can we locate and integrate characters such as “*Weikzas*”, wise men, shamans and exorcists?

To conclude, I want to emphasize the importance of aspects of healing in this particular context and stress topics and concerns about illnesses perceived as supernatural, spiritual phenomena. The underlining aspect of this approach will be found especially in the worldview and ideas concerning spiritual, superhuman entities and in how far they can be held responsible for illness and disease. Since my fieldwork took place in the house of a renowned spiritual healer and I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to meet a dozen different practitioners of Burmese traditional medicine, a natural, strong interest arose and a desire to relate spiritual cosmologies to a context of physical and spiritual healing.

1.2.3 Structure and Composition of the Dissertation

Chapter **1 Central Questions, Methods, Theories and State of Research** has assumed a rather extensive and elaborate shape, which I consider necessary and beneficial in order to underline my particular approach. Beginning with a multidimensional definition of religion, I aim to underline the plurality and complexity of practiced religious life in Burma. This is followed by the central questions that are guiding my research and this dissertation.

In the course of the first chapter we broaden our outlook and invite a historic account of ethnographic fieldwork as well as the concepts and perspectives of transpersonal psychology, anthropology, and auto-biographic ethnography in order to enrich our understanding in terms of the beneficial qualities of this approach. It is my wish to trace, if only

briefly, the historical development of a transpersonal methodology in anthropology of religion and consciousness.

Chapter **2 Religious Diversity and Spiritual Pluralism** marks the beginning of my involvement and examination of literature concerning the wide and complex topic of religious syncretism in Burma. An understanding of Theravada Buddhism, its worldview, cosmology and ideology shall be imparted, and the interconnection and mutual impact with pre-Buddhist religious systems shall be illuminated. The widespread belief, worship and practices related to the *Cult of the Nats* shall be explained. Insights and knowledge of the mentioned topics seem necessary for a substantial understanding of alchemical or healing practices in the context of

3 Growing into the World of Weikzas, the chapter that will present my empirical data and findings in the field. While presenting my empirical insights I will continuously and gradually unfold and reveal the methods that led me towards the accumulation of data. The reader will be invited to join me on a personal journey through the world of supernatural entities - Weikzas and phenomena which were previously unimaginable for me. A comprehension of transpersonal phenomena in the context of *the path of the Weikza* shall be provided by sharing my own personal transformative experiences while doing research on the subject. Since I explicitly aimed to compose a polyphonic and multi-perspectival text, I used four different fonts in this empirical part of the dissertation “*Experiencing Ethnography*”:

Personal accounts, stories and field journal entries
(Font: Euphemia)

Details of U Shein’s biography (Font: Calisto MT)

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These different fonts serve to highlight and make transparent the different narrative threads and illuminate the voices of myself, my informants and my hosts. The joint process and path of cognition and insight shall be portrayed to unveil the inter-subjective dimension of the research endeavour.

1.3 An Approach Towards a Reflexive, Auto/Biographic Ethnography

1.3.1 Traditional Ethnography and the Positioning of the Researcher

In the course of this chapter I wish to outline and present different approaches towards ethnographic field-research, the place where we undoubtedly and accordingly locate the origin of anthropological knowledge. Anthropological data and understanding finds its foundation and beginning in the “field”, the place where the encounter between human beings takes place. (cf. Kremser, 1998: 135) This encounter has been assuming different shapes according to the respective historical and socio-cultural circumstances. Spatio-temporal contexts have always experienced changes and transformation, and consequently the concept of the “field” attained different forms of meaning and importance in the course of the history of anthropology. In this context I want to present what Austrian anthropologist Prof. Dr. Manfred Kremser called the “*Four Anthropological Perspectives*”, since these provide us with a key to the understanding of the fundamental relationships that we experience in the anthropological research-process. On the micro-level, every encounter in the field is first and foremost the encounter between two human beings; therefore we come upon four distinct relations and perceptual approaches: Firstly, the self-perception of the ethnographer, the specific manner in which the ethnographic researcher views, perceives and reflects upon her/himself. Secondly, the external perception of the ethnographer, referring to the mode in which the ethnographer is being perceived and reflected upon by the people or culture under study. Thirdly, the way in which the “other”, the so-called “stranger” in the field, views, perceives and reflects upon her/himself. And fourthly, the manner in which the “other” perceives the ethnographer and her/his way of approaching and acting in the field. Here it is essential to note that different epochs in anthropology have accordingly emphasized different aspects of this encounter in the field and attached different importance to one or the other relation and approach. Moreover this model provides us with a framework to illuminate

and trace the historic changes and developments in awareness that anthropology as an academic discipline was experiencing before arriving at current, contemporary approaches.

In Kremser's article "*Von der Feldforschung zur Felderforschung*" (1998) we come to know that there have been several attempts to classify and divide the development of anthropological field-research into different phases. Whereas Marilyn Strathern talks about the pre-modern (until 1921), modern (1922-1974) and post-modern era (since 1975), Andrea Lissner-Espe chooses a slightly different division and introduces the encyclopaedic (until 1921), positivistic (1922-1968) and reflexive era (since 1968). (cf. Kremser, 1998: 136) Complementary to this model we find American anthropologists Denzin K. Norman's, University of Illinois, and Yvonna S. Lincoln's, Texas A&M University, concept of the "*Six Moments in Qualitative Research*" (Denzin/Lincoln, 1994: 7) which I will be discussing in the course of this chapter.

The first phase Manfred Kremser identifies in his approach is the "encyclopaedic" era, the time of the so-called "veranda- or armchair-anthropologists", where the main aim and object was to collect as much data as possible from "primitive cultures" on the brink of extinction. With few exceptions anthropologists knew foreign cultures only from observations made by missionaries, colonial civil servants and travellers, and the collecting of data was mainly perceived as being hard physical work and was considered to be inferior to the intellectual analysis and the production of scientific texts. (cf. Kremser, 1998: 137)

The next phase then, the "positivistic" era, introduced by the "father of stationary field-research" Bronislaw Malinowski, made a huge contribution to the recognition of various methods of acquiring data, of participant observation, and long-term stays in the field, were more and more approved and their advantages recognised. Malinowski shaped the genre of the "Ethnographic Monograph" through which a culture was represented, projected and modelled. Still, it was assumed that one finds the ideal research-situation in the field, the subject of research presents itself fully independently and un-influenced by external circumstances and

only waits to be explored by the scientist. What we definitely owe to Malinowski is that he was introducing the character of the professional field-researcher and three main characteristics that he connected with him/her: (1) the person of the researcher had to be consciously perceived as part of the field under study, (2) all participants had to be respected in their being-human, (3) the ethnographer had to apply an institutional attitude. (cf. Kremser, 1998: 138)

Malinowski was therefore constructing the character of the ethnographer and the character of the “other”, a dichotomy which consequently allowed uncovering and making visible the subject of research. Therefore he was able to lay the foundation for the present reflexive attitude of the researcher.

The phase and approach that is still active and prevailing until the present day is governed by the idea that the person of the researcher has to be actively incorporated and reflected in all phases of the research undertaking.

It is essential and indispensable to understand the researcher as vital and inseparable part of the research, and social science wants to be understood as a reflexive undertaking. This era is called the “reflexive” era and its foundation stones were laid in the 1960s, leading to an extreme form of this approach especially during the 1980s. A new genre of literature appeared, the “ethnographic autobiographies”, where researchers put themselves in the very centre of their work confessing and exposing whatever difficulties, doubts and hindrances they encountered throughout the research-process. The ethnographer and writer can no longer take for granted to be able to present an objective, untouched account of the other’s worldview and experiences. Firstly, anthropology came to reflect upon her self-conception and self-image reflectively and also publicly and, secondly, it was realized that also the people we study have their own understanding and perception of how they want to be represented. The realization that the worlds that are being studied by anthropologists are, in part, created by their own perception, approach and the subsequent writing and

presenting of them, has been essential and sustainably influential for study and research until the present day. (cf. Denzin, 1997: XIII)

Furthermore I would like to identify additional key intellectual influences especially outlined in the review of the development of qualitative research traditions by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln who write about “*five moments of qualitative research*.” (cf. Denzin/Lincoln, 1994: 7ff)

- (1) The first moment is identified by them as an objectivist and positivist paradigm, constituted by the myth of the heroic and lone fieldworker. This era, from 1900 until the Second World War, was especially characterized by the goal and aspiration of social scientists to present valid, objective, detached and unfailing data and interpretations. The fieldworker was perceived as being able to work and interpret objectively, detached and separated from the field and being capable of presenting and analysing data without influencing them by her/his personal worldview, assumptions and hypotheses.
- (2) The second moment is described as a modernist and creative phase, characterized by attempts to formalize qualitative research methods. “*The modernist ethnographer and sociological participant observer attempted rigorous, qualitative studies of important social processes including deviance and social control in the classroom and society*.” (Denzin/Lincoln, 1994: 8).
- (3) This modernist phase eventually came to an end in the late 1960s, and was replaced by a third moment. Here a connection can be drawn to what Manfred Kremser identified as the “reflexive era” beginning in 1968, characterized by a new multiplicity of theoretical and methodological orientations and paradigms. This third moment acknowledged by Denzin and Lincoln lasted from 1970 to 1986 and is described in terms of “blurred genres” in ethnographic literature referring to a vague and diverse situation in the ways data would be collected, analysis be done and texts composed. It seems that during this period the necessity and recognition for scientific

multilingualism, the composition of polyphonic texts and the realization of manifold interpretations of reality were finally dawning at the horizon.

- (4) The subsequent fourth moment coincides with a “crisis in representation” in which standards of truth and methods were challenged, not at least through the critical examination of textual practices and representation. Denzin and Lincoln state here that *“the erosion of the classic norms in anthropology—objectivism, complicity with colonialism, social life structured by fixed rituals and customs, ethnographies as monuments to a culture—was complete.”* (Denzin/Lincoln, 1994: 10) The crisis of this period was threatening and scrutinizing the products, the writings of the ethnographer’s work as well as the moral and intellectual authority that ethnographers destined themselves.
- (5) Finally the fifth moment was descending within our discipline, still characterized by a continuing diversity, multiplicity and a series of tensions. *“Qualitative research embraces two tensions at the same time. On the one hand, it is drawn to a broad, interpretive, feminist, and critical sensibility. On the other hand, it can also be drawn to more narrowly defined positivist, post-positivist, humanistic and naturalistic conceptions of human experiences and its analysis.”* (Denzin/Lincoln, 1994: 576).
- (6) Denzin and Lincoln also identify a possible sixth moment in ethnographic, qualitative research towards which we are currently moving, characterized by reflexive, experiential texts, that are *“messy, subjective, open ended, conflictual and feminist influenced.”* (Denzin/Lincoln, 1994: 559) Denzin determines this sixth moment as a period of *“intense reflection, “messy texts”, experiments in Autoethnography, ethnographic poetics, anthropological and sociological poetry, evocative and layered accounts, the “New Journalism”, performance texts, plays, ethnographic fictions and ethnographic novels and narratives of the self.”* (Denzin, 1997: XVII).

There is apparently no doubt about the general existence of the multiplicity of perspectives, voices, worldviews, and practices which are identified by Kremser, Denzin and Lincoln. This discussion helps to see and understand where contemporary anthropology and ethnography came from and are presently moving to.

To conclude this chapter I want to quote American sociologist Carolyn Ellis:

"For my dissertation work I continued an ethnographic study of isolated fishing communities I had started as an undergraduate at College of William and Mary. I tried to conduct my research most professors and books taught it. I learned to observe from a distance, keep myself out of the story and even my line of vision and dispassionately record what I saw and heard. I tried to be an objective observer and assumed that field notes provide a snapshot of what had happened. As you might suspect, research didn't work that smoothly in practice. I got emotionally involved with my participants and our interactions were intricate grapplings with day-to-day details and life crises. I learned as much from what I felt as from what I observed." (Ellis, 2004: 9)

This adequate quote brings us right to the importance of *emotion* in the fieldwork-process. We also have to consider emotionality in the course of the whole process, like phases of loss, mourning, desperation, the desire to enter into the human and spiritual world around us, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly, the rage of cowardice, insecurity, despondence, but also great inspiration, bliss, joy, the intimate feeling of sharing experiences with our participants in a given project, feelings of affluence and abundance and eventually the burning desire to write it all down. (cf. Behar, 1996: 3) These all are probably all phases and stations along our journey.

But, as Ruth Behar puts it: *"But surely this is not the anthropology taught in your colleges and universities? It doesn't sound like the stuff of which Ph.D.s are made. And definitely it isn't the anthropology that will win a grant from the national Science Foundation."* (Behar, 1996: 3)

What I want to explore in the following chapter is explicitly the role of the ethnographer in the whole process of research - from the very first idea for a thesis to the acquiring of data, the challenges that occur in this context, to the analysis and presentation of the findings and insights. I want to locate and position the ethnographer's self, her/his personality, within a manifold interpersonal and also inter-spiritual field, to show how fieldwork itself and consequently the forms of ethnographic writing and data-presentation are embodied by the researcher, how the self is being written in the work and how we ultimately always are our own subjects, and our subjectivity and uniqueness is always intertwined and entangled in the lives of others. This is what has at last always been our topic.

1.3.2 Reflecting and Locating an Embodied Self in an Interpersonal, Interconnected, and Relational Field: Reflecting the 'I' and the Divine Inspiration of Science

"What is the role of the 'I' in ethnography? ... Is ethnography only about the other? Isn't ethnography also relational, about the other and the 'I' of the researcher in interaction? Might the researcher also be a subject? Might the 'I' refer to the researcher who looks inward as well as outward? What can be gained from making the 'I' a part, or even a focus, of ethnographic research?"
(Ellis, 2004: XIX)

The fundamental assumption, that I want to put forward in this context is the conviction and belief that the Self, the personality of the ethnographic researcher with all her/his concepts and worldviews, cannot be separated from the research project and stay un-reflected and un-scrutinized. Ethnographers have to be aware and mindful of the very personal, emotional, spiritual and identity dimensions of undertaking field research and of how fieldwork is always, in its essence, a personal and emotional work. Understanding the researcher's identity as the central research instrument, the researcher has to be unveiled and made transparent as a gendered, emotional, embodied, interactional, spiritual being in and of the research. Research is first and foremost a highly sensitive, emotional and personal work and the idea that the ethnographer is an unattached and

objective observer has urgently to be overcome and transcended. We aim to view ourselves as integral part of our research - sometimes even as our focus - rather than standing outside what we do.

American sociologist Carolyn Ellis gives the advice to firstly ask ourselves the question: *“What in my own life has brought me to do this study?”* (Ellis, 2004: 48). Starting from this central and very personal question the opportunity arises of answering ourselves genuinely, honestly and open-minded in order to identify the overall intention and underlying motivation for engaging in whatever kinds of scientific work. The chance of verifying our innermost intention and goals intimately for ourselves, exposes and teaches us about deepest and most personal wishes and desires that we might have concerning not only our position and progress in science, but more essentially our intimate and most cherished visions and desires we carry for our ultimate awakening as genuinely loving and compassionate human beings.

St. Francis of Assisi made one crucial point very clear in his observance for his fraternity, stated in 1223: *“Science has to be in alignment with the Highest and Greatest. All scientific work has to be ultimately motivated by Divine Love and wants to be in accordance with the synoptic gospels.”*⁷ (Rotzetter, 1999: 74)

What I want to refer here is that science, understood in this manner, is ultimately a way of approaching the final reality of all things and manifestations, a manner to approach and make sense of life in its manifold and diverse expressions. Can science also be a way, an opportunity to understand and make sense of Divine principles in our world? It is obvious and un-obscured that a researcher who advocates such an approach will, as a leading and starting point, begin the scientific journey by making transparent her/his own assumptions, intentions and experiences, by watching her/his own religious beliefs and practices, and observe her/himself as both a researcher and a participant in relationships to the members of the community under study. What happens within the observer must be made known and exposed completely, if the nature and

⁷ Translation by author

different dimensions and manifestations of what has been observed is to be understood. (cf. Behar, 1996: 6).

To give us an amazing quote along the way:

*“The beauty of science has astonished and touched scientists ever since. Science is originally the attempt to comprehend and realize the Divine principle in our world. Pythagoras practiced mathematics because the Divine concepts got revealed to him through it. Kepler, Newton and Einstein were following deeply religious motives.”*⁸ (Norretranders, 1994: 468)

⁸ Translation by author

1.3.3 The Necessity, Benefit and Authenticity of Exposing the Self and Making Transparent the Personal Transformation Process in the Field

Inspired by Laura Bohannan's anthropological novel "Return to Laughter" (1954) and A. Coffey's book "The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity" (1999), I wish to indicate and clarify the highly personalized, emotional and spiritual aspects and dimensions of the ethnographic endeavour. There can ultimately be no escape and denial of the physical, mental as well as spiritual presence of the researcher in the field and consequently in the texts and theses that will derive from there. Increasingly the autobiographical, self-reflexive dimension of ethnography has been identified as a key element in practising and writing ethnography. The visibility of the self in the field and in the text has more and more received attention as well as criticism. Still, it seems quite unusual and at times bizarre for the self to be central in the experiences, events and texts in the field and this way of approaching anthropology is therefore often described as being alternative or experimental. According to Coffey, the so-called conventional wisdom of ethnography has assumed a duality of observer and observed. The observing ethnographer is able and will be encouraged to adopt the position of an ignorant, but professional stranger. Over-familiarity, identification with the subject of research and the field where research does take place is considered a problem and threat to scientific objectivity rather than a strength and advantage (cf. Coffey, 1999: 20ff). When we adopt the stance of a 'stranger' or 'unknower' we deny the situatedness and inter-connectedness of the fieldworker self, alongside other selves she/he encounters and interacts with in the field.

In many methodological works on ethnography we find warnings about the stereotype of 'going native' as a deterrent, cautioning us not to become totally absorbed by and immersed in the cultural, religious and spiritual frameworks and contexts under study. We must be aware of not experiencing complete personal transformation in the course of our fieldwork. As Coffey reminds us incisively, we have to always bear in mind that *"over-identification and rapport is held up as a source of doom and*

failure.” (Coffey, 1999: 31). If our relationships in the field get too close and intimate, our whole ethnographic endeavour will be damaged.

As Hammersley and Atkinson put it in a nutshell: *“The comfortable sense of ‘being at home’ is a danger signal. From the perspective of the ‘marginal’ reflexive ethnographer, there can thus be no question of total commitment, ‘surrender’, or ‘becoming’. There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual ‘distance’. For it is in the space created by this distance that the analytical work of the ethnographer gets done.”* (Hammersley/Atkinson, 1995: 115).

I would like to argue here that, given that a critical, at times analytical and of course self-conscious awareness always accompanies the whole research process with all its stages, becoming an active and integral part of the cultural setting under study, can - in the best case - lead to an immersion with the setting, its participants and their worldviews which essentially allows much more intimate and profound understanding of a culture. Fascination, honest engagement and surrender to the topic under study allow us to fully explore the range of experiences and identities that occur in the process of fieldwork. We have to be constantly aware and reflective of the on-going process of re-definition of the different identities we carry while being, living and participating in the field. Our self and the various identities we take on in the course of our research-undertaking are subject to constant change and transformation, and cannot be considered singular, fixed and bound entities, rather what we experience and perceive as self, has multiple and manifold expressions and dimensions which have to be taken consciously into account in order to create a coherent image of ourselves and our work. Coffey argues that *“full immersion and identification with the subject of our research is always possible and desirable, and fieldwork is only truly meaningful when we are fully engaged, and indeed challenged.”* (Coffey, 1999: 37) Like Carolyn Ellis is deeply convinced:

“You have to be immersed in your dissertation project!” (Ellis, 2004: 130.)

To come to an intermediary conclusion, I want to summarize: It is my conviction that it is totally necessary, genuine and desirable to consciously recognize and appreciate that we are part of what we study, we are affected and influenced on multiple dimensions by the cultural, spiritual and religious context that we study, we are shaped and transformed by our fieldwork experiences and shape the fieldwork setting at the same time. We perceive ourselves as the main and essential research instruments and we always bear in mind that the impact of our fieldwork is usually greatest for ourselves. If we truly and honestly want to accept the multidimensional challenge of the ethnographic endeavour, we have to consciously and knowingly shift our awareness between an outward focus on social, cultural and spiritual aspects of our personal experiences and the experiences of our participants, and an inward focus that ultimately exposes a vulnerable, tangible self that is constantly moved by, transformed, touched and inspired by the variety and diverse forms of expression of cultural and religious phenomena. How to combine these two approaches to compose a meaningful, coherent, inspiring artistic synthesis of our ethnographic research, shall be the main focal point of the following chapter.

1.3.4 The Personal and Interpersonal Dimensions of Fieldwork

We successfully came to the conclusion that the necessity of consciously integrating, reflecting and observing the self in the course of the whole research process is crucial for the whole endeavour and essential for genuine, holistic and integral results of our work. What I consider of vital importance - as hopefully outlined in the past pages in an open and frank manner - is the constant, honest and truthful self-reference to the self that is engaged in the research project. What I was fortunate and thankful to learn in the course of my own research-undertaking was, and still is, the fact that this research, with all its manifold and astonishing experiences and insights, is mainly and foremost a teaching of life for myself, exposing and revealing to me my own state of mind, and my deepest yearnings and convictions. I came to understand and experience myself as a multidimensional being, existing simultaneously in a variety of different levels and dimensions within the sheer endless pantheon of human states

of consciousness. My deep interest, appreciation and inspiration from religious phenomena was ultimately unveiling my very own and personal religious personality and the spiritual being that I am, constantly trying to make sense of the human experience that I am making right now.

To willingly and consciously take this insight and realisation as a starting point from where this whole research has to be enlightened helps me to not fall into categories or theories to construct a seemingly ‘outside’ world and ‘outside’ individuals who can be described, analysed and understood separate from myself.

Qualitative research is, in its very nature, a highly interpersonal and intimate encounter between spiritual beings trying to make sense of their current, temporary human experience. Fieldwork, in its essence, depends on our capacity, willingness and readiness to genuinely build and establish relationships with human beings in the field. It are these very relationships, that we establish, that give our ethnographic research its incomparable and priceless intensity, its quality and depth, and its insight into the everyday social, cultural and religious worlds. As Amanda Coffey puts it, it is the recognition of the complexity and variety of the interpersonal dimensions of fieldwork that are of essential relevance. *“The interconnectedness of researcher, researched, social actors and significant others is the very essence of fieldwork.”* (Coffey, 1999: 56). I am convinced that the formation and sensitive development of relationships in the field cannot be estimated highly enough. The establishment of an emotional connection to the field is crucial for the quality of our research experiences, the quality of the collected data, and consequently the processing of the data to compose and materialize a meaningful and scientific text. Cognition, insight and emotion can no longer be separated, since we have come to realize that our cognitive perception is highly influenced and inspired by our emotions and the way our hosts in the field perceive, live and communicate their emotional life.

Honouring these realisations and paying proper respect to the person of the researcher, her/his innermost, personal transformational experiences in the course of the research-work and the reflection of the interpersonal

and inter-spiritual relationships that are being built while doing fieldwork, made an innovative, reflexive anthropological literature-genre come into being: reflexive, narrative Ethnography and Autoethnography - as an attempt and endeavour to take multiple dimensions, voices, developments and the interconnectedness of human and spiritual beings consciously into account and demonstrate respect and fascination.

1.3.5 Reflexive, Narrative Ethnography, and Autoethnography

What Denzin and Lincoln identified as the fourth of seven moments in qualitative research, called the “crises of representation” (1986-90), marked a starting point in the development of new forms of writing and occurred as profound rupture in the mid-1980s. Different influential works called into mind and attention that research has to be more reflexive and questions concerning gender, class and race needed to be discussed. Whole new models of truth, method and representation were sought. The classical, conventional norms in anthropology - like objectivity, causal linear theories, moral and scientific authority, questions of validation - were scrutinized, and particularly as far as writing is concerned, new forms of textual presentation were required. Especially Denzin and Lincoln reminded us to view writing “*as a method of inquiry that moves through successive stages of self-reflection.*” (cf. Denzin/Lincoln, 1994: 10) In the following fifth moment – the postmodern period of experimental ethnographic writing - new ways of composing ethnography and new designs for ethnographic writing strategies were explored. The idea and concept of narrative ethnography and Autoethnography can be conceived as a response to issues of modern representation and its attempt to integrate the personal, autobiographic dimension. The term Autoethnography suggests a meeting place for the inward and outward dimensions aiming to create representational spaces that reflect and present the individual researcher, the research-participants and the manifold interactions and relationships they form. Central and in the very focus of attention is an emphasize of the experiences, subjective inward experiences, as well as the reflexive engagement in shared experiences with participants and hosts in the field.

As Mark Neumann puts it: “[..] *Autobiography suggests a desire for self-expression in interpretive communities where academic conventions have constrained rather than enabled the representation of subjective experience.*” (Neuman, in: Ellis/Bochner, 1996: 193).

The Self, the very own narrative and life story (especially the life story we experience in another culture) are being used to look more deeply at the interactions between the self and others. This approach offers insight into how the researcher changed as a result of observing others and participating in their life. (cf. Ellis, 2004: 46). The researcher’s own, subjective experiences are important and are gathered to illuminate the culture under study.

“The primary purpose of personal narrative is to understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context. In personal narrative texts, authors become “I”, readers become “you”, and participants become “us”.” (Ellis, 2004: 45ff)

Researchers and participants in the field have the deliberate possibility to engage in personal relationships. Participants are thought of becoming co-researchers, and are encouraged to collaborate and speak in their own voices which will then be included in the ethnographic text as authentic as possible.

“Readers, too, take a moral active role as they are invited into the author’s world, aroused to a feeling level about the events being described, and stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives. The goal is to write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference, to include sensory and emotional experience, and to write from an ethic of care and concern.” (Ellis, 2004: 45ff)

As Dan Rose argues quite reasonably in his book „Living the Ethnographic Life“ (1990), the future of ethnographic writing shall give emphasise to a polyphonic, multi-vocal and multi-perspectival approach which will include the following ingredients: (1) the author’s voice and her/his own emotions, (2) theoretical mini-essays that reflect critically the particular

literature of particular scientific disciplines, (3) the conversations, voices, attitudes, concerns and experiences of daily life of the people with whom the author participates, observes and lives *“will take form as a narrative and discourse in the text—there will be a story line”*, (4) poetics and poetry will join the prose, (5) pictures, photos and drawings will take an essential and interior relation in the text, (6) *“the junctures of analytic, fictive, poetic, narrative and critical genres will be marked clearly in the text but will cohabit in the same volume.”* (Rose, 1990: 57)

It seems to be important and crucial for the understanding and uncovering of the entire research endeavour that the researcher is able and willing to approach and make transparent, in a personal tale or narrative, what went on in the backstage of doing a research project. Therefore, as Rose reminds us in his first point, the researcher’s voice and her/his private, subjective emotional feelings and reactions and his/her spiritual experiences as well want to be exposed and uncovered.

Since there is a deep, undeniable connection between the researcher, the central research questions, the field, the material and the worlds and experiences studied, the emotional and spiritual transparency of the researcher allows us to perceive and comprehend the research in an encompassing and holistic way. Furthermore, Carolyn Ellis, calls in mind in her inspiring book *“The Ethnographic I”* (2004), that valuable and inspirational autoethnographic writing has to be truthful, vulnerable, evocative, and therapeutic. *“Good autoethnographic writing is truthful, vulnerable, evocative, and therapeutic.” “Who is it therapeutic for?” “Sometimes ourselves, and our readers, and our participants, and sometimes all three.”* (Ellis, 2004: 135).

It is essential that researchers who want to be successful and moving in Autoethnography have to be comfortable with emotionality - their own and others. The more we are able to get close to our own experiences and the emotions connected with them, the more likely we are to understand different realms of experiences of our informants and hosts in the field.

Anthropologist Ruth Behar expresses even more convincingly and explicitly in her book *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996) that “*anthropology that doesn’t break your heart is just not worth doing it anymore.*” (Behar, 1996: 177). Behar is convinced that the irony we find is that anthropology has always deeply been rooted in an ‘I’, but this emotionality and self-reflexivity has only recently gotten a foot inside the academy (cf. Behar, 1996: 16) and we are still very insecure and uncertain which place to assign to that personal, emotional dimensions of our work.

Vulnerability and tangibility in the research- and writing - process implies to approach whatever stage or dimension of the research endeavour with an attitude of sincere openness, transparency and the readiness to share with our readers and audience even the most intimate and personal experiences in order to allow insight and mutual, open-hearted understanding.

In the same manner it is crucial for mastering the autoethnographic endeavour to adopt and establish in our writing the capacity to evoke within our readers the impression of being with us in the middle of our field, to really sense and feel the experiences that we ourselves and our research-participants were having.

“The writing makes you feel you are there. You’re in the situation yourself, feeling the feelings, experiencing the conflicts.” And through the autoethnographic writing “we are reminded of similar events in our own lives. The writing encourages us to share our stories and talk about what happened to us.” (Ellis, 2004: 140)

Therefore, evocative, auto-ethnographic writing encourages to be written in the present tense and first person in order to be more immediate. Important are here a lot of detailed descriptions of the setting, about the particular characters acting, internal monologues and personal reflections and narrations of experiences.

What then might be the most important aspect of autoethnographic writing?

“You show what happens, bring the reader into the scene - take them into the details, rather than telling what happened. The meaning is in the details and in the response.” (Ellis, 2004: 142).

As far as the therapeutic dimensions of ethnographic writing are concerned, we have to obviously differentiate between therapy and research. Carolyn Ellis is convinced that it is absolutely impossible to keep the therapeutic and research roles distinct, especially when we are working on an emotional or spiritual subject. Essential in this context is that our research has the capacity of providing understanding what was happening to us, personally, and in the course of the whole research, in order to allow others, especially our readers, to approach and remember similar circumstances in their own lives. There can be a highly therapeutic value inherent in the whole process of research, from the very beginning until the final part of writing - for ourselves personally, for our participants and our readers - and any dialogue between participants and ourselves can become a process of mutual exploration and shared discovery of our innermost selves. If we manage and allow ourselves to present our research-findings and insights in a personal, genuine, open-hearted and reflexive way, never trying to hide anything but instead expose ourselves, make ourselves vulnerable and tangible, open and sincere, we gently open up possibilities, within our readers and the audience we want to reach, to come closer to themselves on an emotional, heart-felt level. *“How do we learn to write so that our work is therapeutic and useful?”* Carolyn Ellis asks her students at the end of the chapter. (Ellis, 2004: 137). Ellis openly suggests us to not be so concerned with accuracy but instead become really involved in telling the best story we can from the material we have.

It is my deep wish and hope that I will be able to meaningfully adopt this approach in this dissertation. The empirical part of this work - *“Experiencing Ethnography”* - will be especially taking reference to the above mentioned approach, in so far that I will present the findings and insights of my fieldwork in Burma in a highly personal, self-reflexive, narrative and genuine way.

I whole-heartedly and devotedly dare to embark on the journey of uncovering myself, allowing you, appreciated reader, to join me on this emotional, spiritual quest and travel with me behind the scenes, backstage of my research.

In the following chapter I want to introduce and present to you the methodological approaches that I was fortunate to find meaningful and valuable for the study of religious, spiritual and supernatural phenomena that I encountered and studied in Burma in the course of my fieldwork.

1.4 Theoretical and Methodological Approaches for the Study of Transpersonal Experiences

1.4.1 Behind the Scenes

As outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, this work, and its findings and insights, is the result of almost six months of fieldwork in Central Burma. To allow you, dear reader, to imagine the whole field-situation better in a deeper and more comprehensible way, I want to tell you a little bit about my time and experiences in the field, unfolding to you the field-setting and concrete situations that I experienced. To allow you insights into my very personal field-diary shall enhance your impressions of what it was like to be there.

Against the background of the concrete situation in the field, we want to explore what made me choose the subsequent methodological approaches that I decided to adopt.

Field journal-entries ⁹

Doha Airport. 28.10.2006

Welcome! Here we go! It is 15 past 6 a.m. at Doha International Airport. Desert, desert, desert, as far as the eye can see, here and there some small bungalow-like houses and a little bit of green grass and plants, otherwise only desert. People from countries I can't imagine in their transit, and languages I have not yet heard, men in long white robes and women with tight black masks on their faces. Then, German tourists with backless tops, German and Austrian tour groups on their way to an all-in-all 10-day package tour through Thailand,

⁹ In the course of this dissertation we are moving towards a transpersonal, autoethnographic ethnography and a subsequent revelation of the researcher. To approach this subject gradually I decided to translate field journal entries at the beginning sections of the dissertation into English, whereas journal entries in the empirical part "*Experiencing Ethnography*" will be presented in the German original.

Burma or Cambodia. Sunrise in the desert, amazing colours that take away my breath. And I am here, happy and excited to be on the road again, alone, journeying to a place I have never been before. May all Buddhas and awakened beings remain close to me, this is what I honestly ask for. May I be guided and blessed, secure and confident, full of love and trust. May I always keep my mind positive, compassionate, full of love and understanding, patient in every moment and situation, open and ready to wait, listen and learn. May I understand the essence and heart of the Buddha's teachings so to approach each and every human being with a mind and heart full of compassion, devotion, surrender, hope, fearlessness and love.

I pull myself out of the bustling, busy duty-free shop area and visit the Muslim Women's Prayer room.

Rangoon. 28.10.2006

I have arrived, finally. Sayagyi U Shein and three of his companions have picked me up from the airport. At first I was unable to see or recognize them. It was night, overwhelming humidity and heat, and unbelievably many people mixed up with excitement and jetlag made it impossible for me to fully grasp myself. Too strong, new and vast were the first impressions and the feelings I had. I wanted to organize myself a taxi to go to U Shein's house. All of a sudden the people at the taxi-booth got very excited when they realized where I wanted to go. "Your friend is here! No go anywhere, wait!"

The next thing I remember was the amazing face of this small, elegant man U Shein appearing amidst the crowds, surrounded by a fine, white aura. Am I awake or do I dream?

We still have more than 30 degrees, now, in the middle of the night. Travelling more than an hour to Sayagyi's house where he immediately pulled me up the first floor to his shrine-room, his temple. He introduced me to all the Buddhas and spirits, the sacred objects, and then all of a sudden kneels down before a palm-sized ivory Buddha-statue, the most sacred object in the whole house. We have to pay respect to the Buddha and all the awakened divine beings. It would be unimaginable to take dinner before the prayers have been said.

From Monday onwards I will be able to stay in his house. It takes days to seek permission from government authorities to accommodate a foreigner in a Burmese household. U Shein immediately asked me if I want to be his apprentice in the Healing Arts and Traditional Burmese Medicine. I don't know yet.

Happy and unbelievable tired I fall in a deep, dreamless sleep.

Rangoon, U Shein's house. 29.10.2006

What an unbelievable day! We just finished a ritual which was taking the whole day. It is the last full moon before the winter starts and monsoon is finally over. Monks are receiving alms in their monasteries, and it is apparently also a very fortunate and good day for healing practices. Today

more than hundred people have been to U Shein's house, consulting him for very different reasons. The whole day people were praying, reciting mantras, spoke about their requests, got medicine from the Master. Finally we started an elaborate, long ritual where sacred and blessed milk had to be poured over dozens of Buddha-statues. I learned that this ritual, for reasons I did not understand, requires the presence of a stranger, a foreigner, who was I. Luckily I am born the same day as the Master, a Sunday. An even more fortunate sign! So I got to start pouring milk over the Buddha, milk from a small golden cup, seven times for each Buddha-statue, whereas I had to drink the last sip of milk myself and make a strong wish meanwhile. I have never been drinking such sacred milk.

I was received unspeakably lovingly and warm-heartedly in the family-circle. I am puzzled and confused, and at the same time strongly touched by the warm-heartedness and hospitality I encounter. I have to join dinner now.

In the Field

Finally, I was able to move to Sayagyi's house in an outskirt area of Rangoon, the former capital of the country. It was a highly bureaucratic act, costing an amount of money almost the monthly salary of a High school-teacher. The township is poor, water supply by far not constant, but not as bad as current, which is almost always cut off. People have to receive electricity through diesel-generators, which are noisy and smelly. Apparently it is the

government who decides which areas of town will be supplied with electricity.

The neighbourhood around U Shein's house is humble and modest, most families live in small huts, roofs are covered with corrugated iron, the only water at disposal is from a huge ton outside the house. Still, the small gardens and backyards are overflowing with lush tropic trees and plants, bananas, mangos, coconut-trees.

The day starts early. Monks from the nearby Pagoda start their chanting of the sacred verses long before dawn. Sutras are been transmitted via megaphone, so that as many people as possible can receive the blessings from hearing the sacred words and prayers. Hours and hours filled with singing and chanting. Also, early in the morning shortly after the sun has risen, monks go, barefoot as in the Buddha's days, for their daily alms-rounds. Lay men and women already expect them, and, in complete, but even more graceful, silence, offer their alms and donations to the monks and nuns. This daily ritual is of utmost importance to lay Buddhists as well as to monks and nuns, enabling the former to gain merit and purify negative karma and allowing the latter to gain material support from the community. Buddhist monks play an essential role in the Buddhist Sangha, providing the lay community with spiritual advice, religious teachings, and mental care and apprehension. Throughout the country they are venerated and honoured for their ascetic, pure life that is solely devoted to the study of the Buddhist



scriptures, the training of the mind through meditation and prayer, and the spiritual support and care of the community.

1.4.2 The Contribution of Transpersonal Psychology and the Idea of State-Specific Sciences: Personal Background

Being deeply inspired and touched on a personal level during my field residencies in Burma, I started doing literature-research on alternative, holistic research-approaches towards the study of religious and spiritual experiences. One day, when I returned from one of my fieldwork-stays in Burma, I met my dear Professor Dr. Manfred Kremser and open-heartedly told him from my work and the experiences in the field. At that time I was puzzled and confused over the different intense and transforming experiences I had during my field-research, experiences I was unable to align and integrate meaningfully at that time. I continuously had the feeling that I myself got very much involved in the subject of my research on a very personal, intimate and transforming level, and that I could not anymore, at a certain point, differentiate and separate anymore between myself, my research, the participants in the field and the experiences I was studying. It strongly seemed to me and occurred to me that the experiences I tried to study objectively and independently from an observing point of view, happened to become my very own experiences. “What do you do if you study and try to understand spirit possession, spiritual healing and the pantheon of spirits and celestial deities, and then, one day, you experience the spirits yourself?”¹⁰ I asked Prof. Kremser. “I am desperate and confused and I have the feeling that I will never be able to complete this dissertation on a professional, scientific level.” “It is marvellous and desirable when we have the chance of being transformed and renewed by the work that we do. Don’t be afraid, when your very own horizon of meaning and your worldview gets transformed and inspired in the course of your research. Instead, try to make transparent and comprehensible the change, transformation and amplification of ways of perceiving and seeing that you were able to discover!” Prof. Kremser encouraged me lovingly and confidently.

¹⁰ The conversation was lead in German and is only described here correspondently. In fact, I was fortunate to have been able to lead numerous such conversations with my dear Professor. Again, German originals are presented in the empirical part.

Slowly I was regaining hope and confidence. Prof. Kremser advised me to study Transpersonal Psychology and the research methods that were suggested there.

In the course of this chapter I want to share my encounter with Transpersonal Psychology, its philosophy, concepts and research-methods, and relate them to my very own research-approach.

1.4.2.1 Scientific Worldviews: The Cartesian-Newtonian Paradigm and the Perspective of Quantum Physics

“Is modern science, with all its sophisticated machinery, merely rediscovering ancient wisdom, known to the Eastern sages for thousands of years? Should physicists, therefore, abandon the scientific method and begin to meditate? Or can there be a mutual influence between science and mysticism—perhaps a synthesis?”
(Capra, in: Walsh/Vaughan, 1993: 189)

The scientific worldview and mode of perception has been governed for the last 300 years by what is commonly referred to as the *Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm*. The terminus of *paradigm* has been successfully introduced into the scientific debate by the influential philosopher of science Thomas Samuel Kuhn (1922-1996) and his ground-breaking book *“The Structure of Scientific Revolutions”* (1962) was and has been deeply influential in both academic and popular circles. Kuhn describes the term paradigm as *“conceptual system that dominates the thinking of scientific communities during certain specific periods of the evolution of science.”* (Grof, 1984: 5) A paradigm is therefore, according to Kuhn, *“an accepted example of actual scientific practice—examples include law, theory, application, and instrumentation together—that provide models from which spring coherent traditions of scientific research”*. (Kuhn, 1973: 10)

Research in the different forms of the scientific endeavour proceeds from certain commonly accepted perspectives and a specific worldview that form the fundamental ground of perception and approaching various sorts of scientific concerns. A paradigm provides the scientific community with legitimate scientific problems and tasks and offers accepted and

acknowledged ways of solving these tasks methodologically, proposes criteria for analysing data and gives a clear definition of what reality is, is not and cannot possibly be. (cf. Grof, 1984: 5) Once the paradigm is accepted by the whole scientific community, its basic philosophical assumptions are not questioned or further examined anymore. Instead scientific practice will be comfortably embedded within its set of beliefs and convictions, the scientific perception will not be reflected critically anymore.

Kuhn, however, argued that science progresses and develops in 'revolutions' whereby "*one scientific tradition establishes itself as dominant only later to be succeeded by a new mode of understanding the world; revolutions based upon new discoveries and methods of investigation.*" (cf. URL: <http://paranthropology.weebly.com/jack-hunter.html>, 25.07.2011)

The paradigm, or world-view, which has been dominated Euro-American science for the last three centuries, is beautifully explained by Viennese physicist Fritjof Capra in his successful and popular book "*The Tao of Physics: An exploration of the parallels between modern physics and eastern mysticism*" (1975), where he introduces the philosophical foundations of the predominant scientific perspective towards reality, based on the ideas of René Descartes and Isaac Newton.

French philosopher, natural scientist and mathematician **René Descartes** formulated his enormously powerful theory of the duality of mind and body, by assuming that what he called *res cogitans* - subjective experience, thinking, mind, conscience and the interior life world of the thinking individual - is essentially and entirely different and separated from what he termed *res extensa* - the objective realm of matter, the physical body, the entire physical universe, including, plants, animals, stones and stars and the external environment of the human mind. (cf. Tarnas, 1991: 349). With this concept the foundation for viewing nature and all its phenomena from a fundamental division into two separate and independent realms, that of mind and that of matter, was successfully laid. Descartes' philosophy and basic assumption had a tremendous influence

on the modes of thinking and perceiving in the Western world up to the present day. His famous sentence ‘cogito ergo sum’—‘I think, therefore I exist’ has *“led Western man to equate his identity with his mind, instead of with his whole organism. As a consequence of the Cartesian division, most individuals are aware of themselves as isolated egos existing ‘inside’ their bodies.”* (Capra, 1975: 21)

On the one side of the Cartesian Dualism are to be found the soul and consciousness of the human being, to be understood in the narrow sense of intellect and reason and the thinking activity of the human mind. On the other side of this dichotomy we find the external environment, the objects of the outside world, which all lack of subjective awareness, mind or purpose. All physical phenomena are to be perceived as entirely material objects that function like intelligent machines. In this world view one was convinced that God had created the universe and determined its mechanic principles, and consequently this universe, a machine created by the highest intelligence, would function independently and autonomously. (cf. Tarnas, 1991: 349) Descartes therefore raised the human rational mind, the only entity that would be capable of posing intelligent questions and finding plausible, rational answers endowed with reason, to be the highest authority in all questions concerning knowledge and science. With this insight and this assumption the world would ultimately be freed from religious concepts and ideas, the material world emancipated itself from superstitious, speculative, intuitive and non-rational thinking. Consequently the individual considers him-/herself to be an independent, free, self-determined, rationally thinking, and self-conscious being, who is endowed with the capacity to think, calculate, categorize, measure and manipulate fundamentally different from an objective God or the external world. According to Tarnas, the quintessence of this division between the rational subject and the material world was the birth of modern science: the capacity to gain secure knowledge of the world and elevate the human being to be the master and dominator over nature.

“Die Frucht dieser Spaltung zwischen rationalem Subjekt und materieller Welt war die Wissenschaft: die Fähigkeit sicheres Wissen von dieser Welt zu liefern und den Menschen zum ‘Herrn und Meister der Natur’ zu machen.” (Tarnas, 1991: 352)

To this concept and the new formulation of the nature of reality British naturalist and physicist **Isaac Newton** contributed his doctrine of mechanics upon which he developed the foundation of modern physics, which dominated all scientific thinking until the end of the nineteenth century. The basis for the Newtonian universe was the three-dimensional space, in which all physical processes would occur, an ‘absolute space’, immutable, unchanging and continually static and inactive. What truly seems remarkable and crucial in Newton’s understanding of the universe is that ‘time’, a further dimension, exists likewise independently, as an absolute determinant, does not have any connection or relation with the material world whatsoever and flows steadily from the past through the present into the future. Newton’s mechanistic universe was a universe of solid matter, which was comprised of basic elements, atoms, which are, by definition, indestructible. (cf. Grof, 1984: 6). Atoms interact with each other by the law of gravity according to fixed and unalterable regularities. These interactions take place in the above mentioned three-dimensional, absolute space, which is homogenous and completely independent from the presence of matter.

“Newton’s universe resembles a gigantic super machine governed by linear chains of causes and effects. It is strictly deterministic: if we knew all the factors operating at present, we should be able to reconstruct accurately any situation in the past or predict any event in the future. Although this determinism cannot be scientifically proven and the complexity of the universe prevents its practical testing, it constitutes one of the cornerstones of mechanistic science.” (Grof, 1984: 6)

The consequence of this perspective of reality is that it is principally possible to observe nature and its various phenomena from an objective point of view. Consciousness therefore is considered an insignificant product of subject matter. Within this dominant paradigm science was

considered to be a 'hard science', observer and observed are strictly separated, independent and unattached and the possibility for objective scientific observation was the ideal of scientific description.

The developments in modern physics in the twentieth century have been challenging and scrutinizing all major assumptions of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm. In the centre of this great upheaval which has had a sustaining and on-going influence on all major fields of research within science, stands the intellectual achievement of German physicist **Albert Einstein**, whose main achievement, the 'theory of relativity', was revolutionary for the comprehension of space and time.

"One of the most bizarre premises of quantum theory, which has long fascinated philosophers and physicists alike, states that by the very act of watching, the observer affects the observed reality." (cf. URL: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/1998/02/980227055013.htm>, 25.07.2011)

As cultural anthropologists we can neither demand from ourselves nor assert the claim to fully attain insight into the theoretical concepts which form the basis for the elaborate theory of quantum physics. I therefore want to share in the following paragraphs the ideas, works and interpretations that supported my rudimentary understanding of the subject.

In this regard Fritjof Capra's book *"The Tao of Physics"* is wonderfully helpful for the layperson in gaining insight in this demanding subject matter, since Capra has the ability in explaining extensive knowledge concerning applied physics in comprehensible clear terms, without presupposing a deeper understanding of theoretical physics or mathematics. The fundamental quintessence, the interpretation of reality according to quantum physics, can be summed up in the following quote:

"Quantum theory thus reveals a basic oneness of the universe. It shows that we cannot decompose the world into independently existing smallest units. As we penetrate into matter, nature does not show us any isolated 'basic building blocks', but rather appears as a complicated web of

relations between the various parts of the whole. These relations always include the observer in an essential way.” (Capra, 1975: 71)

The previous, taken-for-granted assumptions of science were confused and deranged by profound new scientific insights:

- Atoms, which were to be considered to be solid matter, according to Newton, turned out to be ‘empty’; matter was no longer the fundamental substance of nature. Instead the realization arose that matter has to be a form of energy, matter and energy are fundamentally exchangeable.
- Within the meaning of the theory of relativity, space is not three-dimensional and time is no autonomous unity. Both have a very profound interconnection, cannot be approached separately, but are intimately connected and form the four-dimensional continuum, ‘space-time’.
- Subatomic particles are equipped with a very ambiguous nature: They can be observed and described as particles and waves at the same time. Position and movement of one particle is not to be measured exactly and simultaneously. (cf. Tarnas, 1991: 450)

“At the subatomic level, matter does not exist with certainty at definite places, but rather shows ‘tendencies to exist’, and atomic events do not occur with certainty at definite times and in definite ways, but rather show ‘tendencies to occur’.” (Capra, 1975: 70)

The human observer has a crucial and influential role as far as the interaction and reciprocity of object and observer is concerned. According to Capra and other representatives of quantum theory, the classical perception of an independent and objective observation of nature is no longer maintainable.

“The Cartesian partition between the I and the world, between the observer and the observed, cannot be made when dealing with atomic

matter. In atomic physics, we can never speak about nature without, at the same time, speaking about ourselves.” (Capra, 1975: 71 f.)

In conclusion, we want to ask ourselves the question whether there exists an objective, observable outside reality to be discovered by the observer-scientist or whether the scientist and participant observer, as in the context of applied social and cultural anthropology, has an influence on his/her observations, determined by the research questions he/she poses, the methodologies and theories applied and the interpretations generated, which are in turn, influenced by particular social, cultural, economic and political circumstances and the respective personal, religious and spiritual values and worldviews of the individual?

The following quote I found highly inspiring, even though I am not sure if it really does fit in the context:

“Saints and mystics throughout history have adorned their realizations with different names and given them different faces and interpretations, but what they are all fundamentally experiencing is the essential nature of the mind. Christians and Jews call it "God"; Hindus call it "the Self," "Shiva," "Brahman," and "Vishnu"; Sufi mystics name it "the Hidden Essence"; and Buddhists call it "Buddha nature." At the heart of all religions is the certainty that there is a fundamental truth, and that this life is a sacred opportunity to evolve and realize it.” (Rinpoche, 1992: 48)

1.4.2.2 Development of Transpersonal Psychology and Main Themes

The field of transpersonal psychology emerged in the cultural and social muddle of the 1960s, particularly at the West Coast of the United States. The challenges and extremes of the 1960s - the Vietnam War, the flower-power-Hippie movement and the advent and widespread use and experimenting with psychedelic drugs and psychoactive plants, the growing fascination of and interest in philosophies and psychologies from the East - touched and awakened many people, and did also add to and introduce a process of self-reflection and closer examination among the various sciences. Spiritual teachings and meditation practices were openly discussed and practised and many people travelled to India or other South- or Southeast-Asian countries to meet religious and spiritual teachers and Gurus, and experience altered states of consciousness (ASC).

Transpersonal Psychology characterized itself as “fourth force” in psychology which aimed to recognize, understand and explore areas not currently examined within the contexts of behavioural, classical psychoanalytic, or humanistic psychology. (cf. Alexander, 1980: 193)

The word *transpersonal* has its etymological roots in two Latin words: *trans*, meaning “beyond”, which implies the existence of and the connectedness with something beyond the individual being; or “through” which refers to a connectedness among the various aspects of oneself, as well as a connectedness of oneself with others and with nature (cf. Braud/Anderson, 1998: 39), and *personal* which means person, mask or façade. *Transpersonal* therefore refers to an approach and viewpoint seeing beyond and transcending the seemingly separate individual person and emphasizing the relation, interconnectedness and alliance of all manifestations in the universe. This interconnectedness is one of the main characteristics of transpersonal psychology, the relationship between self and the cosmos and the idea that there is some integral link between the individual and the universe. To illustrate this approach and perspective which was dawning among transpersonalists, I want to give an appropriate quote by the British philosopher and psychologist William James, who is

considered to be one of the most important characters in the establishment of the American psychology of religion and whose thoughts still do play important roles in contemporary psychological studies of religious experiences:

"We with our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Conanicut and Newport hear each other's foghorns. But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the island also hang together through the ocean's bottom, Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir. Our "normal" consciousness is circumscribed for adaptation to our external earthly environment, but the fence is weak in spots, and fitful influences from beyond leak in, showing the otherwise unverifiable common connection." (James, in: Braud/Anderson, 1998: XXIII)

The fundamental consideration and assumption is here that—on an absolute and transcendent level—there essentially exists no separation between the various and manifold manifestations in our universe and there is a basic, all-pervasive unity underlying and connecting all living beings and all physical forms in the world. This consideration has to be understood thoroughly and integrated in order to understand the clear scientific position and the main themes and subjects that transpersonal psychology proposes. On the assumption that reality is unbelievably and indefinitely vaster, more complex and multi-layered than any scientific theory or any ideological system of beliefs, it is our absolute duty to maintain an emotional and mental open-hearted attitude and approach towards the exploration of the world and therefore not get attached to or hold on to existing scientific paradigms rigidly and inflexibly. (cf. Grof, 1986: 9)

This assumption and consideration consequently leads to the reflection and scrutinizing of conventional scientific approaches towards reality, human consciousness and religious phenomena. On that fundament,

science and its self-evident and orthodox paradigms are shattered in its foundation pillars, and instead a holistic and kaleidoscope vision of the human being and her/his possibilities is adapted.

1.4.2.3 Transpersonal Theory and the ‘Participatory Turn’

In the following section I aim to give a brief overview of the debate as far as the *theoretical foundation* of the transpersonal movement is concerned, primarily referring to the work of psychologist Jorge N. Ferrer and anthropologist Gregg Lahood. These theoretical positionings not only highlight the past and current trends of transpersonal studies, but furthermore form the theoretical basis for my own research of religious pluralism and shamanic worldviews and healing techniques in Burma.

Subsequent to these explications and clarifications I will lead over to a more practical, i.e. application-oriented complex of themes, elucidating and interpreting the influence of different conceptions of reality on the scientific methodological praxis. Charles Tart’s conception of state-specific-sciences will serve to visualize how transpersonal fields of knowledge can possibly be used and appreciated in the scientific research endeavour and the approaches of transpersonal psychologists Rosemarie Anderson and William Braud will conclude this section with a concrete advice and toolkit for performing applied transpersonal research.

Developments in the Field of Transpersonal Studies.

The transpersonal movement was first initiated in San Francisco in the counter-culture of the 1960’s. The emergence of this ‘*first turn*’ in the transpersonal vision cannot be disconnected from fundamental social upheavals and changes, activism and civil rights movements. In addition, the introduction and subsequent banning of psychedelic and mind-expanding substances, the outbreak of war in Southeast Asia and an increasing interest and fascination for Eastern religious and spiritual concepts and practices, have all to be taken into serious consideration. According to Gregg Lahood this first turn “*can be defined as an attempt to integrate psychologies East and West; an attempt to map the farthest*

shores of consciousness; [...] and the merging of pragmatic science with spiritual concerns." (Lahood, 2007a: 2)

The overriding attempt and declared goal of this first turn aimed at releasing the possessing absorption of the Cartesian-Newtonian worldview and contemplating over the spiritual potentials and capacities of the human condition. The field of humanistic psychology should be extended and transcended to include and fully take into recognition and appreciation the spiritual dimensions of human nature and existence. Non-ordinary states of consciousness were raised and valued as legitimate fields of study and a keen desire to integrate spiritual practices of indigenous and ancient spiritual traditions was an essential characteristic of the movement. (cf. Lahood, 2007a: 2)

Since its origins one of the main and central concerns of transpersonal theory was, and still is, to conceive spirituality and the experiential and cognitive dimensions of spirituality as central in our understanding of the human nature, its potentials and its interrelation with the cosmos. Transpersonal theory is not only meant to be an academic discipline with associated modes of theory-building, methodologies, etc., but, to put it in Ferrer's words: *"The transpersonal vision is a way of thinking and living self, other and world that can be diversely manifested not only in transpersonal states, but also in relationships, community, society, ethics, education, politics, philosophy, religion, cosmology, and almost any other area of human thinking, feeling and action."* (Ferrer, 2002: 7)

The essential assumption of transpersonal theory is that an encompassing and holistic understanding of the human condition and the cosmos is only possible and viable when including spiritual phenomena. Even if there are differences within the transpersonal movement as far as theoretical conceptions and viewpoints are concerned, transpersonal scientists are convinced that transpersonal and spiritual states of consciousness and related phenomena provide important and indispensable value in understanding human beings and the world.

The debate regarding the serious and sustainable construction of theory in transpersonal studies was, among others, initiated and elaborated by psychologist Jorge N. Ferrer, chair of the department of East-West Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Ferrer is the author of *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (2002), and co-editor of *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (2008). (cf. URL: http://www.ciis.edu/Academics/Faculty/Jorge_N_Ferrer_Bio.html, 29.07.2011)

Ferrer specifies a relevant distinction between what he calls the *experiential vision (first turn)* in transpersonal studies i.e. “*the modern understanding of transpersonal and spiritual phenomena in terms of individual inner experiences.*” (Ferrer, 2002: 15) and the *participatory approach (second turn)* i.e. “*the radical shift of emphasis from intrasubjective experiences to participatory events in the understanding of transpersonal and spiritual phenomena.*” (Ferrer, 2002: 115)

This shift from the *first turn* to the *second participatory turn* is considered crucial for the development and continuity of the transpersonal impulse and developments in science.

In the following I want to give brief overviews of the main theoretical considerations and assumptions and the evolvement of new ideas within these two *turns* in transpersonal studies.

The First Turn - The Experiential Vision.

In his book *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (2002) Ferrer offers a profound threefold analysis of the origins of the experiential approach within transpersonal studies. He comes to the insight that spirituality, as understood in the modern West, is basically understood in terms of individual intrasubjective, inner experiences, that individuals have transpersonal experiences that reach beyond their ordinary state of awareness and transcend their individual biographical histories. (cf. Ferrer, 2002: 15) In this context, the term *transpersonal* was solely conceived as ‘beyond the personal’, the presence of spirit was recognized in the individual interior depths. This

experientialism (1) is meant to address transpersonal and spiritual phenomena only in terms of individual, inner experiences. Ferrer is in no way denying that there is a profound intrasubjective dimension inherent in transpersonal experiences, but we have to carefully watch out to not mistake these experiences in terms of an individual ‘*subject*’ having experiences of transpersonal or spiritual ‘*objects*’, which would subtly maintain the Cartesian dualistic perception of the human reality. (cf. Ferrer, 2022: 2) Second in Ferrer’s analysis comes his assumption that transpersonal and spiritual phenomena cannot well enough be approached by the means and demands of empiricist science, i.e. through the methods of language and replicable, falsifiable, verifiable standards of inquiry. Studies in transpersonal and spiritual phenomena need to be freed from this *inner empiricism* (2) and the gateways to adopt own standards of validity have to be opened. (cf. Ferrer, 2002: 3)

Ferrer’s third point of criticism and reflection within the experiential turn refers to the universalistic vision that different spiritual traditions ultimately relate to one fundamental, common core, to put it most simply, that various spiritual philosophies and practices, although different approaches and paths, ultimately lead to the very same goal. This is what Ferrer labels as ‘*perennialism*’ (3). (cf. Ferrer, 2002: 3 f.)

The Second Turn - The Participatory Nature of Spiritual Knowing.

“Spiritual knowing is a participatory event: It can involve the creative participation of not only our minds, but also our hearts, bodies, souls, and most vital essences.” (Ferrer, 2002: 115)

Ferrer proposes that, instead of the mentioned emphasis of the first turn on individual, subjective dimensions, verifiable by the standards of empiricist science leading to the common goal of detecting a universal, spiritual ground, transpersonal phenomena, in the second turn, can be understood as *multilocal participatory events*. We want to examine this statement more closely.

To perceive transpersonal phenomena, i.e. transpersonal and spiritual experiences, as *events*, permits to recognize certain key features that broaden and transcend its perception of being solely inner experiences. Ferrer draws an analogy and compares transpersonal phenomena with a party *“in the sense that they are not only individual inner experiences but participatory events; they are neither subjective nor objective, they cannot be possessed (they are not anyone’s property); they can be optimized but never forced; and they can emerge spontaneously with the coming together of certain conditions.”* (Ferrer, 2002: 118)

The idea of transpersonal phenomena as participatory events accentuates and emphasises their spontaneous, experiencing character that involves the most vital dimensions of shared, interconnected and mutual being.

Further, the participatory vision realizes and stresses that transpersonal phenomena are *multilocal*, that is they can occur in various loci, not only in the individual, but also in a relationship, a community, a collective identity and a place. When considering the essential and vital connectedness and attachment of many cultures (referring here to the context of Burmese spiritual and religious systems) with the spiritual realm, with spiritual entities and ancestors, this statement proves especially meaningful. Understanding spirituality as a relational, dialogical, participatory experience suggests the assumption that the innermost realm or locus *“for spiritual realization is not the individual, inner, transpersonal experience but the community, the Between.”* (Ferrer, 2002: 119)

The most important characteristic of transpersonal phenomena, perceived as transpersonal multilocal events, is that they are essentially *participatory* in their nature, referring to the communal, shared and reciprocal potential of insight and cognition inherent in all transpersonal experiences. *“Transpersonal events engage human beings in a participatory, connected and often passionate knowing that can involve not only the opening of the mind, but also of the body, the heart, and the soul.”* (Ferrer, 2002: 121)

Transpersonal spiritual experiences are to be perceived as *communion*, as *co-creative participation*, that is presential, enactive and transformative for all participants involved in the event.

Again we arrive at the conclusion that the observer and the observed, the subject and the object, are not entirely separate entities, but they mutually and reciprocally participate in co-creating shared realities and joint experiences, realizing the fundamental dialogical, participatory nature of spiritual and transpersonal insights and experiences.

This insight has, in my estimation, an influence on applied research in the fields of religious- and consciousness studies that cannot be estimated enough. We have to keep in sight that all qualitative research in the mentioned fields of study requires not only a strong and authentic reflection of our very own transpersonal approaches, assumptions and experiences. ‘Knowledge’ is always created and generated in an interpersonal, interactive, mutual and collective endeavour that fruitfully involves and brings together the realms of meaning, value and experience of all human beings involved.

1.4.2.4 Scientific Paradigms: Limitations and Potentialities

Advocates of the transpersonal approach generally sympathize with the view that orthodox Western scientific understandings of human consciousness have too often been limited by the primarily rationalistic and scientific-technological perspectives regarding human consciousness and the variety of mental experiences. Scientific investigation and research emphasize a specialized and intense focus on narrowly delineated and limited aspects of reality which too often provoke blindness and loss of sight to other important aspects of the world (cf. Tart, 1998: 103).

Charles Tart firmly reminds that “*the consciousness of the individual scientist is far and away his or her most important instrument, yet for much of the last century the study of consciousness per se was considered outside the purview of empirical science.*” (Tart, 1998: 103).

Gary T. Alexander (1980) determines four fundamental assumptions or points of departure, which lay at the very basis of the intellectual

considerations of Transpersonal Psychology: (1) *“that Western science is inadequate as a paradigm for understanding human consciousness”* and should be considered as only one possible *“belief system among others which offers analyses of the human condition and its potentials”* (2) that Eastern ‘spiritual Psychologies’ and wisdom-traditions offer an alternative, transcending and substantive perspective on consciousness; (3) that there is a variety of different states of awareness to be experienced by human beings; (4) that there are techniques available to approach, evoke and experience these altered states of consciousness (cf. Alexander, 1980: 194).

As far as the first of these outlined assumptions is regarded, German psychologist Gudrun Koch-Göppert from the University of Oldenburg identified 5 criteria that still do signify and justify the monopoly position of Western science: (1) the three-dimensional space; (2) the linear time; (3) the subject-object-separation; (4) the local causality; (5) the consistent Self-organisation (cf. Koch-Göppert, 2007: 53).

In the following I want to explore these criteria and describe them in my own words and translation from Koch-Göpperts German book *“Wissenschaftliches Forschen: Topographie der Bewusstseinszustände”* (2007).

(1) The three-dimensional space: In Western cultures with the validity and acceptance of the nature-scientific paradigm, the human perception is bound to the naturalness and self-evidence of the three-dimensional space which is perceived having a concrete length, width and height. The three-dimensional space is the foundation-premise in physics and is considered the general, recognised validated space. The human body with its three-dimensional shape exists in a three-dimensional space. In this notion of classical mechanical science space exists independently from matter. Koch-Göppert mentions an experience which transcends the habitual orientation in the three-dimensional perception and leads the person into an experience of infinity and boundlessness; such experiences are primarily known from Eastern mystics or advanced meditators.

Especially when studying and researching shamanic cosmologies and worldviews it is of vital importance to the understanding and insight of the researcher to transcend the idea and assumption of the three-dimensional space. How can a shamanic journey into the underworld or the world of spirits and celestial beings ever be understood or imagined, if we do not take into consideration the possible existence of other realms of existence than the ones we know and habitually experience in an every-day state of consciousness?

(2) The linear time: Koch-Göppert quotes the Indian philosopher, author and spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti who states that time is a movement that the human being divides into past, present and future and as long as humans are doing that they will always live in conflict (cf. Koch-Göppert, 2007: 55). Our rational thinking creates the interval of the linear perception of time that is an arbitrary construction of the rational mind inherent in everyday-consciousness. The interval of time gets constructed between the arising of an idea and the concrete action. Hereby the present moment will be omitted and missed. It is of vital importance to situate and integrate the present moment in a conventional research- and study design. Otherwise insights and inspirations of immediate experience, which are only possible in the wide awareness of the present moment, will be left out completely. But is not this present moment exactly the state of awareness researchers find themselves in when they have a sudden idea or inspiration?

In the ancient Greek mythology we find two Gods who represent the different characteristics and dimensions of time. These aspects are of great inspiration for understanding and experiencing time.

On one side we find *Chronos* who is, according to Greek mythology, the God of time. He symbolizes the linear lapse of time and is also the God of the individual lifetime. His name means 'year' in Greek and he is the personification of time, the objectively constructed time. On the contrary, we find *Zeus'* youngest son *Kairos* who is considered to be the God of the 'convenient opportunity' and the 'right moment'. *Kairos* symbolizes the

present moment, the qualitative time as opposed to the quantitative linear time (cf. Koch-Göppert, 2007: 54).

This distinction is of exceptional relevance for researchers and the way how they approach their subjects and the participants and friends in the field. Allowing us to fully and whole-heartedly arrive in the present moment opens our awareness towards the manifold aspects and previously hidden dimensions of reality and give us a holistic picture of what is being studied.

(3) The subject-object-separation: In the construction of reality in the Western world the experience of being separated from animate and inanimate objects is considered to be the cultural norm. Most of us have the habitual feeling and perception of possessing a Self, enclosed in a body, where the centre of emotion and actions lies. As opposed to this perception there exists an external world of people and things that we come into contact with our senses. It is considered to be insufficient to recognize, describe and analyse phenomena exclusively in an analytical, rational manner. In this recognition lays the insight that everything and every object is indivisibly connected and linked which the seemingly external world that surrounds it (cf. Koch-Göppert, 2007: 56). This assumption is also one of the basic premises to be found in the Buddhist philosophy and in mystic philosophical beliefs like *Advaita Vedanta*, which is called here the ‘law of non-duality’: on an ultimate level there does not and never did exist any separation and division between our own minds and the reality that we perceive and experience. Non-dualism may be viewed as the understanding or recognition that dualism or dichotomy are illusionary phenomena. By transcending this subject-object-separation the researcher might be able to open up the self-environment-border and allows it to become permeable in order to come to a deeper understanding of the nature of reality. To quote Stanislov Grof in this context:

“Consciousness is not a product of the brain, but our primary principle of being and therefore plays a major role as far as the creation of our reality is concerned. [...] A consequence of this insight is that the human

*psyche is fundamentally coessential and ultimately identical with the entire cosmic creative principle.”*¹¹ (Grof, 1997: 21)

(4) The local causality: The effect or consequence of an incidence or an action is, within Western scientific research, always determined by a cause and can only be understood meaningfully by the law of cause and effect. Experiences which lack this local, causal coherence and transcend the habitual boundaries of space and time do not belong to the orthodox catalogue of assumptions, rules, laws and predictions and are therefore not being taken seriously by science (cf. Koch-Göppert, 2007: 56).

Probably most of us have had experiences where the physical, outside environment corresponded to our innermost, psychic conditions and situations. Imagine this every-day-life- example: I have a problem that I am unable to solve myself and I desperately need important information for the solution. All of a sudden somebody comes along and provides exactly what is necessary to find the right and desired answer. How was this possible? Another very common example might be that the death of a person manifests through a standstill of a watch or a breaking glass. Even though there is no rationally comprehensible and causal bridge, there still seems to be a connection that transcends the boundaries of space and time. Not until we consider these connections and correlations to be possible, will we be able to open up towards them and make use of them in the scientific context.

(5) The consistent Self-organisation: A healthy person possesses a relatively inconspicuous Self-structure; he/she experiences him-/herself as a vivid, actively acting person with an awareness of the own identity and continuity. This person is able to differentiate between ‘I’ and ‘Non-I’ in the encounter and interaction with others, and is able to separate oneself and to connect to others willingly and consciously. Most people have the impression and experience of themselves as being somehow detached from themselves. They localize the seat of their ‘I’ within the boundaries of the physical body, but nevertheless do not feel connected with this ‘I’. Koch-Göppert speaks in this context of an encapsulation of the physical body

¹¹ Translation by author

within which exists a 'controlling officer' who governs and operates all processes of thinking, feeling and acting and therefore being able to maintain this consistent self-organisation (cf. Koch-Göppert, 2007: 58). Consequences of this construction of reality are feelings of separateness and isolation from the environment.

By reference to these 5 criteria the constructed and seemingly real world can be described. All phenomena and experiences, perceived outside this everyday-world, fall out of the conventional frame of description and are labelled 'pathological' in the perception of Western science. The reality of scientific research is the everyday - world and all research-objects and - subjects are solely situated in the rational everyday-consciousness. The paradigm of the orthodox Western sciences underlies the monopoly of the everyday-consciousness.

A quote from transpersonal psychologist William Braud shall serve to conclude and to put Koch-Göppert's concern in a nutshell:

"A researcher's ideal stance is to be as neutral, uninvolved, and distant as possible with respect to what is being studied. Because researchers' qualities are irrelevant to their objective observations, researchers may be interchanged. Virtually identical findings are expected from all researchers who repeat the research procedures. [...] The researcher is the expert whose observations, views, hypotheses, and interpretations are privileged over those of the research subjects. [...] The major aim of research is the discovery of general principles or universal laws that provide the possibility of prediction, explanation and control."
(Braud/Anderson, 1998: 5)

1.4.2.5 Charles Tart: A Leading Proponent of the Transpersonal View

Charles T. Tart, Ph.D., was born in 1937 and grew up in Trenton, New Jersey ¹². He originally studied electric engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before he finally decided to become a psychologist. Charles Tart is a Core Faculty Member of the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, California, and he is internationally known for his psychological work on the nature of consciousness (particularly altered states of consciousness). Together with Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, Roger Walsh, Stanley Krippner, Frances Vaughan and others, Tart is considered to be one of the founders of the field of Transpersonal Psychology. His contribution in transpersonal psychological research, especially the idea of developing state-specific sciences, made him well known throughout different scientific areas.

“As well as a laboratory researcher, Professor Tart has been a student of the Japanese martial art of Aikido (in which he holds a black belt), of meditation, of Gurdjieff’s work, of Buddhism, and of other psychological and spiritual growth disciplines. His primary goal is to build bridges between the scientific and spiritual communities and to help bring about a refinement and integration of Western and Eastern approaches for knowing the world and for personal and social growth.” (cf. URL : http://www.paradigm-sys.com/ctt_bio.cfm, 12.09.2009)

Ground-breaking and highly innovative was Charles Tart’s development of *State-Specific Sciences* that I will now outline. State-specific sciences recognize various states of consciousness, existing at different levels of awareness. They try to adequately take into account the fact that human beings are not only capable of experiencing different states of awareness but are most likely to encounter and experience these states throughout their particular research processes. *“Such a science would examine these different states and the techniques by which they may be induced, e.g., psychedelic drugs, various forms of meditation, modes of biofeedback*

¹² For Tart’s complete biography refer to his homepage: http://www.paradigm-sys.com/ctt_bio.cfm

and so on, thus enabling us to come to a deeper awareness of the nature and potential of human consciousness.” (Alexander, 1980: 196).

Fundamentally Tart differentiates between *paradigmatic* (or *normal*) science and, what he calls, *essential science*, which he considers to be compatible with an enlarged study of the important phenomena of altered states of consciousness (ASC). He begins by discussing the four basic rules of scientific method to which a conventional scientific investigator is committed: (1) observation; (2) logical theory construction; (3) the testing of theory by predicting observable consequences; and (4) full communication linking these various processes (cf. Tart, 1998: 107).

As far as (1) *observation* is concerned, Tart states that all research begins with making observations and collecting data about what actually happens. It is necessary to realize and to acknowledge to oneself that we often can be insensitive and biased observers and that our individual and cultural accustomed states of consciousness (SOC) make us likely to observe certain parts of reality and to ignore or observe other parts of it with error. What is important here in Tart’s thinking is the assumption that the most important phenomena of ASC are either poorly observed or not at all because of systematically underestimating and devaluing them as ‘subjective’, ‘ephemeral’, ‘unreliable’ or ‘unscientific’.

“The essence of good science, however, is that we commit ourselves to observe whatever there is to be observed, whether it is difficult or not, whether it fits in with our beliefs and desires or not.” (Tart, 1998: 107)

Tart reminds us that the unbiased and isolated observer, whose observations do not affect the observed, is one of the traditional ideals of science, but has little if not no place at all when it comes to the establishment of state-specific sciences (SSS). Rather than pretending an objectivity that we do not have, we must try to understand the characteristics and distinctiveness of each individual researcher in order to compensate for it and understand its influence on the observed. (cf. Tart, 1998: 108) Especially when working on topics dealing with ASC, it is crucial to recognize that, in this case, the observer is the experiencer of the

ASC and therefore the observer's experiences are the data. This is the very first insight to understand Tart idea of state-specific sciences.

As far as (2) *logical theory construction* is concerned, Tart notes that the theory a scientist develops must consistently account for all that he has observed and should have a logical structure that other scientists are able to comprehend. (cf. Tart, 1998: 108) A scientific paradigm or a SOC is too logic or a set of logics: "*each has certain assumptions and rules for working within these assumptions.*" But, "*by changing the paradigm (with its paradigm-specific perceptions and logics) or altering the SOC to an ASC (with its paradigm-specific perceptions and logics) the nature of the theory building may change radically.*" (Tart, 1998: 108) Researchers in different states of consciousness may come to very different logical conclusions about the nature of the same events than will researchers in other states of consciousness. It is therefore necessary, if state-specific sciences want to be developed, to provide systematic training for scientists in different states of consciousness. Scientists who received training in the same SOC may then check on the logical validity and comprehensibility of each other's theorizing.

When we now come to (3) *observable consequences*, we want to keep in mind that essential science is built on a recognition that however 'logical' our theories might be, this fact is still not enough to guarantee progress in terms of understanding and mutual comprehensibility. Tart advises to avoid the trap of what he calls the *Principle of Limitless Rationalization*, which manifests when the paradigmatic framework of normal science becomes predominant and data that don't fit are automatically sub-rated and devalued or discounted and discharged altogether. "*In essential science, theory is always secondary to data. Paradigms and theories are useful when we use them as appropriate and useful but when we become attached to them and they function automatically we are enslaved by them and our vision becomes constricted.*" It is of vital importance to acknowledge the fact that ultimately, whatever is observed is nothing more but an experience in the observer's mind. (cf. Tart, 1998: 109)

As far as biases and pre-assumptions of the researcher are concerned, it is in (4) *communication/consensual validation* that Tart emphasizes the importance of “*full and honest communication about all the other aspects of the processes of observation, theorizing and prediction/consequences.*” (Tart, 1998: 109) Our colleagues will check and eventually expand our observations by adding in their own and also test and monitor our theories. A social and open feedback and correction process works to ideally reduce the effects of biases. It is conventionally required that observations should be capable of being made public; they must be replicable and comprehensible by any properly trained observer. “*Where the observations are reports of particular internal experiences, the (experienced) conditions that led to the report of certain experiences must be described in sufficient detail that others may duplicate them and consequently have experiences which judge to be identical. (...) The emphasize on the public nature of observation in science has a misleading quality insofar that it implies that any intelligent person can replicate a scientist’s observations.*” (Tart, 1998: 109f.). It will require a high degree of professional training, especially as far as research in ASC is concerned, in order to allow a scientific colleague or any other person to comprehend and reproduce observations and experiences.

Consequently, public observation and comprehensibility always refer to a limited, specially trained public. It is then only by basic agreement of those specially trained people that certain data will be accepted as a foundation for developing a science. That lay people cannot replicate the observations is of little relevance. (cf. Tart, 1972: 1205)

What Tart finds crucial to acknowledge in this context is what he calls ‘*state-specific communication*’. Given that two researchers in the same SOC are fluent in communicating with each other in that particular SOC, the communication between these two may be completely meaningless, deteriorated and senseless to an outside observer, an observer in a different SOC. Consensual validation may consistently be restricted by the fact that only observers in the same SOC or ASC are able to communicate adequately and meaningfully with each other and they may not be able to

communicate adequately to someone in a different SOC or in normal consciousness. (cf. Tart, 1998: 111)

1.4.2.6 State-Specific Sciences

“My state-specific sciences proposal is basically that our ordinary state is not the only or the "natural" state of consciousness. It is one particular way of organizing the mind. We develop various fields of science in it. They work quite well in some areas and inadequately in others. So let's expand our scope by looking at various ASCs: can we practice essential science in them? Can we observe in a state-specific fashion? Can we theorize with a state-specific logic? Can we test the consequences our theories predict by whatever state-specific logic is used within those states? Can we develop other, complementary sciences in various ASCs that will give us a full-scale look at what's possible? “ (Tart, 2000: 20) ¹³

According to Tart the practice of science is perceived as being performed and practiced by a small number of highly selected, talented and specifically trained people who spend a large amount of time making detailed observations on different subject matters of their particular interests. Normally they have special places, laboratories, instruments and methodologies that assist them in making more and finer observations. They speak to one another in a special technical language and theorize about their data in accordance with the specific logics they have established to construct elaborate logical systems. Their activities are mostly incomprehensible to lay people and their work may often not have consequences that affect in any way the lives of ordinary people. (cf. Tart, 1998: 111)

If state-specific sciences are to be created, Tart proposes that a concrete and systematic training in altered states of consciousness would be necessary and meaningful in order to allow practitioners to agree with one another that they have attained a specific SOC and will consequently be able to communicate with one another in that specific state.

¹³ The complete article can be downloaded at Tart's homepage: <http://www.paradigm-sys.com/uploads/helping%20to%20create%20TP%20-%20British.pdf>

Anthropologist Charles D. Laughlin provides a clear nexus to the anthropological research on ASCs. He labels *“transpersonalism as being a movement in science towards the acknowledgement and significance of data of extraordinary experiences that go beyond the boundaries of ordinary ego-consciousness.”* (Laughlin, in: Young/Goulet, 1994: 100). Transpersonal anthropology would then be the study of transpersonal experiences cross-culturally. Laughlin reminds us that anthropologists have long recorded on extraordinary experiences reported by their informants and even some anthropologists have even undergone spontaneous transpersonal experiences themselves while in the field. In the beginning of his article *“Psychic Energy & Transpersonal Experience: A biogenetic structural account of the Tibetan Domo Yoga Practice”* (Laughlin, 1994) he proposes a concept that he calls ‘transpersonal participant-comprehension’, which calls for following the instructions and procedures given from within the culture (perhaps given by a teacher, shaman, or guru) *“leaving oneself open to whatever experiences arise as a consequence of performing ritual and symbolic practices, and recording what happens, using whatever symbolic media available. This participation frequently requires the “suspension of disbelief” necessary for entry into domains of occult meaning and experience.”* (Laughlin, in: Young/Goulet, 1994: 102)

Laughlin encourages us to adopt a reflexive, developmental perspective and asks us to be open and ready towards an emic exploration of the experiences being studied, prepared that transpersonal ethnography might change the organization of consciousness of the ethnographer. The following quote clarifies his suggestion: *“Most westerners, including most scientists, are very poor phenomenologists. They are not trained to anything like the level of transpersonal sophistication to be found in certain other cultural traditions. A mature contemplative is a ‘state-specific’ scientist who has undergone training sufficient to examine the internal features of his or her own mentation while exercising an uncommon degree of tranquillity and vigilance.”* (Laughlin, in: Young/Goulet, 1994: 104)

Before turning to the potential of Eastern Spiritual Psychologies and mental practices, I want to end this passage with a quote of William James:

“Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.” (cited after: Alexander, 1980: 196).

I want to eagerly and excitedly turn now towards specific training options and ways of guiding and teaching the mind in transpersonal research skills, towards transpersonal approaches that expand the usual dimensions for studying human experience by directly employing alternative modes of awareness, imagination and intuition in the conduct of the research.

1.4.2.7 The Potential of Eastern Philosophy and Mental Training: Rosemarie Anderson's Intuitive Inquiry

"To me, science is really a very idealistic vocation. Science to me is a spiritual quest, because you make a commitment to discover truth, no matter what you would like things to be. You make a commitment to constantly work to discover and abandon your biases, to put aside your own beliefs when they interfere. To try to get at the truth for its own sake, which to me is a very noble ideal."
(Tart, 2000: 22) ¹⁴

In this chapter I am referring to Rosemarie Anderson's article "Intuitive Inquiry: A Transpersonal Approach" and to William Braud's article "Integral Inquiry: Complementary Ways of Knowing, Being and Expression" in Braud's and Anderson's book "Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences" (1998).

These approaches, and the consequent application of the research-strategies proposed, form a meaningful and easy comprehensible way for becoming familiar with and practicing a transpersonal approach within social science. Both are fundamentally grounded in an Eastern psychological perception insofar that experiences and processes are addressed that extend the personal or individual, and go beyond the usual limits of ego and personality, an approach that is essential and constitutive for Buddhist and Hindu mystic traditions.

Anderson's concept and strategy present and provide a toolkit for bringing imagination and intuition back into scientific inquiry. To be able to explore the full dimensions of human consciousness and experience, today's epistemologies must be enthusiastic, spirited and dynamic. (cf. Anderson, 1998: 70)

In the first part of her article Anderson is proposing different, and in her conception, essential qualities which should be indispensable components of scientific inquiry.

¹⁴ The complete article can be downloaded at Tart's homepage: <http://www.paradigm-sys.com/uploads/helping%20to%20create%20TP%20-%20British.pdf>

Firstly, the element of compassion is mentioned in this perspective, arguing that research, which is informed and guided by compassion, is qualitatively highly different from an emotionally detached approach. Our values, motivations and intentions frame the manner of our thinking and actions, therefore we should be very alert that compassion and appreciation, as a basic and fundamental prerequisite, guide the research process from the very beginning onwards. Anderson recalls her own research on sacred weeping and emphasizes that the capability and openness towards her own experiences in this context allowed compassion and resonance with the experience of others to occur. She strongly argues for the principle of compassion as value and principle of validation as it makes implicit processes in scientific inquiry more explicit and accessible. (cf. Anderson, 1998: 71)

Secondly, she introduces the principle of sympathetic and participative resonance in scientific endeavour as a validation procedure for the researcher's particular intuitive insights and syntheses. This idea suggests that research has the potential and capacity for immediate apprehension and recognition on the side of the researcher and on the side of the audience that is the addressee of the research findings. Meaning and insight passes somehow directly from the writer to the reader or listener by calling back and remembering an experience already shared by both. (cf. Anderson, 1998: 73 f.)

Furthermore, Anderson builds on the premise that the personal is universal, arguing that intuitive inquiry positions the experience and interpretation of the researcher at the centre of inquiry and the depth of a researcher's intuitive understanding gives a universal voice and character to the research findings. (cf. Anderson, 1998: 75) It is necessary and advised when wanting to acquire this tool of intuitive inquiry to at least try to transcend our senses of separateness in order to allow us to come together at the threshold of appreciating, knowing and acknowledging an aspect of life that we might share. Even how unfamiliar and unknown an experience might seem to us, the attempt to personally and individually express the experience or phenomenon encountered may allow us to see another's expression of experience as understandable and valuable. It is

clear in Anderson's explanation that the researcher is compelled to actively integrate and advocate various forms of expanded states of awareness in order to establish an "inverted perspective" which allows him to lean into an experience intuitively to gain knowledge and insight inwardly.

"Intuitive Research Methods emphasise the unique and personal voice of the individual researcher and depend on the experiences and insights of the researcher at every phase of the research process." (Anderson, 1998: 75)

Another aspect that should be part of intuitive inquiry is the perception to think of research procedures and protocols as a ritual in order to have the capacity to reveal different layers of meaning. Here an intuitive and introspective perspective is demanded in order to thoroughly permeate the nature of an experience. We have the possibility to approach every step of our scientific inquiry with appreciation, joyful curiosity and gratitude and then create for ourselves the space to perceive our work as a sacred practice. At this point we want to remember Charles Tart's statement that science is fundamentally a spiritual quest devoted to the discovery of truth. (cf. Tart, 2000: 22) It seems highly relevant for the outcome of any scientific work, which motivations and intentions lie at the very base of any research endeavour: If the motivation is guided by appreciation, joy, empathy and gratitude, the outcome of our work will be inspiring, motivating and enriching for ourselves and our audience.

The more we might be able to enter the described process, the more another element will hopefully emerge: the element of delight and surprise throughout the whole scientific process. (cf. Anderson, 1998: 80) In this part of her article Anderson actually mentions features of inquiry that touched me personally since I was also able to experience them many times in the course of my own research.

Particularly she mentions thoughts in the night and intuitions that might occur that can surprisingly lead to new insights and new ways of looking at old challenges and problems.

And then Anderson, referring to Barbara McClintock, makes a statement which, when we really internalize it, and reflect upon it sometime, might radically change the whole way we approach our work, our topic and the whole methodologies with which we used to approach a certain subject:

“Knowing a thing requires loving it”. (Anderson, 1998: 80)

By loving and through fully and devotedly living the experience studied, the researcher has the chance and delight to look from inside the experience and neutrally comes to know what is there until the essential qualities of the experience come to life as the researcher's own experience. As Braud and Anderson put it in the introduction chapter of their book: *“A radically different attitude needs to be cultivated in the new science. The old humility, awe, wonder, and delight in the cosmos must be restored. These are critical to regaining a reverence for nature. [...] In doing science, the prerequisite attitude involves letting the phenomena speak for themselves, rather than forcibly posing one's hypotheses on the phenomena.”* (Braud/Anderson, 1998: 15).

1.4.2.8 Intuitive Research Skills

In the second part of the article, Anderson provides us with the specific research skills that are necessary and supportive for intuitive inquiry. How do we really put these insights and valuable recognitions into concrete practice while in the field?

Studying the pantheon of human experience requires comprehensive and all-embracing methods that engage logic and analysis as well as our capacities for imagination, intuition, emotion and alternative states of consciousness. (cf. Anderson, 1998: 82) Here Anderson introduces the element of *reflective listening* to our own experience as researcher as well as to the experiences of others, meaning that we are constrained to thoroughly explore and record all the features of our experience and our motivation for undertaking the specific study. It is essential to use the results of that inner reflection as an interactive template to listen and understand the experiences of others. *“The researcher's capacity for reflective listening to him/herself and to others initiates a field of*

sympathetic resonance that facilitates the capacity of all participants in the process to listen to the depths of their experiences." (Anderson, 1998: 83). What seems crucial in thoroughly and comprehensively applying the principle of reflective listening is the capacity of temporarily putting aside all our pre-conceptions, pre-assumptions and theories that we might already have in mind concerning the topic of our study. We are called to approach whatever subject under study with an open, wide, attentive and unbiased beginner's mind. This analogy is often found in Zen Buddhist philosophy: *"The practice of Zen mind is beginner's mind. The innocence of the first inquiry - what am I ? - is needed throughout Zen practice. The mind of the beginner is empty, free of the habits of the expert, ready to accept, to doubt, and open to all the possibilities. It is the kind of mind, which can see things as they are, which step by step and in a flash can realize the original nature of everything."* (Suzuki, 1973: 13).

Reflective listening brings us then to the next characteristic of intuitive research skills which Anderson calls *indwelling*, referring to the process of turning inwardly to seek deeper, wider and more genuine understanding of the quality or aspect of human experience. Here it is necessary for the researcher to learn how to abide attentively, neutrally and lovingly in the realization process in order to gain every possible meaning. *"Indwelling on a particular facet of human experience often becomes a preoccupying feature of the researcher's daily activities. The researcher becomes the eye of the inquiry."* (Anderson, 1998: 84). The process is fully conscious and deliberate, and whatever is encountered in the process becomes raw material for enquiry: dreams, relationships, newspapers, sudden encounters, casual conversations etc.

Anderson continues throughout the article to remind the reader that the heart of all transpersonal research is personal and social *transformation*. One of the unique properties of applying transpersonal approaches to research is the potential transformation of the researcher and all beings involved in the research endeavour. The whole research process should therefore be approached as comprising transformative potential for the researcher as well as for all those involved in the process. In intuitive inquiry the researcher, the participants and the audience ideally work

together to give a mutual expression of the experience which each of them has; everybody involved is somehow changed in the process.

Summarizing we can state that the concept and idea of Intuitive Inquiry as proposed by Rosemarie Anderson is meant to be a disciplined, structured form of *inward discovery*. The researcher is actively encouraged to let the particular facet of human experience that she/he studies for his research also be part of his own horizon of meaning and experience. The particular experience studied ideally also takes place in the awareness of the researcher in the course of the inquiry. (cf. Anderson, 1998: 87)

Intuitive Inquiry is fundamentally guided and permeated by the assumption that the person and world co-constitute one another, they are inextricably intertwined and one can have no meaning when regarded independently of the other. Therefore, in order to understand the seemingly outside world, one has to fully accomplish the inward journey.

1.4.2.9 Organic Research: The Parable of a Tree

“Organic Inquiry is based on feminist principles, and is a research method rooted in respect for the feminine, the earth and the involvement of those that are part of the study. It takes into account the notion that as human beings doing research, try as we may to be completely objective, it is impossible. It therefore includes the researcher’s story as an essential part of the research itself, instead of focusing on just the stories of the participants. It also invites Spirit in, as part of the study, and is considered to be partially responsible for the transformation. The researcher, the participants, and the readers of the study are all part of the transformative change that this approach hopes to bring.”

(cf. Jennifer Clements, URL: <http://www.itp.edu/resources/sacredfeminine/research-organic.php>, 11.08.2011)

The following passage is meant to be a *visualization exercise* addressing the personal and sacred aspects of one’s chosen research topic. Inspired by the idea of Organic Research¹⁵, developed by transpersonal psychologists Jennifer Clements, Dorothy Ettling, Dianne Jenett and Lisa Shields, I want to share their wonderful parable of a tree symbolizing the different stages of research as it unfolds in its progress and growing. (cf. Clements et al., in: Braud/Anderson, 1998: 114ff)

Let’s envision ourselves to be gardeners who aim to grow healthy, strong and prosperous trees. The tree and the process, development and transformations it needs for growing represents our research, from our first, initial ideas to the final result.

Sacred: Preparing the Soil

Before any seeds can be planted, the ground must be prepared carefully and diligently, the soil needs

¹⁵ For more information concerning Organic Research, refer to: <http://www.serpentina.com/research/organic-ifresearchsacred.html>

to be loosened and released, old stones and roots want to be removed.

Similarly the ground and foundation of our research needs to be prepared in an adequate, careful and sensitive way. It will be amazingly beneficial and valuable to the development of our research if we reconsider and reflect old ways of thinking, self-evident assumptions, convictions and belief systems. Digging them out from the soil of our research allows the sacred to emerge, creating a space where the encounter with the divine can take place.

We want to create a respectful attitude, honouring ourselves and all participants involved in our projects, building a strong focus in our minds and hearts to recognize and realize the gifts of the unconscious and the divine.

Personal: Planting the Seed

After we have been preparing the ground, the fundament for our research, the earth is ready and receptive for the seed. The seed, in our analogy, represents the initial idea and concept of our research, which ideally arrives from our very own personal experience. The topic of our research has a crucial meaning and importance for us on a personal level. Our very own stories and personal experiences become the seeds, the core of our study. We realize that the more we are courageous and brave to give personal voice to our research the more we allow the reader of our work to become transformed and enriched.

Chthonic: The Roots Emerge

When the ground has been prepared with sensitivity and reflexivity and the seed has been planted deep in the earth, it's up to us now to fully trust that what is happening underground will be successful and fruitful. Roots will emerge and create a network meaningful in its own right. We are realizing that this branching and evolving process follows the laws and rules of nature, and not those of the gardener. Our research has an underground, chthonic development and dynamics of its own; our contribution at this phase of our work is to become sensitive and receptive towards the flow and movement naturally inherent in the process of our study.

Relational: Growing the Tree

A gentle and delicate tree trunk, a graceful plantlet, begins to emerge above the ground, and we as gardeners are able to see the development and growth of our tree. The branches of our tree are the stories, experiences and various contributions of our participants, informants, hosts and friends involved in our research project. They all contribute equally and mutually to our work, the branches are connected and inseparably interwoven with the main trunk of the tree, our core research topic.

Transformative: Harvesting the Fruit

We remember that, through our personal as well as relational perception and alignment of our work, all participants involved harvest the transforming fruits of our tree. In the centre of organic research stands

the personal transformation of researcher, co-researchers, readers and others that are being touched and enriched by our work. The willingness to be changed and transformed through personal and genuine involvement in the topic under study is the prerequisite for a successful organic research.

(cf. Clements et al., in: Braud/Anderson, 1998: 114ff)

The perspective and approach of Organic Research is a wonderful example for a transpersonal research method that invites *trans-personal* dimensions, transcending the subjective, personal realm into the sphere of the sacred, including not only personal but also interpersonal dimensions. *Intersubjectivity* is essential in realizing the interconnectedness and connectivity between various aspects of ourselves and between the participators and contributors of our study.

1.4.3 Transpersonal Anthropology: Methodological Approaches in Anthropology of Religion and Consciousness

1.4.3.1 The Origins of Transpersonalism in Anthropology: Early Representatives

Austrian-American anthropologist **Erika Bourguignon** (born 1924 in Vienna) has been a central and relevant figure in Anthropology of Consciousness for many decades. Her influential work on possession and altered states of consciousness (ASC), *“Religion, altered states of consciousness and social change”* was published in 1973, several years after the formal founding of the transpersonal movement in science. The importance, prevalence and central significance of ASC for a holistic understanding of cultures and personhood is given clear expression in Bourguignon’s work.

“The presence of institutionalized forms of altered states of consciousness in 90% for our sample societies represents a striking finding and suggests that we are, indeed, dealing with a matter of major importance, not merely a bit of anthropological esoteria. It is clear that we are dealing with a psychobiological capacity available to all societies, and that, indeed, the vast majority of societies have used it in their own particular ways, and have done so primarily in a sacred context.” (Bourguignon, 1973: 11)

It is therefore of immense anthropological significance that the majority of cultures around the planet acknowledges and appreciates the existence and cultivation of states of consciousness entirely different and transcendent from the mode of our normal, rational waking consciousness.

Among the early advocates and pioneers, who draw attention to alternative, intuitive modes of perception and cognition, was French philosopher **Lucien Lévy-Brühl** (1857-1939) who formulated the ‘law of participation’ or ‘participation mystique’, *“the discovery of the ambience of mystical meaning that surrounded the senses of ‘primitives’ that went beyond partial categories such as ‘sympathetic magic’ or ‘contagious magic’ and included all senses and meaning in one world of ancient*

tradition in which everything had a 'soul' and humankind was bathed in it while life lasted." (Turner, 1992: 11)

According to anthropologist of consciousness Gregg Lahood, Lévy-Brühl's concept of the '*law of participation*' can be seen as a precursor of *participatory knowing*, which is central in the current debate among contemporary transpersonal theorists and advocates of the *participatory turn* in the transpersonal movement (cf. Lahood, 2007: 38).

Lévy-Brühl clearly refers to the mutual, dialogical, participatory nature of transpersonal and spiritual experiences:

"The object is presented to the subject as in a certain sense distinct from himself; except in states such as ecstasy, that is, border states in which representation, properly so called, disappears, since the fusion of the subject and object has become complete. Now in analysing the most characteristic of the primitive's institutions-such as totemic relationship, the intichiuma and initiation ceremonies, etc .- we have found that his mind does more than present his object to him: it possesses it and is possessed by it. It communes with it and participates in it, not only in the ideological, but also in the physical and the mystical sense of the word. The mind does not imagine it merely: it lives it." (Lévy-Brühl, 1910/1985, ctd. in: Turner, 1992: 11)

German-American anthropologist **Franz Boas** (1858-1942) is, according to Lahood, also perceived as being an important ancestor and contributor to the transpersonal movement and vision in contemporary scientific theory. In 1883 and 1884 he did extensive anthropological fieldwork and participatory observation among the Inuit and obviously experienced what he called a 'conversion experience'. (Morris 1992, ctd. in: Lahood, 2007: 38) This experience ignited his concern with social issues, racial inequality and the racist biological determinism that he found in the dominant scientific theory of cultural evolutionism. Moreover the encounter and study of the Inuit transformed his understanding of ethnographic fieldwork in that sense the

“[...] ethnographic fieldwork began with the fact that the objects of ethnographic study (for example, the Inuit of Baffin Island) were not just objects, but subjects, and his [Boas] research called attention to their creativity and agency. More importantly, he viewed the Inuit as his teachers, thus reversing the typical hierarchical relationship between scientist and object of study.” (cf. URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Boas, 29.07.2011)

The idea of ‘apprenticeship’, which becomes manifest in Boas’ approach towards ethnographic fieldwork, is more and more becoming an important and recognized method in anthropological field research. *“By using apprenticeship as a field method, anthropologists and others who use this technique are turning their object of study back to itself; using what they know to behave in a way that will enable the acquisition of more information and better understanding.”* (Coy, 1989: XII)

Keeping the ideas and concepts of those who paved the way for transpersonal anthropology in mind, the main thoughts, theories and actual experiences of contemporary trends in transpersonal anthropology shall be explained and clarified subsequently.

1.4.3.2 Main Ideas of Transpersonal Anthropology

As a basic principle we want to treasure our insight that transpersonalism in science is considered as an approach in which extraordinary states of consciousness - and the experiences deriving from them - are considered especially relevant and valuable for the gathering of data. The scientific study of experiences and insights that derived from altered states of consciousness is the central concern of the transpersonal approach. Transpersonal anthropology is then the study of transpersonal experiences and related phenomena in a cross-cultural approach, whereby the consciousness of the individual researcher plays a crucial role in the whole research endeavour.

“Transpersonal anthropology research is the investigation of the relationship between consciousness and culture, altered states of mind

research, and the inquiry into the integration of mind, culture.”
(Campbell/Stanimford, 1978: 28)

Emeritus Professor for anthropology and religion at the department of sociology and anthropology at Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada) **Charles D. Laughlin** is widely considered to be one of the main founders of and contributors to the field of transpersonal anthropology. Moreover he is known and recognized for having co-founded a field within neuro-anthropology, an approach he called *Biogenetic Structuralism*, a theory that combines anthropology with the insights of neuroscience and quantum physics. (cf. URL: <http://www.biogeneticstructuralism.com/index2.htm>, 31.07.2011)

In order to understand and accomplish the goals of a transpersonal anthropological research approach the different modes and ways in which experience and knowledge may be gathered have to be illuminated and explained.

Again, it is of vital importance, to call to mind that the vast majority of human societies operate upon multiple realities, i.e. states of consciousness that differ from the normal waking reality, are considered to be valuable and the experiences and insights gained in these states are approached in an appreciative manner.

According to Laughlin positivistic researchers, committed to the Cartesian-Newtonian dualistic viewpoint, long defended an uncritical preference of ‘monophasic’ consciousness, that is, the “*only phases of consciousness appropriate to the accrual of information about the world are those acceptable as ‘normal waking consciousness’.*” (Laughlin, in: Walsh/Vaughan, 1993: 190) Experiences made and insights gathered in altered states of consciousness would generally be devalued and labelled as ‘subjective’, ‘dream’, ‘imagination’, ‘delusion’ etc. and their value for a holistic, comprehensive scientific understanding would therefore consequently be underestimated.

This monophasic bias which characterized early anthropological approaches towards field research are recognized by Edith Turner as

fundamental hesitations that occur while participating in the field, fear of getting too much involved in the topic emotionally or entering states of consciousness that are uncommon to scientific rationalism and therefore seeking to create a safe zone against too much involvement and participation. (cf. Turner, 2003: 109 ff.) Turner calls this '*fear of religious emotions*', a shyness, embarrassment and hesitation to expose the 'I' in anthropology.

As stated earlier, this tendency to favour monophasic consciousness originates in the worldview of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm that has governed the Western sciences for centuries and influenced its methodologies to only accept the waking, rational state of consciousness as the only state in which valuable information may be collected. In this context anthropologist Tara W. Lumpkin observes what she calls '*the loss of perceptual diversity*' in 'developed' nations: "*Perceptual diversity allows human beings to access knowledge through a variety of perceptual processes rather than merely through everyday waking reality. Many of these perceptual processes are transrational altered states of consciousness (meditation, trance, dreams, and imagination) and are not considered valid processes for accessing knowledge by science.*" (Lumpkin, 2001: 37)

The majority of human societies, as stated above, knows, recognizes and appreciates a variety of different states of consciousness, the experience of multiple realities and the appreciation of perceptual diversity. Charles Laughlin has introduced the terms '*monophasic*' and '*polyphasic*' to describe the different states of consciousness as discovered and valued in different cultures that can be found throughout the world.

He demonstrates that most human societies cherish the integration of experiences derived from two or more alternative phases of consciousness and presents us the example of Tibetan Buddhism, where the integration of waking, meditative and dream consciousness is a fundamental fact. (cf. Laughlin, in: Walsh/Vaughan, 1993: 191) Also psychologist and transpersonal scientist Roger Walsh reminds us in this context that "*polyphasic cultures value and derive their worldviews from multiple*

states such as ordinary waking, dreaming, and various contemplative states” (Walsh, 1993: 125) and Tara Lumpkin adds that “polyphasic cultures value perceptual processes that use altered states of consciousness, such as dreaming, lucid dreaming, contemplation, ecstatic and trance states, as well as ordinary waking consciousness.” (Lumpkin, 2001: 38)

Is it possible that, according to Laughlin, a failure to or denial of integrating polyphasic consciousness may result in psychopathology?

Has it been a major hindrance to the formation of a sophisticated theory within the anthropology of religion and consciousness that monophasic anthropologists long refused to produce alternative states of consciousness in themselves leading to a “*loss of intuitive insight*”? (cf. Laughlin, 1988: 32)

Altered states of consciousness and transpersonal phenomena have been in the centre of anthropological interest and investigation of ‘non-Western’ cultures since centuries.

Edith Turner asks again and again devotedly: *“The ethnographer’s own experience of spirits and witches should be treated as anthropological data. Is it correct for our discipline to close itself off from what is of major concern to its field people? I am afraid there is a realm ahead for some of us - a rather frightening one - into which we must pass if we are to hold up our heads as anthropologists: the realm of spiritual experience.”* (Turner, in: Young/Goulet, 1994: 72)

1.4.3.3 Training for Transpersonal Anthropologists according to Charles D. Laughlin

“With very few exceptions, the work of most anthropologists reflects an ethnocentric bias toward monophasia. This appears quite ironic when considering that anthropology is probably the oldest transpersonal discipline to be found among the sciences.”
(Laughlin, in: Walsh/Vaughan, 1993: 191)

A strong call for anthropologists of religion and consciousness to venture to enter different states of consciousness and recognize the realm of spiritual experiences within themselves is found to be at the heart of the debate in transpersonal anthropology.

Young and Goulet (1994) bring out this point most clearly in the introduction to their anthology *“Being changed by cross-cultural encounters: The anthropology of extra-ordinary experience”* (1994): [...] *Anthropology has not been able to fully shake off its earlier involvement with cultural imperialism. [...] Emic views are not considered as serious alternatives to Western scientific conceptions of reality. In other words, one’s informants are not taken seriously.*” (Young/Goulet, 1994: 10)

We have to appreciatively acknowledge the existence of multiple realities that offer being experienced by the human consciousness and actively make an effort in transcending the long-accustomed realm of our familiarized, common, rational everyday-awareness. As anthropologists in the fields of religion and consciousness and as active and engaged fieldworkers we face a unique opportunity in taking the realms of existence, meaning and experience that we are fortunate to encounter in the life-worlds of our field-informants and -friends as serious alternatives to our ‘Western’ scientific understanding of personhood and cosmos.

One possibility how this task will be achieved is proposed by Charles Laughlin’s training for transpersonal anthropologists, who underlines that the willingness to undergo a personal transformation throughout the research process stands in the heart of the transpersonal anthropological

training. This is, of course, a very demanding and ambitious challenge, appropriate only for those individuals “*with a strong and durable, but flexible, ego structure, individuals who are capable of confronting novelty without danger. [...]*” (Laughlin, in: Walsh/Vaughan, 1993: 194)

Ideally the transpersonal apprentice is guided and supported in this process by someone familiar of transpersonal experiences, an experienced adept or shaman. Laughlin emphasizes that one of the central achievements of a transpersonal anthropologist is to remain a capable, rational, abstract scientist while at the same time participating fully in polyphasic explorations. It is of immense relevance for transpersonal anthropologists to strive for mastery what Laughlin terms ‘*cross-phasing*’: a process of adequate transmission of information across different phases of consciousness. What does this mean in an applied and practical sense? Laughlin, with his background in neuro-anthropology explains ‘*cross-phasing*’ in neuro-scientific language but does not cut out to give clear, practical examples for the successful integration of ‘*cross-phasing*’: (1) information and insights from dreams, imagination or meditation that can be actively and consciously used to gain access and understanding of the unconscious and (2) perhaps the most persuasive and brilliant example: information retrieved by shamans in expanded states of consciousness directly applying to a this-worldly situation and task. (cf. Laughlin/Mc Manus/Shearer, 1983: 145)

Examples of a lack of the positive integration of ‘*cross-phasing*’ would consequently be any practitioners of trance or possession or even people suffering from schizophrenia or the borderline-syndrome, who, when leaving the altered state of consciousness are completely unaware of it and incapable of gathering any valuable information or insight.

A transpersonal anthropologist would therefore, in the course of his training, be able to master the degree of ‘*cross-phasing*’ inherent in many cultural and religious institutions. He or she would be able to master activities and gather information in one state of consciousness which would consequently deepen his/her insight and understanding in another state of consciousness. Laughlin encourages transpersonal anthropologists

to actively and wholeheartedly participate in transpersonal events in the field, like possession- or divination - ceremonies, shamanic rituals, dream-work, meditative rites and the like. He points to the fact that accomplished transpersonal fieldwork is the extension of the method of participant observation:

“Transpersonal anthropology is really just a natural extension of the grand tradition of “participant observation” that has made ethnology so unique among the social sciences. But it is an extension that requires the ethnographer to “suspend disbelief” in the native worldview to an extraordinary extent and to participate actively in those native procedures that guide one to the extraordinary experiences that give the worldview its spiritual grounding.” (cf. URL: <http://www.biogeneticstructuralism.com/tutcont.htm>, 31.07.2011)

By successfully accomplishing ‘cross-phasing’, transpersonal anthropologists are put in the position to explore polyphasic phenomena which form the fundament of cosmologies of non-Western societies. It is to be supposed that, through transpersonal experiences that are gained through polyphasic consciousness spiritual and mythological worldviews and cosmologies can be understood and observed through a disciplined inward discovery. The relevance for transpersonal anthropologists of seeking transpersonal experiences cannot be highlighted enough: *“It is through transpersonal experience that humanity is potentially able to directly experience the essential unity of all phenomenal reality, is able to experience the dissolution of the personal ego and participation as an element in a greater being, is able to expand his knowledge and reality by transcending the barriers of corporeal existence and travelling into realms beyond the limits imposed by his immediate operational environment.”* (Laughlin/Mc Manus/Shearer, 1983: 148)

By aspiring to enter expanded states of consciousness as a form of controlled and reflected form of introspection, cross-cultural research on religious and spiritual worldviews and healing systems is being extended by integrating phenomenology as inward mental training to study the essential processes of consciousness. In our context of transpersonal

anthropology, phenomenology is understood as active inquiry of one's waking consciousness and altered states of consciousness, whereby a strong emphasize is put on experience and the willingness of the anthropologist to participate sensuously in different life-worlds. (cf. Knibbe/Versteeg, 2008: 49)

The indeterminate, unbounded and limitless nature of experience is here accentuated.

In their article "Assessing Phenomenology in Anthropology" (2008) Dutch anthropologists Kim Knibbe and Peter Versteeg locate the method of 'apprenticeship' in the centre of the phenomenological approach in anthropology. In this approach phenomenological researchers are advised to become an 'insider', a participant in the life-world of their host-cultures and ultimately a capable actor who realizes that knowledge is fundamentally and always created in interaction with the people in the field. It is in this methodological orientation that 'intersubjectivity' becomes of vital importance for the holistic production of knowledge. (cf. Knibbe/Versteeg, 2008: 52) German anthropologist Thomas Ots calls for a modification and expansion of anthropology's central method of participant observation - which has striking similarities with polyphasic training in transpersonal anthropology - and which he calls "*experiencing participation*", reporting that, during his fieldwork in China on Qigong groups he "*entered the group as a follower of Qigong rather than as an anthropologist.*" (Ots, in: Csordas, 1994: 134)

It cannot be denied that an 'experiencing participation', despite our differences in perception, value and worldview with the host-cultures, will provide us with a much deeper insight into the life-worlds of the people we study.

1.4.3.4 Embrace

By now our understanding and appreciation of the importance of altered states of consciousness and extraordinary experiences in anthropological fieldwork has grown to the extent that their value for exploring and understanding religious and spiritual worldviews and related practices on a multi-dimensional level cannot be denied anymore.

Ideas of quantum physics have revealed that on the smallest, for the human mind comprehensible unit, the subatomic sphere, a division between the observer and the phenomena being observed cannot be maintained anymore. *“The physicist participates in the reality under investigation; his or her methods alter or even constitute it. We can no longer speak of the behaviour of the particle independently from the process of observation.”* (Jackson, ctd. in: Lahood, 2007: 43)

In addition to these realizations we successfully worked out the main ideas of transpersonal psychology that centre around the assumption that our normal, familiar, rational consciousness is but one sphere of experience and that in appreciating and embracing the human potential and possibilities at its fullest the seemingly *“ordinary is being sacralised”* (cf. Braud/Anderson, 1998: XXIII) Transpersonal psychology seeks to honour human experience in its most encompassing and holistic dimensions, including various forms of altered and expanded states of consciousness, that are being encountered with an attitude of gratefulness, wonder, enjoyment, surprise and deep appreciation.

Theories of transpersonal anthropology have emphasized a participatory approach, stating that all spiritual knowledge and related experiences are to be understood as *multilocal participatory events*. We have been reminded of the amazing possibility of training ourselves in achieving states of consciousness inherent in the cultures we study through inward discovery and introspection, meditation, participation in spiritual and shamanic events or mastering ‘cross-phasing’. We have heard and may internalize anthropology’s call to integrate transpersonal experiences in our research processes, especially when studying religious and spiritual

ideas, concepts and practices cross-culturally. The researcher and the research cannot be separated and at the heart of the enterprise stands the transformation of all participants involved.

Finally it was through the methodological approaches of auto-ethnography that the role of the 'I in ethnography' has been highlighted and the continuous reflection of values, concepts and worldviews of the ethnographer have to be integrated in the whole research endeavour while gendered, emotional, embodied, interactional and spiritual dimensions are being unveiled. Amanda Coffey reminds us: *"The interconnectedness of researcher, researched, social actors and significant others is the very essence of fieldwork."* (Coffey, 1999: 56)

1.4.3.5 Extraordinary Anthropology

I want to share a quote from Swedish scientist of religions and shamanic researcher Ake Hultkrantz (1920-2006) as particularly appropriate introduction:

„Als ich mich als angehender Anthropologe daran machte, die Kultur und insbesondere die Religion eines nordamerikanischen Indianerstammes - der Shoshoni in Wyoming - zu untersuchen, hatte ich die Absicht, meine Forschungen durch Interviewtechniken, teilnehmende Beobachtung und Archivauswertungen abzusichern. Ich musste jedoch feststellen, dass irrationale Faktoren meine sorgfältig ausgetüftelten Vorkehrungen durcheinanderbrachten, und zwar vor allem auf dem Gebiet der Religion. Aber das war noch nicht alles. An Ritualen mit Medizinmännern teilnehmend, musste ich in meinem Notizbuch Beobachtungen von einer Art festhalten, die ich in keiner Fachzeitschrift hätte veröffentlichen können, ohne meine wissenschaftliche Reputation auf Spiel zu setzen! Es ereigneten sich Dinge, die man im Rahmen unseres gängigen wissenschaftlichen Wertesystems nicht als Faktum registrieren konnte.“ (Hultkrantz, in: Duerr, 1982: 74)

The reluctance, hesitation, unwillingness and maybe fear of anthropologists to get involved in their research projects on a multidimensional level has, besides personal, individual reasons, apparently one fundamental cause to be found in the respective literature over and over again. Anthropologists who themselves get involved in extraordinary experiences and transpersonal states of consciousness while in the field, face a formidable challenge not only on a personal but also on a scientific level.

“Extraordinary experiences force one to deal with the possibility that reality is culturally constructed and that instead of one reality there are multiple realities-or at least multiple ways of experiencing the world, depending upon time, place and circumstances.” (Young/Goulet, 1994: 8)

When the anthropologist has an extraordinary experience - either willingly and desired since he chose an applied transpersonal approach for his research, or unprepared and spontaneous - his/her conception of reality, all basic assumptions and ideas concerning personhood, cosmos and his/her place in the universe, are being shaken and turned upside down. The experience can be rejected, devalued, depreciated, banned from one's memory and not communicated to colleagues. It is the fear of ostracism, the fear of being outlawed, looked down upon and not being taken seriously anymore by the scientific community, that leads researchers to not accept, share or make public these sorts of experiences.

“Because of the fear of ostracism, an entire segment of cross-cultural experience common to many investigators is not available for discussion and scientific investigation.” (Young, Goulet, 1994: 8)

Fortunately, a courageous awakening within anthropology of religion and consciousness can be observed, a trend towards exposing oneself and sharing transpersonal phenomena in the field in order to give ‘extraordinary anthropology’, the ‘anthropology of extraordinary experience’ or the ‘experiential approach’ its long ignored but particularly deserved place within the scientific debate and literature.

In the course of the following section the main proponents and advocates of ‘extraordinary anthropology’, their experiences and ideas, will be introduced.

1.4.3.6 The Experiential Approach in Anthropology of Religion and Consciousness

“The persons most prejudiced against a concept of non-ordinary reality are those who have never experienced it. This might be termed cognicentrism, the analogue in consciousness of ethnocentrism.” (Harner, 1990: XX)

American psychologist and philosopher **William James** (1842-1910), best known for his interest and work on the various kinds of religious experiences (*“The Varieties of Religious Experience - A Study in Human Nature”*, 1902) is widely considered as being one of the most important and influential pioneers in introducing an experiential methodology to research on religious and spiritual states of consciousness. James termed his epistemology ‘radical empiricism’, a method of doing scientific research that *“required (1) that all of the ideas and theories in science be grounded in direct experience, and (2) that no experience be excluded from the scientific purview”*. (Taylor, 1994, ctd. in: Laughlin/McManus, 1995: 35)

*“To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system.”*¹⁶ (cf. URL: http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/James/James_1912/James_1912_02.html, 06.08.2011)

This statement seems as a strong appeal that all science should ultimately be grounded in experience, whereby recognition of all experientiable phenomena is crucial. Evident in James’ work is the emphasise on *relations*. Considering the dualistic perception of reality inherent in the Cartesian worldview which formed the intellectual and scientific paradigm during James’ lifetime, his distinction between conjunctive and disjunctive

¹⁶ William James: “Essays in Radical Empiricism”, Chapter 2: “A World of Pure Experience”.

or connective and disconnective relations becomes comprehensible. *“James noted that rationalist science tends to emphasize disconnective relations as being real, and connective ones as being ‘transcendental’ or ‘illusionary’. [...] Radical Empiricism holds that both connective and disconnective relations are empirically available to direct perception.”* (Laughlin, McManus, 1995: 36)

To transcend this dualism and realize the continuity of consciousness and the final inseparability of experiences is clearly indicated by James in the following quote:

“Radical empiricism, as I understand it, does full justice to conjunctive relations, without, however, treating them as rationalism always tends to treat them, as being true in some supernal way, as if the unity of things and their variety belonged to different orders of truth and vitality altogether.”

(URL:http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/James/James_1912/James_1912_02.html, 06.08.2011)

Concluding we want to retain that, as Laughlin and McManus argue, James advocated the inclusion of the widest possible range of human experience within the scientific endeavour, thereby relying and trusting the introspective abilities of one's own consciousness. William James' concepts and approach are visionary and, when taken literally and actually put into practice, provide a beneficial and valuable methodological tool for the study of transpersonal phenomena within the fields of anthropology of religion and consciousness.

Within social and cultural anthropology a variety of forerunners and representatives of an approach that discourses the relevance of *experience* in its different dimensions can be found.

Anthropologist **Edward M. Bruner** outlines in the introduction of *“The Anthropology of Experience”* (ed. with Victor W. Turner, 1986) the double consciousness of experience and its relation to anthropological field research, addressing the dualistic dimension of the experience of anthropological fieldwork: on the one hand we participate in whatever

situation in the field, on the other hand we report it, therefore being part of the experience and outside observers at the same time.

“This double consciousness is an essential condition of the ethnographer who participates as he or she observes. In ethnography, there are always at least two double experiences to be dealt with: on the one hand, our experiences of ourselves in the field, as well as our understanding of our objects; on the other hand, our objects’ experiences of themselves and their experience of us.” (Bruner; in: Turner/Bruner, 1986: 14)

The challenge for us anthropologists performing field research in the subject areas of religion and consciousness is to successfully bridge this gap by being mutually aware of our individual personal experiences as well as of the experiences of our hosts and finding a way to let all participating voices in the process of knowledge-gaining be equally heard and shared. Our own personal experiences and the analysis of them should highlight the starting point of our ethnographies, realizing that *“in the field we are in a dialogue with ourselves as much as we are in a dialogue with others. Field experience is indeed a personal voyage of self-discovery.”* (Bruner; in: Turner, Bruner, 1986: 15)

Once more Bruner points to the importance of including the personal and experiential, details of our biographies, field notes or personal narratives in our field accounts in order to communicate an understanding and insight into our field situation as clear and authentic as possible and make our ethnographies more real and alive. (cf. Bruner; in: Turner/Bruner, 1986: 9)

As we will realize in the course of the coming sections, one of the core concerns of the experiential approach in anthropology is to include our own experiences into our ethnographies, an approach that anthropologist Michael Jackson, referring to William James, has called the *‘radical empirical method’*, whereby anthropologists make themselves ‘experimental subjects’ and therefore treating their very own personal experiences as primary data. (cf. Young/Goulet, 1994: 305)

It is vital to understand that, in an experiential approach, it is necessary for the ethnographer to engage and involve him/herself as much as possible in the topic under study, be it rituals, healing practices or whatever has extraordinary meaning and importance for the people in the field.

Accounts of anthropologists of extraordinary experiences are manifold, at least at some of them we want to take closer looks, including my very own exceptional, transforming experiences and insights during my field work in Burma.

Two important figures, advocating the experiential approach very strongly on the one hand, and contributing to the establishment of the study of neo-shamanism on the other hand – probably these two cannot be looked upon separately – are the anthropologists Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner whose lives and work deserve to be mentioned, if only briefly.

The life of **Carlos Castaneda** as well as his considerable literary work is surrounded by an unfathomable and mystic nimbus, his biography is colourful and enigmatic at the same time and the question concerning the authenticity of his work is unsolved until today. He studied anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, between 1959 and 1973 and several research travels led him to Mexico, where he encountered a *brujo*, a magician of the Yaqui, who gained worldwide recognition and fame in his books under the name Don Juan Matus. (cf. Stuckrad, 2003: 153)

Don Juan became the spiritual teacher and master of Castaneda, introducing him to the Yaqui-tradition in a long-standing apprenticeship, whereby extraordinary spiritual experiences were revealed.

In 12 books Castaneda shared his insights and experiences with a broad public audience: *The teachings of Don Juan - A Yaqui way of Knowledge* was being published at the University of California Press, and it was the same university that accepted *Journey to Ixtlan* 1976 as his doctoral thesis, a fact that caused massive irritation and bewilderment among his colleagues. (cf. Stuckrad, 2003: 153ff)

Castaneda was unfortunately neither able during his lifetime to provide a photograph of his master and most important informant Don Juan nor to reveal his field diaries, facts that finally led to perceive his work as fiction and phantasy and not being grounded in serious empirical fieldwork.

However one wants to value the degree of reality in Castaneda's book, it remains an acknowledged fact that his work has been deeply inspiring for many people, and the shamanic perspective and worldview revealed itself to those searching for meaning sense in life. "[...] where Eliade and other academics only presented shamanisms to the West, Castaneda's work, in a radical shift, encouraged Westerners to become Shamans themselves." (Wallis, 2003: 39)

Castaneda's books were, and still are, constitutive for the establishment and unfolding of a field of discourse within science, where the personal experience of extraordinary states of consciousness, the transcendent interpretation of reality und the conviction that altered states of consciousness are potentially available for every human being, is at the heart of the debate. Moreover, Stuckrad regards the first edition of *The teachings of Don Juan* as the charter of modern Western shamanism. (cf. Stuckrad, 2003: 155)

US-anthropologist **Michael Harner** is regarded as one of the most influential and well-known contributors to the experiential approach and to the field of neo-shamanism. Harner, former professor at the department of anthropology at the New School for Social Research in New York, was also holding lectureships at the universities California, Berkeley, Columbia and Yale. (cf. Jakobsen, 1999: 160)

In 1959 he received a research assignment of the American Museum of Natural History, which led him to the Peruvian Amazon into the territory of the Conibo-Indians. He succeeded in gathering amounts of data concerning various dimensions of the life of the people, but he failed in gaining substantial insight into the religious worldview and related practices. Finally he came to realize that, if he really wished to achieve understanding, he ought to take in the sacred drink made from the two

Amazonian plants Ayahuasca and Chacruna. *“The people were friendly, but reluctant to talk about the supernatural. Finally they told me that if I really wished to learn, I must take the shamans’ sacred drink made from ayahuasca, the “soul vine“. I agreed, with both curiosity and trepidation, for they warned me that the experience would be very frightening.”* (Harner, 1990: 2)

This incisive and transformative experience marked the beginning of Harner’s intensive engagement, study and self-awareness with shamanic states of consciousness which finally led to the formulating of his concept of *core-shamanism*, a body of techniques that probably count among the most well-known and widely practiced consciousness practices in the western world. (cf. Wallis, 2003: 46)

Harner’s concept of core-shamanism can be understood as conglomerate of various cultural forms of expression of shamanic knowledge and practices, which is essentially attuned and modified to encounter Western notions of reality in an adequate manner. (cf. Jakobsen, 1999: 162)

Characteristic to the method is a highly individualized process, in which apprenticeship is far shorter in time than in traditional shamanic cultures.

A quote from the introduction of Harner’s *The Way of the Shaman* shall serve to illustrate his idea:

“These new practitioners are not ‘playing Indian’ but going to the same revelatory sources that tribal shamans have travelled to from time immemorial. They are not pretending to be shamans; if they get shamanic results for themselves and others in this work, they are indeed the real thing. Their experiences are genuine and, when described are essentially interchangeable with the accounts of shamans from nonliterate tribal cultures. The shamanic work is the same, the human mind, heart and body are the same; only the cultures are different.” (Harner, 1990: XIV)

In 1979 Harner initiated the *Foundation for Shamanic Studies*, a non-profit corporation that is being represented internationally and entertains

a worldwide network. Aim and object of the organization is to spread shamanic techniques to Western countries, organizing seminars, lectures, courses, speeches and the like and to contribute to the preservation of shamanic knowledge and culture worldwide.

The biographies and approaches of Castaneda and Harner not only contributed to establish an applied, practical shamanism in Western countries, but - more specifically and of interest to the field of transpersonal studies - they fostered to adopt aspects and dimensions of experience and their relevance in the cognition-process sustainably, be it in the scientific domain or in popular science. The investigation of altered states on consciousness as fundamentally rooted in personal, individual experience has deeply inspired scientists from the fields of transpersonal studies and anthropologists of religion and consciousness.

As Edith Turner puts this experiential approach that places insight gained through personal experience at the heart of the endeavour: *“As for my function as ethnographer, I had to relax the detached observer - imperative in order to see as the Africans saw, thus bridging the gap and entering the culture.”* (Turner, 2006: 43)

1.4.3.7 Edith Turner and the Anthropology of Experience

Anthropologist Edith Turner, her work and especially her courageous, inspirational research approach, the *anthropology of experience*, were and still are highly inspiring and stimulating for my work and for myself on a personal level. I want to share parts of her work in order to illuminate and illustrate her ideas and approaches towards field work on spiritual phenomena.

The wife of renowned anthropologist of religion Victor W. Turner, Edith Turner (*1921), spend many years in her life in diverse fields, such as Africa, Alaska and Ireland, doing ethnographic research together with her husband and continuing her work after his death in 1983. She has been teaching courses on *Fieldwork and Ethnography, the Anthropology of Religion, and Shamanism and Healing*, among others, at the University of Virginia. A current entry at the staff-site of the University's homepage

shows that Edith still seems to be in active employment at the Department of Anthropology, today being 92 years old. (URL: <http://www.virginia.edu/cgi-local/ldapweb>, 9.8.2011)



Picture 3: Edith Turner

(URL: <http://www.virginia.edu/anthropology/faculty/turner.html>, 10.08.2011)

Her distinct approach towards the research of shamanism and ritual began to develop in the mid-fifties when Victor and Edith spent almost two and a half years among the *Ndembu* of Zambia, studying and interpreting their rituals. She confesses that the reality of spirits, although always accepted as truth by Africans, was not been taken seriously by Victor and herself at that time. *“All right, ‘our’ people believed in spirits, but that was a matter of their different world, not ours. Their ideas were strange and a little disturbing, but somehow we were on the safe side of the white divide and were free merely to study the beliefs.”* (Turner, in: Harvey, 2003: 145)

Turner indicates in her work over and over that the fundamental question of whether or not spirits really exist has not been yet faced satisfiably within anthropology. Instead, it is the reports of Africans about spirit encounters that are of overall interest to anthropologists and not the Africans’ actual and genuine experiences of the spiritual world. (cf. Turner, in: Young/Goulet, 1994: 71)

After the death of Victor Turner in 1983, Edith returned to Zambia in 1985 in order to continue her research and deepen her understanding of the reality of spirits. Out of this travel and fieldwork she published her book *“Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing”* (1992), together with her colleague William Blodgett, as well as Singletin Kahona and Fideli Benwa, their main informants and friends in the field.

In the introduction Turner quotes Clifford Geertz: *“We can but listen to what, in words ... they say about their lives ... We gain [our sense of other people’s lives] through their expressions. It’s all a matter of scratching surfaces.”* (Geertz, 1986: 373 qtd. in: Turner, 1992: 1) Turner disagrees with Geertz in so far that she highlights the possibility of ethnographers to actively get involved in events of ultimate concern to the subjects under study. This active involvement allowed her to go deeply into an experience of the spirit world herself, a fact that was highly transformative to her personally and expanding her scientific ethnographic approach. Edith Turner actually saw the *Ihamba* spirit with her own eyes during the *Chihamba* ritual of the *Ndembu* in Zambia.

She writes: *“Then I knew the Africans were right. There is spirit stuff, there is spirit affliction: it isn’t a matter of metaphor or symbol, or even psychology. And I began to see how anthropologists have perpetuated an endless series of put-downs about the spirit events in which they participated. They might have obtained valuable material, but they have been operating with the wrong paradigm, that of the positivist’s denial.”* (Turner, in: Harvey, 2003: 146)

These lines are especially highlighted in my copy of the article and I remember how goose pimples were crawling up my body, my heart started beating faster and being filled with joy and the certainty of finally being understood.

Since this transformative experience Edith Turner has put herself actively out to explain, communicate and support an approach within anthropological fieldwork where studying spirit phenomena with an attitude and mentality from inside is perceived as a legitimate and valuable

kind of anthropology. For her *'going native'* is a respectful, meaningful and authentic way of approaching the world of spirits, and she reminds us many times of the intellectual imperialism and the positivistic explanation prevalent in anthropology until the present day. Turner's explicit concern is to bring the presence of the anthropologist into the ethnographic account, supporting a 'person-centred ethnography' that is also apprehensive of subjective experiences of the fieldworker. (cf. Turner, 1992: 15) In order to apprehend and enter the realm of subjective experience while being in the field, it is of vital importance to relax presupposed assumptions and theoretical suppositions in order to be right *inside* our subjects' own experiences. Turner advocates an approach where we, as anthropologists in the field, let our own personal spiritual life shift to a position in the front, enabling us to experience and know the material and data we gather in its fullest sense. (cf. Turner, 2006: 43) In other words: When the effort and attempt of rigidly following our research agendas, initial research intentions and concepts, is temporarily loosened and dropped, the possibility of gaining extraordinary insight in the phenomena of our study arises. There is an opportunity to enter deeply into the life world and horizon of meaning of our hosts, leading us to whole new insights, transforming our understanding of our initial research intention and deepening and enriching our relationships with ourselves and with the people we collaborate with in the field.

As Johannes Fabian puts it in the introduction of the anthology "Extraordinary Anthropology: Transformations in the Field" (2007): *"Much of our ethnographic research is carried out best while we are 'out of our minds', that is, while we relax our inner controls, forget our purposes, let ourselves go. In short, there is an ecstatic side to fieldwork which should be counted among the conditions of knowledge production, hence of objectivity."* (Fabian, in: Goulet/Granville Miller, 2007: 1)

Field journal entry, Rangoon, February 2009

In the following I want to share one of the many situations and insights that turned my mind and understanding towards a transpersonal, experiential approach within my research.

We are located in the garden of my main and most important informant, Master Sayagi U Shein; it is a mild, but humid day in February 2009. Prayers and curing ceremonies are in full play at the temple, we can hear the chanting and praying. U Shein's oldest disciple and close friend U Aung Myint and myself are discussing the potential of the human mind of perceiving the world of spirits. I remember vividly how fascinated and curious I was (and still am, of course) about *learning to see what the Natives see*. (cf. Turner, in: Graham, 2003: 150)

I: "AM, what do you have to do to be really able to perceive the spiritual world?"

AM: "You must obey the *Law of Buddha*, the *Five Precepts*, this is the fundamental, the most important, and then make practice, do meditation. By using this awareness, you are aware of your breath. You stay focused. You will first see the smoke, two streams of smoke you will see coming out your nose. After that you will perceive light, it will become clearer and clearer, just like the sky, like fluorescent light. If I myself get there I will tell you!"

I: "If I get you right, if you really want to perceive the spiritual world and be able to make contact you have to first practice *Shamatha* meditation, for years and years and try to establish this concentration. Right?"

AM: "Yes, exactly. But still it depends on your *Parami*, some can get within one hour, others will practice their whole lifetime. Others never."

I: "What if I want to meet the *Weikza* Bo Min Gaung and take an interview with him?"

AM: "Yes, you can. If you meet Bo Min Gaung you will not be like that. He will give you instructions how to practice, where to go, etc. and you have to obey in order to meet him. Then you can become his disciple, you cannot refuse, this can be very dangerous. It is up to you, if you decide. If you want to be a Bo Min Gaung disciple, you firstly have to practice the five precepts, you know. *Shila* is the first. Smoking is not prohibited. Alcohol is prohibited. Bo Min Gaung likes to smoke cigars. This is OK. If you want to contact any *Weikza* you must first observe the five precepts. Also you have to practice *Sadhana*, chant the Mantra, recite the prayers, you know. Over many years you will be then become concentrated, you mind will become pure, not distracted, you have to turn your mind fully towards the *Weikza*; over time you will be successful and make contact to the *Weikza*. You will come to know about the *Weikza*, they will tell you in your heart, sometime you can see them, and sometime you will hear their voice in your heart. Sometimes you can even see them."

It is more than obvious in this conversation that the necessity and benefit of adopting and entering this '*natives' point of view*' can be highly beneficial and fruitful in terms of achieving the ability of perceiving the spiritual world. Over and over again I was advised by informants and friends in the field to at least make an effort to view and approach the topic of my research through *emic* strategies and perspectives suggested by them. Meditation, paying respect to the Lord Buddha and actively practicing the five Buddhist precepts were always, among others, to be perceived as fundamentally important in opening the mind towards perceptual diversity and polyphasic consciousness.

In their introduction to *“Extraordinary Anthropology: Transformations in the Field”* (2007) Goulet and Granviller Miller remind their readers about the importance of what they call ‘crucial transformative moments’ in the field and the consequent reflection and reporting of them. (cf. Goulet/Granviller Miller, 2007: 1)

In my understanding a ‘crucial transformative moment’ occurs when one is able, willing and ready to let transform the reality that was previously taken for granted with all its ideas, concepts and suppositions concerning life and personhood. In this subtle melting, a dissolving and floating mental movement can be observed, perceived and sensed at the same time, as if the foundation pillars of the house we call ‘taken for granted perception of reality’ would slowly deflate. This is a remarkable, inspiring and relieving experience that opens doors of perception that have previously been shut or neglected.

Field Journal Entry, Guest House, Mandalay, February 2009 ¹⁷

Meanwhile I have been establishing a regular meditation practice that I manage to integrate successfully in my daily routine of meeting healers, traditional practitioners and friends who support my research. I spend my days taking interviews and leading many informal conversations about aspects of the Weikza phenomenon, slowly learning about the perception and beliefs of the people. The evenings I spend alone in my small room of a Guest House in Mandalay, Upper Burma and I do exactly like people advised me so many times. In the meantime I was given three different Buddhist prayer beads that have been especially blessed for me to

¹⁷ In the course of this dissertation we are moving towards a transpersonal, autoethnographic ethnography and a subsequent revelation of the researcher. To approach this subject gradually I decided to translate field journal entries at the beginning sections of the dissertation into English, whereas journal entries in the empirical part *“Experiencing Ethnography”* will be presented in the German original.

support my devotion and practice. What an invitation to practice is that?! I have the choice between three different prayer beads! My commitment, dedication and trust in the loving and heartfelt people around me has been grown to the extent that I fully devote myself to entering their horizons of meaning, adopting their practical approaches towards the world of spiritual entities. I can feel in my heart that they are right. There is a way of pacifying and clarifying the intellectual mind, in order that we can see and perceive with the heart. Slowly I am able to realize the connection between the choice of my dissertation topic and my very personal wishes, desires and inspirations.

The subject of my work reveals my very own perception of reality.

Also I have the feeling that the more I open towards the reality that I encounter here, by the help of immersion in meditation, the more aspects and characteristics of that reality I am able to perceive. It feels as if finally everything falls in its' right place. I feel as if an invisible energy is subtly guiding me through this research. In order to perceive its voice my rational mind has to be quiet, otherwise I can't hear.

Anthropologist Charles Laughlin has made a great contribution in introducing a participatory approach within transpersonal anthropology, an approach which I hope to have been able to elucidate a little bit by sharing my own experiences and insights. The following quote highlights his emphasize again:

“Transpersonal participant-comprehension means following the instructions and procedures given from within the culture (perhaps as given by a shaman, teacher or guru) leaving oneself open to whatever experiences arise as a consequence of performing ritual and symbolic practices, and recording what happens, using whatever symbolic media available. This participation frequently requires the “suspension of disbelief” necessary for entry into domains of occult meaning and experience.” (Laughlin, in: Young /Goulet, 1994: 102)

To conclude this section, French ethnologist Jeanne Favret-Saada inspires us by saying:

“There is no other solution but to practise it oneself, to become one’s own informant, to penetrate one’s own amnesia, and to try to make explicit what one finds unstateable in oneself.” (Favret-Saada, in: Young/Goulet, 1994: 72)

1.5 Past and Present Research

1.5.1 State of Research Within Social- and Cultural Anthropology concerning the Variety of Religious Phenomena in Burma

Scientific anthropological work on Burma is not too densely sowed and in order to understand the situation and state of research it is useful and necessary to give a short overview of what has been done on this sector since the beginning of the 20th century. In the following I want to quote those anthropologists and their work which were and are most relevant, revealing and insightful for my particular work and goal.

Firstly, American anthropologist Manning Nash attracts interest. He performed 18 months of fieldwork in Upper Burma between 1961 and 1962 working on social and economic change in the newly independent Buddhist nation. In addition to articles and an edited volume on Theravada Buddhism, he published in 1965 the book *“The Golden Road to Modernity: Village life in contemporary Burma”*, which is considered one of the most important introduction works on Burma, covering different aspects of economic, social and religious life.

Melford Elliot Spiro is also an American anthropologist, University of California, San Diego, who has conducted his fieldwork in Burma at the turn of the sixties, mainly in the small village Yeigy in Upper Burma. His emphasise was religion and the supernatural beliefs and cosmologies. In 1978 he was therefore able to publish *“Burmese Supernaturalism”*, a comprehensive and detailed study covering various types of supernaturalism, including the beliefs in ghosts, witches, spirits and demons. Other areas of discussion include supernaturally caused illnesses and their treatments, the shamans and exorcists and the relationship between supernaturalism and Buddhism. According to Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière *“Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes”* became the best known anthropological work about Burmese Society outside the Burmese studies circle. Spiro, recognized as a

psychological anthropologist, is well known for his fieldwork among the Ojibwa, as well as in Israel and in the South Pacific.

From my friends in Burma, especially from Prof. U KH, the former Head of the Department of Anthropology at Yangon University, I came to learn about Dr. U Maung Htin Aung, Rector and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Rangoon between 1946–59 and author of a couple of books on the history and Buddhism of Burma, but especially on Burmese folk tales and drama. Among his publications, which are not too easy to come across, is the 1962 published “Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism” which I found an insightful account of “animistic” aspects in Burmese religiosity and furthermore an introduction to the cult of alchemy and its Zawgyis and Weikzas.

In order to make a large step into the present, contemporary landscape of anthropological research of Burmese religion and supernaturalism, French anthropologist Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière demands attention with her outstanding research and work on the cult of the *Nats* and the varieties of Nat-pwes surrounding them. Studying social anthropology in Paris, she has been engaged in Burmese Studies since 1977 and now employed at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies of the *Centre Nationale de la Recherché Scientifique* as an expert on Burma-Studies.

Monique Skidmore is an Australian anthropologist, teaching at Australian National University in Canberra, who has received very much scholarly attention for her outstanding work and the extensive fieldwork she conducted in Burma since 1994. She has specifically been working on topics such as the politics of the country’s regime, health, woman and religion. Her 2005 published anthology “*Burma at the turn of the 21st century*” provides insight into the everyday lives, concerns and values of the people of this reclusive nation. Prominent anthropologists and religion scholars with in-depth, long-term knowledge of central Burma offer detailed analyses of the ways in which Burmese actively manage and shape their lives in the shadow of military government.

Moreover, French anthropologist Guillaume Rozenberg needs to be mentioned as well. He is travelling to Burma since 1997, conducting extensive field work on subjects such as Buddhism and the contemporary *Weikza*-cults and the ways they interact and relate to each other. I have been particularly fascinated by his work on the *Weikzas*, since such kind of concrete research, concerning the beliefs and practices evolving around the various Burmese *Weikza*-cults, has not been done so far.

1.5.2 The *Weikza*-Phenomenon in Anthropological Literature

In this overview a selection of past and contemporary academic works on the nature and characteristics of the *Weikza*-phenomenon in Burma shall be presented in a chronological order until the present day. The most important and influential ideas of anthropologists, having done and doing research on the topic, shall be presented and different definitions of a *Weikza* will be collected and compared. Notations and spellings are being rendered in the exact same way as the respective author had used them. Concluding I will add a few considerations regarding the particular research approaches and methods applied in fieldwork.

1.5.2.1 Past Scholarship

British anthropologist **E. Michael Mendelson**, who conducted his fieldwork in Burma between June 1958 and November 1959, has provided pioneer work in the field of Buddhism in relation to religious and political authority working on a monograph on monastic Buddhism in respect to the legitimation of political power of the state. Niklas Foxeus declares Mendelson as “*founder of the academic study of the weizza phenomenon in the West.*” (Fuxeus, 2011: 16)

As Mendelson travelled through the country in order to follow his researches he encountered a rather bewildering and incomprehensible phenomenon that he was unable to ignore due to its country-wide spread and deep embedding in the religious perception and practice of the Burmese people. “*I came to know that, besides the two components of Burmese religion described by previous authors – Buddhism proper and the cult of the Nats - there was a third component to which very few*

scholars had ever paid systematic attention. This component concerned the activities of weikzas.” (Mendelson, 1961a: 230)

Mendelson chose to call the associations and congregations that he encountered in this context “*Messianic Buddhist*” (cf. Mendelson, 1961b: 560) in order to refer to their soteriological potential.

When doing research on religion and spiritual beliefs in Burma, the *Weikzas* will undoubtedly push themselves at the fore; it is impossible to oversee them or overhear people talking about them, calling upon them, venerating them, admiring them and aspiring to resemble them and also become a *Weikza*.

In his article “*The King of the Weaving Mountain*” (1961) Michael Mendelson dedicates well elaborated thoughts to the characteristics of a *Weikza*. A *Weikza*, according to Mendelson, is a human being, a person, who was able to attain mastery over various subjects, crafts or arts, in the fields of alchemy, astronomy, cabbalistic signs, mantras, and medicine. (cf. Mendelson, 1961a: 230) He is able to encompass and perfect these powers with the help and support of powerful spiritual entities to the extent that he succeeds in transcending the boundaries of ordinary human existence. As a fully-fledged *Weikza* he will be able to “*fly through the air, journey underground, make himself invisible, assume various shapes and, above all, live for very great periods of time. [...]*” (Mendelson, 1961a: 230)

The term *Weikza* derives from the Pali word *vijja* which Mendelson also translated as knowledge or science, especially referring to all sorts of secret science or magical knowledge. (cf. Mendelson, 1963: 797) *Weikza* therefore describes and characterizes a person who was able to obtain extraordinary, supernatural powers (Pali: *Siddhi*) partly through *Samatha* (Pali) meditation practice, the practice of ‘calm-abiding’.

In fact, the concentrated, consistent practice of meditation and training of the mind is considered an essential component and prerequisite in acquiring the capabilities and perfection of a *Weikza*.

Mendelson realized through his field researches that the idea of the *Weikza* is a very powerful and enduring one in Burmese religious thinking and practicing and does not in any way be contradictory to the Buddhist teachings.

According to Mendelson, the primary and most important aim of the *Weikza* is to gain immortality, not necessarily in a corporeal but in a spiritual sense, in order to be present with all his powers and achievements when Maitreya, designated by Gotama Buddha as the future Buddha, will appear to preach the Buddhist religion. (cf. Mendelson, 1961a: 231)

Maung Thin Aung (1909-1987) was an important and widely recognized scholar of Burmese history and culture and author of a couple English books and articles which enriched the international scholarly study of Burmese history and religion. In his article “*Alchemy and Alchemists in Burma*”, published in 1933, he refers to the *Weikza* as a ‘*Zawgyee*’, a term being derivative from the Indian word ‘*Yogi*’. According to the Myanmar-English Dictionary (1993) ‘*Zogji Yogi*’ is translated as ‘*alchemist who possesses supernatural powers*’ indicating a close similarity and overlapping with the characteristic features of a *Weikza*. To my knowledge Thin Aung does not use the term *Weikza* in his publications. A *Zawgyee* (or ‘*Zawgyi*’ in his 1962 published book “*Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism*”) is a man, but never a woman, who was able to introduce into his physical body the right combination of metal compounds which then enables him to fly in the air or travel underground and become invulnerable. His body had been raised above the ordinary laws of nature and he will be able to transform whatever base metal into gold by the power of his ‘stone of live metal’. (cf. Thin Aung, 1933: 347) Since the practice and mastery of alchemy is one of the essential features of a *Zawgyi* or *Weikza*, Thin Aung’s work is of central interest insofar as it provides historical accounts of the development and changes of alchemy in Burma. According to Thin Aung India was the first major centre from where the art of alchemy spread towards the Arabian countries, Egypt and Greece, later to Europe and then eastwards to Burma and China. In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between alchemy and related cults and Buddhism, Thin Aung provides his

readers with a whole chapter discussing the importance of the cult of the Ari monks in his 1962 published book “Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism”. A sect of heretical Buddhist monks, called the Ari, existed in Burma before the great King Anawratha introduced Theravada Buddhism to his newly conquered empire. The Ari monks, who are considered to be Burma’s first alchemists, were known to have practised magic, sorcery and alchemy and striving to gain control over inferior spirits. (cf. Thin Aung, 1962: 131) The alchemical practices and philosophy that can be encountered in Burma nowadays are apparently to be considered as remnants of the cult of the Ari monks.

One of the most important scholars conducting systematic fieldwork in Burma in the early sixties, researching Buddhism and the cults of *Nats* and *Weikzas*, was American anthropologist **Melford Elliot Spiro**. He published three books successively from the data he collected, two of them dealing with Burmese religious beliefs and practices in particular. Brac de la Perrière says about Spiro: “[...] *Spiro’s work was the most outstanding, the most ambitious in scope, and the best known outside of Burmese studies circles.*” (Brac de la Perrière, 2009: 192)

In his book “*Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*” Spiro divides Burmese Buddhism into four distinct subsystems: ‘*nibbanic*’, ‘*kammatic*’, ‘*apotropaic*’ and ‘*esoteric*’, whereby he classifies all beliefs and practices in the context of *Weikza* as belonging to ‘esoteric’ Buddhism. Alchemical techniques and practices, the work with fire, are central features of Burmese *Weikza* sects (known in Burmese as *gaing*), the achievement of the alchemical stone, the philosopher’s stone is the primary aim of all alchemical experiments. (cf. Spiro, 1978: 165)

According to Spiro “*Weikzas are men who, through alchemic and cabbalistic techniques, enjoy vastly prolonged lives and various types of supernatural power.*” (Spiro, 1996: 24) The eternal life essence, which is inherent to all elements that matter consists of, can be extracted from the alchemical metal and introduced into the human body that, consequently, can too become eternal. The ultimate aim of the alchemist would therefore be to incorporate the supernatural power of his alchemical stone into his

own body, gain immortality and become a fully-fledged *Weikza*. (cf. Spiro, 1978: 166) What is of essential relevance is the desire and wish of the *Weikza* to be able to encounter the future Buddha Maitreya, who is to appear 5000 years after the death of Buddha Gautama, be able to take refuge and attain enlightenment in the presence of a living Buddha. Because of this strong belief in the advent of the future Buddha, Spiro introduced the terms '*millennial Buddhism*' or '*eschatological Buddhism*' in the Burmese religious context.

Spiro's interpretation of Burmese religious life and practices is grounded in a strong psychological approach, assuming that the major function of religion is to address the human problem of suffering and introducing ways, strategies and explanations to cope with that suffering:

"Although religion, like all cultural systems, has numerous functions, and although different religions may have different functions, they all help their devotees to cope with the problem of suffering." (Spiro, 1996: 2)

Brac de la Perrière emphasizes Spiro's enormous contribution to anthropology and religious studies with his unchallenged work. Still, she does not hesitate to mention Spiro's persistence in viewing Buddhism and the belief in *Nats* and *Weikzas* as two separate religious systems, first because, as he says, the Burmese themselves "*view them as different religions*" (Spiro, 1978: 187) and second because the modes and approaches of dealing with suffering are entirely different. (cf. Brac de la Perrière, 2009: 192) According to Brac de la Perrière, Spiro failed "*to see how these different aspects are ultimately inscribed in an overarching Buddhist framework*" [...]. (Brac de la Perrière, 2009: 193)

To comprehend the complex, manifold aspects and characteristics of Burmese religion it seems reasonable and valuable to internalize Brac de la Perrière's contention to not apply "*frameworks used by Western scholars to construct Burmese religion through their own paradigms*", but to rather approach Burmese religious thinking as a religious syncretism still "*analyzing Buddhism's privileged status as a social construct that determines the Burmese social structure.*" (Brac de la Perrière, 2009: 189)

Another valuable and insightful explanation on the nature and characteristics of *Weikzas* is given in a joint article by **J.P. Ferguson** and **E.M. Mendelson** “*Masters of the Buddhist Occult: The Burmese Weikzas*” (1981), whereby Ferguson is responsible for the writing of the text, having used extensive field notes and translations of Mendelson. The article gives detailed distinguishing characteristics of *Weikzas*, monks, *Zawgyis*, hermits and *Sayas* and reviews thoroughly the history of *Weikzas* in Burma.

A *Weikza*, according to Ferguson and Mendelson, “*is conceived as a human who has acquired supranormal powers through mastery of alchemy, astrology, spells, signs, meditation or other occult arts.*” (Ferguson/Mendelson, 1981: 63) Moreover, a fully realized *Weikza* has acquired extraordinary knowledge and skills that allow him to postpone his death for thousands of years, leave his body at will, speak many languages, fly through the air or travel underground and, most importantly, he is also able to cure and divine and command and control lesser gods and spirits that are most often held responsible for causing human sicknesses and misfortunes.

Ferguson and Mendelson highlight in this context that in Burmese religious belief the acquisition of unusual, extraordinary powers is theoretically possible for every human being and by no means unique only to the *Weikza*. “*Humans can acquire unusual powers through meditation, alchemy, astrology, charms and medicines, recitation of Buddhist prayers over a rosary, or living a pure life and using it as a ‘vow of truth’ to accomplish the miraculous.*” (Ferguson, Mendelson, 1981: 63) The broad framework and sanctions of Buddhist doctrine and practice provides the overall basis for practicing and mastering supernatural arts and abilities.

A *Zawgyi*, according to Ferguson and Mendelson, would on the contrary be conceived as a “*red-robed master of occult practices, particularly alchemy and charms, who uses his powers for non-Buddhist ends, such as obtaining women.*” (Ferguson/Mendelson, 1981: 65)

The distinction here is quite clear: Even though the *Zawgyi* is as well an accomplished master of one or the other art, whatever he can do, a *Weikza* is supposed to be better and higher talented and skilful.

Before giving an account of historic appearances of various *Weikzas* in Burmese history, characterizing the most famous *Weikzas* Bo Bo Aung and Bo Min Gaung, the article closes with an attempt to interpret the existence and veneration of *Weikzas* in Burma taking into account modern political developments. The authors consider the *Weikza* cult as a relatively late phenomenon in Burmese religious history that “*can be conceived as a symbolic reaction to the shock of colonialization*”. (Ferguson/Mendelson, 1981: 74) The soil from where *Weikza* movements, beliefs and practices developed and spread are deteriorating economic conditions and the lack of political freedom. Certainly, considerations of this type are most valuable, since any cultural phenomenon, also religion in its various moldings, can only be understood holistically when the social, economic and political circumstances will be reflected and considered carefully.

1.5.2.2 Present Scholarship

When reviewing existing anthropological work on Burma political circumstances have to be taken into account. Accessibility for foreign researchers and scientists and the possibility of conducting anthropological fieldwork is limited and cannot be compared to conditions one might encounter in other South-East Asian countries.

Due to the takeover of power by General Ne Win in 1962, anthropological field researches in Southeast Asian societies introduced after the Second World War were abruptly stopped in Burma. The generation of anthropologists constituted by Spiro, Pfanner, Mendelson, Manning and June Nash, was brutally separated from the field. (cf. Brac de la Perrière, 2009: 193) There was a gap of more than a generation during which no field research could take place. From the eighties onwards, social scientists have started to slowly return to Burma, yet, long-term ethnographical field research has not been permitted again. Methods and research agendas have to be adapted to the given context; especially researches in historical and religious fields have been manageable.

The most important and relevant works of anthropologists especially concerning the *Weikza* phenomenon shall now be mentioned briefly to allow insight into current researches. Of course the extensive work of French anthropologist Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière on the cult of the *Nats* remains pioneering and inspiring and will be discussed in chapter 2.2 *Complexity of Burmese Religion: Buddhism and the Spirit Cult*.

In 1995 US-scholar of religious studies **Patrick Pranke** published the article “*On Becoming a Buddhist Wizard*” in Lopez’ anthology “*Buddhism in Practice*”, giving detailed information about the goals and path of the large and famous *Manosetopad Gaing* (Weikza-sect). Starting with the mention and importance of the Ari monks Pranke illustrates these heretical monks as powerful community of Buddhist monks who indulged in magic and sorcery and were known for propitiating a pantheon of gods and spirits. Apparently it seems unclear who the Ari were, but evidence is given that many of the beliefs and practices that were attributed to them have survived in Burma until the present day. (cf. Pranke, 1995: 343) India has been without doubt the largest influence on the development of Burmese alchemy, astrology and traditional medicine, and a large number of Burmese Buddhists continue to be inspired by theories and practices of alchemy and other supernatural arts.

When considering Burmese religious syncretism and heterogeneous systems of belief one encounters, on the one hand, the “*native animist cult of spirit (nat) propitiation*” and on the other hand and more interesting for our concern “*an esoteric tradition of occult sciences dedicated to the attainment of magical powers and extraordinary long life*” which is known as the *Weikza-Lam* or path of occult knowledge. (Pranke, 1995: 343) Practitioners of this path are to be held out in prospect to attain the stage of a Buddhist wizard who “*prolongs his life for eons until finally attaining nirvana in the presence of the future Buddha Metteyya (Maitreya)*.” (Pranke, 1995: 344)

According to Pranke, the *Weikza* movement enjoys remarkable popularity in Burma today, attracting followers and devotees from almost all social and educational classes.

For me the most inspiring and amazingly rich work on the *Weikza* phenomenon had without doubt been contributed by French anthropologist **Guillaume Rozenberg** who has been working on Burmese Buddhism since 1997. Rozenberg had been organizing the panel “*Encountering the Weikza: The Unity and Diversity of a Burmese Phenomenon*” together with Brac de la Perrière at the 2010 International Burma Studies Conference in Marseille, France, assembling all scholars currently engaging in studying this topic.¹⁸ Apart from books and papers in French, the 2010(b) published article “*The Alchemist and his Ball*” and the book “*Renunciation and Power: The Quest for Sainthood in Contemporary Burma*” (2010a) proved to be of utmost interest and relevance seeking for a comprehensive understanding of the *Weikza* phenomenon.

In the beginning Rozenberg gives a definition of the *Weikza*, “*a category of individuals, who in combining strict observance of Buddhist moral precepts and meditation with the practice of an art such as alchemy or cabalism, have acquired extraordinary powers [...]. Included among these powers are invulnerability, the ability to fly and make oneself invisible, and above all, the capacity to prolong one’s existence beyond the normal span.*” (Rozenberg, 2010a: 188)

After having outlined the most important features of a *Weikza*, characterizing him as someone “*at the threshold of enlightenment*” taking eager concern and interest in the salvation and spiritual realization of his fellow human beings, Rozenberg continues to describe in detail the major steps in the alchemical process, explaining the different forms of crucibles and various character attributes of metals thereby unveiling highly complex but relevant modes of alchemical action. (cf. Rozenberg, 2010a: 196 ff.)

The chapter “*The Weikza Path*” (p. 42-68) in “*Renunciation and Power*” offers the most detailed and rich description of a *Weikza* I have come across so far, hence I want to share the main points briefly. According to

¹⁸ I had also been invited, but was unfortunately unable to join, since I was given birth to my son two weeks prior to the date of the conference.

Rozenberg, the *Weikza* phenomenon is still as widespread and striking in the whole country as it was decades ago when Mendelson and others first encountered this unexpected and bewildering phenomenon. (cf. Rozenberg, 2010b: 42 f.) The challenge of studying and defining the *Weikza* cult gets intensified by the variety and complexity of the phenomenon, the diversity and multiplicity of different manifestations of the *Weikzas* and the highly diverging and different conceptions Burmese people themselves hold regarding the phenomenon. Rozenberg tries to approach this complex situation comprehensively by offering two different definitions of the *Weikza*, a *restrictive* and an *inclusive* definition. The *restrictive definition* characterizes the *Weikza* as a being that is (firstly) “endowed with great supernatural potency (*dago*) that he uses to help others and to protect and support the Buddhist religion” and (secondly) the *Weikza* “has the capacity to prolong his life for thousands of years” in order to be able to show reverence to the coming Buddha and attain enlightenment in his presence. (Rozenberg, 2010b: 48)

Practitioners of the *Weikza* path usually concentrate and specialize in one (or more) of the several different techniques associated with the *Weikzas*’ potential. A common differentiation in Burmese perception of the *Weikza* path is according to the specific technique that is practiced: mastering symbols or cabbalistic squares (*In Weikza*), iron (*Than Weikza*), mercury (*Byada Weikza*), the recitation of mantras (*Mandan Weikza*), or being an expert in traditional herbal medicine (*Hsay Weikza*). The *Weikza* practicing one or the other art may have attained a high degree of perfection and mastery which always presupposes and demands a great level of spiritual accomplishment achieved through the intense practice of Buddhist meditation and the observance of the five or eight precepts. These characteristics would be ascribed to the so called *mundane Weikza* (*Lawki Weikza*), the one who finds himself on the path to ultimate liberation and enlightenment and still resides in the world, supporting his fellow human beings, guiding and accompanying them on their path to ultimate freedom. Still and despite all his perfection and mastery, the *mundane Weikza* is unable to reach Nirvana by himself; he has to abide in the presence of a living Buddha, since “those who have the extraordinary

opportunity to witness a Buddha immediately achieve enlightenment.”
(Rozenberg, 2010b: 49)

The *inclusive definition* Rozenberg introduces differentiates between lesser and greater accomplishments as far as the achievement of supernatural powers is concerned. (cf. Rozenberg, 2010b: 60) The importance of supernatural powers in the *Weikza* path is expressed by the term *gandari*, translated in the Burmese-English dictionary (1993) as “*occult science concerned with making a person invisible*”, but, according to Rozenberg, the term *gandari* may refer “*to everything that is related to the acquisition of supernatural powers, not just invisibility.*” (Rozenberg, 2010b: 53)

According to the spiritual perfection, the mastery of one or more related techniques and the acquisition of supernatural powers, the category *supramundane Weikza* (*Lawkutara Weikza*) can be applied to individuals being fully enlightened and able to enter nirvana whenever they wish. (cf. Rozenberg, 2010b: 47) To assess the state of a practitioner of the *Weikza* path is not easy and distinct since most of the individuals oscillate between the two stages, a fact that would reflect the ambiguity of the term *Weikza* “*whose meaning alternates between extraordinary mundane knowledge generating supernatural capacities, on the one hand, and supramundane knowledge corresponding to an understanding of the Buddhist truths and enlightenment, on the other.*” (Rozenberg, 2010b: 61)

Concluding I want to briefly point out Rozenberg’s reflections regarding the objective of the *Weikza*’s path. Since the main and most important concern for every practitioner of the path is to be present - physically - either at the reassembling of the relics of Gautama Buddha or at the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya, the *Weikza* can be perceived as a “*substitute for the Buddha*”. The path of the *Weikza* can therefore be recognized as unveiling the “*tragic fate of contemporary Theravadin societies: the absence of any living Buddha*”. (Rozenberg, 2010b: 68)

The most recent work on the *Weikza* phenomenon had been provided by Swedish scientist **Niklas Foxeus** submitting his Ph.D.-thesis at the

Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies at the University of Stockholm in June 2011. His dissertation, based on fieldwork in Burma for several months between 2005 and 2008, is a detailed study of the millenarian orientation and political potential of royal esoteric associations founded in Burma in the early 1950s. The *Weikza* congregations are to be perceived as new religious movements representing a resurrection of religion and a quest for identity in the postcolonial era. The extensive and elaborate thesis focuses on the idea of the *Sekya Min*, “the world emperor, who was considered to be a powerful *weizza* and *bodhisatta*” (Foxeus, 2011: 1) who can be found at the centre of beliefs of a number of esoteric congregations. In his introduction Foxeus is pointing to the fact that in contemporary Burma the path of the *Weikza* is representing an alternative soteriology by which final liberation and salvation can be attained. (cf. Foxeus, 2011: 12) According to Foxeus a “*weizzadhour is a Buddhist layman or monk who has attained success in various mundane arts or crafts (lawki-weizza) and who has therefore acquired supernatural powers (theiddi, Pali: siddhi), such as being able to fly, to be present at two places at the same time, to materialize objects, to predict the future, and so forth.*” (Foxeus, 2011: 12)

Since Foxeus’ amazing piece of scientific work is referring to a clear political coherence in the context of the *Weikza* phenomenon it could not have been of specific relevance for my particular concern. I therefore want to leave the discussion with the mentioned definition of a *Weikza*.

1.5.2.3 Methods and Approaches in Studying the Weikza Phenomenon

“In order to find out the relation with the Weikzas, we have to pray, do meditation and purify our mind. Then we will be able to see them. Also you must keep the five precepts. You have to long for the Weikzas in your heart. And then, even if you don’t see the Weikza in person, you will see him in your dream.” (UKH, 09.02.2009, Mebegon)

In the following section I want to briefly assess the research methods being used in fieldwork by some fellow anthropologists. To start off with, it can be recorded that an explicit transpersonal or auto-ethnographic research approach had not been applied by anyone scholar, at least as far as I am able to evaluate the various research strategies. Especially as far as the *experiential* research on *Weikza* is concerned I came to learn in the course of my fieldwork that an individual involvement in the topic under study and the intention to engage oneself on a personal level are of crucial relevance for a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Mendelson and Spiro were both able to draw on long-term field residences in Burma which enabled them to live among Burmese villagers, observe and participate in their lives and study their worldviews, therefore being closest to Malinowski’s ideal conception in which the researcher should spend at least a year among the people under study. Especially Spiro is giving clear statements concerning his research approaches in the introduction chapters of both of his books: *“As between the ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ approaches, then, my approach is unabashedly etic. The former approach leads to a descriptive and relativistic inquiry whose interest begins and ends with the parochial. [...] Despite the current revolt against functionalism, therefore, I remain an unregenerate functionalist.”* (Spiro, 1996: 6f.)

Spiro clearly represents a scientific paradigm which seeks to gain insight and understanding through an etic research approach, entering the field with predefined theoretical assumptions and a distinct functionalistic perspective, which aims at determining the different functions of religion.

For Spiro it seems crucial that the anthropologist is able to enter the field research process with an accurately defined theory which necessarily influences the gathering of data: *“The theory guides the data collection in that it determines which facts, among the infinite welter, are to be considered as evidential—i.e., are to be collected as data; and their explanation, in turn, is derived from the same theory by which they were selected.”* (Spiro, 1982: 28)

The theoretical presuppositions decide which social, religious and cultural facts are to be considered as valuable data, on the one hand, and it is also the theory which is then being referred to when data needs to be interpreted. The hegemony and assumed superiority of Western science and its capacity of valuable theory-production is more than evident in this approach.

Making a great leap into the present time I want to briefly assess the research methods, as far as possible, of contemporary scientists Guillaume Rozenberg, Per-Arne Berglie and Niklas Foxeus regarding their methodological approaches concerning the Weikza phenomenon from the perspective of transpersonal anthropology.

As stated earlier, I have deep admiration for Rozenberg’s work and insights on a scientific level; still I have been quite astonished by some of his confessions in the foreword of *“Renunciation and Power”* (2010). Rozenberg confronts the readers with his resentment, aversion and boredom of Buddhism and Westerners fascinated by Buddhism right in the beginning: *“Should I hide the fact that Buddhism has always bored me? I have never been attracted by its doctrine, nor have I ever found any intellectual or psychological succour in its ‘philosophy’...”* (Rozenberg, 2010a: VII)

Rozenberg continues to recount how the Burmese themselves were perplexed by someone studying Buddhism without *“trying to understand it from ‘inside’”* and kept encouraging him to practice meditation or even to join the monastic order temporarily. *“I shied away. To each his own quest...”* (Rozenberg, 2010a: VII)

Rozenberg's approach seems to be in sharp contrast to the basic statements and assumptions of autoethnographic research and transpersonal approaches where the topic of research is ideally of deep personal meaning and value to the researcher and experiences are being studied and investigated that are personally compelling and inspiring. It can be considered one of the primary goals and concepts of a systematic transpersonal phenomenological research approach to succeed in adopting an insider's perspective, *"when the single-minded pursuit of data within a clearly defined research agenda was momentarily set aside, and the opportunity to enter deeply into the world of our hosts was embraced."* (Goulet/Granville Miller, 2007: 1)

Swedish religious scientist Per-Arne Berglie offers in his article *"Shamanic Buddhism in Burma"* (2005) a valuable comparison of the shamanic, occult and normative dimensions of Buddhism in Burma. The complexity of Burmese religion with its monks, spirit mediums, *Weikzas*, *Bodaws*, magicians and wise men is assessed and esteeming reference is made to Berglie's supervisor Ake Hultkrantz, who is regarded as the *"greatest living figure in shamanistic research today"* (Hoppal, 2005: 5) It seems important to note that Hultkrantz, being Berglie's supervisor who in turn was Foxeus' supervisor, advocated an unconventional view of shamanic phenomena, a perspective which can be seen clearly in his essay *"Ritual und Geheimnis: Über die Kunst der Medizinmänner, oder: Was der Herr Professor verschwie"* (1981). Here he is holding the conviction that *"according to his view much of what is experienced in the North American Indian shamanic séances cannot be measured with scientific methods."* (Mebius, 2005: 22) Apparently Hultkrantz advocated, apart from a strictly scholarly approach to the subject of study, an attitude that admitted a deeper and more personal insight. (cf. Mebius, 2005: 24) I have to admit that I am having a hard time in recognizing this approach in the work of his disciples.

Niklas Foxeus also clearly distances himself from phenomenological, universalist methods of comparative religion in his dissertation *"The Buddhist World Emperor's Mission: Millenarian Buddhism in Postcolonial Burma"* (2011) and restricts himself instead to regional

comparisons of religious phenomena in their historical specificity. (cf. Foxeus, 2011: 30) Still Foxeus advocates a highly reflexive approach, making transparent the circumstances under which his data was collected and reflecting upon the researcher's attitudes, presuppositions and biases and in how far they shape knowledge and insight and influence the field. (cf. Foxeus, 2011: 32) He recognizes that the products of research are *"considered to be shaped and constructed by the scholar. This means that ethnographic 'data' does not have an independent existence."* (Foxeus, 2011: 32)

Taking reference to Charlotte Davies and her assumption that *"reflexivity expresses researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to their research situation and hence their effects upon it."* (Davies, 2003: 7), Foxeus is committed to acknowledge the active role of the researcher in the production of data and calls for a "radical reflexivity" (cf. Foxeus, 2011: 33) The researcher should be able to reflect on basic principles during the whole research process as well as in the writing afterwards. Objectivity is a goal which cannot be attained easily but which one should always strive after.

Concluding I want to highlight once again that I do not want to devalue the approaches of my colleagues in any way; I honour and appreciate their efforts, insights, interpretations and valuable findings which supported and enriched my understanding and cognition of Burmese religious thinking and worldview tremendously. Still, in my specific situation and concern I consider a transpersonal research approach - which recognizes phenomenological cognition of the individual researcher as highly valuable and perceives transpersonal experiences as equally relevant forms of data - as most appropriate and suitable.

2 Religious Diversity and Spiritual Pluralism

2.1 Buddhism in Burma

2.1.1 Worldview and cosmological perspectives

I briefly want to describe the cosmological perspectives to be found in the Buddhist Sutras, according to Suvanno Mahathero.¹⁹ According to Buddhism beings can be born and reborn in 31 distinct “planes” or “realms” of existence. These planes of existence “*range from the extraordinary dark, grim and painful hell realms all the way up to the most sublime, refine and exquisitely blissful heavenly realms*”.²⁰ Existence in every realm is impermanent since in the cosmology taught by the Buddha there is no life in eternal hell or heaven. Human and non-human beings are born into a particular sphere of existence according to both their past Karma, the Karma they were accumulating during their lifetime, and the Karma at the moment of death. Especially the Karma and the state of mind in the moment of dying are of essential relevance for deciding over the next sphere of incarnation. When the karmic force, the karmic impact or impulse that drove beings to that particular realm of existence is finally exhausted, they pass away taking rebirth once again according to the Karma they have accumulated during their lifetime. In these 31 planes, 11 realms, which are called *Kama-Loka* in Pali, are dominated by the five senses, which include our own human realm, six other realms occupied by *Devas*, or according to Burmese perception by *Nats* (since the difference between *Nats* and *Devas* does not seem to be clear-cut and this question is governed by disagreement), and four realms of hell and therefore extensive suffering. The lowest planes are here the hell-planes which are completely devoid of happiness and pleasure, and in ascending order: the animal world, the world of the *Pretas* or hungry ghosts and the world of the *Asuras* which are demonic, jealous beings. (cf. S. Mahathera, 2001: 22)

If we now go beyond these 11 realms we find another 16 realms of *Devas* and Gods of several characterizations, these realms are called *Rupa-Loka*

¹⁹ For his complete text “The 31 Planes of Existence” see http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/allexistence.pdf

²⁰ “The 31 Planes of Existence”, p. 21

in Pali, and signify the world of material and fine material forms. In these realms we find a variety of different *Devas* or *Nats*, *Devas* of unlimited glory, of unbounded and streaming radiance, etc.

Finally there are 4 realms of existence left, these being called *Arupa-Loka* in Pali, and identifying the formless and immaterial world, the abode where existence is only governed by infinite space, infinite consciousness and finally, which is the ultimate plane, the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception, the realm of nothingness, which is what is called *Nirvana* or complete realization of the nature of phenomena. (cf. S. Mahathera, 2001: 21ff)

To reflect this cosmological worldview is crucial in understanding and classifying the various phenomena of spirit possession which we will now examine in detail. In Burmese religious thinking and perception spirits, *Devas*, *Nats* or realized beings like the *Weikzas*, are virtually omnipresent, inhabiting different abodes or realms of existence, invisible for unaccomplished human beings. Since the idea of a supernaturally caused illness or disease is very deeply rooted and present in contemporary Burmese traditional medicine, we will therefore have to study briefly the foundations of the traditional medical system and its relevance nowadays before we will move on to analyse forms of spirit possession in this very context.

2.1.2 History of Burmese Buddhism

In order to properly understand and apprehend the current development of Buddhist meditation practice in Burma and the connection between secular and religious institutions, a brief historical overview of the history in Burma shall be provided at the beginning of the considerations.

Since Burma is known to be one of the major countries following Theravada Buddhism, the Vipassana meditation that enjoys remarkable popularity in Burma as well as internationally, shall be explained briefly. According to Bischoff, two of the major systems of Vipassana meditation have emanated out into the greater world: the tradition deriving from the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw and that from Sayagyi U Ba Khin, which will be discussed in detail in a following chapter (cf. Bischoff, 1995: 2).

First I want to give a short outline of Burma's very first encounter with Buddhism.

Concordantly we find the story of the two flying *Arhats* and disciples of the Buddha, Sona and Uttara, who were sent from Ceylon in order to spread Buddhism eastwards. On their way to Burma and Thailand, they were travelling through Uruvela, close to Buddha's place of enlightenment, Bodhgaya in Bihar, Northern India, and encountered the Buddha there. (cf. Jordt, 2007: 28) Sona and Uttara made offerings to the Buddha and took the two refuges, the refuge in the Buddha and the refuge in the *Dhamma*, since the *Sangha*, the Buddhist community, did not exist at that time. When the two monks were about to leave the Buddha, they asked him for an object of veneration that they could carry along with them. The Buddha gave them eight hairs from his head. Finally, when they arrived in the place that is Rangoon, Burma's former capital and biggest city today, they enshrined the hairs in a *Stupa* which is now the great Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon.²¹ (cf. Bischoff, 1995: 2) Furthermore it is believed that the hill upon which the Shwedagon Pagoda stands was not at all randomly chosen by the two *Arhats*, but was, in fact, the site where the three Buddhas preceding the Buddha Gotama in this world cycle themselves

²¹ For Bischoff's booklet 'Buddhism in Myanmar' see also: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bischoff/wheel399.html>

deposited relics. Buddha *Kaukkathan* is said to have left his staff on the *Theinguttara* Hill, the Buddha *Gawnagong* his water filter, and Buddha Kassapa a part of his robe. (cf. Shway Yoe, 1963: 179)

Therefore, the Shwedagon Pagoda remains the most important site of worship and pilgrimage for Burmese Buddhists until the present day.



*Picture 4: Shwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon, Burma
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2008)*

2.1.3 Contemporary Theravada Buddhism

2.1.3.1 Vipassana- Meditation Movement in the 20th Century

The popularization and revitalization of the Vipassana meditation in the 19th and 20th century was due to the intense support and effort of three important characters: the only democratically elected prime Minister U Nu (1907-95), Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) and Mahasi Sayadaw (1909-82), who were all equally responsible for the wide popularity of Vipassana in Burma nowadays. S.N. Goenka (*1924), whose achievements and lifework will be discussed in the course of this chapter, was the disciple of Sayagyi U Ba Khin who was in turn the disciple of Ledi Sayadaw.

U Nu was a devout Buddhist and had long been a spiritual leader in his country. Particularly during the period of the Sixth Buddhist Synod (1954-

56) that was held in Rangoon under his host, he had built the Kaba Aye Pagoda and the Maha Pasana Guha in Rangoon.²² In August 1961, mainly due to moves initiated by U Nu, his parliament declared Buddhism as the official state religion. During his reign the Vipassana tradition moved from a technique practiced by the aristocracy to a popular technique that was within the reach of everyone - it represented the “*democratisation of enlightenment*” (cf. Houtman, 1999: 8).

U Nu can be considered to be very relevant in what Gustaaf Houtman calls the “*popularisation, democratisation and internationalisation of enlightenment*” (Houtman, 1999: 8). U Nu sponsored in the 1940s and 1950s what was by then a third generation of teachers to disseminate the Vipassana techniques under the umbrella of state sponsorship, amongst whom Mahasi Sayadaw was by far the most influential. Accountant-General Sayagyi U Ba Khin, the other very influential and important Vipassana teacher traced his method back to the *Anapana* method of Ledi Sayadaw. U Nu can be approached as a statesman who had “*taken mental culture into the heart of the government.*” (Houtman, 1999: 8) U Nu also had made it a requirement for his cabinet members to meditate long enough to achieve enlightenment, which implies that the person, who attained this stage of realisation, is no longer able to break even one of the five Buddhist precepts: not to kill, steal, lie, commit adultery or take any intoxicant substances. “*The seriousness of this belief, that individuals became incorruptible through achieving enlightenment was reflected by the fact that U Nu introduced Vipassana into the prisons. Those who “passed the meditation course” were given their permanent freedom and were considered trustworthy people who would not transgress against other citizens.*” (Jordt, 2007: 30).

It was maybe U Nu’s greatest wish and desire to unify the Sangha and to purify and propagate the *Sasana*, a quest for a national Burmese identity, which unfortunately and naturally created a big amount of uneasiness amongst the various ethnic minorities, primarily among those who were not Buddhist. In any event, at least between the years 1947 and 1962

²² For U Nu’s biography see also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U_Nu (05.01.2012)

actions taken and institutions formed for the revitalization of *Sasana* were placed under the protection and patronage of the government. (cf. Jordt, 2007: 31)

Ledi Sayadaw was one the most outstanding, excellent and influential figures as far as the propagation and spread of the Buddhist teachings and their concrete practices are concerned, particularly among the laity of the country. He was actually the very first who was breaking with the orthodox Buddhist idea that *Abidhamma* studies were exclusively the concern of the monastic community and that lay people just had to listen to the teachings of the monks about *Dana* and *Sila*. The only religious and moral duties of lay Buddhists were to support the monasteries and temples materially and to observe the five Buddhist precepts. Ledi Sayadaw assumed that the study of *Abidhamma*, the philosophical concepts of Buddhism, would be quintessential among the Buddha's teachings and that they should definitely also be available to the lay Buddhist community. Ledi Sayadaw consequently formed societies in nearly every town where laypeople were taught *Abidhamma* and had the opportunity to practice insight meditation.

He started making people becoming aware of the fact that the Buddhist teachings should be available to all people without the difference whether they find themselves in a monastic or a lay environment. Of course, several new orientations emerge from the fact that from now onwards more and more lay people were trained and taught in the study of *Dhamma* and had therefore the opportunity to gain insight into the teachings which put them into the unique position to articulate pressure on the monks to be competent, pure and authentic in respect to the Buddhist teachings. The lineage from Ledi Sayadaw to his disciple Mahasi Sayadaw mirrors the institutionalization of the new movement, as both of them, but in particularly Mahasi Sayadaw, initiated and supervised the establishment of lay meditation centres that were directed by lay committees (cf. Jordt, 2007: 23ff).

Ingrid Jordt calls particular attention to the fact that it was especially the British colonialization of Burma that forced and stimulated the

revitalization movement of Buddhism and the rise of the mass lay meditation movement. First the colonial administration resolved the Burmese kingship and “*reorganized the state into a bureaucracy suitable for the pursuit efficiencies in extracting resources and reordering civil society.*” [...]. (Jordt, 2007: 23) Traditionally what could be found in Burma was what Jordt calls the *ternary order*: Sangha, state and laity. Monks traditionally renounced the world and served as preservers of the teachings and propagators of rightful, morally correct actions; “*lay householders supported the Sangha materially and worldly rulers had the obligation to uphold the purity and propagation of the Sasana.*” (Jordt, 2007: 23)

Traditionally this situation, in which all participants had their particular roles and duties to follow, served as the fundamental legitimation for the ruler’s powers and status. With the advent of British colonialism foreign ideas concerning leadership, administration and bureaucracy were imposed, and a modern, progressive state had to be established.

The Vipassana revitalization can be perceived, according to Jordt, as an “*attempt to secure a moral cosmic order in the face of overwhelming socio-political transformations.*” (Jordt, 2007: 24) Insight meditation was realized as a means and vehicle to access sources of power and self-determination previously hidden and unavailable. The central idea behind the meditation movement is, in this respect that the purification of the state occurs by means of the purification of the citizens and improvement of its morality.

To conclude it can be stated that it was thanks to the wisdom, engagement and foresight of especially U Nu, Ledi Sayadaw and Mahasi Sayadaw and other Buddhist masters to be mentioned, that this very fundamental transformation which was taking place in society and within the order of the state was able to be encountered by a specific movement that lead towards a genuine, mental training of the mind in order to benefit the development of society.

Mahasi Sayadaw established Burma's largest lay meditation centre, the *Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha*, which opened in 1950, with the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw as its principle master. "*Mahasi Sayadaw started the teaching of his own particular method of insight in 1947 and taught for 33 years until his death in August, 1982. The centre has prospered with up to 500 meditators practicing intensive meditation daily.*" (cf. URL: http://www.buddhanet.net/m_centre.htm, 30.08.2011). Ingrid Jordt points out that the establishment of Mahasi Sayadaw's meditation centre in Rangoon represents in a way a contradiction to what is orthodoxly considered to follow Buddhist norms and convictions. Firstly, it is the specific vocation of the Sangha to strive for *Nirvana*, whereas it is the "*laity's role to provide for the Sangha the material requisites for the monks' practice.*" (Jordt, 2007: 17) Secondly, the traditional location for religious practice would be the forest, where monks were trained in ascetic practices and meditation. At the lay meditation centre both these conventional ideas are transformed: A lay person is here fully engaged in Vipassana meditation, trying to achieve enlightenment. Also the centre is not situated in a remote forest area away from human settlements; it is located in a well busy neighbourhood close to Rangoon's city centre (cf. Jordt, 2007: 17ff). In this sense the laity has, to a large degree, domesticated the institution of the Sangha by asserting that the fundamental goals of the Buddha's teachings are not meant to be practised by hermit, learned monks alone, but should be readily available for all people from all walks of life. What can be called the *mass lay meditation movement*, a term, that, according to Jordt, incorporates the movement's political and sociological dimensions, or the Vipassana movement has reconfigured and restructured Buddhist practice in Burma. (cf. Jordt, 2007: 3)

The specific mental training which can be found at the very heart of the Vipassana training and in how far this approach provides a structure for the people in coping with the political crisis and the harsh consequences for everyday-life will be discussed in the following chapter (cf. Houtman, 1999: 7)

2.1.3.2 Vipassana Meditation and its Main Characteristics

Vipassana is one of India's most ancient techniques of meditation, attributed to Buddha Gautama. *Vipassana* (Pali) or *Vipasyana* (Sanskrit) means insight into the impermanent nature of body and mind and is a way and technique of self-transformation through self-observation and introspection. *"It focuses on the deep interconnection between mind and body, which can be experienced directly by disciplined attention to the physical sensations that form the life of the body, and that continuously interconnect and condition the life of the mind. It is this observation-based, self-exploratory journey to the common root of mind and body that dissolves mental impurity, resulting in a balanced mind full of love and compassion."* (cf. URL: <http://www.dhamma.org/en/vipassana.shtml>, 30.08.2011).

"Vipassana is a first-person, empirical investigation of cognitive procedures and mechanisms." (Jordt, 2007: 61) The ultimate goal of Vipassana meditation is to realize and finally remove all the conditions for human suffering, representing a *"practical technique and method for a moral empirical theory of knowing, practice and being."* (Jordt, 2007: 61). The transformation of mind and the way it perceives is being achieved by the simultaneous realization and comprehension of the mind that knows and the object of consciousness by observing thoughts, feelings and sensory perceptions. Thoughts, feelings and sensations are realized to be fundamentally impermanent and temporary in their nature. Ideally, Vipassana meditation shall serve for gaining deeper intuitive insights into the nature of *Anicca* (impermanence), which is the first fundamental recognition in the path leading to enlightenment. (cf. Jordt, 2007: 62) According to the impermanence doctrine, human life embodies this change and continuous transformation in the aging process, the cycle of birth and rebirth (*Samsara*), and in any experience of loss or suffering. (cf. URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impermanence>, 02.02.2012) The doctrine further asserts that because things are impermanent, attachment to them is essentially misleading, and can only arise suffering (*Dukkha*). *"Under the impermanence doctrine, all compounded and constructed things and*

states are impermanent." (URL: <http://impermanence.askdefine.com/>, 02.02.2012)

The practical experience and the realization that whatever feelings, thoughts, mental formations or bodily sensations are ultimately of impermanent nature constitutes the foundation for insights into the universal characteristic of *Anatta* (the insubstantiality and impermanence of a self), since the meditator finally recognizes that there is no doer in the doing; there is merely the process of cause and effect (*Karma*) going on without end. This recognition ideally leads to the realization of the omnipresence of *Dukkha* (suffering) and the comprehension that where there is no permanence or substantiality there can only be dissatisfaction and suffering (cf. Jordt, 2007: 63).

Vipassana, or insight contemplation, is the method of meditation prescribed in the *Mahsatipatthana* Sutra, which, in the Theravada Buddhist tradition refers to a foundation or a presence of mindfulness, outlined in the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness* which form the basis for maintaining moment-by-moment mindfulness and for developing mindfulness through meditation. These *Four Foundations of Mindfulness* are: the body (Pali: *Kaya*), the feelings or sensations (*Vedana*), mind or consciousness (*Citta*), and mental objects (*Dhamma*).²³

"The word Satipatthana is the name for an approach to meditation aimed at establishing sati, or mindfulness. The term sati is related to the verb sarati (Sanskrit), to remember or to keep in mind. It is sometimes translated as non-reactive awareness, free from agendas, simply present with whatever arises", (URL: <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.22.o.than.html>, 02.02.2012) remaining focused without validating or interpreting whatever sensation arises. "Remaining focused" refers to the element of concentration in the practice, as the meditator holds to one particular frame of reference or concentration among the conflicting flows of experience. The effort put into the practice should be strong and upright, trying to abandon unskillful states of mind and develop skillful ones in their stead, all the while trying to

²³ Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satipatthana>

discern the difference between the two. "Alert" means being clearly aware of what is happening in the present moment. "Mindful" in this context means being able to keep the frame of reference or one-pointed concentration continually in mind and to stay focused on the object of meditation. As these qualities all ideally work together, they bring the mind to a solid state of concentration, focus and awareness. (cf. URL: <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.22.o.than.html>, 30.08.2011).

2.1.3.3 S.N. Goenka and the Worldwide Spreading of Vipassana Meditation

"[...] The entire cause of happiness lies inside, not outside. The actual truth lies deep within. For every unwholesome action, vocal or physical, the root is the mind." (S.N. Goenka: http://ignca.nic.in/cd_09014.htm, 01.02.2012)

To India, the country of origin, Vipassana was reintroduced by one of Sayagyi U Ba Khin's most famous disciples, Satya Narayan Goenka, as a non-sectarian teaching and was rapidly spreading through India, Asia and the rest of world. Although Indian by descent and Hindu in his belief, Goenka was born and raised in Mandalay, Burma. Searching for a way to overcome and cure his chronic migraine-attacks, he had the good fortune to come into contact with Sayagyi U Ba Khin, and to learn the technique of Vipassana from him. After receiving training from his teacher for fourteen years, Goenka settled in India and began teaching Vipassana in 1969. *"In a country still sharply divided by differences of caste and religion, the courses offered by Goenka have attracted thousands of people from every part of society. In addition, many people from countries around the world have come to join courses in Vipassana meditation".*²⁴ Goenka has taught Vipassana meditation to thousands of people in India and in many other Western countries. Meditation centres have been established under his guidance in India, Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, France, the United Kingdom, Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Nepal and other countries (cf. URL: <http://www.dhamma.org/en/goenka.shtml>, 30.08.2011). *"Goenka emphasises that the Buddha never taught a sectarian*

²⁴ Cf. URL: <http://www.dhamma.org/en/goenka.shtml> , 01.02.2012

religion, he taught Dhamma – the way to liberation – which is universal. Therefore, he views his own teachings as non-sectarian and open to people of all faiths or no faith”. (cf. URL: http://www.reference.com/browse/s._n._goenka, 01.02.2012)

Goenka calls Vipassana meditation an experiential "scientific" practice. (cf. URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S._N._Goenka, 02.02.2012) Practitioners are encouraged to examine and test their own experiences as evidence by observing themselves with equanimity, tranquillity, calmness and vigilance. The main practice of the technique is the continuous, vigilant and attentive observation of one's own breath. During a regular 10-day Vipassana meditation course participants are not having any contacts with the outside world; furthermore they are not engaging in any form of communication and interactions with fellow meditators which serves to quiet the mind and facilitate the necessary concentration for meditation. Constant observing of the breath, for up to 10 hours a day (during a Vipassana course) allows the mind to enter in a state of natural concentration and focus. *“This concentration prepares one for the main part of the practice - un-attached, equanimous observation of the reality of the present moment as it manifests in one's own mind and body.”* (URL: <http://www.vri.dhamma.org/general/goenka.html>, 30.08.2011)

Vipassana Meditation centres, where ten-day courses are being offered free of any charge (although it is common to give appropriate donations to show appreciation and respect for the teachings), have been established worldwide and find growing popularity until the present day.

S.N. Goenka made a great contribution in establishing the Vipassana meditation technique in Burma, his home country, and continuing the tradition and revitalization started by U Ba Khin and Mahasi Sayadaw. Furthermore he can be considered as the initiator and the founder of a worldwide interest, renewal and revival of the tradition, allowing people and meditators from all possible religious backgrounds to experience the benefits of Vipassana mind-training.

2.2 Complexity of Burmese Religion: Buddhism and the Spirit Cult

Before outlining and explaining practices related to the spirit cult, the relation between Theravada Buddhism and the latter one shall be described in its historical development. In this context F. Lehman speaks of “*a syncretic Burmese religion rather than of Buddhism*” (Lehman, in: Eliade, 1993: 575), reminding us once more that the question whether we find two distinct components in Burmese religion, two different religious systems or rather various spirit cult practices that are historically linked to and legitimized by Buddhism, should mark the starting point of a discussion of the Burmese religious sphere. (cf. Brac de la Perrière, 2009: 187) From its very beginning Buddhism in Burma was particularly linked and connected with political dimensions, power and authority and claims of political authority are legitimized through Buddhism until the present day. (cf. Decaroli, 2004: 151) To unroll and unveil these complex relationships allows an insight and understanding not only of the relationship between Buddhism and politics but also between spirit cults and political power.

The foundation of the Burmese Buddhist state dates back to the legendary encounter between King Anawratha of Bagan and the monk and Buddhist scholar Shin Araham. “*Anawratha began to unite the region by subjugating one chieftain after another and was successful in giving the Burmese people a sense of belonging to a larger community, a nation. The crucial event in the history of Burma is not so much the founding of the city of Bagan and the building of its walls and moat, but more Bagan's acceptance and intense propagation of Theravada Buddhism in the eleventh century.*” (Bischoff, 1995: 18) The religion was brought to Upper Burma by the Mon *Bhikkhu* named Shin Araham. (cf. Bischoff, 1995: 18) Since these early times Burmese emperors and rulers have historically been legitimated by demonstrating support and encouragement for the Buddhist saints and fulfilling their duty in providing for the Buddhist monastic order. Since Anawratha's reign, *Arhats* have been consulted by

rulers at moments of crisis and in times of decision-making and such encounters have always been considered having large impact in the structure and shape of the Buddhist order of the country. Anawratha's encounter with Shin Arahān in 1056 resulted in the introduction of the Theravāda Buddhist monastic ordination tradition and marked the beginning of a new Theravāda Buddhist monarchic system in Upper Burma. (cf. Houtman, 1999: 7)

Anawratha realized Buddhism as a vehicle to unite diverse religious elements and beliefs in his empire and used donations to the Sangha to demonstrate and reinforce his political authority. (cf. Decaroli, 2004: 153)

Reflecting on the composition and unique features of Burmese religion, one has to take into account that Burmese also practice a cult of service and veneration to various spirits. This cult exists both at a national level as a formal institution of the Burmese monarchy - the establishment of the 37 *Lords* dates back to the reign of King Anawratha - and these Nats can be perceived as the spirit guardians of the kingdom. In local and regional forms of the spirit cult the *Nats* are associated with characteristic features of the landscape and family lines, and do as well exist as homeless ghosts, demons, and various spiritual entities associated with nature. There is a broad scriptural basis for the idea that it is the positive duty of authority, in particular of a proper Buddhist monarch, to subdue and conquer, by conversion, whatever spirit forces may be thought to exist as a threat to the conditions in which Buddhism, its doctrine, practice and monastic order may flourish in society. (cf. Eliade, 1993: 1328) The duty and attempt of the Burmese royalty, especially the kings, was therefore historically twofold in propagating, supporting and promoting Theravāda Buddhism, on the one hand, but also in providing an authority and dominance over potentially harmful spirits that might turn out to be a threat for Theravāda Buddhism as a national religious system.

On the one hand Anawratha succeeded in establishing Buddhism as the religion unifying the Irrawaddy valley; on the other hand he recognized and acknowledged the local spirit cult figures by placing them under the

rule of *Sakka*, Burma's guardian of Theravada Buddhism. (cf. Brac de la Perrière, 2009: 197)

According to Schober (2004) Anawratha successfully initiated religious reforms to strengthen Theravada Buddhism, but failed in his effort and struggle to free and purify his kingdom from the veneration and propitiation of *Nats*. (cf. Schober, in: Walter, Fridman, 2004: 803) At a first glance it appears that Anawratha strived after totally eliminating *Nat* worship, but why then, Decaroli brings up the question "*is he known for sponsoring the worship of the thirty-seven? And if his goal was to promote Buddhism at the exclusion of other forms of religious expression, it seems odd that [...] he incorporated images of the thirty-seven Nat Lords into his foremost Buddhist complex, the Shwezigon.*" (Decaroli, 2004: 158)

According to Robert Decaroli the famous *Glass Palace Chronicles* portray King Anawratha rather as a person inclined in engaging in the worship and propitiation of spirits himself, having a strong connection with spiritual entities in his personal life.

It might well be that the establishment and introduction of the cult of the 37 Lords was a deep personal wish. (cf. Decaroli, 2004: 159)

Faced with his failure to convince the local population to abandon their beliefs in spirits and convert to Buddhism, Anawratha finally decided to take 37 statues, representing the religions practiced at that time and have them placed at the state pagoda *Shwezigon* in Nyaung-U, near Bagan, Upper Burma. These thirty-seven *Nats* at the Shwezigon Pagoda are considered to be the original list of *Nats*. (cf. Brac de la Perrière, 1996: 46) As mentioned before, in order to regularize and legalize the spirit cult and place it under the protectorate and authority of Buddhism, Anawratha established *Sakka* (*Sakra*, Burmese: *Thagya Min*) as the principal lord and head of the 37 *Nats*. (cf. Nash, 2007: 82; Decaroli, 2004: 160) The traditional hierarchy of *Nats* is therefore headed by *Thagya Min Nat*, who can be identified with the God *Indra* in Hindu mythology. (URL: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/589584/Thagya-Min>, 15.08.2011) It was

Anawratha's wish apparently was to not eliminate the practice of spirit worship but to properly ensure that the *Nats* became associated and connected with the appropriate form of Theravada Buddhism. (cf. Decaroli, 2004: 164)

The 37 *Nats* are closely identified and connected with Burmese history, most of them being legendary personalities either of royal blood themselves or in any close relationship to royalty. (cf. Nash, 2007: 82) It is believed that an untimely, unfortunate, sudden, unjust, violent or in any way tragic death prevents reincarnation altogether and evokes or facilitates the potential aimless and jeopardizing wandering of the soul.

Many *Nats* came into being by the jealousy and greed for power of the king, their death being ordered by him personally in order to protect his empire against rivals and enemies. As Brac de la Perrière explains: *"The king, in order to lessen the risks that a region exposed to such a form of death might incur, instituted a local cult: he had a temple built, a stature sculpted, and ordered the local population to carry out appropriate rituals."* (Brac de la Perrière, 1996: 47)

By integrating potentially harmful spirits into the pantheon of Buddhist deities, success was twofold: possible harm or damage through the spirits could be successfully alleviated and the spirits enjoyed the status of tutelary deities protecting the Buddhist religion and being protectors of certain geographical regions indicating their connection with concrete geographic areas. The worship of *Nats* is therefore deeply embedded in Buddhist belief; no *Nat* ritual can take place outside a Buddhist context. It was an enormous benefit to the Burmese kings to tie the *Nats* to specific regions, allowing them to strengthen their authority over territories in their empire. (cf. Brac de la Perrière, 1996: 58) Formerly subversive, harmful forces were captured, converted and promoted by the central kingdom to preserve and safeguard the Buddhist system of values.

Brac de la Perrière stands out in highlighting these complex relationships between Buddhism, spirit cults and political authority with the result that the spirit cult cannot be perceived as a religious system on its own, but as

part of Burmese religion as a whole. She writes: “*I view Burma’s mainstream religion as a religious system that incorporates within the Buddhist framework practices of seemingly different horizons such as the spirit cult or the Weikza cult.*” (Brac de la Perrière, 2009:198)

2.2.1 The Cult of the Nats and the Cult of the 37 Lords

In the centre of Burmese spirit belief we find beings called *Nats*, of which there numerous different kinds. The Term *Nat* etymologically derives from the Pali-Sanskrit word *Natha*, meaning lord or guard. (cf. URL: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nat_%28Geist%29, 15.08.2011) A rough distinction can be drawn between the 37 Lords and all the rest, between higher (*Ahtet Nats*) and lower *Nats* (*Auk Nats*). The higher *Nats* are associated with the arrival of the future Buddha, awaiting him in heaven and do not have any personalities or legends that relate them to concrete events in Burmese history. Nash compares the *Ahtet Nats* to the *Devas* in Hindu mythology. (cf. Nash, 2007: 82) The king of these *Nats* is the previously mentioned Lord of the *Nats* *Thagya Min*. The 37 Lords are venerated as godlike beings and their life stories mostly relate to famous, legendary personalities in Burmese history, who encountered a tragic, sudden death preventing them from reincarnation. The cult surrounding the *Nats* is complex and diverse and includes different categories of rites which correspond to different units within Burmese society, namely, the household, the village, the region and the nation. (cf. Brac de la Perrière, 2005: 66) It is in these dimensions that *Nats* find their areas of competence and fields of responsibility and it therefore requires constant attention and observance of rules and taboos in order to maintain balance and harmony between the human and the spiritual realm.

At the entrance of every town, village or household we find small *Nat* shrines, demanding and enabling one to give offerings and pay respect to the respective *Nats* that no harm or calamity would give trouble and distress. Major trees are also considered to be the abodes of *Nats* and therefore need to be appeased, venerated with offerings and prevented from being cut down. (cf. Nash, 2007: 78)



*Picture 5: Honouring of a tree Nat
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2007)*

Each household and family will set up a shrine for the most favoured *Nat*:



*Picture 6: Shrine for the Nat Bago Mae Daw, U Shein's house. Every morning the Nats are being worshipped and pacified by offerings of flowers and fresh water. One of U Shein's disciples takes care of that.
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*

Since most of the *Nats* can be traced back to actual life stories of personalities, it is not surprising that their wishes, desires and requests

resemble those of human beings. *Nats* are regarded as moody, capricious and impulsive, they are able to haunt and harm humans and need therefore be pacified and pleased in rituals continuously. They have the power to hamper and complicate the lives of those who do not pay proper respect to them and equally to support and help those who respect and venerate them. (cf. Hauser, 2000: 139)

2.2.2 Characteristic Features of *Nat*-Worship: *Nat-Pwe*

A *Nat-Pwe* is an organized event, often at fixed dates of the calendar, lasting between 3-7 days and having the major purpose of renewing and strengthening the relationships of the devotees and worshippers with the spirits. (Brac, 2005: 81) On the one hand we find calendric rituals in the main temple of the respective *Nat* when the most important events in the myths and stories are celebrated. The most famous *Nat-Pwe* one is held in August in the village of *Taungbyon* and attracts thousands of spirit mediums and other worshippers. The other kind of ceremony is the *Nat Pwe* ordered directly by a client and with a special purpose and wish. These can be expensive arrangements since many people may be involved: spirit-mediums, dancers, singers and musicians.

The central figure in a *Nat-Pwe* is a spirit-medium-ship called *Nat-Kadaw*, who has an important and responsible task to fulfil: the establishment of a connection and interaction with the *Nats* in order to be the megaphone for the *Nats* and allow communication between them and the participants of the festival. Therefore, in these *Nat*-dancing ceremonies, accompanied by loud and on-going rhythmic music, the *Nat* enters the medium who, in a state of trance, “becomes” and hence personifies the respective *Nat*. Here possession is sought by medium and *Nat* alike, both enter into the altered state of consciousness voluntarily and happily. (cf. Spiro, 1967: 51)

From my own observations and conversations with *Nat-Kadaws* I was able to find out that the *Nat-Kadaw*, the spiritual medium, has sometimes, but by far not always, complete awareness of what is happening while in trance and is also able to remember and recall these instances afterwards.



*Picture 7: Preparing for a Nat-Pwe: Candles are lit, food and drinks offered to the Buddha, the Weikzas and the Nats.
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2008)*



*Picture 8: The Nat-Kadaw: Dancing accompanied by loud rhythmic music to incarnate the spirit of Bago Maedaw Nat.
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2008)*

Experiencing Ethnography

3 Growing into the World of Weikzas

„Tatsache ist, dass ich mich kontinuierlich und in jedem Moment als Teil meiner Feldforschung erkenne.“²⁵ (Haller, 2011: 39)

The goal of the following section is to genuinely and honestly trace my personal process of insight and transformation and skilfully connect this development to my ethnographic data and findings in the field. Personal narratives shall be combined with scientific foundations in order to make transparent the researcher behind the research and live her up as a human being. As outlined and expressed in the previous sections of this text, it is my deep wish to align my ethnographic results and discoveries with a chronological reconstruction of my personal paths of knowledge and insight.

3.1 The Journey begins ...

“And so begins our work, our hardest work – to bring the ethnographic moment back, to resurrect it, to communicate the distance, which too quickly starts to feel like an abyss, between what we saw and heard and our ability, finally, to do justice to it in our representation. Our field notes become palimpsests, useless unless plumbed for forgotten revelatory moments, unexpressed longings, and the wounds of regret.” (Behar, 1996: 8f).

Almost two years have passed since I have been to Burma for the last time. Unbelievably long two years, so it seems and feels for me right now. And so much has been happening in this period of time. The most outstanding and transforming incident in these two years had without doubt been the birth of our son Leon, who is now almost one and a half

²⁵ “Fact is that I recognize myself continuously and in every moment as part of my research.” (Translation by author)

years old. Leon's birth and the amazing, but delicately challenging months that were following, forced me to retreat from the work on this dissertation and to fully surrender myself into being a Mama.

As a devoted consciousness-researcher I was (and still am) able to experience realms of existence and states of consciousness that had previously not even been imaginable.

Honestly, it took my quite a while to recover, physically as well as emotionally, from the birth experience. Leon was born on the first day of June- it was a mild and warm day- by Caesarean operation. Since we could not get him to move his head downwards, with all available means, there was no chance for a spontaneous, natural birth. Leon seemed to be at peace with this way of birth and we got convinced that a baby probably chooses at some point by itself the manner it wants to see the light of day. It was me who was struggling for quite some time with the fact of not been able to experience a natural birth and learning to live with a wound, a physical as well as an emotional wound.

When I now see and communicate with this amazingly sweet, small being, who is happy and unbelievably curious and fascinated by almost all aspects of life, then I know and I feel that everything is exactly perfect the way it is.

One of the most fascinating aspects as far as my maternal retreat and withdrawal from my dissertation is concerned, is without doubt that my work had its

distinct possibility to develop, grow and flourish in this time of complete non-engagement in the topic. As outlined and explained in chapter 1.4.2.9 Organic Research: The Parable of a Tree, I was able to experience and benefit from an underground, chthonic development of my work- a progress and growth that was facilitated and allowed through renunciation and focussing on aspects and dimensions seemingly unconcerned and entirely different from the topic of my dissertation. The period of retreat had been amazingly fruitful and beneficial for the entire progress of the work, as I now realize retrospectively. I had never been separated from nor lost the intention and goal of this work in any way. Instead I allowed my project to develop and transform in its own specific dynamics and pace, to mature and progress guided by its inherent dynamic forces.



*Picture 9: Leon and I in Summer 2011
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2011)*

I will now start to travel back in time, back to the point where I travelled to Burma in order to do fieldwork for the very first time. I wrote all my experiences and insights elaborately down in notebooks. But I will have to look and re-member, re-experience, re-undergo these experiences and will have to look back and see things, experiences, insights and encounters through the eyes of today, through the level of knowledge and experience of today. I will start at the beginning. For the sake of the authenticity and the self-reflecting approach of this section I will leave my field journal entries in German, the language I wrote them. I am well aware that the following parts of this dissertation are in a way honest, open, self-exposing and self-reflecting that has commonly been very unusual in conventional science.

Let us now make a journey to Burma, to the house of my most important informant and master, the healer Sayagyi U Shein.

3.2 The Original Research Plan

When I prepared my field researches in Burma I had of course the intention to collect ethnographic data in the form of interview questionnaires, informal, narrative conversations, and through participant observations. My questionnaires were very well structured and carefully considered to not in the slightest run into danger to leave out essential questions. I had been very mindful to ask similar or even same questions to all of my informants to guarantee comparability in interpretation and analysis of data. ²⁶ I entered the field as well prepared as possible, having read and internalized whatever scientific books, articles and texts existed

²⁶ Please see the appendix for the complete questionnaires.

and were available to me at that time. I had the honest feeling to know exactly what needed to be done and was full of confidence and trust to be successful.

„Ich habe das Gefühl ich stehe völlig am Anfang und habe keinen Plan wie ich all diese Erlebnisse in **meinem Kopf** einordnen soll.“

”I have the feeling I am at the very beginning and I have no clue how I possibly should put together all these experiences **in my head**.”

I have been entirely convinced that cognition and understanding is in itself an act of rationality and intellect which I therefore consequently located to belonging to the ‘realm of the head’. I was to perceive life and the people and incidents around me through the medium of my intellectual, rational mind, which is to be associated with the left hemisphere of the brain. Without even consciously realizing or questioning it I wanted to be faithful, honest and devoted to the science I had been taught at university for years.

The paradigm of conventional science is characterized by rationality, objectivity and distance. In order to transcend this perspective a technique of participation that demands from us the total involvement of our whole being is necessary. (cf. Turnbull, in: Turner, 2006: 42) Edith Turner writes: *“As for my function as ethnographer, I had to relax the detached-observer imperative in order to see as the Africans saw, thus bridging the gap and entering the culture.”* (Turner, 2006: 43)

At this stage of my research I had by far not yet reflected upon Turner’s or other transpersonal anthropologists’ approach and this perspective was simply not at all available to me and my research at that time. I do not want to devalue or disdain the methods of science in no sense, as I honour and appreciate the findings and insights I was able to gain.

3.2.1 Living, Learning and Laughing in Sayagyi's House

I met the traditional healer and alchemist Sayagyi U Shein during a Congress on Shamanism and Healing, held at Mondsee, Austria in 2006.



*Picture 10: Shamans at the Mondsee Congress 2006
(Wolf Wies © 2006)*

Sayagyi U Shein is the first one left in the first row.

I was immediately deeply fascinated and touched by his presence, his charisma and his loving and generous nature. I was standing by his side during nearly the whole course of the congress, watching his healing practices, hearing his words and trying to understand and realize his worldview, his perspective and his unique capacities. A personal encounter happened and I was able to tell Sayagyi about the topic of my research. At that time I was still working on my Master's thesis in Social and Cultural Anthropology, aiming at portraying Thai and Burmese traditional medicine in a comparative manner, a topic, as I found out in the course of this work, which was far too complex and extensive to be possibly covered comprehensively within the scope of a Master thesis. Sayagyi was very interested in my work, touched by my questions and curiosity and invited me to come to visit him at his house and healing centre in Burma. The following weeks were passing by extremely quickly. I was making the necessary preparations for my field stay in Burma and thankfully received

an invitation letter from Sayagyi to be a guest in his house in Yangon. U Shein managed that I could stay in his house for the whole period of my residence in Yangon, which is an extraordinary accomplishment since the possibility to accommodate foreigners in private homes is tightly restricted and regulated by the Burmese government.

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 30.10.2006

„Heute ist der 30.10.2006 und mein zweiter Tag in diesem Land, in diesem Haus, bei diesen Menschen neigt sich dem Ende zu. U Sheins Assistent hat die letzten beiden Tage nahezu durchgehend auf irgendeinem Amt verbracht um die Genehmigung einzuholen, dass ich hier bei ihm im Haus wohnen kann. Scheint alles nicht so einfach zu sein, viel Papierkram und Unmengen von *Kyats* die das ganze kostet. U Shein möchte unbedingt, dass ich bei ihm wohne. Er hat mich fest unter seine Fittiche genommen und behandelt mich als wäre ich sein eigenes Kind. Ich verbringe den ganzen Tag mit ihm, an seiner Seite, und seine dicke Masseuse, die auch seine Köchin ist und ständig laut rülpst, hat mich keine Sekunde aus den Augen gelassen. Nach dem Mittagessen hat sie mir sogar ein Schläfchen verordnet. Also habe ich geruht, im einzigen klimatisierten Zimmer des Hauses.“

The primary task and mission at that stage, at the very beginning stage of my research was to receive an impression and determine the fundamental characteristics of the Burmese religious worldview, on a theoretical as well as on practical basis. Particularly advantageous was the fact that I found myself in the house of one of Burma's most accomplished and prominent healing masters, a fact that allowed experiencing and observing directly lived religiosity and practical spiritual healing.

Since the spectrum of tasks in a Buddhist healing temple is primarily devoted to diagnosing and treating diseases and imbalances of various origins, the performing of a number of rituals is to be found at the heart of the practices. Since my arrival in Burma was coinciding with auspicious and important dates of festivals I had the rare opportunity of witnessing a ceremony of major importance for U Shein and his disciples, the so-called '*medicine grinding ceremony*' which is only held once a year at the day before the full moon of the month November (*Tazaungmone*). This ceremony, about which I was so far unable to find any valuable scientific literature, is meant to be celebrated among the community of disciples, assistants and colleagues of traditional medicine of Sayagyi U Shein. It is a great annual gathering of his disciples, followers and devotees from all over Burma, but also from regions far afield such as China or Japan. Hundreds of traditional medicine practitioners, primarily in the field of spiritual healing, arrive together with their families at Sayagyi's house.



*Picture 11: Sayagyi's disciples and colleagues grinding sacred woods.
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2006)*

The ceremony of grinding medicine is falling on the exact same date as one of the most important festivals celebrated in the Buddhist lunar calendar, the festival of *Kathina*, which is traditionally held at the end of the *Vassa* (Pali '*vasso*' ~ *rain*), the three-months retreat period during the rainy season where Buddhist monks and nuns remain inside monasteries and

temples to dedicate themselves to the study of Buddhist scriptures and the practice of meditation. *Vassa* lasts approximately three months, in the Burmese calendar from July (the month of *Waso*) to October (the month of *Thadingyut*). (cf. URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vassa>, 11.11.2011) The beginning of the *Kathina* festivals marks the end of the *Vassa* retreat, indicates the time where monks and nuns are allowed to move and leave their monasteries again, and is traditionally a festival where lay Buddhists are able to express their gratitude and devotion to the Buddhist clergy. Monks and nuns are being offered all kinds of donations, especially new robes. It is a time of generosity and sharing, where lay men and women have the fortunate opportunity to strengthen, renew and honour their relationships with the monasteries and temples. (cf. URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/holydays/kathina.shtml>, 11.11.2011)

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 04.11.2006

„Es ist der Vollmond des 4. November, der erste Vollmond, den man wieder sieht, nachdem die Regenzeit aus ist, der Vollmond der den Winterbeginn einläutet, der Vollmond, der auch ein Ritual einläutet, das sich nennt *Kathein* (*Kathina*), an dem die Mönche neue Roben geschenkt bekommen, dieses Festival ist auch schon seit Tagen im Gange, die ganze Stadt, das ganze Land spendet für die Mönche, dass sie neue Roben für den Winter bekommen und alle möglichen Gebrauchsgegenstände, von Fächern, über Schlapfen, Radios, und Uhren, alle Dinge die ein Mönch gut brauchen kann, Sonnenschirm zum Beispiel. Die ganze Woche wurden nonstop auf Pali Buddhas Schriften rezitiert über Megaphone von der nahegelegenen Pagode übertragen, 24 Stunden am Tag haben wir die Gesänge gehört in Pali, Buddhas

Belehrungen und den Segen aufgenommen, der allein
im Hören der heiligen Verse entsteht.“

Without being consciously aware of it at that time, the continuous, persistent and monotonous chanting of the Mantras of the Buddhist monks, which we were able to hear for many days and nights uninterruptedly, had a transforming and mind-altering effect, which allowed me to loosen the grip of rational thinking and intellectual analysis. This mind-altering transformation initiated by the chanting was - considered retrospectively - opening doors of intuitive, trans-rational perception.

Many days before the '*medicine grinding ceremony*' was actually taking place, extensive and elaborate preparations and arrangements were taking place in U Shein's house, in the garden and the whole compound. People were arriving constantly from different ethnic areas in their traditional ethnic festive dresses; the whole house was being cleaned and decorated, a huge kitchen was being set up in a hut in the garden to cater for the many visitors. A big golden temple-like tent was built, primarily to provide shade and protection from the relentless tropical sun.

Meat and fish was cut out of our diet and replaced by strictly vegetarian meals; the Buddhist precepts have to be taken seriously, at least for this important, auspicious day of the festival.

Finally the great day had arrived and celebrations started very early in the morning.

I remember U Shein's close disciples reporting about more than one-thousand people participating in the ritual.

After dedicating the whole ceremony to the Buddha and the fruitful continuity to the Buddhist Sasana, the teachings of the Buddha, all the Weikzas and Devas were called upon to guarantee their help, support and benevolence.

“Without the consent and support of our Weikzas and
Devas we cannot be successful. We need the help of all

spiritual entities, their support, in order to produce an effective, powerful remedy. Also, the reason, why so many people come, so many shamans and assistant shamans is that they all bring their protective and supporting spirits with them. They will then also be part in the ceremony. All the powers have to be brought together; this is very important.”

(AM, Rangoon, 04.11.2006)

The whole day, from early morning until night, approximately one-thousand people, U Shein’s disciples, followers, their families and children, and also many other spiritual healers and shamans were devotedly grinding seven different kinds of precious timber on stone plates, which were sprinkled with special blessed water over and over again. Utmost importance and attention was paid that indeed everybody was participating actively to allow all present energies to be melted together, fused, and united. I remember vividly the sparkling, electrified energy that was being present throughout the whole ritual, a morphogenetic field of resonance that was uniting all participating people and spiritual entities on a certain frequency. It was an atmosphere of high concentration and trance and it happened many times during that day that people got possessed by spiritual beings that were then communicating through them.

The aim and object of the whole endeavour is to produce a medicine, out of this mixture of the paste of the different woods, which is then formed to small cones by hand, dried in the sun and then used as incense medicine. These incense cones are considered to be a highly powerful remedy against all negative spiritual influences, possession and unwanted, harmful spiritual impact. The cones have to be held in high esteem and kept safely in a place that is above oneself.



Picture 12: U Shein's followers and disciples forming incense cones
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2006)

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 04.11.2006

„Es ist Abend des 4. November 2006, ich bin in U Sheins Haus im einzigen klimatisierten Zimmer des Hauses, endlich alleine, nach einigen Tagen an denen wir sehr viele Leute hier hatten. Ich bin jetzt etwa eine Woche hier, meine allererste Woche.

Wir haben heute eine wichtige Zeremonie vollendet, die *Grinding Medicine Ceremony*, nicht für das Gold Ash Powder, sondern für eine spezielle übernatürliche Geist-Medizin, die zu einem Räucherwerk verarbeitet wird, angezündet werden kann und böse Geister und negative Energien verbrennt. Es war ein irrwitziger, unglaublicher Tag für mich heute, ich habe vieles überhaupt nicht verstanden. Es wurden stundenlang verschiedene Hölzer auf Steinplatten gerieben, immer wieder mit einem speziell gesegneten Wasser beträufelt, so dass ein Saft entstanden ist, der dann mit einem speziellen Holz, dessen Namen ich nicht

weiß, gemischt wird (Thana Ka). Daraus entsteht diese spezielle Räuchermedizin, eine rein geistige Medizin. Es ist alles etwas irritierend für mich. Es waren heute an die tausend Leute hier, im winzigen Haus, haben sich oben in den Tempel, die Pagode hineingestopft, der Tempel der eigentlich riesig ist im Vergleich zu den sonstigen Räumen des Hauses. (U Shein lebt in einem winzigen Zimmer, auf 10 oder 6 m², in sehr einfachen Verhältnissen.) Es wurde dann Kraft auf mich übertragen, von U TW, dem Chefarzt hier im Haus, dem Hauptschüler von U Shein, Heiler und Assistent hier, während wir gemeinsam das Holz für die Medizin gerieben haben. Die Menschen fallen reihenweise in Ohnmacht, Frauen, von denen man sagt die wären wiedergeborene Devas, die sich bewusst für ein menschliches Leben entschieden haben, warum weiß ich nicht. Es wird so viel gezaubert. [...] Jetzt ist Abend. Das letzte was ich erlebt habe ist ein Kali-Ritual, das hochgradig skurril für mich war. Und das war dann das ganze was dem Fass ein bisschen den Deckel aufgesetzt hat, ich war dann endgültig verwirrt. Alle sagen mir ständig wie lucky und glücklich ich bin, dass ich hier bin. WM hat mir das heute so erklärt, dass sehr wenige Österreicher nach Burma kommen überhaupt, von diesen wenigen Österreichern die nach Burma kommen, kommen noch weniger in U Sheins Haus, und die allerwenigsten, nämlich nur ich, sind da an diesem speziellen Festival-Tag, der einmal im Jahr stattfindet. [...] Ich habe das Gefühl ich stehe völlig am Anfang und habe keinen Plan wie ich all diese Erlebnisse in meinem Kopf einordnen soll.“

I have to confess that the beginning period of my field research was highly challenging for me on a personal as well as on a scientific level. I was being thrown right into the middle of extensive and intensive spiritual ceremonies, confronted with states of consciousness and forms of trance that I was unable to comprehend in any meaningful way at that time. One of the most astonishing moments in this period of time occurred in fact a couple days after the “medicine grinding ceremony”.

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 12.11.2006

„Heute sind wir gemeinsam im Tempel gesessen und haben die Fotos der *grinding ceremony* angeschaut. Auf den Fotos die vom Festival gemacht wurden, waren nicht nur die Devas, die wir gerufen haben sichtbar in Form von kreisrunden Lichtern, sondern auch der Maitreya Buddha als oranges Muster hat sich dazugesellt, und die verschiedenen Nats auch; alle waren anwesend. Aufgrund der Tatsache, dass alle herbeigerufenen geistigen Wesenheiten tatsächlich präsent waren und sich auf den Bildern in Form von Lichtern zeigen, gehen die Menschen davon aus, dass das Ritual erfolgreich war.“



*Picture 13: Devas and Weikzas at the Grinding Ceremony 2006
(Sayagi U Shein © 2006)*

Maitreya Buddha is being visible as an orange light at the top of the room.

To be sure, what can be seen on this picture, I asked U Shein again through email.²⁷ On 04.01.2012 I got the following answer from him:

Hello Dear daughter,

1. The Photo you gave is the light of chief of Deva, Sakka.
2. The light can only be seen when you take photo.
3. No one can take Photo to Weiza and Devi if they don't agree.
4. The king of Deva, Weiza and Devi give power to those who make services to mankind.
5. The light on the Photo is the power of blessing of chief of Deva, Sakka for super-power.

With love,
Father Shein

²⁷ This letter is the original description given from U Shein through an email on 04.01.2012.

3.2.1.1 Pictures of Spirits?

“We have been indoctrinated to think that things that cannot be seen or weighed or detected with conventional scientific methods cannot be real.” (Heinemann, 2010: XVII)

Very recently Dr. Klaus Heinemann’s book *“Orbs: Their Mission and Messages of Hope”* (2010) was falling into my hands, creating great astonishment, wonder and curiosity. Klaus Heinemann, holding a Ph.D. in experimental physics from the University of Tübingen, Germany, can be counted among the most important researchers on the *Orb*-phenomenon, together with theologian Dr. Miceal Ledwith, the American medium JZ Knight and professor emer. William A. Tiller Ph.D..

I want to present the main ideas and statements as exposed by Heinemann and others doing research and study in this field to make the assumption that Orb-research allows insight into the realm of conscious forms of life outside of our physical, material reality. I am well aware that the whole debate concerning the research and scientific proof of orbs is highly controversial and ambivalent.

As highlighted in the above chapter the belief and conviction of the existence of a spiritual, for the human eye invisible realm of existence is of major importance for understanding Burmese religious thinking and perception.

Since the advent of valuable, yet inexpensive digital cameras, numerous people worldwide have reported to capture mysterious round-shaped objects in their photographs. These objects are referred to ‘*anomalous orbic images*’ (AOI) or ‘*orbs*’ in literature and very often interpreted as serving as proof of the presence of spirits, angels or transcendental entities. (cf. Schwartz/Creath, 2005: 343) Klaus Heinemann provides a whole series of arguments for the existence of spiritual entities that willingly present and manifest themselves in order to be captured and recognized by humans through the medium of photography.

“Digital photography makes it possible to see things that heretofore could not be seen. People in many places around the world report having taken

photos of circular light phenomena, or orbs, which we have identified as emanations from Spirit Beings, conscious entities that are not part of our physical world.” (Heinemann, 2010: 14)

Klaus Heinemann and his team are convinced that what can be seen on certain digital photographs and labeled as *orbs* can be interpreted as a clear intention of the spiritual world, being visually transferred to the physical, human reality in order to communicate a certain message.

“In other words, an intentional energetic imprint from a reality outside of our physical reality is recorded inside of our physical reality.” (Heinemann, 2010: 7)

According to Heinemann orbs are intelligent, subtle, intangible entities that are capable of manifesting themselves on photographs at will in order to make contact and catch the attention of human beings. The circle and the sphere are the most essential shapes in mathematics and physics since they do not have a beginning or end a clearly defined direction. (cf. Heinemann, 2010:10) Furthermore the actual physical energy that is necessary to appear on a photograph in either of these forms is extraordinary small. Klaus Heinemann adduces different reasons to substantiate his conviction of the validity and authenticity of orbs.

The most frequent contention against the genuineness of orbs is that they are mere reflections of dust particles that waft through the air in close proximity of the camera lens. It can occur that the flashlight of the camera gets reflected on small dust particles or water droplets in the air. These reflections can then be observed as orb-similar objects on digital photographs. Considering the amazing amount of orb-pictures being taken around the world, Heinemann deems it difficult and unreasonable to maintain this thesis. (cf. Heinemann, 2011: 160) The amount of photographs showing orbs is too huge to refer to coincidental photographic defects in all those cases. Heinemann also reports an experiment in which an orb was photographed under clean room conditions, in an environment where dust particles that could reflect flashlight did simply not exist. (cf. Heinemann, 2010:5) Other critical

arguments against the genuineness of orbs focus on impurities of the camera lens or the electronic recording device built into the camera. Also, according to Heinemann, these counter-arguments can be dismissed as untenable. The most convincing and decisive argument in Heinemann's explanations *"in favour of the authenticity of orbs is that there is striking, overwhelming evidence that orbs show up in certain strategic photos and strategic positions within photo."* (Heinemann, 2010: 5) Orbs, possessing a self-determined and intentional nature, are capable of willingly and consciously choosing their exact position within the photograph in order to communicate with the people who were taking the pictures or studying and analysing them. This assumption would be highly consonant and in agreement with the explanations and interpretations I was able to encounter in the context of Burmese healing rituals: Spiritual beings, Devas, Weikzas and the Buddha himself were consciously manifesting and appearing in the form of characteristic light formations on very specific positions within the pictures. From these positions their approval, consent and support of human concerns whatsoever could then be derived.

Heinemann asks in this context: *"How can it happen that these physical airborne particles are, in that very moment when the flash is triggered [...] arranged into the highly defined constellation that leads to meaningful positioning of the orb in the resulting photograph?"* (Heinemann, 2010: 6) If airborne dust particles would always appear in statistically random and accidental locations, then also orbs had to manifest themselves on random positions. Since orbs most often appear on meaningful and significant positions within the picture it can be assumed that a clear intention and purpose is underlying their appearance.

Gary E. Schwartz, professor of psychology at the University of Arizona, and Katherine Creath, professor of optical sciences at the same university, have published the article *"Anomalous Orbic "Spirit" Photographs? A Conventional Optical Explanation"* in the Journal of Scientific Exploration 2005. A survey was initiated to investigate the possible mechanisms and emergence of anomalous orbic images (AOI). One thousand photographs were taken with five different digital cameras and a great emphasis was placed to create conditions which would increase the possibility of AOIs to

emerge. More than two hundred photographs contained AOIs and the two scientists came to the conclusion that virtually all of them had clear evidence of reflection, stray reflections that either arose from the flashlight of the camera reflecting on mirrors, windows, metal furniture and the like, or diffraction from the flash reflecting off dust and dirt particles near the camera lens. (cf. Schwartz/Creath, 2005: 343) *“Light from a stray reflection of the camera flash off of a shiny surface [...] is reflected into the camera lens.”* (Schwartz/Creath, 2005: 349)

After presenting various different arguments against the spiritual origin of orbs in photographs Schwartz and Creath conclude their article with an interesting, yet unexpected conclusion. They emphasize that the existence and emergence of AOIs that clearly deserve the term ‘anomalous’ should be recognized and mention a BBC documentary in this context where an AOI was observed while moving across a room.

Here the authors need to confess that dynamic and moving orbic objects cannot possibly be explained and caused neither by stray reflections nor by dust particles in the air.

“It is neither logical nor responsible at this point to conclude that every AOI observed worldwide can be explained by conventional optical science mechanisms such as stray reflection.” (Schwartz/Creath, 2005: 358)

Ultimately the question whether or not the existence and presence of spiritual entities can be proven and demonstrated by the appearance of orbic images in strategically meaningful positions within digital or analogous photographs remains open, in the same manner as the question, whether or not all orbic images within photographs are the result of stray reflections or dust particles, cannot be answered satisfactory.

Orbs as well as other light formations on photographs largely remain a mystery to science and one is inclined to recall the explanation given by a Burmese traditional healing practitioner:

“The Weikza Bo Min Gaung is our coming Buddha. Just like a hologram his image, his power was coming to the

ceremony. His power body came to us. This is what we can see as the lights on our photographs. His real body is in the forest in a secret place.“

(AM, Rangoon, 10.11.2006)

Concluding I cannot do otherwise but share my own reflections:

I am convinced that ritual celebration presents a unique opportunity for all participants to join and unite their energies of devotion, faith, conviction and personal spirituality. These energies that are being released in the ritual support spiritual entities that are being present to temporarily leave their invisible, subtle realm of existence. Frequencies of existence are being aligned and harmonized, allowing spiritual beings to temporarily assume shape in the form of luminaries to be recognized by humans. Pictures of spirits, be they orbs or any other light image being accepted as the proof of spiritual existences, set a unique example for human spiritual potential and forms of life beyond ordinary human understanding.

Field Journal Entry, Mebegon, 11.02.2009

“Ich habe erkannt, dass, wenn ich meine Intuition nicht kultiviere, mein Weltbild nicht erweitere und scheinbar Unerklärliches dennoch zulassen und akzeptieren kann, diese Forschung letztlich gar nicht möglich sein kann.“



*Picture 14: Orbs at U Shein's manufactory
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*



*Picture 15: Orbs in Nature
(Wolf Wies © 2009)*

3.2.2 Consulting the Personal Oracle

"I shall not commit the fashionable stupidity of regarding everything I cannot explain as a fraud." ²⁸ C.G. Jung

Revealing and explaining the methods that were serving to acquire specific insights and to generate data in a clearly comprehensible manner, is considered a primary prerequisite in science. The ways and methods that lead to specific findings have to be made transparent and understandable, the whole progression of research and processing of data have to be exposed and declared openly. I have been considering carefully and thoroughly for a long time how I shall possibly and meaningfully synthesize ethnographic data and personal insights and experiences. The question of what to tell, which incidents to share and which experiences to communicate had been occupying my mind for many months without being able to find a valuable, satisfying answer. The fear of embarrassment and ostracism was predominant and I was flinching from even speaking about extraordinary experiences during my field research.

When the anthropologist him-/herself has an extraordinary experience in the field the possibility exists of denying and not communicating this experience. But there is also the possibility of accepting the experience as valuable and treasurable and making an attempt to integrate these insights comprehensibly into the overall context of the work.

Young and Goulet write in the introduction to their anthology "Being changed by Cross-cultural Encounters" (1994):

"Fear of ostracism is not unfounded if one does not have the tools which allow the experience to be framed in a 'believable' way to the listener. Because of the fear of ostracism, an entire segment of cross-cultural experience common to many investigators is not available for discussion and scientific investigation." (Young/Goulet, 1994: 8)

²⁸ Quote found at the Homepage of the Society for Psychical Research: <http://www.spr.ac.uk/main/> (15.01.2012)

What seems crucial in this quotation are the logical, comprehensible tools which allow non-ordinary experiences to be framed and communicated in an understandable, reasonable way to the audience.

Field Journal Entry, Mebegon, 13.02.2009

„Und ich muss mich ehrlich fragen: Wie werde ich all diese Erfahrungen und Einsichten kommunizieren und jemandem erklären können, der nicht hier war und diese Dinge nicht erlebt hat? Und was davon soll ich überhaupt erzählen? Und was soll besser für immer verschwiegen werden? Wie erklärst Du jemandem, dass Du mit Deiner Forschung und Deiner Forschungsfrage verschmolzen bist und selbst zum Subjekt Deiner Forschung geworden bist? Die Menschen werden mich für verrückt halten.“

It was possible to find and apply a simple divination technique in order to consult the seemingly unknown and gain access to realms of intuition and answers to questions beyond the range of ordinary human understanding. According to anthropologist Barbara Tedlock, all known peoples on earth have practiced some form of divination, covering a wide range of various different methods and approaches. (cf. Tedlock, 2001: 189) Divination, understood as the art or practice of “*discovering the personal, human significance [...] of events*” can be found in almost all cultures worldwide. (Zuesse, in Eliade, 1987: 375)

Etymologically the word ‘divination’ derives from the Latin word ‘*divinatio*’ (f.) ‘*Sehergabe, Weissagung, Ahnung*’ (Stowasser, 1991: 176), which again comes down from the Latin ‘*divinus*’ meaning ‘*divine, godly*’, the verb ‘*divinare*’ consequently is being translated with ‘*to foretell, prophecy, foretell the future*’. Tedlock shows the close relation and connectedness of the verb ‘*divinare*’ with divination, being translated as ‘*belonging or relating to a deity, divine*’. (cf. Tedlock, 2001: 190)

According to American anthropologist Philip Peek the need for social knowledge gained through divination can be found universally. Apparently, whether in the city or the countryside – no matter the religion, sex or status of the individual – questions and problems arise for which everyday knowledge seems to be insufficient. The information necessary to respond effectively is available, but often only through a process of divination.

Therefore divination continues to provide a trusted means of decision making, a basic source of vital knowledge. *“Divining processes are diverse, but all follow set routines by which otherwise inaccessible information is obtained.”* (Peek, 1991: 2) Very often the diviner’s body becomes the vehicle of communication with the spiritual realm through spirit possession. Peek states, in his 1991 published compendium *“African Divination Systems – Ways of Knowing”* that *“the diviner is central to the expression and enactment of his or her cultural truths as they are reviewed in the context of contemporary realities.”* (Peek, 1991: 2)

“Divination systems are not simply closed ideologies founded on religious beliefs but are dynamic systems of knowledge upon which the proper ordering of social action is based.” (Peek, 1991: 2)

Therefore Peek emphasizes the statement of perceiving divination as a system of knowledge in action, involving a combination of “logical-analytical” and “intuitive-synthetical” modes of thinking, based on a sacred view of the world. (cf. Peek, 1991: 3)

Since this dissertation aims at combining meaningfully logical, rational realms of cognition with intuitive, transpersonal modes of perception, this approach shall be maintained throughout all stages of my development process. Structure and composition of the text as well as the decision which transpersonal experiences shall be integrated and explained can be developed in alignment with a spiritual mode of existence.

Since the very beginning of my fieldwork in Burma I have been particularly drawn to and deeply fascinated by the Weikza Bo Min Gaung. My relationship with Bo Min Gaung and the circumstances under which I was

finally able to encounter him in person, will be portrayed and explained in detail in the course of the empirical section of the dissertation. With Bo Min Gaung's support and through his guidance and inspiration I was able to develop my personal oracular inquiry, using a simple pendulum-dowsing technique. In a state of calm meditative awareness and the concentration on intuitive insights I am able to retrieve all necessary information concerning the correct, meaningful composition of this dissertation and, in particular, requesting statements concerning the mention of (trans-)personal experiences. I have been able to enter into a spiritual dialogue with Bo Min Gaung, composing this work in alignment with his approval or refusal.

The British Society of Dowsters, one of the oldest of its kind in Europe existing since 1930, offers a beautiful definition of the art of dowsing:

"Dowsing, also known as "divining", is an intuitive art and discipline used in all parts of the world in both ancient and modern times. A technique for bringing information from the intuitive or subconscious senses to the attention of the rational mind, it has potential value in almost every area of human endeavour, research and activity, and dowsing practitioners find it a valuable tool in both their work and their everyday lives." (cf. [URL: http://www.britishdowsters.org/learning/An_Overview_of_Dowsing.shtml](http://www.britishdowsters.org/learning/An_Overview_of_Dowsing.shtml), 19.11.2011)

In Burmese religious thinking and perception, as had been explained to me many times, there exists a nexus, a connection between the topics and themes that are of particular interest in this existence with previous lives. I was told many times by different informants and friends that my special attraction to the Weikza Bo Min Gaung is a positive proof of some sort of past connection.

Field Journal Entry, Mebegon, 11.02.2009

„Und diese Frage brennt mir schon die längste Zeit in meinem Herzen: Wie kann ich einen Weikza treffen? Wenn ich wirklich einen Weikza treffen möchte, welche Voraussetzungen muss ich mitbringen

um ihm zu begegnen? Immer immer wieder haben die Menschen versucht mir das zu erklären. Immer wieder erklären sie mir folgendes: Ich gebe das jetzt genau so wieder wie mir das mein Professor UKH, der ehemalige Vorstand des Anthropologie-Institutes der Yangon University, das heute erklärt hat. Und auch wie meine Freunde mir das immer wieder erklären. Und sie erklären mir das so: Sie sagen, schau, Du würdest Dich gar nicht beschäftigen mit diesen Weikzas, mit diesem alchemischen Künsten und supernatürlichen Fähigkeiten, wenn Du nicht in einem Deiner vergangenen Leben bereits irgendeine Art von Verbindung mit den Weikzas gehabt hast. Du würdest gar nicht auf die Idee kommen Dich damit zu beschäftigen. Offenbar bin ich ja schon auf die Idee gekommen mich damit zu beschäftigen und zwar sehr intensiv. Man geht davon aus, dass das allein schon ein Zeichen ist.

Die Menschen haben mir immer wieder gesagt: We believe that there must be some sort of past connection, some sort of connection from a previous existence. Ansonsten ist das nicht möglich, dass man überhaupt auf die Idee kommt darüber wissen zu wollen.“

Since I aim to transport a holistic picture of the development process of this dissertation the connection of past lives that I apparently do have will have to be integrated and merged with concrete ethnographic findings. My quest for and journey of encountering Bo Min Gaung in person traces my very personal process of opening and transcending the borders of normal waking consciousness and gives insight and deeper understanding of the Weikza phenomenon and its specific characteristics.

3.2.3 Bo Min Gaung

Among the many Burmese Weikzas, the Weikza Bo Min Gaung is of utmost importance since he receives outstanding veneration and worship throughout the country. Hence a brief introduction to Bo Min Gaung's biography, his accomplishments as a Weikza and the affiliation with a future Buddhist world emperor shall be presented in this section. For biographical data on Bo Min Gaung I am mainly referring to Mendelson (1961a, 1963), Spiro (1982), Foxeus (2011) as well as statements and data given by a number of informants in the field.

According to available sources Bo Min Gaung had been subject of a remarkable interest and fascination among Burmese since at least the 1940s, the cults which developed around him seem to be a multitudinous variety.

While the date of his birth is unclear, Mendelson determines the year 1888 as a starting point from which his presence and actions can be tracked through different episodes and a variety of miracles that he is believed to have performed. (cf. Mendelson, 1963: 800 f.) He was a large man with fair complexion, was born in Northern Burma, and spent the last 14 years before his '*going-out*' at Mount Popa. The year of his death is assumed to have been in 1952, where he is thought to have undergone a mystical '*going-out*' shifting from his old body to a new one, just as a snake that can shed its skin. (cf. Foxeus, 2011: 72)

Bo Min Gaung was, and still is until the present day, considered to be a very powerful and extraordinarily accomplished Weikza, but also an oracle, a fortune-teller and a healer. Moreover he is regarded as being the leader of all Weikzas and is very often associated with becoming the future world emperor of even the future Buddha Arimetteya.

"Bo Min Gaung is the president of the all Weikza associations; he is the top, the highest Weikza. And also he is assumed to be our coming Buddha Arimetteya. Right now Bo Min Gaung goes around the world to collect his disciples to be told the Dhamma to become Arhat."

(AM, Rangoon, 04.02.2009)

Foxeus, who covers in his substantial dissertation (2011) the prevalence and importance of the concept of *Sekya Min* in present millennial Burmese Buddhist developments, also locates Bo Min Gaung in the centre of the belief and search for a just, upright Buddhist emperor who will introduce a prosperous and righteous era for Burma and the Buddhist religion. (cf. Foxeus, 2011: 45 ff.) According to Spiro it was the British colonial occupation and subsequent abolition of the Burmese monarchy that brought forth the hope and expectation of a Future King who would be able to restore Burmese independence and revive Buddhism. (cf. Spiro, 1970: 172 f.)

The *Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* in the Buddhist Pali Canon speaks of a ‘wheel-turning’ king who is the embodiment of righteousness, authority, morality, restores law and order, and brings peace and re-establishes the Buddhist religion in a time of deterioration and decline of Buddhist value and virtues.²⁹ The Weikza Bo Min Gaung has been intimately linked with this legendary figure and is therefore considered to be an ideal Buddhist practitioner and the one who propagates, supports and espouses the continuity of Buddhism.³⁰ Bo Min Gaung was also considered to be a Buddhist King in one of his previous lives³¹:

“Bo Min Gaung had so many lives. I know only a little bit. For instance, in Bago, 55 miles north of Yangon, once he lived there. His name was Dhammazedī Min Gaung, at that time he was a king. This was approx. about 500 years ago. According to the literature we know that this Dhammazedī Min Gaung is Bo Min Gaung. The body was born U Maung Pu, his mother’s name was Daw Min The, his childhood-name was Min Aung.

²⁹ Cf. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.26.o.than.html>; 23.01.2012

³⁰ In my particular research Bo Min Gaung received major attention in the context of traditional medicine and healing which is the reason for touching the political dimension related with his figure only rudimentarily. For a detailed description on Sekya Min and millennial Buddhism in contemporary Burma, refer to Foxeus 2011.

³¹ For details concerning the various royal previous existences of Bo Min Gaung, see Foxeus 2011: 71

The body in which Bo Min Gaung's spirit lives while he was at Popa, belonged to a monk. When this monk passed away, Bo Min Gaung's spirit entered the body, and he became alive again. He took the robes, lived at Mount Popa and became Popa Min Gaung.³²

Some Weikzas have the power to extend their lives, from hundreds to thousands of years. Some Weikzas have the power to use another body. When someone passes away, the Weikza has the power to enter into this body and become like a human being, but actually he is Weikza. When there is no unfortunate condition, like ogres, he doesn't have to show his powers. Now, Bo Min Gaung passed away in 1952 or so. This Bo Min Gaung is now organizing people to be his disciples. He has masses with him that are listening to his Dhamma, become Arhat and attain enlightenment."

(AM, Rangoon, 06.02.2009)

Bo Min Gaung is a highly venerated and respected Weikza in contemporary Burma, his pictures, statues and shrines can be widely found and some Bodaws and Weikza practitioners do have spiritual connections with him. Also Sayagyi U Shein is a devotee of Bo Min Gaung. It is not clear how many different physical manifestations Bo Min Gaung does have at the present time, since he is able to travel by supernatural means and incarnate temporarily in different bodies of his disciples and followers. It is believed that "*his consciousness can shift between different human bodies*", as Foxeus puts it. (cf. Foxeus, 2011: 71)

During the course of my research I met, besides U Shein, three people who consider themselves outstanding admirers and devotees of Bo Min Gaung and who can tell of personal encounters with the great Weikza.

V: "Who is the Weikza you have the closest connection to?"

T: "This is Bo Min Gaung. Bo Min Gaung was born in a village near Popa, which is regarded as a very sacred and holy place.

³² See also Foxeus, 2011: 72

Since his early childhood days he was very unlike other children. When other children played, he stayed alone. He was interested in being a very pious person, starting when he was a child already. When people saw him, they thought he was an insane person; he took the form as if he was insane, because he didn't want the people to know that he had such magical powers. This is what Weikzas often do. Because when you have such magical powers greedy people might come and threaten you and might want something from you. So this was his childhood like.

He practiced Buddhism, he was telling the beads all the time. Because of his deeds from the previous existences, when he was born again, he practiced Buddhism and at one time he reached a certain stage, a perfectness, a mastery. When he gained it, he didn't want anybody to know that, he was roundabout 40 years old that time. He did in 1953. At the age of 40 he was a highly perfected master, who could master magical powers and could perform miracles.

Once there was a car³³, which was supposed to climb up the mountain of Popa, but just imagine there was no engine in this car. And Bo Min Gaung asked "Would you like to go up the mountain with this car?" It was incredible. There was no engine, no petrol, and no fuel! People got on the car, he just petted it and the car just went! And then the police arrested him because they thought that he created nuisance to the public. Wherever he went people followed him. So when they got to the police station everybody thought that he was just a mad man. He wore a hat with some sun shade at the back for protection. At the police station people were gone mad all of a sudden. Some were riding broom sticks as if they were riding a horse; everybody was running around saying whatever they wanted. So people were shocked for seeing such a scene. So then Bo Min Gaung turned

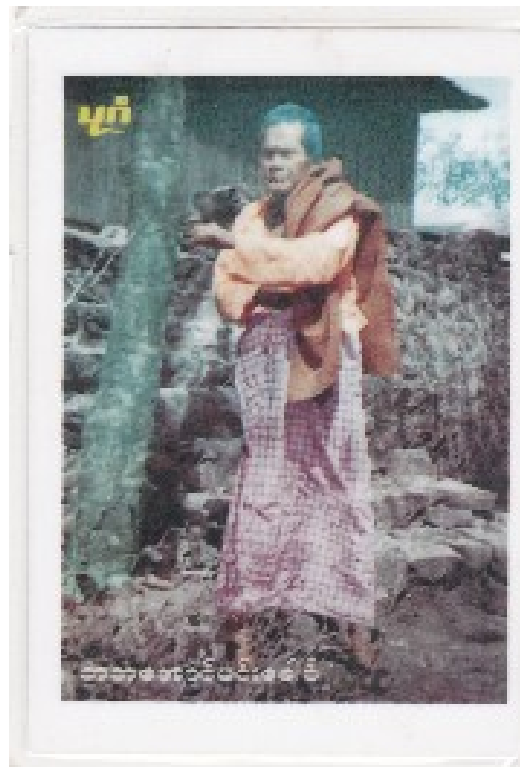
³³ This particular miracle is considered a famous and well known miracle of Bo Min Gaung. See also Mendelson 1963: 801; Foxeus 2011: 68

around his hat with the sun shade in front, all of a sudden everybody was back to normal again.

Until his death he was a very healthy man. He was also a healer, he could heal people, and he was a saint. He was an alchemist, a *Hsey-Weikza* and a powerful healer. He only used water as a medicine. He just chanted some mantras into the water and it became a holy water, you know. And he cured most of the people with that water. I don't know what mantra it was. Bo Min Gaung was a devoted Buddhist."

(TG, Rangoon, 08.02.2009)

Because of his perfection and mastery Bo Min Gaung was (and still is) considered to be a powerful healer who transmits his knowledge and insight to his disciples and followers by the means of visions and dreams. Since Bo Min Gaung is one of the most extraordinary Weikzas he shares and communicates his wisdom especially to those who are active as Weikza practitioners and healers in the field of Weikzadara-Naya.



*Picture 16: The Weikza Bo Min Gaung*³⁴

³⁴ This picture was given to me by a Bo Min Gaung devotee as a present in March 2007.

3.3 Burmese Traditional Medicine

“Traditional medicine is already extremely popular in Myanmar, with one recent survey showing 75 per cent of people in the country used traditional medicine to treat their illness.” (URL: <http://www.mmtimes.com/feature/healthcare/health008.htm>; 05.11.2011)

Traditional medicine³⁵ (*Tainjinhsei* ≈ Indigenous medicine, cf. Myanmar-English Dictionary 1993) how it is contemporarily taught and practiced in Burma is essentially composed of four constituents³⁶: *Deithana* (≈ teachings of the Lord Buddha; sermons of the Lord Buddha) refers to the medical-therapeutic system that was to be taught during the lifetime of the Buddha. A strong association and reference to the Buddhist scriptures can be found here and remedies and medicines are to be prepared according to the advice of the Buddha.

Furthermore a system which is called *Bethitza - Naya* can be found.³⁷ Apparently the strong Ayurvedic influence on Burmese traditional medicine can be recognized here, and the Vedic philosophy forms the fundament for the preparation and production of herbal remedies. *Bethitza - Naya* is grounded on the correct combination of botanical and mineral components to re-establish the harmony and balance of the three base-energies, *Doshas*, in the human body, namely *Vata*, *Pitta* and *Kapha*.

In the following, the medical astrology (*Ne'katha* ≈ astronomy) has to be mentioned.

The astrological system uses calculations of the zodiac of the stars, the planets and the patient's time of birth and age, these calculations are then linked to prescribed dietary and medicinal practices.

The fourth constituent of Burmese traditional medicine is called *Weikzadara-Naya*. Four different interpretations for the term *Weikza* can be found in the Myanmar-English Dictionary: *Wei'za/Wei'zadou* ≈ (1)

³⁵ Since the status and services provided by 'Western' allopathic medicine have not been the emphasize of my research, it may be referred to www.whomyanmar.org for an estimation of the situation in Burma.

³⁶ The translations that I found in the Myanmar-English Dictionary 1993 will appear in brackets

³⁷ Unfortunately I was unable to find a concrete translation

knowledge, wisdom; (2) term for a person who is an expert in a particular branch of knowledge; (3) person with supernatural powers; (4) first university degree in arts. The Burmese word *Weikza* is derived from the Pali term *vijja*, which literally means ‘knowledge’ (cf. Rozenberg, 2010: 45) but can also be translated as ‘wisdom’, ‘practical knowledge’ or ‘craft’. (cf. Foxeus, 2011: 13)

AM, one of the oldest and closest disciples of Sayagyi U Shein, explained the term *Weikza* in the following way:

V: “What is a Weikza?”

AM: “Weikza means the one who knows one subject properly, one who can master one subject, e.g. iron or medicine. Weikza is a human being, a superman in the human level. Many people in Myanmar know them and pray to them. But according to the literature there are more than 84.000 different Weikzas for each subject, so for mercury 84.000 Weikzas, for iron also maybe 84.000 Weikzas, for mantra and magic formula also 84.000 Weikzas, so many. When you become a Weikza you got the superpower in your mind and in your body.”

(AM, Rangoon, 25.03.2007)

In the ‘*Review of Traditional Medicine in the South-East Asian Region*’ published by the World Health Organization³⁸ in 2004 an equal classification of Burmese traditional medicine can be found:

“Myanmar has four TM systems: (i) Dessana, based on natural phenomena such as hot and cold. Its concept is largely based on Buddhist philosophy; (ii) Bethitza, based on Ayurvedic concepts with extensive use of herbal and mineral compounds; (iii) Vessadara, which is linked to meditation and the practice of alchemy; and (iv) Netkhata (astrology), based on calculations of the stars and planets, and the time of birth and

³⁸ For a recent assessment of Burmese Traditional Medicine the factsheets “Health in Myanmar 2010” by the WHO provide an overview of the juridical situation in the country and the Traditional Medicine Law promulgated by the government in 1996: <http://www.whomyanmar.org/EN/Section6/Section50.htm>. Additional information is also provided by the Myanmar Ministry of Health: <http://www.moh.gov.mm/>

age.” (cf. URL: http://www.searo.who.int/LinkFiles/Reports_TRMAug04WG.pdf, 06.11.2011)

Weikzadara-Naya forms a pantheon of beliefs and practices that are part of Burmese traditional medicine and basically -- apart from meditation and alchemy mentioned by the WHO -- refers to different forms of spiritual and supernatural healing, the diagnoses of spiritually caused diseases and spirit possession and the preparation of alchemically produced remedies. It is a vast and complex body of concepts, beliefs, wisdom-teachings and practices. In order to approach this topic successively I am going to present my own ethnographic findings and experiences, referring to those scholarly contributions which seem most relevant for my topic and approach. The scientific reception of this multifaceted phenomenon is reviewed chronologically in Chapter 1.5. *Past and Present Research*.

3.4 Sayagyi U Shein: a brief biography

“The term ‘shaman’ is very fit for Sayagyi, he is a shaman, he can communicate with the higher and the lower spirits and he can help people through the spiritual world. This is a shaman. He has his helping spirits, helping him in curing particular diseases.”

(AM, Rangoon, 23.01.2008)



*Picture 17: Sayagyi U Shein
(Wolf Wies © 2009)*

As mentioned earlier I met Sayagyi U Shein during the Congress on Shamanism and Healing in Mondsee, Austria, in May 2006 and was invited to his house and healing centre in Rangoon in October 2006 for the first time. Once U Shein got permission from government authorities to accommodate me, as a foreigner, in his house, I was blessed with the unique opportunity to be around the master continuously to observe the daily routine in his house and participate in prayers and ceremonies. Due to U Shein's outstanding popularity, fame and nationwide recognition as an accomplished healer and traditional practitioner, the highly bureaucratic and time-consuming procedure of getting the approval for my homestay was successful.

As far as U Shein's biography and his development to become a traditional healer is concerned, I was given a biographical record which has been approved by himself. In the following paragraphs I want to give an account of U Shein's main biographical stages of life and major incidents and experiences which lead him become a recognized and renowned healer. Additionally his closest and oldest disciple AM, who has been my main interpreter throughout my research at U Shein's house, will be given the opportunity to expose his own accounts.

“On 7th October 1926 (the month of Thadingyut 1288, Myanmar calendar) a child who would later become a “master” was born in a town called Pyin Oo Lwin. His parents were U Yan and Daw Thaung Tin. He is the elder of two brothers. Pyin Oo Lwin, his native town, is located on the mountain over 3500 feet above sea level, where the weather is pleasant throughout the year. [...] When he was born a rumour was spread that Daw Thaung Tin gave birth to a strange monster. It was because the child was extraordinary. The child's umbilical cord wound around his neck, and the whole body was covered by a thin membrane of the skin, i.e. the skin was transparent. However, thoughtful people did not regard him as an ogre. He was just a human child who needed a special care. However, his mother believed in the rumours and was very upset. Therefore his uncle U Lugalay took responsibility to look after him. At that time his father was in Thibaw working as a constructor. As the rumour spread, U Yan, his father returned home to see his son. He carefully watched the nature and characteristics of his son and also consulted the horoscope. U Yan was relieved to discover that his son will one day become a great man, and he named him ‘Maung Shein’, which means that he would have supernatural powers in his old age.”

(“A brief Biography of U Shein”, Rangoon, Oct. 2006)

U Shein spend his childhood in Pyin Oo Lwin, passing six grades at school, before it became apparent that he was able to tell the fortune and see into the future. Apparently the knowledge and recognition of his extraordinary abilities spread very quickly and also his mother became very popular since she earned a lot of money due to her son’s capacities. U Shein had been able to tell peoples’ fortunes since he was 12 years old. The discovery of this rare ability marked the beginning point of a turbulent and eventful life history until he finally realized and followed his inner calling and his true destiny.

U Shein’s official homepage gives the following account of his early years in life:

“At his birth the particularity of the child was already recognizable, because a thin white membrane covered all his face. This characteristic is also known in many other cultures as a sign, that a special person, a future healer and shaman, was born. Also his birth horoscope showed that this child would become one day an extraordinary personality.

At the age of ten his first special skills appeared. He was able see and explain clearly the past and future of a person and his predictions always matched the reality for 100%. So already then in his early years many people came to see him and to get advice and help for their lives and to see what the future will bring.” (URL: http://gold-ash-powder.com/Biography_detailed.html, 04.01.2012)



*Picture 18: Traditional horse cart in Pyin Oo Lwin.
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2007)*

“At the age of 16 he was initiated into the religious order for one year, a common practice of all Buddhists. It must be a religious custom at least once in their life time. After one year he turned back to an ordinary life. In 1941 he joined the army until 1962. During the military service, he was transferred to places like Pyinmanar, Pyin Oo Lwin and Mandalay. He married Daw Tin Tin in 1952, the year that marked the beginning of his fame as Sayagyi U Shein. “

(“A brief Biography of U Shein”, Rangoon, Oct. 2006)

One of U Shein’s oldest and closest disciples AM and I are sitting in U Shein’s temple, it is a hot and humid afternoon and we are discussing vividly about the existence of Devas and Nats in the context of U Shein’s life story and the many encounters he had with the spiritual world before he finally came to realize his destiny. It takes me a while to realize that we are constantly surrounded and protected by numbers of spiritual entities that are being present at any time.

V: “Do you think when we talk about the Weikzas and Devas now, that they are here listening to us?”

AM: “Yes, of course they do. They like it, also because we talk good things about them. All Devas are listening right now.”

AM is calling one of U Shein’s spiritual assistants to demonstrate the presence of Devas in this very moment. AM, as one who had been taken refuge in the three jewels and in U Shein as his master, has the ability to command spirits. The presence of Devas can be clearly determined through certain specific behaviour of the spiritual assistant who has been herself a Deva in a previous existence. We are surrounded by countless spirits... And I have yet to realize and accustom to the extraordinary place I am at.

(AM, Rangoon, 25.03.2007)

Recounting this incidence seems interesting and necessary to gain understanding in U Shein’s lifeworld and spiritual perception, since the relationships with Devas and Weikzas are of utmost relevance in comprehending his healing mastery.

The following account of U Shein’s initial spiritual experiences, his initiation to become a spiritual healer, marks the beginning of a lifelong close relationship with the spiritual world:

“One night in 1952 U Shein had a dream that he was warned by a recluse to abstain from the intoxicants like alcohol, to withhold from unlawful sexual indulgence, to keep back from stealing, and to avoid eating meat, i.e. the flesh of big animals and fish. He was prophesized that he will become one who proclaims Buddha’s teachings as well as a healer for those who are obsessed or bewitched by the evil spirit. U Shein however did not take the warning given by the recluse in the dream seriously. He just went on a merry life and drank as he wished. He was therefore wounded very often in the front lines. Only after his hand, knee, joint

and his side were full of wounds, he remembered the dream and started thinking about the instruction. “

(“A brief Biography of U Shein”, Rangoon, Oct. 2006)

Regarding the same incident U Shein’s disciple and friend AM told me:

“Since his birth from now, he was guarded by his Devi-Sister. She told him many times not to drink alcohol, but Sayagyi did not pay any attention, so he was shot in the battlefield three times. The elder Devi told him not to drink, but Sayagyi was a merry-maker and liked to drink also together with other people. So Devi told him if you don’t stop the next time the bullet will go into your forehead and then you will die. So finally Sayagyi listened to her.”

(AM, Rangoon, March 2007)

Finally, the auspicious encounter between U Shein and the hermit Aba Yathé was taking place in a cave in Upper Burma, which had been an important Buddhist pilgrimage place and place of personal worship for U Shein ever since. His personal biography gives the following account of this crucial incident:

“At one night in 1952 he heard again in a dream the voice of the recluse saying: ‘Maung Shein, there is a cave nearby the Ghoke Htate Bridge, in which I live. Come and see me tomorrow without fail.’ The next day, he went to the bridge early in the morning on a motorcycle and arrived there at about 4pm in the evening. [...] When U Shein entered the cave located near the bridge area, he saw the recluse sitting in a cross leg position on a bamboo mattress. He stooped down on his knees with his folded hands showing reverence to the recluse. The recluse said: ‘My son, I have been waiting for you. I am willing to impart to you the heritage of wisdom. Come here. Sit down and spread

your palms.’ The recluse held U Shein’s right palm by his left hand and clapped it with his right palm to infuse his supernatural power and glory into his body.

At that time there was a lot of water dripping down from the cleavage of the roof of the cave over them. U Shein was completely soaked, but the recluse remained dry. The recluse gave him a fruit to eat and a cup of water to drink. U Shein felt somewhat strange in his body. The recluse told him that the sign of a fish and a pagoda would appear on his right palm. If it is to happen, the infusion of power is accomplished and he will become eager to proclaim Buddha’s teachings. Then the recluse disappeared from his sight. He was the same recluse U Shein had seen in his dream and he called him ‘Aba Yathé’ meaning the father hermit, his father of his past existence. He was unconscious from that moment until the next morning. When he was recovered, he found that he was not damp, although the surrounding was full of water falling from the roof. The recluse appeared once more and told him: ‘Maung Shein, should the shape of fish and pagoda appear on your right palm, you must understand that the transmission of power is accomplished, then you will have to proclaim the teachings of the Buddha and you have to abstain from sins forbidden by the precepts’. Then the recluse disappeared and U Shein came back to his home.

About one month later U Shein was unconscious in bed for seven day. No one was able to find out the real cause. It is said that *Visadhara*, a noble man with supernatural powers, infused the supernatural power onto him. On the 8th day he became conscious again.

From that time U Shein went around everywhere to heal people possessed by evil spirits.“

(“A brief Biography of U Shein”, Rangoon, Oct. 2006)

Since this experience of initiation is of vital importance for U Shein’s life journey and laid the foundations for his remarkable development, again his disciple and friend AM shall get the chance to tell this incident in his own words to complete the picture:

“One night in 1952 he had a dream. He was warned by a hermit not to drink alcohol, not to eat the flesh of big animals like buffalo, cow, lion and big fish. He was prophesized that he would become a successful healer for those who are possessed or bewitched by evil spirits. In 1952 he was promoted to be a sergeant, by the power of the higher Devas. One night in 1952 he was called again by the recluse to come near a bridge of Ghoke Htate -River, Upper Burma, 40 miles away from Maymyo. There he met the recluse, the hermit and paid respect to him. He ordered him to come to his place. He found the recluse there. So the hermit gave him a cup of water and held his hands and pressed them together, like a power transmission of supernatural powers, infuse them, into him. The recluse said that the sign of the Shwedagon Pagoda and a sign of a fish will appear on his right palm, and the sign of the Golden Rock Pagoda (Southern Burma) will appear on his left palm. In palmistry a fish means that your life will become good and very happy. But I don’t know so much about palmistry. Pagoda means that you are able to give protection and help to other people. The recluse said that after 6 months these signs will appear and then the infusion of power will be completed. When the pagoda signs on both hands appear the power of transmission will be accomplished completely. Then he will have full 100 % of power in his body. The name of this hermit is Aba Yathé. He is considered to be Sayagyi’s very first master. About one month later U Shein was unconscious in bed for 7 days. It

is said in *Weikzadara-Naya* that the superpower infuses in 7 days. On the 8th day U Shein became conscious again. From that day onwards U Shein healed the people who were possessed by evil spirits.”

(AM, Rangoon, 25.03.2007)

In Burmese understanding the path of the Weikza comprises at its final stage a radical and most intense initiation ritual which serves to transmit and entrench the particular supernatural powers essential for the Weikza's perfection and full accomplishment. In conventional understanding it is said that the Weikza-to-be who is a possessor of a “stone of live metal” or philosopher's stone, will have to swallow this stone and will be, as a result, totally unconscious for full seven days. (cf. Thin Aung, 1933: 347) The power inherent in the alchemically refined stone is going to pass into his body; a transmission process which will be fully completed within seven days is going to take place.

The alchemist will be buried in a secret place in the forest, carefully guarded by a close, trusted disciple who has the task to fulfil to prevent all spiritual disturbances. After a period of seven days the buried man rises as a fully-fledged Weikza, the infusion and transmission of supernatural powers had been completed. (cf. Mendelson, 1961a: 230)

Also in U Shein's particular case this crucial transmission of the extraordinary powers characteristic to a Weikza had been occurred in seven days of complete unconsciousness. It was not an alchemical stone from which powers were transmitted, although in the course of his life U Shein will receive a number of powerful stones by close spiritual authorities, but powers were transmitted directly from a spiritual master to his disciple. Aba Yathé, the hermit from the cave, is considered U Shein's first master who, in choosing U Shein as his disciple, laid the foundation stone for U Shein's lifelong engagement in spiritual healing.



*Picture 19: U Shein in the cave near Pyin Oo Lwin.
(Wolf Wies © 2009)*



*Picture 20: U Shein and his disciples inside the cave.
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)
Note the many orbs visible on the picture*



*Picture 21: Aba Yathé, the father hermit. (Shrine in U Shein's house)
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*

3.5 In U Shein's temple

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, March 2007

U Shein and I get up early. I walk upstairs to join the family for daily meditation. The temple, which is at the same time the place for healing and consultation, the place for meditation, prayer and all kinds of ceremonies and rituals, is in the first floor of the house. U Shein and his family live in modest, small rooms in the ground floor.

After meditation we leave the house to drive to Bo Bo Min's tea garden to take breakfast. U Shein loves to breakfast there, we have *Nangyi*, the traditional Burmese chicken-and-chilli-soup and super sweet condensed milk coffee, Burmese style. The huge amount of chilli makes us sweat immediately,

adjusting our bodies to another hot and humid day. We proceed to Rangoon's main fruit-, vegetable- and flower market, where we buy three different kinds of bananas, mangos, papayas, pineapples, oranges, and various colourful flowers, all offerings to the Buddha and the many Devas and spirits.

Returning back to the temple, numerous patients and their relatives have already arrived, waiting patiently and praying in front of the many golden Buddha-statues, for the Master to come. U Shein smiles, takes off his shirt, sitting down on the floor, in undershirt and *Longyi*, the traditional wrap skirt that women as well as men wear.

U Shein's assistant healer has already started to engage in an apparently unpleasant and severe case: A young woman claims to be bothered and harassed by a spiritual entity and she is convinced that it is her husband from a former life. This past-life husband is obviously still very jealous and strongly feels neglected and ignored by her, therefore giving her all kinds of trouble, waking her in the middle of the night, giving her bad dreams and fear and, maybe the worst of all her symptoms, haunting her with feelings of faint and staggers many times during the day. She was already taking conventional herbal remedies, which only increased and enhanced all those symptoms, which is a clear sign that her problems are of supernatural origin and can therefore only be solved from there. Well, I wonder deeply and I am impressed how the

continuity of life extends far beyond our present incarnation.

Ancestors, spirits and families from former lives are a natural, integrated part of our life in this very existence. I am curious and excited how U Shein will be able to help this woman relieve her suffering and desperation.

As communicated to me by U Shein's oldest disciple AM, this is a clear case of *Payoga*. *Payoga* is a Pali-Burmese word, *pa* meaning outside or external and *yoga* signifying union or fusion, and refers to a spiritual entity — in most cases a malevolent and troublesome spirit — who is in union with a human being in the sense of haven taken possession by her or him.

To give AM's clear definition of Payoga:

"Payoga refers to all kinds of influences and conditions brought about by humans and spirits using supernatural or magical arts. There are people who suffer all kinds of illnesses induced by those who like them or dislike them, using supernatural or magical arts either singly or in combination. Those people may get treatment from qualified medical practitioners, but the medicines do not seem to work. In fact, their illnesses seem to worsen under treatment. This state of affairs is called Payoga."

How can this illness be cured? I wonder.

Transcript from a talk with U AM, U Shein's temple,
25.03.2007

V: "When did U Shein start his healing practice?"

AM: "Sayagyi started shamanism in 1952 and healing in 1970."

V: "Why did he start healing 18 years later?"

AM: "First he got the super power of shamanism. Then much later, he was able to start treating with normal medicine. So first this healing was only for those people who were possessed or bewitched."

V: "Is this what we call *Payoga*?"

AM: "Yes, exactly. *Pa* is equal to outside. *Yoga* means union, or combination or fusion. *Payoga* is not a normal disease, it's an abnormal disease, it is not coming from natural causes, it comes from the spiritual world."

V: "How do you find out if a disease is caused by *Payoga* or not?"

AM: "By the power of Sayagyi, by the super power, we can find out. We command, we give command to those who are possessed by the bad spirit. So if it is *Payoga*, give us some sign so that we can see, fall down or faint for example."

V: "So, U Shein can communicate with the spirit in the person?"

AM: "Yes. Not really communicating, rather commanding them. He can command both, evil spirits or good spirits."

V: "How does it happen that somebody gets possessed by a bad spirit?"

AM: "For instance, when somebody is having chronic headache. If this headache is really caused by some evil spirit then Sayagyi can command and this headache will double or triple or will get more and more. In this way Sayagyi can also command the headache to go away, instantly. That is what is called *Payoga*."

V: "How does it happen that an evil spirit gets inside the person? What happens there?"

AM: "According to the patient's condition, a bad spirit can go into their body. This is one case."

V: "But why?"

AM: "Because sometimes the spirits love, sometimes they hate, sometimes they want to give help, sometimes they want to give trouble. That's the main point. Some evil spirits can give a person headache because they want him/her to remember them. Sometimes they even want help from the patients. Then they do it for love's sake. Sometimes they hate the patient and then they give trouble."

Slowly, I start to realize a little bit what reasons and causes diseases can have. A sickness does not necessarily have to be connected with our present existence here as human beings, but can also relate to a previous life in whatever realm or sphere of being we have been then.

In the meantime a place is set up for conducting a ritual to seek propitiation and reconciliation with the husband from the past life. U Shein commands the unhappy spirit to incarnate in the woman's body in order to be able to communicate with him. As soon as the Master's commandments start the woman begins to tremble, shake and yell incomprehensible words. Apparently it takes some time for the spirit to adjust temporarily in a human body, and this adjustment can be observed from outside with signs of shaking and floundering heavily, screaming and crying. Finally, the woman quiets down and U Shein is able to contact the spirit directly, addressing him personally to find out about his sorrow and despair and the motivation for haunting and stressing his past-life wife. I sit right next to the Master, astonished and confused, not being able to piece

together my impressions and reflections. Will I ever be able to fully comprehend what is really happening here? How will I manage to study possession trance without sincerely and genuinely making an effort to experience the spiritual world myself? Fortunately, AM seems fully devoted to explain whatever details of the process to me, so that I can follow and understand. His presence, and his caring manner of thoroughly guiding me through my confusion and bewilderment, gives me hope and soothes little bit the feeling of being a complete stranger who has no idea what is going on.

The ceremony takes hours. The woman is strained and exhausted, and it takes a huge amount of persuasiveness and negotiating to pacify the spirit and get him to leave the woman's life for good. Finally, the ritual can be completed successfully: The husband-spirit could be convinced to cease from the woman, if she promises to do special prayers on nine consecutive days and make offerings of flowers and incense to the Buddha.

A couple days later she returns to U Shein's temple to pay homage to the Buddha and the Devas and thank the Master for her cure and solution of her problem. Since she has completed the prayers and made the required offerings, she is completely free from any suffering and has not been haunted and bothered by her former husband again. The ceremony had been successful.

I realize and commit to myself that my understanding of such kinds of phenomena is very

small, and that it will take me time and a lot of devotion to learn and apprehend more and more.

“How should I best study the spiritual world, ritual healing and Payoga?” I ask my dear friend U KH one afternoon, while we were sitting at a road-side teashop.

“Veronica, you have to stop asking so many questions, you know.” U KH replies in a sincere, but loving voice. “The spiritual world cannot be understood on an intellectual level. This study is beyond science. You have to do meditation and say your prayers, purify your mind so that you will be slowly able to perceive and learn from the spiritual world.” I am astonished. Stop asking questions?! What about my wonderful, elaborate questionnaires, whose preparation and development took me so much time and honest engagement? What about these great, conventional methods of qualitative research I have been taught at university for years? And now I should throw them all overboard, stop to ask questions and meditate instead?

I am confused and discouraged, and I have no idea how I should manage to really come to a deep understanding of the phenomena that I so strongly wish to grasp and realize.

I decide, that I will continue to ask whatever friends, informants or participants the same question over and over again: “If you were doing this research, on spirits, Devas, ritual healing, Payoga and Weikzas, tell me please, how would you do it? How would you approach the whole topic?”

I know that I firstly and foremost have to listen to the people that inhabit and incorporate the world that I want to study. I have to carefully listen to them, and allow myself to be open towards their approaches and interpretations of their realities.

Slowly, but surely, I come to realize that my conventional social scientific research-methods can be expanded and transcended, that there is a way of rising above traditional ethnographic research-strategies. More and more I come to understand and gain insight into a world that I had not yet experienced before. I allow myself to open up fully and immerse in the topic of my study. I permit that this worldview and cosmology which is the focus of my research becomes my very own horizon of meaning.

3.6 Understanding Spiritual Healing

“Spiritual healing is almost beyond words and definitions. When we venture into this shadowy area we cannot find words to describe it, and yet somehow we have found the location where healing dwells.” (Turner, 2006: XIX)

Sayagyi U Shein is first and foremost considered to be a powerful spiritual healer, a “*Payoga Hsaya*” as it would be called in Burmese. The diagnosing and treatment of *Payoga* is belonging to the 4th branch of Traditional Burmese Medicine, *Weikzadara-Naya*, and is considered a big and important subject here. Ferguson and Mendelson draw a sharp distinction between the *Weikzas* and the *Sayas (Hsayas)* who are considered to be masters of various arts such as traditional medicine or astrology, usually combining a number of skills which highly increases their supernatural powers. *Hsayas* are known to be curers, diviners and exorcists and play vital roles in helping people coping with daily problems

of spiritual origin. (cf. Ferguson, Mendelson, 1981: 66) It seems important to note that a spiritual healer who engages in exorcist rituals has the power to command and control a number of lesser spirits who are most often considered responsible for causing a number of diseases which cannot be cured or alleviated by conventional means such as herbal remedies or dietary prescriptions.

Since U Shein started his healing practices in the form of curing supernaturally caused diseases many years before he was actively engaging in the production of alchemically derived medicines, he is considered as a powerful spiritual master, having a number of supportive spiritual entities at his side.

Due to his spiritual accomplishment and perfection, he was able to accumulate a wealth of virtues (Pali: *Parami*) collected in previous lives as well as through a continuous and devoted practice of meditation and the strict observance of the Buddhist precepts in this life.

A strong anchorage, faith, devotion and the persistent study and practice of the Buddha's teachings is considered to be an indispensable and essential prerequisite in order to purify the mind and gain access to higher, more refined mental states and extraordinary powers which will be necessary for spiritual healing. Among these powers the capacity of hearing the voices of spiritual beings or being able to see them, reading people's minds, foretelling the future and communicating with spiritual entities like Devas or Weikzas are included.

"U Shein has a special ear and eye. He knows. Whoever comes he can see what he has been in his previous existence. U Shein has the power of seeing if someone has been *Ouktazaung* in a previous life.

U Shein can see very thin particles of light with his special eye, and his special ear, his special power. One, he gained these powers by himself, by practising, and second, the higher spiritual authorities gave him these special powers. By using these powers he can see. He is always

connected with his Devas and Weikzas; he can always communicate with them.”

(AM, Rangoon, 23.01.2008)

The presence and support of powerful and benevolent spiritual entities is considered one of the crucial determinants for a successful healing séance. The election to become a spiritual healer is decided by the spirits, spiritual entities like *Devas* or *Weikzas*, or - in the case of Sayagyi U Shein the hermit Aba Yathé - appointing the adept and introducing the path of initiation to become a spiritual healer. (cf. Vitebsky, 1995: 52 f.)

“There are so many spirits everywhere, but our eyesight is limited. The spirits have so many colours. Some are small, some are very tall. So many different shapes, some have big heads or mouths. In Sayagyi’s house angry or jealous spirits cannot stay, because the whole compound is circled by the power ring of Sayagyi. So animal spirits cannot enter the place. Every day we circle our building with the power of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, Raja Deva, and all the Devis and all the Weikzas, we protect our house. “

(AM, Rangoon, 23.01.2008)

3.6.1 Diagnosis of Dis-Eases: Natural or Supernatural

Since therapeutic prescriptions and interventions differ highly as far as the origin of a disease is concerned, the primary and most relevant task is to determine whether a disease is naturally or supernaturally caused. In Burmese traditional medical understanding many sicknesses do not have an ordinary cause, i.e. they are not caused by climatic influences, nutrition or one's way of living, Karma or mental instability or negativity. Especially the importance of mind as far as sickness and healing is concerned, is attributed a powerful influence. Mental defilements like anger, greed, hatred and desire and the disrespect and non-observance of the Buddhist teachings are very often considered leading to serious physical conditions and sicknesses:

“State of mind is very important, for example greediness makes you change your metabolism. Negative states of mind change the state of the body. So when we cultivate a loving and compassionate state of mind, the body will not get sick. We have to practice, do meditation. We have the responsibility to create good or bad, you are the commander, the captain of the ship. You yourself are the real commander. You are responsible yourself.”

(AM, Rangoon, 25.03.2007)

Sicknesses can also be caused as a result of past Karma:

“When you cultivate a loving mind, Payoga is very hard possible. It also depends on your Karma, your present Karma.”

(AM, Rangoon, 6.2.2009)

Also the positions of planets and stars, especially at the date of birth but also during other certain stages of life, are considered to have an effect on one's life and health. According to Thin Aung, humans are under particular planetary influences in particular periods of life; therefore the fortunes, misfortunes and also sicknesses can depend upon the movements of planets and stars. (cf. Thin Aung, 1962: 18 f.)

However, certain forms of behaviour and symptoms of disease are commonly attributed to be of supernatural origin, such as noticeably prolonged crying of infants, mental confusion, fright, striking behaviour such as shouting or crying, paralysis, as well as certain intestinal problems, sudden appetite loss or sore eyes. (cf. Spiro, 1996: 145 ff.) The belief in supernaturally caused diseases is widespread throughout the whole country and I did not meet a single person not taking extraordinary causes into consideration as far as the origin of diseases is concerned.

Ghosts, witches, Nats and a number of lesser spirits may cause sicknesses and suffering of various kinds. Regardless of their different motives for engaging in the human realm, supernatural entities can interfere and attack humans in basically two ways: either by possessing them or by attacking them from a distance.

In the case of possession U Shein is apparently capable of perceiving and seeing the possessing spirit inside the victim's body due to his mental perfection and clear sight. It shall be noticed that *Payoga*, as understood among U Shein and his disciples, can itself have in principal two different forms, a voluntary and desired and an involuntary and harmful form, which will be explained in detail in the course of this section.

Once the root cause of a particular disease or indisposition can be determined and attributed clearly to be of either natural or supernatural cause, the type of supernatural entity and its respective motives for the attack have to be discovered.

Spiro makes the distinction between *witches* (as evil spirits in the form of humans believed to possess supernatural powers, cf. Spiro, 1996: 21 ff.), *ghosts and demons* (as being disembodied spirits of the dead, cf. Spiro, 1996: 33 ff.) and *Nats* (referring to a type of supernatural being who are more powerful than humans, cf. Spiro, 1996: 40 ff.) who can all be equally held responsible for causing one or the other extraordinary disease.

Among U Shein's disciples witches on the one hand, and black magicians on the other hand, are considered to be the primary source for causing such supernatural sickness and various kinds of misfortunes in a person's

life. It is believed that black magicians exist throughout the country as organized groups.

AM says in this context:

“We have these black-magic groups, in Myanmar is called *Auk Lan*; people here are on a lower plane, a lower mental level, they always make trouble, they give you headache. They are organized in groups through the whole country. But we have to be very careful; black magicians are living very secretly. If ever some people get to know who they are, people are going to kill them.”

(AM, Rangoon, 26.01.2008)

Witches (*Souns*) and black magicians (*Auk Lan Hsayas*, “masters of the lower plane”) are able to cause sickness by administering the victim food treated with a magic spell, or introducing some elements such as hair, pieces of fingernails, sometimes leather or raw beef into the victim’s body by mixing it together with food. (cf. Spiro, 1996: 28 f.) Some witches are also capable of introducing larger objects into the body of the victim, such as iron nails, buttons or paperclips. Generally the *Auk Lan Hsaya* is considered to be much more powerful than the *Soun*, who practices evil arts spontaneously and from personal intention, whereas the former one practices mainly by order of a client. (cf. Spiro, 1996: 22 f.)

The following photo taken at U Shein’s house is serving as a proof among his followers and clients for the malevolent intentions and capacities of a witch or black magician:



*Picture 22: A case of Payoga: objects being introduced by a witch or black magician, becoming visible under X-ray.
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2008)*

An informant, whom I met at Mebegon monastery, told me:

“Many people in Myanmar have Payoga. Even me I was given a bean curry one day from a witch. She told me it is pure vegetarian; suddenly a fish appeared at the surface of the curry. This was witchcraft. She never came again. Payoga can only be cured by supernatural powers. We have these powerful rings from the Weikzas; we put in drinking water to cure Payoga. Even people who don’t have education can have powers.”

(Dr. S., Mebegon, 11.02.2009)

U Shein and his followers are identifying various kinds of spirit possession and supernaturally caused diseases as different forms of *Payoga*, whereby a broad distinction is being made between two different forms, a voluntary and desired and an involuntary, enforced and often very harmful form.

The term *Payoga* is being loosely used to label all kinds of sicknesses which are not of any clear natural, comprehensible cause. An understanding of the Burmese spirit world is necessary in order to comprehend sicknesses caused by spirits. According to Thin Aung (1933b)

the Burmese spirit-world is highly complex but can be divided into two main classes of spirits, namely those who are worshipped and propitiated and those who are not, i.e. higher and lower spirits. (cf. Thin Aung, 1933b: 61)

Amongst the entities who are not being worshipped by humans also *Ouktazauns* can be found, and in order to understand the voluntary and desired form of *Payoga* we will have to illuminate the appearance and characteristics of the *Ouktazauns*. *Ouktazauns* are not *Nats*, and the challenge remains that they virtually belong to no supernatural category or maybe they form a supernatural category of their own. *Ouktazauns* are spirits of either sex (though the vast majority is female however) who are believed to guard buried treasures. It is believed that many *Ouktazauns* guard the treasures buried in pagodas, gold, silver, jewels, etc. which are to be used at the coming of the future Buddha Maitreya for the construction of his monastery and pagoda. (cf. Spiro, 1996: 166) This role is the karmic consequence of their former human behaviour, which was characterized to the very moment of death by greed for wealth and material possessions. It is considered to be their justifiable function therefore that they should now guard these buried treasures. In spite of this seemingly rather unlucky position the *Ouktazauns* find themselves in, they still have the power and spiritual perfection of assuming human shape, at least for a short period of maybe twenty but no longer than forty years. During the time as a human being they will therefore have to serve the Buddha very strictly and fully committedly, if not they risk being immediately sent back to the *Ouktazaun* – realm, where they came from. While serving the Buddha and the propagation of his teachings, the *Ouktazauns* very often live in the temples of masters and traditional medicine practitioners in order to be spiritually aligned.

“The oketazaung then must seek out an ahtet lan hsaya (literally ‘above the road’ master), white magician, and get permission to live on earth until she dies and can be reborn on the proper plane.” (Nash, 1965: 177)

The religious duty demands different functions from the *Ouktazauns*, one of them is found in the availability for *Payoga* purposes. The *Ouktazauns*

are therefore very often *Payoga* specialists in that sense that they are genuinely guardian spirits in a temporary human form, which allows them to have special abilities and a unique possibility of insight into the spiritual and supernatural realms. From a human perspective we can therefore speak of a permanent but harmless and quite beneficial form of *Payoga*, which allows the *Ouktazauns* to have actually healing and fortune-telling qualities.

U Shein's disciple explains:

"U Shein also helps those who were the guardian spirits of the treasure trove of the coming Buddha. This is what we call *Ouktazaun*, a ground deva very often. Their duty is to protect the treasures, jewels, etc., or wisdom treasure like the teachings of the Buddha, or even secret cabbalistic treasure. They are always type of a ground Deva, a lower spirit."

"There are many *Ouktazauns* in U Shein's house. They are no ordinary people; they are reborn now in the human plain. Primarily women, men are very rare. There are two types of *Ouktazauns*: one is guarding personal property, the other one the property donated to the coming Buddha. If you have good Karma, you can become chief *Ouktazaun*. There is a hierarchy among the Devas, as it is in the human realm."

(AM, Rangoon, 10.11.2006)

Since it took me quite a while to understand the concept of *Ouktazaun*, my questions continued:

V: Can you please tell me again about the *Ouktazauns*?

AM: *Ouktazaun* is a guardian of the treasures which are nominated to be given to the coming Buddha Arimetteya, the future Buddha, for his monastery and temple. It is the donation for the coming Buddha, the fifth Buddha in our planet. When he attains enlightenment all the treasures, which are buried underground, will appear, reveal for him, meanwhile the *Ouktazauns* guard these treasure.

Some of the *Ouktazauns* they take some kind of vacation, holiday and come to the human plain. For instance this girl here. One day in her plain is equal to maybe 10 years in human life. In a previous life she was a ground deva, guarding the treasures of the Buddha.

V: So with her own will power she can decide to leave the Deva realm and take vacation in the human level?

AM: No, she cannot decide for herself. She has to get permission from the higher devas.

V: What is the motivation for this?

AM: She wants to make good for herself and for others. In the Deva level her body is like an atomic body. She is not able to donate or contact or do anything with this atomic body. Human body is more rough, able to do service and perform good deeds.

V: What happens if the Deva who was coming back is not performing any good deeds?

AM: That's not possible. (We have to interrupt for sharing the merit of a healing ceremony)

Sometimes it is possible when a Deva becomes a human being that the power is somehow cut, like if you cut electricity. So sometimes they cannot know what is the aim and object for themselves and for others. Sometimes they don't even know that they have been Deva in a previous life. Only a master like Sayagyi can reveal that and also reveal their mission. Some have forgotten their aim, their mission and then in the present life they drink a lot of alcohol, they make bad speech, so then at the end of their life they are not promoted to go up, they might have to go down to maybe the animal realm or hell realm. They may also become ogre, because they did not do good things during the human life. The world of the Devas is a sort of hierarchy. She has to get the permission from the spiritual authorities; the higher Devas decide over the lower ones, they don't have free will, the permission of the higher authority decides if he or she can come to the human world. After her death then there are two possibilities: She will either go back to the Deva

realm with promotion, to her ground Deva plain, or maybe to some higher Deva plain.

The often severe and harmful form of *Payoga* occurs in the case of a black magician (*Auk Lan Hsaya*, “*Master of the lower plane*”) or a witch (*Soun*) inducing an offending supernatural entity to possess the patient, whereupon the latter becomes the supernatural’s medium in that case. It has to be taken into consideration that persons themselves can be responsible for a *Payoga*-related sickness, by not respecting or paying adequate attention to rules and taboos related with a respective spirit or Nat and therefore attracting their anger or harm.

In a broad sense the term *Payoga* is used very widely and refers to all kinds of influences and conditions brought about by either humans or spirits using supernatural and magical arts.³⁹ We have to bear in mind that, although physical illness is attributed to natural as well as supernatural causes, behaviour which the Burmese characterize as mental illness is attributed almost exclusively to supernatural causes. When this is the case, the diagnose of *Payoga*, which we could understand as a voluntary and malicious act on the side of the magician or respective spirit and involuntary on the side of the patient, will be likely to be made. Nevertheless it is not always the case that a witch or black magician is involved and can be assumed to be responsible for causing *Payoga*. Also the past and present Karma and the state of mind of a person are considered to be crucial determinants for attracting or fending off a *Payoga* related disease:

“Imagine you did some very bad things in a previous or even present life, this bad fortune will come back to you. This is what we also consider to be *Payoga*. The person himself is responsible for the *Payoga*. Past karmic deeds can come back. By bad Karma *Payoga* can come. If you don’t make bad things, *Payoga* cannot come to you. Sometimes spirits are involved, but not always. For

³⁹ cf. U Shein’s “Definition of *Payoga*”, Rangoon, Oct. 2006

example when someone does not pay respect to Buddha. Payoga may come from your bad deeds, previous or present. You can invite lower spirits in your life because of bad Karma. Because of your bad doings, spirits can come into your body. Payoga and Karma are very close together. “

(AM, Rangoon, 26.01.2008)

“When someone dies in a very angry, greedy or negative state of mind or when he dies in an accident, his spirit cannot enter the celestial realms of Devas after his death. His spirit will be in misery, roaming about aimlessly. He is desperate. Powerful persons can command these spirits. When someone dies unfortunate the spirit cannot go to an upper place. The one that knows the witchcraft asks these spirits to come along with him.”

(RA, Rangoon, 08.02.2009)

Encountering such a case of *Payoga* in a Burmese traditional medicine clinic is a challenging occurrence for a researching anthropologist being a complete and un-experienced outsider and can therefore often be very hard to understand. Since the phenomenon of *Payoga* has literally received quite little attention in scientific literature so far, I can basically only refer to my personal observations and the interviews and conversations I was leading concerning this topic.

According to my incomplete understanding it is the task of the healer (*Ahtelan Hsaya, Master of the Upper Path*) to determine the exact respective spirit which has taken possession of the patient, define the motivation for this particular possession and then, which is considered to be most crucial for the success of the ceremony, to be able to lead the spirit back to his or her respective realm. The spiritual healer will have to call the assistance of his benevolent and supportive spiritual entities in order to cure this kind of disease.

Also he will have to be highly accomplished and realized on a mental level through continuous practice of meditation, internalizing the Buddha's

teachings and observing the five Buddhist precepts. As I have been told repeatedly:

“Payoga means curing with mind-power. The physician is curing by mind; the treatment is determined by the power of mental concentration of the physician.”

(SWU, Rangoon, 25.02.2009)

When all parts of the ritual are conducted successfully, the patient who was before maybe in a confused, schizophrenic, paranoid or depressed condition recovers miraculously, and it is often possible that, in lighter cases, even a single session can ultimately detect the possessing spirit and free the patient from his disturbance and the sickening symptoms. (cf. Interviews with AM, Rangoon, Feb. 2008)

“Many stories affirm that healing is provided by a power or spirit helper coming to assist a willing person who has the gift from the power or spirit. It is this power or spirit that works through the healer for the sufferer and takes away pain and the source of the trouble.” (Turner, 2006: XIX)



*Picture 23: U Shein in a healing ritual: According to himself and his disciples the presence of spiritual entities supporting the healing ritual becomes visible when photographed.
(Sayagyi U Shein © 2006)*

3.6.2 Relationships with the Spiritual World

“There is no better way to start learning about spiritual healing than with a story. A story can bring the past to the present, open people up for the experience of being healed, and prepare them to do the work of healing themselves. The telling of the story of a spiritual experience—whether transmitted by speech or in print—is the means whereby a spiritual fact can be conveyed to another person whole and entire, be received by listeners as an actual experience of their own, and be counted as such in the memory of the listener.” (Turner, 2006: XXI)

At the centre of healing lies the consideration and reflection of manifold and complex **relationships**. Since sickness and disease have, according to Burmese and other indigenous perceptions, their fundamental origin in disharmony and unharmonious relationships of various kinds, the recovery, renewing and re-establishment of disturbed and troubled relationships is therefore essential when healing wants to be attained. (cf. Kremser, 2008: 15) Understanding the dynamics of healing affords therefore acknowledging and realizing the dynamics inherent in various relationships, between humans and between humans and the spiritual world. Manfred Kremser refers to a variety of different relationships whose understanding, recognition and recovery seems crucial for a successful healing process. Spiritual healers and shamans are not only responsible for the cure of sicknesses but predominantly for the healing of relationships, various and multi-faceted relationships that humans find themselves in: the relationship with the own self, the own consciousness and also the unconscious realms, the relationship with one’s own body and senses, the relationships with the social environment and nature, and finally the relationships with the spiritual-immaterial world. (cf. Kremser, 2008: 2f.)

Central to those reflections shall be the question of how our mental and physical existence is embedded and interwoven with spiritual realms and powers inherent in a seemingly infinite universe. These recoveries and renewals of various relationships follow diverse dynamics and regularities,

have different depths and forms, and also various meanings and values for the person concerned.

Inspired by Edith Turner and her remarkable way of being able to communicate essential characteristics of spiritual healing by the means of telling stories connecting with healing experiences, I aim to present ethnographic insights and personal experiences through stories from the field. What insights can I gain from my own experiences, perceptions and connections with the spiritual world regarding the spiritual relationships of my informants? How can these stories be linked, united, joined together in order to illuminate reciprocal and mutual interactions and connections and a most complete picture of investigated phenomena?

Edith Tuner is convinced that there has always been “*a connection of all things with all things*” and human beings can reach each other with their souls as being part of this profound connectedness that runs through the entire universe. (cf. Turner, 2006: XXII)

The following stories from the field shall be read as an attempt to portray and illuminate these various relationships between the human and the spiritual world. Stories about my own experiences with the spiritual realm and stories of friends and informants in the field shall contribute to a holistic and integrated perspective.

As Edith Turner puts it:

“Increasing numbers of researchers are doing the same thing, writing- much as I have done here- from within the belief of the people among whom they work. This is real reportage on the other world, that other level where the spirits and powers are known.”
(Turner, 2006: 21)

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 4.11.2006

„Heute haben wir ein Ritual für die Göttin Kali gemacht. Die *Deva*-Frauen, von denen man meint sie wären *Ouktazauns*, sind in indischen Gewändern, in Saris, aufgetaucht und es wurden laute indische

Kali-Gesänge gespielt, und geläutet und geläutet. Die Frauen sind sehr schnell in Trance gefallen, haben ihre Zungen aus dem Mund gestreckt und haben dann alle einen goldenen Dreizack, von U TW, durch die Zunge durchgestoßen bekommen. Das war relativ schockierend für mich zu sehen.

Eine hat sogar gleich drei dieser Nadeln von U TW durch die Zunge gestoßen bekommen und dann hat sie Limetten gegessen, und was mich am allermeisten erstaunt hat, sie hat in Trance eine Kokosnuss am Boden aufgeschlagen, und die ist auf der Stelle aufgeplatzt. Es werden übernatürliche Kräfte frei; anscheinend ist Kali diejenige, die sich dieser Wesen ermächtigt und durch sie spricht. Es war ein sehr wildes, wütendes Ritual, es wurde sehr viel gestampft und geschrien.

Zwei, drei Frauen sind dann überhaupt in Ohnmacht gefallen, nachdem das offenbar energetisch zu viel für sie geworden ist (meine Deutung). Es war sehr wild, alles Mögliche wurde niedergerissen, umgestoßen, Wasser ausgeschüttet, Bananen umhergeworfen, Kokosnüsse aufgeschlagen, und immer diese laute indische Musik dazu. Nachdem das dann fertig war und ich in Schweiß gebadet und relativ geschockt daneben gestanden bin, fassungslos, habe ich mir die Zungen der Frauen angeschaut, sie haben mir gleich freiwillig ihre Zunge gezeigt, lächelnd als wäre nichts gewesen, und ich war fassungslos zu sehen, dass diese Zungen nichts an sich hatten. Manche haben sich sogar Kerzen und Räucherstäbchen im Mund ausgedämpft, aber

gleich zehn Kerzen auf einmal und es war weder eine Spur von Verbrennung, noch ein Loch in der Zunge, noch Blut, noch irgendetwas zu sehen. Die Zungen waren makellos. Es waren auch zwei Männer darunter und die haben mir gesagt, sie spüren weder Schmerz, noch bleibt eine Narbe zurück. Wie die Verbindung die die einzelnen Personen zu Kali haben, ist mir noch sehr unklar. Sie müssen, stelle ich mir vor, eine individuelle, sehr persönliche Beziehung haben zur Göttin Kali, eine große Hingabe und Glauben. Auch erstaunt mich, dass in einer buddhistischen Gesellschaft, Kali, die eine Hindu Göttin ist, meinem Wissen nach, so eine bedeutende Rolle spielt...”



*Picture 24: Ritual for Kali.
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2006)*

Some of U Shein's close disciples do have personal intimate relationships with the Goddess Kali which have to be renewed and strengthened regularly in order to secure Kali's continuous support and blessing. Devotees offer their whole body so that the deity is able to incarnate herself temporarily and take possession of her devotee. These relationships have their origin in a strong connection with Kali from a previous life, a

close karmic relationship which demands a regular ritual cultivation and renewal. During these rituals, which can be either performed in groups of Kali-devotees or by a single person connected with Kali, individual relationships are being revived, the person feels purified and spiritually strengthened. Since Kali is considered to be the goddess of time, change and destruction, rituals for Kali can very often be accompanied by loud music and feel quite rough and wild for an outside observer.

Also, U Shein has also a strong personal relationship with the Goddess Kali:

„Kali is with Sayagyi since he was born. In Maymyo, near his house, is a Kali temple, so this connection is very long. In a previous life Kali and Sayagyi have been brother and sister. When Sayagyi became a human being, Kali was always with him. Before in the Deva plain they have been brother and sister. Since this time Kali protects him.”

(AM, Rangoon, 23.01.2008)



*Picture 25: Hindu Gods and Goddesses in U Shein's temple
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2008)*



*Picture 26: Hindu Gods and Goddesses in U Shein's temple
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2008)*

According to Spiro the path of the Weikza and the religious thinking of its devotees can be perceived as a syncretism of occult Indian, Chinese and indigenous beliefs with an overlay of Buddhist doctrine. (cf. Spiro, 1982: 162-63) Hinduism is considered to be Buddhism's parent religion (cf. Spiro, 1982: 36) whose influence in Burmese religion can be especially observed in astrology and alchemy and related rituals. Since Burmese astrology and in particular alchemy has its roots in Hindu astrological beliefs, Hindu gods and goddesses are especially worshipped and referred to in these practices. (cf. Thin Aung, 1962: 1f., 18 f.)

In February 2009 I was able to witness an amazingly powerful ceremony of group possession guided and mediated by U Shein. The ceremony had the function of reconnecting and renewing the personal relationships of the devotees, U Shein's disciples, with their respective spiritual entities⁴⁰. It was an impressive demonstration of U Shein's capacities and connections with the world of the spirits.

⁴⁰ It needs to be mentioned that this ceremony was also part of a documentary film produced by order of U Shein. Wolf Wies had been the executive producer and I was honoured to be able to contribute my ethnological insights as well as writing parts of the film's scripts. The documentary can be downloaded at : <http://gold-ash-powder.com/film.html>

“U Shein’s hands have supernatural powers. On his right hand there is the Shwedagon Pagoda, on his left hand the Kyaiktiyo Rock and a fish. The fish is an important symbol in Buddhism, symbolizing fearlessness. First he was unable to see these figures, but when he finally saw he was able to cure. U Shein can recognize and heal those who have been spirits in former lives. When he touches or commands, the patients faint or fall down. Those who are free from a spiritual influence from a past life, there is no reaction. When U Shein gives the command, the spirit from the former life can take over the body. U Shein can do miracles. The spirits from the former life must be very well looked after and cared; they must be fed with fruits and honoured. U Shein can ask these spirits to predict about the future. The people have to do like the spirits instruct them; then they will be happy and the life of the person will be fortunate and prosperous. Financial problems and diseases will be overcome. People must live according to the wishes of the spirits inside of them. They are *Ouktazauns*. So they must live according to Buddhist principles. They must lead a pure life, like never take alcohol or tobacco. Because the *Ouktazauns* are pure and holy, evil spirits cannot enter Sayagyi’s place. ”

(RA, Rangoon, 08.02.2009)

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 08.02.2009

The ritual starts. Three ladies and one man, *Ouktazauns* in one of their previous lives, are gathering for performing a ceremony together to honour the relationships with the respective deities they have the closest connections to. U Shein is commanding the spirits to take possession of the bodies of the devotees by raising his right hand, the hand that is always used when supernatural powers are used and transmitted. A bell is ringed continuously in a sharp tone. Precious stones and

holy relics have been spread out on a white cloth. The women, facing the Buddha's shrine, take place in front of the holy objects. U Shein is commanding the *Ouktazauns* to come; when the devotees are possessed they do not feel anything, no pain, no tickling, their physical senses are temporarily numbed. They are possessed by the deity. Also the spirit of Kali is called to incarnate in her devotees. They will have to show their tongues now so that they can be pierced through with the needle. Kali is very powerful and very aggressive. She can only enter in the former *Ouktazauns*, but they also must have some relation with her from a previous life, they have been a relative of Kali. Kali always predicts the future. The whole temple is filled with an extraordinary fine, high frequency energy that can be clearly perceived and felt by all of us being present. The women and the man are shaking, trembling and dancing in trance, their tongues being pierced by long golden needles. A sacrifice for the spirits and a sign to show their deep devotion.

When the right time has come, U Shein can command the spirit of Kali to leave the bodies of the devotees again.

After the ritual is finished, participants feel light and free of disease. I am told that this way of voluntary possession is also a way of healing, a way of uniting with the spirits, experiencing valuable insights about one's current life situations and challenges that one might face.

„Heute haben wir eine überaus mächtige Demonstration von U Sheins Heilkräften und seiner Fähigkeit mit der spirituellen Welt zu kommunizieren, bekommen. Drei Frauen und ein Mann, *Ouktazauns* in vergangenen Leben, haben ihre Körper zur Verfügung gestellt um der Göttin Kali Platz zu machen sich in ihnen zu inkarnieren. Ich war zutiefst berührt. Der Raum war erfüllt von einer feinen, aber starken und sehr präsenten Energie, die alles erfüllt hat und alle Anwesenden erreicht hat. Ich bin einmal mehr davon überzeugt, dass die Präsenz und Anwesenheit der Geister wahrgenommen werden kann. Ihre Präsenz kann gefühlt und empfunden werden, fast genauso wie warme Strahlen der Morgensonne.“

It is especially the goddess Kali that is most often referred to, not only in cases of a personal renewal and strengthening of the relationships with devotees, but also in cases of seeking individual guidance and advice from the goddess.

Rituals for Kali can be perceived as a form of divination, as ways of seeking advice and help from the specific spiritual entity and attain hidden information and insights that are inaccessible by the rational everyday consciousness. In this context the spiritual healer has the mediating and introducing function, in so far as he enables to establish the connection between the client and the spirit.

Among the different healing ceremonies, there are certain rituals, which I was able to experience and witness almost daily at U Shein's house, which are initiated and wished for by an individual in order to meet and communicate with a specific spiritual entity. Aim of these spiritual encounters is the ritual propitiation and consultation of spirits in order to achieve certain crucial information concerning their particular present life situation.

These rituals mostly follow a set routine and structure: Firstly, the healer and the client determine the particular problem or request and formulate a prayer together, which will then be written down and chanted by the master hence enabling the client to quickly enter a state of trance. Again U Shein is raising his right hand, the hand that is used for introducing the spirit to possess the body of the devotee. This state is determined by strong shaking of the whole body, sometimes screaming and yelling as well and can last for 45 minutes at the longest. During this phase it is very important that a bell is clanged continuously and rhythmically and the client is not disturbed or addressed verbally since this might disturb and eventually break the connection which is about to be established with the spiritual entity. Finally, the client usually faints completely which is considered to be a very good and desired sign, since this apparent unconsciousness signifies the final agreement between the client and the desired spirit. Mostly the clients seek connection with a specific well-known spiritual entity, like a mother, father or husband from a previous life or the spirit of an ancestor. The ceremony is considered a success when the client returns, awake and clear-minded, and with a concrete and specific instruction what has to be done, which prayers and practices have to be performed at what date etc. in order to solve the problem or achieve the desired goal. Since I have been witnessing many of such rituals and also been able to experience certain clients for many weeks, I was also able to see the often astonishing effects of such rituals, especially since the given instructions were carried out correctly.

“Through this ritual we can meet the spirits of ancestors, like a mother or father from the past life. I can also meet Kali, who I have a connection with from a past life. I can ask questions and get answers for problems in my life. Also I can worship the spirits. After I feel fresh and new, very light.”

(RA, Rangoon, 18.01.2008)



*Picture 27: Ceremony to unite with a personal spirit
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2006)*

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 04.11.2006

„Heute Nachmittag habe ich von U TW, U Sheins Assistent, Schamanenkraft übertragen bekommen. Ich musste mich auf den Buddha konzentrieren und U TW hat die Kraft aus seiner rechten Hand in meine rechte Hand übertragen. Als die Kraft geteilt war und ich dann meine rechte Hand gehoben habe, sind am Stück sieben Menschen in Ohnmacht gefallen, bewusstlos niedergestürzt, unter diesen vielen Anwesenden im Tempel, sieben Frauen. Das war relativ irritierend und gleichzeitig sehr erstaunlich für mich, ich kann mir noch keinen wirklichen Reim machen. U Thein Win hat gelacht und mir zugeblinzelt.“

3.6.3 Embrace

Slowly I am able to get involved in daily prayers, meditations and rituals on a personal level and embark on a journey into the spiritual world. I comprehend intuitively that we are equipped with a variety of different perceptual channels and cognitive abilities to experience diverse layers of reality. In how far I cultivate the ability to devote myself to perceiving and experiencing reality through complementary modes of cognition depends on my readiness, confidence and trust in my intuition.

The pantheon of spirits and venerated, and also feared, spiritual and celestial beings that I encounter in Burmese daily religious practices, is vast, complex and multi-layered and only through continuous observing, questioning, reading and the attempt to understand lived spirituality *‘from the inside’* am I able to rudimentarily comprehend the lifeworld of U Shein, his assistants and disciples. I am able to understand and experience that, in Burmese religious thinking, we are constantly and at any moment surrounded by countless spiritual entities, be they hopeless, confused or lost souls unable to attain a new reincarnation, or be they heavenly, benevolent Devas inhabiting refined upper realms of existence ready and devoted to support and guide humans on earth. This reminds us of Jorge Ferrer’s concept of transpersonal phenomena as being “*multilocal participatory events*” in that sense that the fundamental dialogical, participatory nature of spiritual and transpersonal insights is emphasized. (p. 66 ff.)

Healing has its point of origin in the restoration, revival and recovery of imbalanced, impure or conflicted relationships between human beings, but also, essentially to understand, between the human and the spiritual world. The dialogue, the communion between humans and spirits and the participatory nature of these encounters highlight again the sharing, participatory characteristic of rituals which occur multi-locally, in the human and the spiritual locus of existence. Human beings do not perceive themselves as being isolated and detached from spiritual realms of existence, but instead assume a perpetual, continuous interaction, mutual influence and the possibility of communication with spiritual entities.

Relationships need to be nurtured, cultivated and cared for when the balance and harmony between various realms of existence shall be maintained in harmony.

Field Journal Entry, Mebegon, 11.02.2009

„Wenn ich mich so zurückerinnere, wie das war als ich zum ersten Mal hier war, und mein Verständnis oder Nicht-Verständnis war, so muss ich sagen, dass sich doch mein Zugang sehr gewandelt und meine Wahrnehmungsweise sich verändert hat. Ich kann mich noch sehr gut erinnern, als ich zum ersten Mal die speziellen Rituale miterlebt habe, speziell diese Rituale, in denen sich Menschen mit einem Geist oder einer Wesenheit aus einem vergangen Leben verbinden. Anfänglich war ich hochgradig verwirrt und irritiert und konnte mir eigentlich überhaupt keinen Reim machen, was da vor sich geht. Jetzt ist es so geworden, dass meine Einsicht und meine Verständnis sehr gewachsen sind, aber auf einer sehr subtilen Ebene. Es ist nicht so, dass ich unbedingt mehr verstehe von dem was passiert, aber ich habe so ein Empfinden dafür bekommen, ein sehr subtiles, intuitives Erfassen, das immer stärker und ausgeprägter wird. Ich habe erkannt, dass, wenn ich meine Intuition nicht kultiviere, diese Forschung letztlich gar nicht möglich sein kann. Ich sehe mich hier in diesem Land innerhalb der traditionellen Medizin und dem schamanischen Heilen mit einem Pantheon an verschiedenen Ritualen und sehr komplexen Wahrnehmungsweisen und Vorstellungen, die die Menschen hier mitbringen und selbstverständlicher Weise auch voraussetzen,

konfrontiert, und ich bemühe mich sehr, dieses Weltbild begreifen und verstehen zu lernen. Und ich lerne gerade, dass Erkenntnis und wirkliche Einsicht nur passieren kann jenseits des rationalen Geistes. Das bedeutet, ich muss mein ganzes Wesen zur Verfügung stellen, mein ganzes Sein, meinen ganzen Geist mit all seinen Aspekten dieser Forschung und dieser Erkenntnis schenken. Und nicht nur in meiner Ratio bleiben und rationale Erklärungen für Dinge wollen; das ist unmöglich, und diese Erklärungen kann es auch gar nicht geben. Und speziell wenn es um die Weikzas geht und um das Verständnis des Pantheon der Weikzas, komme ich immer mehr dahinter, dass gewisse Dinge mit dem rationalen Verstand nicht mehr zu verstehen sind, weil sie sich auf einer Ebene abspielen, wo selbst die Menschen, die diese Erfahrungen bereits gemacht haben und selbst Weikzas begegnet sind, mir das nicht erklären können. Es ist eine Ebene, wo nur mehr eine Erfahrung, eine direkte unmittelbare Erfahrung möglich ist und nicht ein intellektuelles Erkennen-Können.“

3.7 Growing into the World of Weikzas

“We systematically remove the personal and the experiential in accordance with our anthropological paradigms; then we reintroduce them so as to make our ethnographies more real, more alive.” (Bruner, in: Turner/Bruner, 1986: 9)

The quest for encountering a Weikza in person brought me together with a number of Burmese informants, followers and disciples of Weikzas, and led me on a journey through the country. This process of personal and mutual cognition and development shall be described as detailed and comprehensible as possible, including the personal and experiential details of biographies, field notes or personal narratives in field accounts in order to communicate an understanding and insight into the field situation as clear and authentic as possible and make the ethnography more real and alive. (cf. Bruner; in: Turner/Bruner, 1986: 9)

It was precisely through this broadening and expansion of cognitive paths that I became capable of understanding and experiencing such a complex phenomenon as the world of the Weikzas and its believers. Scientific research-approaches and methods need to be broadened to become as holistic, dynamic and manifold as the phenomena and experiences studied (cf. Braud/Anderson, 1998: 28).

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 14.11.2006

“Wo auch immer ich hingehe, welchen Schreinraum oder Tempel ich betrete, augenblicklich bleiben meine Augen bei Bildern, Fotos oder Statuen der Weikzas hängen. Sie sitzen gleich neben dem Buddha und den Nats. Ich frage mich, wer sie eigentlich sind? Und wieso scheinen sie mir so allgegenwärtig?“

When entering Sayagyi U Shein’s house, one is immediately confronted with the presence of Weikzas. Before visitors are led by a golden staircase into the first floor of the house where prayers, ceremonies and healings

take place, one passes by a small shrine room dedicated to the Weikzas, especially to the Weikza Bo Min Gaung, whose over-proportionally large statue occupies the central place of the room. Every day U Shein, his disciples and clients who come to his house, would pay respect and say prayers in front of Bo Min Gaung before continuing to the main temple in the first floor.



*Picture 28: Statute of the Weikza Bo Min Gaung in U Shein's house
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2008)*

When seeking a holistic comprehension and understanding of Burmese religious world-views and related practices, the presence and veneration of Weikzas, whose main characteristics I want to mention again, cannot be overestimated enough. Michael Mendelson, who can be identified as the father of and pioneer in studying the Burmese Weikza phenomenon, was the first scholar who came to realize this third component of Burmese religion, the paths and activities of the Weikzas, besides Theravada Buddhism and the cult of the Nats. (cf. Mendelson, 1961a: 230) A Weikza is considered to be a human being who was able to acquire supernatural extraordinary powers and spiritual insight and understanding, mainly through the mastery of one or more techniques, the mastery of alchemy, traditional medicine, astrology, meditation, cabbalistic signs and mantras. The concept of Weikza is deeply embedded and interwoven with Burmese Buddhist beliefs, since it is the main and most important goal of the

Weikza to achieve longevity and eternal youth, i.e. to extend his present life, in order to be physically present at the advent of the future Buddha and to be able to hear his preaching and attain final liberation in the presence of a living Buddha. (cf. Mendelson/Ferguson, 1981: 64)

According to Buddhist beliefs four Buddhas already appeared on earth in the present aeon: *Kokathangon, Gonagon, Kassapa and Gotama Buddha* had already been present in this universe offering their insights, teachings and guidance to their devotees and followers. (cf. Kunsal Kassapa, 2005: I) According to Dr. Sein Yi, the author of the foreword in a book by Kunsal Kassapa, a Theravada monk of Spanish origin who has been entrusted with the publication of a biography of the Weikzas of Mebegon (“The Wonders of Mebegon Village” 2005), at the end of a five thousand year period after the death of Buddha Gotama all his relics and treasures will be collected together to mark the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya. Maitreya Buddha, “*the Blessed One will manifest light and give teachings for seven days at the top of Gandamadana Mountain*” (Kunsal Kassapa, 2005: I), a mythological place in the Himalayan Mountains. (cf. Swearer, 2010: 97) This auspicious place will only be accessible for celestial beings, Devas and Weikzas, who, after having paid homage to the future Buddha, will attain immediate salvation. Weikzas are therefore responsible for supporting and promoting the Buddhist religion, giving messages and guiding their faithful followers and disciples, hence personifying an altruism which evidently reminds of the *Bodhisattva* in Mahayana Buddhism. (cf. Mendelson/Ferguson, 1981: 64)

As far as Burmese traditional medicine is concerned, the four fundamental components of the traditional medical system have previously been elaborated. We remember that the Weikza, his capacities and accomplishments, are central in *Weikzadara-Naya*, the branch of Burmese traditional medicine that incorporates various forms of spiritual healing and the production of alchemically derived remedies. The most important connection between the Weikza phenomenon and traditional medicine is the fact that the Weikzas are considered to be wise, compassionate and well accomplished healers. The following statements of different informants highlight the healing capacities of the Weikza:

“The task of Weikza is to help the people, like a bodhisattva. The aim and object of Weikza is to help people. One of the Weikza’s subjects is to save people from poverty, danger and disease; this is the duty of the Weikzas. Bo Min Gaung was also a healer. He taught a lot of people and also he cured many people, like our Sayagyi.”

(AM, Rangoon, 06.02.2009)

“The Weikza is always a healer, a saviour in one way or the other. Weikza is a sort of a Bodhisattva. “

(UT, Rangoon, 08.02.2009)

“Weikza is on the upper level as a human being. A Weikza can cure each and every disease. But you don’t have to be a Weikza yourself to produce Weikza medicine.”

(AMT, Mandalay, 14.02.2009)

Also for U Shein and his disciples the Weikzas, their veneration, guidance and support are of utmost importance, and I cannot remember a single day not talking about or mentioning the Weikza’s powers and accomplishments. Since U Shein is also, besides curing people from unwanted negative spiritual influences, producing a powerful remedy through alchemical techniques for more than thirty years, his connection with the world of the Weikzas has been especially strong almost all his life. Amongst his disciples U Shein himself is considered to be a Weikza:

“Sayagyi is also a Weikza, a *Hsey Weikza*, medicine Weikza. But still he is living here with the people. His aim and object is not to go away into Nirvana, when he dies he will be going to some Deva plain and then come back to the people. This is very much the Metta way, guided by loving kindness for the people.”

(AM, Rangoon, 30.01.2008)

Slowly it is dawning on me that my interests and fascination lead me to the house of a highly realized and venerated being, U Shein, whose powers and

mastery I will have to gradually comprehend and realize in the course of my research and the personal engagement into the topic of my study.

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 19.01.2008

„Ich bin zutiefst berührt von der Liebe und Fürsorge, die mir hier begegnet in diesem Haus. U Shein hat mich vom Flughafen abgeholt und mich gleich in den Arm genommen. Wieder kann ich in seinem Haus wohnen und werde umsorgt wie eine Prinzessin. Ich kann gar nicht verstehen, wieso mir so viel Liebe von U Shein entgegengebracht wird. Langsam realisiere ich auch U Sheins Fähigkeiten und Kräfte, er steht in ständigem starkem Kontakt mit seinen geistigen Helfern. Was auch immer er für eine Entscheidung zu treffen hat, wird vorher mit seinen geistigen Entitäten abgeklärt. U Shein kann die Geister sehen und hören zu jeder Zeit.“

3.7.1 Different Paths to Perfection

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 17.11.2006

„Manchmal habe ich das Gefühl, als würden sich die Weikzas selbst auf ganz subtile Weise in den Vordergrund drängen; als würden sie nur darauf warten erkannt und wahrgenommen zu werden. Es scheint, als wäre es unmöglich, ihre Gegenwart zu ignorieren; sie sind zu präsent. Ihre Bilder, ihre Statuen, und die Menschen, die unaufhörlich von ihnen sprechen. Es scheint fast so, als wollten sie bewusst und willentlich auf sich aufmerksam machen.“

My journey of researching and understanding the Burmese Weikza phenomenon sent me on a journey not only physically through the

country, but also initiated an emotional and mental quest within my own consciousness. I had to move to different places, meet different people and tried different approaches of comprehension and insight. The challenge to communicate ethnographic data and insights meaningfully is to be able to bridge the gap by being mutually aware of my own personal experiences as well as of the experiences of my hosts. I am striving to present a way to let all participating voices in the process of knowledge-gaining be equally heard and shared in the hope that I will be able to convey a picture of the phenomenon as holistic and multi-perspective as possible.

Many different people told me about their personal encounters with the Weikzas. A close friend of mine, who is also an anthropologist and supported my research tremendously, can tell of a lifelong relationship with the Weikza Bo Min Gaung:

“You have to long for the Weikzas in your heart. And then, if you don’t see the Weikza in person, you will see him in your dream. Since I am seven years old, I meet Bo Min Gaung. One time I was going to Mount Popa with my parents. I have seen Bo Min Gaung there in person. I could even ask questions to him in my mind. He was an old man with white hair. He sat on a mattress in the pagoda, with crossed legs. I have my personal photo with Bo Min Gaung that my father took that time with the box camera. This was the time when my connection with Bo Min Gaung started.”

(UKH, Rangoon, 09.02.2009)

For a complete understanding of the figure of Weikza in contemporary Burma it is necessary to outline the two different kinds of personality that are designated with the term Weikza and the two different forms of spiritual accomplishment and paths to perfection respectively.

Burmese followers and practitioners of the Weikza path draw a fundamental distinction between the *worldly* or *mundane* Weikza (*Lawki Weikza*) and the *supermundane* Weikza (*Lawkutara Weikza*).

According to Tosa, the concept of *Lawki Pyinnya* (Pali: *Lokiya Panna*) is crucial for understanding the way in which Burmese people order their world. (cf. Tosa, 2005: 159)

Lawki or *Lokiya* literally means *worldly* or *mundane*, according to the “Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary” also ‘*belonging to the world*’, ‘*world-wide*’, ‘*covering the whole world*’ or ‘*famed*’, ‘*widely known*’ (cf. URL : <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali/>, 15.01.2012), whereas *Pyinnya* (Burmese) or *Panna* (Pali) refers to wisdom, insight or knowledge. (cf. URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prajna>, 15.01.2012)

Hence the *Lawki* Weikza was able to achieve mastery in one or a number of different mundane techniques, arts or practices. The most important of these practices included in the category of worldly knowledge (*Lawki Pyinnya*) are alchemy (*E’gija*), cabbalistic squares (*In*), medicine (*Tainjinhsei*: indigenous medicine), mantras (*Mandan*) and astrology (*Baydin*). (cf. Myanmar-English Dictionary, 1993)⁴¹

All of this capacities and achievements are considered to belong to ‘this-worldly knowledge’, hence the mundane or ‘this-worldly’ Weikza is characterized as a being on the path towards spiritual perfection and Nirvana, and is endowed with the quality of near-immortality. He is considered a highly accomplished being, who is not yet fully enlightened and realized. (cf. Rozenberg, 2010: 47)

In contrast to the concept of *Lawki* Weikza endowed with *Lawki Pyinnya* the category *supermundane* Weikza (*Lawkutara* Weikza) has to be mentioned. For understanding the complex characteristics of the Weikza the dichotomy between *Lawki* and *Lawkuttara* seems of crucial importance: *Lawkuttara* (Burmese, Pali: *Lokuttara*) has the following meanings: ‘*the highest of the world*’, ‘*best*’, ‘*sublime*’ or ‘*transcendental*’ (cf. URL: <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali/>, 15.01.2012) and refers to the kind of knowledge and insight that leads a practitioner to full enlightenment and Nirvana. Hence the *Lawkuttara* Weikza is considered

⁴¹ For an explanation of *Lawki Pyinnya* see also: Tosa, 2005, 2009; Rozenberg 2010; Foxeus 2011;

a fully enlightened individual, “*able to enter into Nirvana whenever he would like.*” (Rozenberg, 2010a: 47)

The supermundane Weikza is regarded to be superior in his knowledge and perfection as the mundane Weikza, consequently represents the ultimate goal of the path of the Weikza and will therefore also be called *Ariya-Weikza* (Pali: ‘*well-born*’, ‘*belonging to the ruling race*’, ‘*noble*’, ‘*aristocratic*’, ‘*gentlemanly*’; cf. URL: <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali/> , 16.01.2012)

Summarizing, it can be recorded that there essentially exist two kinds of Weikzas, regarding their level of realization, perfection and the acquisition of supernatural powers: The *Lawki* Weikza is still living amongst the people, offering his continuous guidance and support and frequently shares his meritorious deeds with the people through healing, divining or producing medicines derived from alchemical transformation processes. He has attained mastery and success in a number of arts, a prerequisite on the path to become a *Lawkuttara* Weikza, a fully realized being who finds himself on the threshold of ‘*going-out*’, a mystical transformation whereby the Weikza is able to leave the cycle of rebirths and extend his lifespan indefinitely. As Foxeus points out most comprehensively, there are two kinds of such mystical ‘*going-out*’: ‘*going-out alive*’ whereby the Weikza leaves the cycle of rebirth with his mind and body intact; he may suddenly disappear physically completely from the human realm without leaving anything behind, sometimes not even his cloths. (cf. Rozenberg, 2010: 51; Foxeus, 2011: 15) This form of ‘*going-out*’ is clearly considered to be the more desirable one. In the second case, ‘*going-out dead*’, the Weikza leaves his dead body behind which remains in the human world. It is said that the Weikzas reside in a special sphere of existence, an abode which is inaccessible and invisible to ordinary human beings.

These places can be forests and mountains in Burma or, as frequently mentioned, the Himalayan Mountains and the legendary kingdom of Shambhala.

V: So where are the Weikzas now?

AM: Their headquarter is the Himalaya, the big mountains in India. They are residing there. Now they are making meditation, thinking about what will happen to the world and reflecting upon the future of mankind. You know, when the Atlantic Ocean emerged, all the wise men and Weikzas went to a place high in the mountains, near Tibet. Shambhala is the name; it is a place for those who have a very long life. Normal people cannot find this place.

But still, at the same time, Weikzas are present everywhere, here on earth.

(AM, Rangoon, 27.03.2008)

“A Weikza is a highly realized being and he has a very long lifespan. They can extend their lifespan. The potential of the Weikzas is enormous, they can be anywhere in any form. Even Bo Min Gaung is around now and can hear everything what we talk. We admire him, so he will be O.K. We share the knowledge with each other. “

(UT, 08.02.2009)

Slowly it becomes clear that a Weikza can either be encountered as a real, physical human being in the form of the *mundane* Weikza, or does exist in the mystical, transcendental abode where the *supermundane* Weikzas are thought to reside.

I have been favored by fortune to be able to have met U Shein, a *mundane Hsey* Weikza, and to be able to study and observe his healing rituals and the production of his alchemically derived medicine. But there is one question that was occupying my mind and heart ever since:

V: “Please tell me, how can I meet a full-fledged Weikza?”

UMT: “To meet a Weikza is not possible for everyone. You have to take care of your moral and observe the five precepts. The frequencies of mind have to become equal in order to perceive the Weikza. “

(UMT, Mandalay, 14.02.2009)

Apparently it is of vital importance to purify one's mind and heart through the persistent practice of meditation and concentration in order to align one's mental vibe and state of realization with the stage of the Weikzas. The following statement puts this process quite clearly:

“You have to rise up your power so that it becomes equal to the Weikza's power through mind power, concentration and meditation. Then your power will rise up gradually to equal the frequency of the Weikza. Slowly you will be able to see the Weikza. Frequency must be equal; therefore concentration and Samadhi are very important. You have to cultivate Shila, Samadhi and Wisdom (Panna) in order to get the same frequency.”

(SWU, Rangoon, 25.02.2009)

I learn and understand slowly that the desire to meet a supermundane Weikza poses quite a challenge and introduces a process of practicing meditation and mental concentration for myself. Over and over again I am confronted with different invitations to participate in prayers and meditations, to join my hosts at their most important festivals and ceremonies and open myself up towards an experience of the phenomena studied. After I had been given three different Buddhist prayer beads, I started thinking about the instructions I had been given and realized I had to finally take all these well-intentioned advices seriously. At this point it makes sense to remember a quote from anthropologist Charles Laughlin, one of the pioneers of Transpersonal Anthropology:

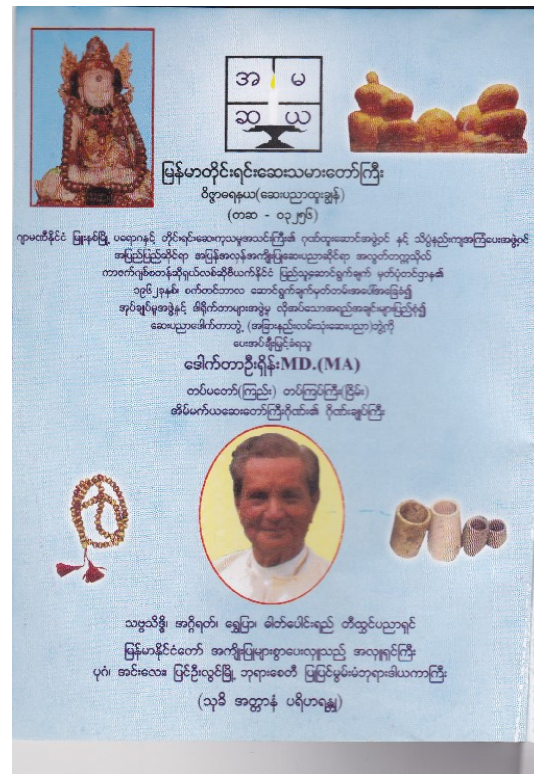
“Transpersonal participant-comprehension means following the instructions and procedures given from within the culture ⁴² (perhaps as given by a shaman, teacher or guru) leaving oneself open to whatever experiences arise as a consequence of performing ritual and symbolic practices, and recording what happens, using whatever symbolic media available. This participation frequently requires the “suspension of disbelief” necessary for entry into domains of occult meaning and experience.” (Laughlin, in: Young/Goulet, 1994: 102)

⁴² Highlighting by author

3.7.2 Alchemy: U Shein and the Gold Ash Powder

Before embarking on a journey through the country in order to meet different traditional medicine practitioners and alchemists, I spent a couple weeks at U Shein's house and healing temple which is at the same time also the place where certain steps of the production of the alchemically derived medicine are completed.

More than thirty years ago Sayagyi U Shein started producing his Gold Ash Powder, a remarkable effective alchemical medicine, whose process of production U Shein got transmitted from his Devas through dreams. This medicine is administered in cases of natural sicknesses, as opposed to diseases of supernatural origin which can only be treated by the Master through his spiritual capacities and the help and guidance of his supportive spiritual entities. The following photograph, U Shein's folder for informing about his healing services, shows the important and powerful *In Ah-Ma-Ya-Sa* (cabalistic square in the upper centre of the picture) that symbolizes not only the transmission of knowledge and power through dreams given by spiritual entities, but also represents the most important *In* that U Shein and his disciples are working with in the course of healing practices.



Picture 29: Sayagyi U Shein: Introduction to his Healing Arts (Sayagyi U Shein © 2006)

“U Shein founded a group called Ah-Ma-Ya-Sa, meaning the great medical group comprised of those who receive messages and healing power through dreams. There are about one hundred thousand members in this group including doctors, professors, merchants and those from all walks of life. There are also the foreigners who came to become the followers of U Shein from Switzerland, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan and Hong Kong.”

(“A brief Biography of U Shein”, Rangoon, Oct. 2006)

U Shein’s disciple explains about the Ah-Ma-Ya-Sa- In:

“Ah Ma Ya Sa is the abbreviation of our society, meaning *Panna gained through dreams*. This is our logo. The power of Sayagyi can be given to that cabbalistic sign and then it is given to somebody to test whether they are possessed. Power can be transferred through the sign.”

(AM, Rangoon, 30.01.2008)

Through a transmission process that lasted five years, U Shein was able to receive the necessary information bit by bit through dreams given by his supportive spiritual entities and was finally able to produce Gold Ash Powder successfully. What the exact content of his dreams was and how the communication with the spiritual world manifested concretely, has to be kept secretly by U Shein and can mostly not even be shared with his closest disciples and friends.

“Sayagyi found the Gold Ash Powder by the help of the higher Devas and Weikzas, communicating with him through dreams. We don’t know how many helped him, it is a secret, we cannot know. He was living in a little hut for four years and made alchemy, secretly only at night when nobody could see him, nobody should notice.”

(AM, Rangoon, 20.02.2007)

Following the main stages of the production of Gold Ash Powder shall be described before leading over to the curing effects of this remedy and sharing reports and stories of informants, friends and patients. Introducing, it can be stated that the making of Gold Ash Powder is a highly complex alchemical procedure that involves different phases and steps and takes in sum twenty years of time. Understandably it was a challenging task for me, having very little chemical and literally no alchemical knowledge, to follow and comprehend this process sufficiently in order to describe it comprehensively. It needs to be mentioned that certain steps in such an alchemical process have to be kept secretly and cannot be shared publicly. U Shein has been, and still is, amazingly open, honest and authentic as far as his worldview, spirituality and alchemical techniques are concerned; he has always been ready to share, explain and demonstrate so that I could learn and understand. But certain things have to be kept in secret by the Master:

“Sayagyi always has to spare some time in his daily life to contact the higher beings. This is his secret. When other people sleep, he may sit in meditation and get the

contact and the information from the higher beings, so that he knows what to do and how to do. In the middle of the night he practices and makes contact. Sometimes he makes practice even before our eyes, but we wouldn't know, we wouldn't notice. He gets information from the higher authorities every day, like where to go, what to prepare. He knows, but he has to keep secretly. Even I have been with him more than 35 years and I also don't know certain things."

(AM, Rangoon, 20.03.2007)

3.7.2.1 Brief Historical Account and Main Concepts of Burmese Alchemy

"No doubt tackling alchemy is a hazardous undertaking. An anthropologist risks either getting lost in the maze of alchemical ideas and practices, or on the contrary, in an effort to obtain order and intelligibility, simplifying to an extreme the contents of an art that is nothing if not complex and multi-hued." (Rozenberg, 2010b: 190 f.)

I can but join Rozenberg as far as the claim for complete comprehension of alchemy, its philosophy and practices are concerned, especially on the side of an anthropologist. The goal of the following section is therefore to trace the history of alchemy rudimentarily and to give an overview of the main philosophical ideas and concepts underlying this art. In further consequence, the main steps of an alchemical transformation process, with the goal to produce medicine, shall be explained using the example of U Shein and an alchemist, who also considered being a *Hsey* Weikza, located in Mandalay. I will try to compare and contrast their respective approaches, ideas and goals. The emphasise will not be put on a complete comprehensive illustration of alchemical practices, since I don't consider myself to be able to fulfil such a task satisfactorily. Instead, meanings and values for the people engaging in alchemical arts shall be explained and portrayed as completely as possible.

India had been apparently the first major centre of alchemy from where the philosophy and practices spread to the West, first to the Arabian countries, Egypt and Greece, before finally arriving to medieval Europe. However, the question if India had actually been the historic origin of alchemy could not be answered and clarified completely. According to Eliade, it can also be assumed that alchemy had been introduced to India through the Arabs - what is indeed controversial - since the belief in the transformation of metals in gold and also the conviction in human immortality was known in India previous to the influence of Arabic alchemists. (cf. Eliade, 1960: 156 f.) In this context alchemy is connected with Yogic beliefs: To succeed in transforming mercury to a solid state is synonymous with attaining the state of *Cittavritinirodha*, the complete peace of mind which is considered the ultimate goal of Yoga. (cf. Eliade, 1960: 160) Eliade draws a connection with alchemy's major goal, transmuting base metals into gold, thereby purifying impure substances and perfecting them. Gold symbolizes immortality, is therefore considered the perfect metal, and this symbolism unites with the perception and achievement of a pure, free and immortal spirit attained by the Yogic practitioner. (cf. Eliade, 1960: 153)

According to Htin Aung it can be assumed that alchemy was practiced in Burma and China as early as the fifth century A.D. (cf. Htin Aung, 1962: 41 ff.) In Burma the most important period for alchemy had been between the fifth and the eleventh century A.D., practices and beliefs almost developed into a religious cult mostly associated with the Ari Monks. One of my Burmese informants, also an experienced alchemist and traditional medicine practitioner, gives the following information about the Ari monks:

V: "Who were the Ari monks?"

SWU: "Ari was not a religion, but a cult. They practiced alchemy and some sort of Buddhism, influenced by Mahayana and Tantra Buddhism. The Ari did not practice very deeply but more comfortably, to gain power and material possessions. They could also marry and stay with a family. King Anawratha very much disliked the manners

and practices of the Ari monks. Ari also believed in Nats, but not in the 37 Nats; those came with Anawratha. The novices who wanted to be Ari Gyi had to study all kinds of arts, martial arts, 18 different kinds. They were very different from Theravada monks. Also their meditation was very different. They were sinking in water for a long time in order to get mind power. They could also survive in heat, in fire. They were cultivating all kinds of supernatural powers. This is where Weikzadara starts, from these Ari Gyi.”

(SWU, Rangoon, 25.02.2009)

Whenever the history of Burmese alchemy was discussed, the Ari monks, their beliefs and practices had been mentioned. Apparently the Ari were considered a heretical sect and priesthood who practiced various forms of magic, witchcraft and alchemy until the advent of powerful King Anawratha who united the whole of Burma into one powerful kingdom and successively banned and repressed the Ari. (cf. Thin Aung, 1933a: 350 f.)

U Shein’s disciple adds to the discussion about the history of Burmese alchemy:

“When you want to speak about history of alchemy or Weikzadara-Naya in Myanmar we have to consider the Ari Gyi, who were very important in past times. But historically it all came from India thousands of years ago. The mother of Weikzadara is India, the Northern Himalaya Mountains, all Weikzas live there, even all Weikzas from all countries live there.”

(AM, Rangoon, 02.02.2009)

At this point a legendary story about the first Burmese alchemist and Weikza that had been told to me on many occasions shall be shared. Also Maung Thin Aung⁴³ mentions the story of the famous monk who was later to become the famous alchemist and Weikza *Shin Izagona*. I will describe the story as it had been told to me by one informant:

⁴³ Cf. Thin Aung, 1962: 51 ff.

“The very first alchemist recorded in Burmese history is the one with a goat’s eye and a bull’s eye, his name is *Shin Izagona*. *Izagona* means a person with one eye of a bull and one eye of a goat. He was making a ball of wisdom by means of alchemy. Although he tried so many ways and was sponsored by the king, at last he had no success, he had nothing left and he got really fed up with it and then he thought of what use did my eyes be to me? This was the punishment for his failure. But he had one boy stay with him, a disciple, and the boy took both of his eyes and threw them in the waste. When he put them there, there were suddenly lights coming out of the waste as if it would burn. So then, the boy hurried to the market and brought whatever eyes he could get, a goat’s eye and a bull’s eye. Then the eyes were brought to *Izagona* and with the power of the wisdom stone, he got perfect eyesight again. He had succeeded and had reached the stage of a Weikza. So he asked everybody to move their things made out of iron out of their house. And then he had to go to the place where all the Weikzas stay, to the dwellings of Weikzas. Before he went there, he touched everything with his stone of wisdom, and whatever he touched turned into Gold. And this is why they say there are so many temples and pagodas in Bagan, because even a widow could afford to build a temple because of Shin Izagona. And that was the very first story of Weikza recorded in the history of Weikza in Myanmar, approx. in the 10th century.”

(TG, Rangoon, 08.02.2009)

3.7.2.2 The meaning of the Elements, Mercury, and the Philosopher’s Stone

Etymologically the word *alchemy* probably derives from Arabic, *al* being an Arabic noun marker and *chem* or *khem* signifies ‘black’ and could therefore refer to the black soil as it can be found in the fertile Nile Delta. *Chem* could also be related to the Greek *Chymos*, meaning the liquid or juice of a plant, therefore indicating that one of the main tasks of alchemy

had always been the preparation of medicinal remedies and drugs. (cf. Eberlein, 2005: 12 f.)

Alchemy was in a way considered to be a *universal science*, a holistic science which aimed at integrating arts, medicine, religion and science and postulated correlations between planets, stars, minerals, animals, plants, organs and parts of the human body and sicknesses. (cf. Eberlein, 1995: 13)

Health, longevity, the transmutation of base metals into gold and the production of the elixir of immortality are considered to be the main objects and aims of the alchemical quest. Especially in the Burmese context the achievement of supernatural powers through alchemical means is of great importance, powers which are believed to be acquired through the alchemical stone (*dat-loun* ~ *philosopher's stone*) ⁴⁴ whose production and refinement is central to all alchemical experiments. (cf. Spiro, 1970: 165)

Central in all alchemical practices is the belief that all animate and inanimate things consist of five elements (*Dhatus*) ⁴⁵ : earth (*Pathavi*), fire (*Tejo*), water (*Apo*), wind (*Vayo*) and space (*Akasa*) which are thought to support, depend and co-exist with one another. Different characteristics are attributed to each of these five elements whose knowledge is vital for any successful alchemical procedure. Even though different elements are considered possessing different qualities, like hardness, fluidity, cohesion, heat, motion, etc., Burmese alchemists are still convinced that there exists an eternal, innate essence that is inherent in all elements. Alchemical concepts and beliefs proceed on the assumption that through this essence - if it is extracted from the alchemical metal and further processed into a medicinal powder or even introduced into a human being by swallowing the stone or consuming the medicine – a human being can gain perfect health and immortality. (cf. Spiro, 1970: 165)

⁴⁴ Myanmar-English Dictionary: Department of the Myanmar Language Commission; Ministry of Education, Yangon, Union of Myanmar. First printed 1993, 20.000 copies, Nr. 27 6,5 Mile Pye Road

⁴⁵ Cf. "Myanmar Traditional Medicine-Manual for Health Basic Training Course", Dr. Aung Naing (Ed.); (State Traditional Medical Council, The Union of Myanmar); p. 11 ff.

The importance of these five elements for the successful attainment of the alchemical stone (*dat-loun*) and the subsequent production of an alchemical remedy were explained by a Mandalay-based alchemist:

“In alchemy there is this theory that, in order to get the stone, the mixtures of the metals have to be heated in order to change the system of the five elements. This is the first stage. You have to give heat day by day according to the characters of the five elements. The signs of the elements can then be seen on the surface of the metallic mixture. The mixture has to be passing through the elements; you will see the signs of the elements step by step. The wisdom stone is very difficult to get. The system of heating is according to the elements. Step by step the elements will appear in the mixture. After the completion of the signs of all the elements, we call it the wisdom stone, *dat-loun*. All the elements are being shown during the procedure. If all the elements have appeared, the quality of the stone is then very high.”

(TMS, Mandalay, 12.03.2007)

Mercury is of essential importance in the alchemical endeavour, since it is the only metal that is liquid in its normal state and usually evaporates when getting heated; hence the solidification of mercury is an extraordinary difficult task. As mentioned prior, Eliade compares the process of solidifying mercury with the attainment of ‘pure awareness’ or ‘divine consciousness’, hence this process of perfection presupposes a high level of mental insight and wisdom on the side of the alchemical practitioner. The path of the Weikza, including success in alchemical endeavours, is intimately linked with the practice of meditation and the observance of Buddhist precepts. As Rozenberg puts it: *“The two processes, purification of the ball and purification of the individual, are often assimilated: the practice of alchemy is taken to be a form of Buddhist meditation. The practice of meditation is said to be [...] a condition to succeed in alchemy and to attain the state of Weikza.”* (Rozenberg, 2010b: 203 f.)

As mentioned, the *dat-loun* - ‘stone of live metal’ or *philosopher’s stone* - is of extraordinary importance in order to transmute base metals into precious metals and produce a remedy most often in the form of powder. The alchemical stone bestows its possessor with remarkable capabilities and powers:

“The main aim of the stone is to prolong your life. When you swallow the stone you will be able to fly. You can live long. By the treatment of the stone in combination with iron, mercury, etc. you can make ash medicine and you swallow the ash. Even if you get the stone, if you can’t control it, you will die. When you eat the stone, your whole body becomes the stone, and then nobody can ever kill you. But all this takes years of practice. There are many differences of power. In the final stage of Weikza, the Weikza can even spit on led and it will turn into gold.”

(AM, Rangoon, 30.01.2008)

The *dat-loun* conveys its possessor, a fully-fledged Weikza, with superhuman powers, such as the ability to fly in the air, travel under water or underground, be invulnerable and free from all fatigue and sickness. Furthermore it is through the powers of the stone that the alchemist will be able to turn ‘*lead into silver and brass into gold*’. (cf. Thin Aung, 1959: 42) The transformation of metals in order to produce a remedy, most often in form of a brown, yellow or white ash, is one of the main objects and goals of the *Hsey Weikza*. These ashes, in U Shein’s particular case Gold Ash Powder (*Shwe Pya*), can be mixed with honey, different herbs, or may also be taken in its pure form to keep people in good health, cure various also severe diseases, and prolong a healthy and good physical condition. The effects and action of Gold Ash Powder on human health will be explained in the course of the coming sections.

In order to benefit mentally as well as physically from the extraordinary powers of the alchemical ball, the Weikza can place it in his mouth, carry it under his armpits or in a pocket close to his body. To place the ball in water or tea, let it stay there for some time and afterwards drink the liquid that has been penetrated by the powers of the stone, is considered a

remarkably powerful remedy against various sicknesses and is believed to provide physical endurance, strength and mental brilliancy.

I remember very well the occasion when I was given the alchemically charged water for the first time. It was an amazingly inspiring and insightful moment for me, which I would like to share.

In TMS's garden, Mandalay, Feb. 2007

TMS is preparing his two alchemical stones in drinking water for me. I am excited; we are sitting in his garden in one of the outskirts of Mandalay. It is the end of March and delicately hot, the trees give us shade. After three hours of interview I feel hungry, tired and hot. TMS is sensing intuitively my exhausted condition and sends off one of his assistants to prepare boiled water. He is happy to provide me with his special drink. He is very happy to explain about alchemy, but he cannot explain about the spiritual conditions; these I have to experience myself.

“When I saw you, I had the immediate feeling that there is a connection with you”. He gives his stones in the water; this drink is very powerful. “You can come always again to my place; I have the feeling that you are a true friend”.

According to TMS I am the first Western visitor at his place. He is telling me that he prefers not to be famous for his medicine; he prefers to live very simple.

Now the drink is ready; everybody gets a cup, ladies first. *“This water will kill all gems, viruses and bacteria in your body.”* TMS drinks this water also

every day; sometimes he takes also the ashes to get good health. But he is not giving this water to everybody; the intention and precepts of the person have to be upright. Not everybody can take it. Sayagi feels if someone is upright, he uses his intuition. The water feels very good to me; I am amazed and astonished. The water feels highly energetic. *“After taking this water your feelings and your mind will be very clear and sharp. This medicine will regulate your mind and improve your physical condition.”* I am quite speechless enjoying the amazing effects of the water, regaining my concentration and strength with every sip. When I finished the whole cup, my exhaustion, hunger and fatigue have completely disappeared. I feel wide awake, completely relaxed and inspired.



*Picture 30: The alchemical drink in TMS's garden, Mandalay
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2007)*

3.7.2.3 Major Stages of Gold Ash Powder Production

Field Journal Entry, 20.11.2006

„Heute Nachmittag, gerade als ich der Hitze entfliehen wollte und mich ein bisschen hingelegt habe, stürmte U Shein aufgeregt in mein Zimmer und ruft: *„Veronica, come quickly, take your camera, Gold will come!“* U Shein und ich sind sofort hinaus in den Garten, wo in einer eigenen kleinen Hütte sein Schmelztiegel und Blasebalg stehen und er, unterstützt von mehreren Assistenten, seine alchemische Arbeit verrichtet. Ich werde das nie vergessen. Ich bin so skeptisch gewesen, als mir immer wieder erklärt wurde, man könne aus Quecksilber Gold erzeugen. *By the power of the Weikzas..* Alle, inklusive mir, standen gespannt um den Schmelztiegel, in dem nun schon seit mehr als 6 Tagen, Tag und Nacht, Metalle geschmolzen werden. Immer wieder werden die Tongefäße, in denen sich die Metalle befinden, aus dem Feuer genommen, abgekühlt, die Metall-Mischung verändert und das ganze wieder verschmolzen. Nun war der entscheidende Moment gekommen. U Shein zieht das schmale Tongefäß aus dem Feuer, es ähnelt ein bisschen einer dicken Pfeife. Es wird in einem Wassertopf abgekühlt und am Boden aufgeschlagen. Ich bekam eine Gänsehaut und konnte meinen Augen nicht trauen: U Shein nimmt einen Gold-Stein aus den Scherben des Tongefäßes, dreht sich mir zu und meint zufrieden: *„See, Veronica, very good, Gold come.“*



*Picture 31: U Shein's assistants working on the production of Gold Ash Powder
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2008)*

I cannot raise the claim to be able to describe and explain the highly complex alchemical process of metallic transformation that is necessary to produce Gold Ash Powder in all its details, nor to demand full comprehension of alchemical dynamics inherent in this difficult endeavour. The task and mission of an anthropologist is to rather describe and explain comprehensively the meanings and values of people in connection with this powerful remedy. Therefore only a brief summary of the major steps in the production of Gold Ash Powder shall be given.

As mentioned earlier, the whole process and different steps of the Gold Ash Powder production was transmitted and revealed to U Shein through dreams given by his Devas and Weikzas, in a five year period. Up until today U Shein is still receiving spiritual afflatus and instruction from the transcendental world in order to be able to refine and improve his alchemical remedy and develop new compositions and applications. Among many Burmese traditional medicine practitioners, alchemical medicine is considered, besides traditional herbal remedies, to be the strongest and most effective medicine, capable of improving or even curing a number of diseases and also severe health conditions. Since Gold Ash Powder, like many other alchemically produces medicines, is intimately

linked with mercury and gold, extraordinary effects and healing powers are attributed to this remedy. Mercury, with its extraordinary uniqueness of being the only metal in a liquid state, is perceived as being the appropriate base substance for any human being on the path to becoming a Weikza. Rozenberg compares the Weikza's task of transforming mercury into a solid, inalterable state, thereby acquiring supernatural powers and insight with the capacity of "*reversing the normal course of nature, and most notably, overcoming the principles of impermanence.*" (Rozenberg, 2010b: 221)

Basically, Burmese alchemists can be classified according to the metal which is the base for their endeavours, most commonly either iron (*Than-Weikza*) or mercury (*Byada-Weikza*), which would be the typical metal alchemists would work on (also U Shein) for the afore mentioned reasons.

Gold has a highly important place in the alchemical process. Gold is considered to be the perfect metal; it is unable to rot or decay and symbolizes the pure, free and immortal spirit. Gold, produced through an alchemical transformation process, has since history been perceived to possess an extraordinary power and vitality through which human beings are believed to attain immortality. (cf. Eliade, 1956: 115) John Read (1884-1963), who was professor of chemistry at the University of St. Andrews, mentions in his article "*Alchemy and Alchemists*" (1933) the German composer and writer Johann Daniel Mylius who presents a symbolical representation of the analogy of the alchemical microcosm to the macrocosm, giving an interpretation of the place of alchemy in the universe. Because of its wonderful description I want to share the original quote:

"Here, proceeding from "what is above" to" that which is below," we obtain a comprehensive view of "the miracles of one thing." First, comes the celestial world with the Tetragrammaton, or Name of the Lord, surrounded by angels. Next, appears the planetary and zodiacal world. This is followed by the terrestrial world, in the centre of which appears the terrestrial Paradise containing the seven metals and the alchemical principles. Below, on the left, is man, carrying the symbol of gold, the

masculine principle; on the right, woman, or silver, the feminine principle. Both these principles take part in the alchemical operation, and are bound to the macrocosm by chains. The formation of the world, the generation of metals, and the reproduction of man are held to be fundamentally similar.” (Read, 1933: 275)

Gold, having its unique place and meaning in the universe, has always been permeated with the idea of sacrality, perfection and immortality and has had an important and prominent meaning since Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Chinese historical times. (cf. Eliade, 1993: 235 ff.)

When asking U Shein’s closest disciple AM about the importance and meaning of gold, he explains:

“The highest form of Gold Ash Powder, when you take it, your body becomes like gold. Gold is considered to be the highest metal, it can never decay. So by eating undecayable metal or substances your body becomes undecayable as well. After making your body strong enough, you sit in meditation to strengthen your mind. After that you will know your life, your death, you can know your previous lives, part by part you come to know. It is like looking through a microscope or magnifying glass. You can even see the atoms in your body, when your mind is strong enough. This is due to the power of the gold in our Gold Ash Powder.”

(AM, Rangoon, 20.03. 2007)

In Burmese alchemy nine metals, which are classified as ‘females’, and twelve metal compounds, ‘males’, are known and used. Here again, the importance in alchemy’s microcosm to reflect the harmony and perfection through the union and merging of opposites, is being expressed. Since all perfection in the universe can only be attained by the union of female and male, the alchemist too has to fusion the female metals with the male metal compounds in order to succeed in his endeavour.

As far as the production of Gold Ash Powder is concerned, six different metals are being used by U Shein, gold, silver, mercury, iron, copper, and zinc, whereby mercury has to be transformed into a solid state first.

As mentioned, especially the treatment of mercury is very difficult, as it usually evaporates when it gets heated. U Shein has successfully managed to transform mercury in a solid state through adding a secret alchemic substance. It is necessary to heat this substance together with the mercury and the philosopher's stone in a porcelain jar. The jar gets a lid, will then be sealed with clay and baked with moderate heat in an oven with sawdust for one month. The result is mercury in a solid form. ⁴⁶

V: "You mentioned earlier that U Shein has different philosopher's stones. What are their powers?"

AM: When you put the wisdom ball, or Deva-ball as we often call it, together with the mercury in a clay or porcelain pot, the mercury will become hardened. It is one of the powers of the Deva-ball. Without the Deva-ball mercury cannot become solid. Otherwise mercury will fly away, it is liquid. This is one of the qualities. Deva-ball helps to make pure Gold Ash. Deva-balls transform the metals, the minerals, like silver into gold and so on. The ball is of metal material itself. U Shein has 30 or 40 different ones, they have all different qualities. Another quality of the ball is to take out the poison from the Gold Ash Powder, the rest of the mercury, which could be poisonous. Without the Deva-balls the Gold Ash Powder is not possible."

(AM, Rangoon, 06.02.2009)

⁴⁶ For a description of the production of Gold Ash Powder see also U Shein's homepage: www.gold-ash-powder.com. The previously mentioned documentary, which also covers the Gold Ash Powder production, can also be downloaded here.



*Picture 32: Solid Mercury made by U Shein
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2008)*

The gold, that is needed for the successful production of Gold Ash Powder, is created by U Shein himself. This was the step of the endeavour that I described in the beginning of this chapter by sharing my own experience of being able to witness this amazing accomplishment. Details of this step of the process cannot be easily shared, especially with someone being unfamiliar with alchemy and spiritual developments. For the production of gold it is again mercury that will be baked together with the philosopher's stone in the sawdust oven for one month. The result is impressive, astonishing and almost unbelievable: pure gold.



*Picture 33: Gold produced by U Shein
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2007)*



*Picture 34: Alchemically produced gold
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2007)*

When the gold and the mercury necessary for the production of Gold Ash Powder had been produced successfully, it is the task of Buddhist monks in Upper Burma in the mountains of the Shan State to melt the six different metals (gold, silver, mercury, iron, copper and zinc) together for several times. They are also disciples of U Shein, and since temperatures are more cool in mountainous areas, these procedures are carried out there. Many monks throughout Burma are well acquainted and practised in alchemy. During each melting course the slag will be removed. This procedure lasts

at least one month and each metal will be melted up to 108 times before it is considered absolutely pure in an alchemical sense.⁴⁷



*Picture 35: Instruments for the production of Gold Ash Powder
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*

Finally, all six metals are melted together and then filled in a large glazed clay pot together with cut apples, pineapples, peeled oranges, grapes and honey. This mixture will be kept alternately underground or kept under sunlight for one year respectively, the whole procedure takes about twenty years. Once a year the pot will be opened and the parts of the fruits which are dried out will be refilled with new fruits and honey. The process of fermentation and decomposition produces mould fungus and substances with proved antibiotic properties. During this twenty-year lasting process the metals run through an alchemical transformation that eliminates their toxic effects. The added fruits, as well as the honey, are in this case the “food” for this transformation. The final product in this step is an absolutely pure alloy of these six metals in solid form which can now be used for the coming steps of production.

⁴⁷ Cf. URL: <http://www.gold-ash-powder.com/Production.html>, 02.02.2012



*Picture 36: Clay pots filled with the mixture of six metals, fruits and honey
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*

In a next step the alloy produced out of the six metals, the fruits and the honey are going to be melted together with the philosopher's stone. The outcome of this process is a white powder which is then again blended together with grapes, apples, oranges and pineapples. Again honey, from the high mountains of Upper Burma, will be added to this mixture. This special honey contains nectar of innumerable different flowers, which is the reason for its great healing properties. This mixture will be kept under earth, together with the philosopher's stone, for another year. Through this process the mass transforms into a humid mash, which will turn into a white powder when heated. This will then be put in a jar and baked with minimal heat in the sawdust oven for one month again. Due to the alchemical process only traces of metal remain which have completely lost their toxic effects. To be sure that no more toxic substances are left, U Shein makes a test. The foil of gold will get black if there are toxics left. It remains clean if the Gold Ash Powder is completely pure.

Subsequently the Gold Ash Powder will be mixed with a carrier substance, rolled to pills which are then being dried in the sun.



*Picture 37: Gold Ash Powder Pills
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*

U Shein is also working on a liquid form of Gold Ash Powder; the exact instructions for the production are transmitted to him from the spiritual world.

To produce Gold Ash Powder in a liquid version, the powder has to be mixed and distilled with fruits. Within one distillation process not more than 10 drops per minute should be generated. Gold Ash Powder liquid can be taken orally.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ The various steps of the Gold Ash Powder production had been explained to me in a number of interviews and informal conversations from U Shein's oldest disciple AM during my fieldworks in 2006-2009.

3.7.2.4 Healing with Alchemical Medicine

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 12.11.2006

„Es besteht kein Zweifel daran, dass irgendetwas nicht heilbar wäre. Eine unheilbare Krankheit gibt es hier in diesem Haus nicht. Das Gold Ash Powder scheint unglaubliche Wirkungen zu haben. AM hat gemeint, wenn man es sein Leben lang nimmt, dann werden die Knochen zu Gold und man würde vielleicht sogar zweihundert Jahre alt werden.“

Since systematic medical clinical trials have not been carried out to assess and evaluate the effects of alchemically derived medicines, I want to subsequently present explanations and assumptions referring to their effectiveness as given by my informants, namely traditional practitioners and patients, as well as refer to my own observations and experiences when taking alchemical medicines.⁴⁹

Medicines produced by means of alchemy are always attributed a spiritual component which is considered to be principally responsible for the remarkable healing properties. As could be illustrated, a strong and supportive relationship with the spiritual world, with Devas and Weikzas, are of utmost importance for the successful production of alchemical medicines, since instructions of production are most often transmitted by spiritual entities through visions or dreams. It is this connection and communication with the spiritual world, especially the quality of connection established between a practitioner of alchemy and his/her respective spiritual entities, which decide over the quality of the medicine being produced.

In the case of U Shein I have been told many times by his disciples that his Gold Ash Powder is subject of continuous improvement and changes due to the communication channels that U Shein is able to establish with the spiritual world:

⁴⁹ U Shein ordered an examination of his Gold Ash Powder at a Swiss medical company. The results can be viewed under: http://gold-ash-powder.com/Test_GoldAsh.pdf

“More and more, day after day, Sayagyi has been very lucky and fortunate to get contact to higher and higher Weikzas and Devas and they told him how to improve the medicine, so the medicine got stronger and stronger.”

(AM, Rangoon, 27.03.2007)

To assess the exact effects that Gold Ash Powder is having on the body and determine the ways by which this remedy directly affects the body's organs and the immune system, was not easy to find out. I was fortunate to be able to meet a medical doctor, Dr. NS, who considers himself to be a disciple and follower of U Shein. Dr. NS received his training at Yangon Medicine University, considered to be the most reputable medical school in Burma. I met Dr. NS a number of times during all of my field stays in Burma and had different opportunities for discussing the healing effects of Gold Ash Powder. I perceived him as being a humble, modest and quiet man, who was able to gain the confidence of his patients quickly through his sensitive, calm and caring manner.

“I studied medicine at Yangon medical University 1, graduated in 1980 and I do now have 27 years of experience in treating many patients. 5 months ago I opened my own therapeutic centre here in Yangon. I started 20 years ago treating the patients with a combination of herbal and Western medicines, especially in the treatment of strokes, paralysis, heart attacks, but also HIV and cancer. I got the knowledge about the herbs from monks in Yangon, where I visited different lectures and got personal demonstrations. Since three years I am also working together with Sayagyi U Shein; he is also my master. In the beginning I tried the Gold Ash Powder on myself and was able to experience its remarkable strong effects. Slowly I started giving the Gold Ash Powder to my patients; results were astonishing. Since I discovered the amazing effects of alchemical and herbal medicines, I hardly give allopathic medicine to my patients anymore.”

(NS, Rangoon, 03.03.2007)

Dr. NS can report various successful cases of treatment and gives a clear estimation and explanation of the direct effects that Gold Ash Powder has on the body and various physical processes:

“I knew very quickly that Gold Ash Powder is in no way harmful to the body system. First I used it myself, to know its effects. My health improved very quickly and I felt strong. Then I was giving it to my patients. Gold Ash Powder is having an antibiotic action and is therefore strongly supporting the immune system. I had various cases, like Hepatitis B, Tuberculosis and also HIV/Aids. In some cases of paralysis due to a stroke I did not have any success with Western medicine; so in these cases I combined Gold Ash Powder, herbal medicine and vitamins. This was very effective. Between two to five months most patients completely recovered and were able to walk and move again normally. I work with Gold Ash Powder liquid that I inject intramuscular and also intravenous.

Gold Ash Powder has an anabolic effect. Our body metabolism is composed of catabolism and anabolism, cells are being destructed and rehabilitated, and when new cells are constructed we call this anabolism. At a young age there is an emphasise in anabolism, at the middle age catabolism and anabolism are equal, and at an old age the anabolism gets lower. Since Gold Ash Powder has an anabolic effect it increases the new cell formation of all bodily tissues, it promotes the formation of new cells. Another effect of Gold Ash Powder is the antioxidant effect, in the body's catabolism there is toxic material which will be evacuated by the Gold Ash Powder. Then it is increasing the blood circulation, the cells need energy, calories, oxygen, and free radicals. Gold Ash Powder is increasing this circulation. Blood can successfully be carried to any part of the body; the transport system is being improved.”

(Dr. NS, Rangoon, 08.02.2009)

I was able to encounter a number of different patients who had been prescribed Gold Ash Powder, or a similar alchemical remedy, and who were able to recover outstandingly fast and could improve or even overcome completely their diseases. Since I had been staying at U Shein's house for a couple of weeks uninterruptedly I was able to witness patients when they came to seek advice and treatment for the first time and then also experience them returning after some time of treatment. The developments and improvements were sometimes astonishing.

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 20.11.2006

„Heute Vormittag hatte ich eine faszinierende Begegnung. Eine junge Frau, vielleicht 35 Jahre, war da, um sich bei U Shein zu bedanken und Opfergaben und Spenden für den Tempel und die Devas zu bringen. Vor sieben Jahren hat sie sich bei ihrem Mann mit HIV angesteckt und wurde dann selbst krank. Der Mann ist bereits verstorben. Sieben Jahre lang hat sie intensive GAP-Behandlungen bekommen. Sie musste ihre Ernährung umstellen, regelmäßig meditieren und immer den Buddha und den Devas opfern. Mittlerweile ist sie wieder verheiratet, hat zwei gesunde Kinder und erfreut sich bester Gesundheit. Was allerdings wirklich erstaunlich ist: sie hat wieder einen HIV-negativen Bluttest. U Shein hat mir stolz ihren Befund gezeigt. Langsam gewöhne ich mich daran zu begreifen, dass Krankheiten, die in Europa als absolut unheilbar gelten, hier das noch lange nicht sind.“

AM realizes my astonishment and adds convinced:

“In Western perception many sicknesses are incurable, but our Gold Ash Powder can cure them all! I have seen so many people successfully recover from serious

diseases like HIV, and then have HIV negative tests again.
That is possible!”

(AM, Rangoon, 20.11.2006)

Because I have been very curious and in order to experience the alchemical medicine myself, I started taking the Gold Ash Powder in a dosage prescribed by Sayagyi U Shein. Here are some notes from my field journal:

Field Journal Entry, Rangoon, 17.11.2006

„Die letzten Tage habe ich mich etwas mitgenommen und erschöpft gefühlt. Offenbar hatte ich eine Verkühlung. Ich nehme seit Tagen die Gold Ash Powder Kapseln. Heute habe ich das Gold Ash liquid zu trinken bekommen. Das war ein wirklich erstaunliches Erlebnis. Nach nur fünf Minuten sind meine Augen wie von ganz alleine weit aufgegangen. Ich habe mich augenblicklich sehr stark gefühlt und meine Verkühlungssymptome waren plötzlich wie weggeblasen. Mir ist sehr heiß geworden, ich konnte kaum essen und habe mich stattdessen satt und hellwach gefühlt. Mein Geist war komplett klar, ruhig und hellwach. Nachdem ich nicht essen konnte oder wollte, habe ich mich in den Tempel zu Meditation zurückgezogen. Ich habe noch selten eine so klare, konzentrierte Meditation erlebt. Diese Medizin fühlt sich wie reines, flüssiges Bewusstsein an. So als würde man ‚klaren Geist‘ zu sich nehmen, der einem hilft den klaren Geist in sich selbst zu kultivieren. Erstaunlich, wirklich! Ich bin immer mehr überzeugt von den bemerkenswerten Heilwirkungen dieser Medizin.“

Again I would like to return to the discussion about the spiritual dimension in the production and administration of alchemical medicine,

since meanings associated with individual spirituality proved of core importance not only for the efficiency for the medicine but also for a success in healing.

In this context I want to share an encounter with an alchemist being specialized in the treatment of various forms of cancer, whom I met in a Mandalay suburb in his clinic. MT has completed the diploma course in Myanmar Traditional Medicine at the University of Mandalay in 1979 and had, by the time I met him in February 2009, thirty-five years experience in traditional herbal medicine and nineteen years experience in the practice of *Weikzadara-Naya*. MT considers himself to be a *Than-Weikza*-practitioner, since iron is the starting metal from which he produces his alchemical remedies which will be combined in the course of the procedure with red arsenic and copper sulphate. In his case it is important to notice that he is explicitly referring to diagnostic instruments in an allopathic medical context, using laboratory blood reports as well as ultrasound or computer tomographic analyses. TM had his first medical successes with the treatment of Malaria which he claims to be able to cure through administering the patients with drinking water which had been charged with one of his philosopher's stone. He has different stones which are all equipped with very different healing properties and are therefore used for different diseases.

"I put the stones in the pipes of our drinking water and then distribute the water to all my patients in the clinic. I don't not know how exactly this Weikza medicine works in the body. Research is needed here. By using this specially treated water the Malaria parasites are leaving the body. But it is very difficult to explain what is really happening in the body. We don't have modern techniques to make these clinical trials. "

(MT, Mandalay, 14.02.2009)

TM is producing a liquid form of alchemical medicine, similar in its production process to U Shein's liquid Gold Ash Powder.

“I am making a liquid type of medicine which I either inject, intramuscular or intravenous, or give to the patients orally. This is all; I am not using herbal medicine. In case of cancer, I directly inject the medicine into the tumor area. This is my invention, my own formula.”

TM takes a considerable amount of time in explaining the spiritual background of his work, highlighting over and over again the importance of mind in the healing process and the relevance of the connection with Weikzas in order to produce an effective alchemical remedy. Over and over again I come to realize that this kind of medicine is fundamentally linked with the world of the Weikzas, their powers, blessings and their instructions which can only be received and experienced when cultivating a clear, calm and compassionate mind through the practice of meditation. Also on the side of the patients it is of utmost importance and central relevance, if healing shall be successful, that patients commit to a daily practice of meditation and prayer.

“Like Gold Ash Powder, also other powerful alchemical remedies are not only a physical but also a mental medicine; this is why meditation is very important when taking this medicine. A mental medicine can only work when the mind is calm and clear. This is very important.”

(Dr. NS, Rangoon, 03.03.3007)

MT continues to explain his worldview and his personal relationships with the Weikzas in the context of the production of alchemical medicine. He strongly believes in the world of Weikzas and has personal contacts with them. His closest Weikza is Bo Min Gaung, who is also his teacher and the one who reveals the steps of producing his medicine.

TM tells me:

TM: “Bo Min Gaung is my teacher. He was living near Popa Mountain, but he died 50 years ago. Now he lives in many places, he is wandering. He can move without a body, because he moves around spiritually. I can make a

mental connection with him through meditation, emphasising my mind and asking permission to meet him. I pray very much: "I would like to see you Bo Min Gaung, please come and meet me." Then Bo Min Gaung appears in my mind and I can see his image very clearly. Sometimes Bo Min Gaung also gives a short speech to me and instructions into my ear. The formulas of my medicine are given to me by Bo Min Gaung, I receive from him."

V: "How does your medicine affect the body? Why, do you think, does it work so effectively?"

TM: "I think that it is the special power of the Weikzas. Since the stone, and also the medicine, were created by the help of the Weikzas, the stone itself is very powerful and can cure the disease. Weikza power is working directly; it is a very unique supernatural power. We cannot explain in words, even we ourselves in our own language we cannot understand completely. It is very unique. Weikza power is directly working through the medicine on the body. Bo Min Gaung's mind and his energy are working through the medicine on the patients. So, the medicine is part of the mind of the Weikzas and the patients take in the Weikza's power.

A Weikza is not an ordinary human being; he has passed through many many different stages to have supernatural powers. These powers are transmitted through the medicine to the patients.

Without the connection to the supernatural world all the healing is not possible. In order to stay aligned with the world of Weikzas you have to purify your mind, mediate, observe the precepts, etc. Then medicine production and the curing will be possible."

Before I leave TM, highly inspired and touched, I have to ask him one last question, the question I ask almost everybody I meet on the Weikza's path:

V: "Please tell me, if you were doing this research in Weikzadara, how would you best do it? What is your personal advice for me?"

TM: "If you want to know about Weikza you have to try to be a Weikza yourself! You have to follow the way of Weikza to follow your research. Please meditate! And you have to strongly wish to meet Weikza."

(MT, Mandalay, 14.02.2009)

3.8 Encountering the Weikza ⁵⁰

Since my very first day in Burma, I was (and still am, of course) deeply fascinated, touched and drawn to the Weikza Bo Min Gaung. For some reason it was Bo Min Gaung, among the many Weikzas, who kept pulling me, amazing me and sending me on a journey to meet him. Still, it took me many weeks, many conversations, even more questions and many fundamental insights that allowed discovering and opening different cognitive channels and modes of perception. In order to be able to meet a Weikza, my rational mind needed to fully calm down and become quiet to let intuition and tacit knowledge arise. On the one hand I have been fully devoted to understanding the worldview, cosmology, traditional medicine and practices in the context of *Weikzadara-Naya*, on the other hand I knew intuitively from the beginning that, if I wanted to comprehend the horizon of meaning of my friends and informants on a deeper level, I had to make an effort to follow their advices and instructions in order to be able to experience this horizon of meaning myself.

Well, I was determined to get to the bottom of the Weikza phenomenon. I wanted to experience it myself and comprehend on a complete level all those fantastic stories that people were telling me, having sparkles in their eyes. I wanted to dive into this energy of admiration, affection, devotion, and mystery. I wanted to know and to experience myself what it means *‘to long for the Weikza in your heart’*, as my dear friend UKH told me many times.

During the course of my fieldwork in Burma I was blessed with having the opportunities of meeting a number of traditional medicine practitioners, alchemists and devoted Weikza followers. Moreover, I perceive it as an outstanding unique chance that I was able to live in Sayagyi U Shein’s house for many weeks and therefore had the possibility to truly immerse in peoples’ lives, believes, and practices.

⁵⁰ Appreciated Reader, please keep in mind that this chapter is especially meant to be a personal account of my own experiences of encountering the Weikza. I apologize that, for the sake of authenticity, the main parts of this section are written in German, since this was the language I wrote in my field journals.

Especially my relationship with U Shein seems of importance, since Father U Shein had always been treating me as if I was his own child.

Field Journal Entry, 02.03.2007

„U Shein möchte mir unbedingt einen Ring schenken. Heute Morgen hat er im Tempel plötzlich sieben kleine Rubin-Steine ausgepackt, ein Geschenk an mich. Er war voller Freude und meinte, wir müssen unbedingt zum Goldschmied fahren und einen Ring für mich machen lassen aus diesen Rubinen. Wieso bloß? Er ist so liebevoll und großzügig zu mir, als wäre ich sein eigenes Kind.“

Apparently U Shein has a strong connection with me and with Austria from a previous existence. This would also be the reason why he had been invited to join the Austrian congresses on ‘Shamanism and Healing’ for a number of times. His disciple AM explains to me:

“On Sayagyi’s first visit to Austria angels were coming to him to greet him, they may be Austrian or German. They were coming and giving power to him. U Shein has a very ancient connection to Austria from his previous life. You know, U Shein never give any ruby rings to anybody who is not very close and intimate to him from a previous life. So this is very special. “

(AM, Rangoon, 20.03.2007)



*Picture 38: U Shein and I
(Wolf Wies © 2009)*

I knew and could sense from the beginning, when I first saw U Shein in Mondsee, that there was a special connection that I was unable to name. Even though the times I was able to spend in his house, the people I could meet through him, were enriching my research and my life tremendously, I knew I had to move on.

Finally, on my last field trip in February 2009 I was ready to take the advices of friends and informants to heart. My dear friend UKH did not get tired of reminding me:

V: "Please tell me, UKH, how can I do proper research on the Weikza topic? Research which can then be communicated to a scientific audience?"

UKH: "I will tell you. Anthropology can only be scientific to a certain extent, in order that it can be proved by science. Certain aspects can't be proved. There is material culture and nonmaterial culture, like religion. How can religion be proved? We as anthropologists have to accept that there is mind, there are spirits. Weikzadara cannot be proved materially, we have to accept it. To understand Weikzadara we must have experience. If you have the experience you will come to know that it is right. This is

supernatural; supernatural cannot be proved. You will know according to your experience. You already have some connection with the topic. You came here, do practice and might meet a Weikza. I am sure you will see a Weikza; but we can't say when. But you have some relation with them from a past life. Weikzas are teaching by experience, not by wisdom. This is above science. "

(UKH, Mebegon, 11.02.2009)

Slowly I came to realize that there is a way to free yourself from the tight grasping of the intellectual, rational mind. I came to understand and experience that life indeed, and especially the realm of spiritual perception, is an unexplainable miracle, beyond science. Religion cannot be proved, Weikzas cannot be proved and understood rationally. The instruments of science, with its major aims of formulating universal laws that provide the possibility of prediction, explanation and control, are in its essence inapplicable to those kinds of subjects. There had to be alternative ways.

Field Journal Entry, Mebegon, 11.02.2009

„Die Weikzas haben eine Stufe der Transzendenz und eine Läuterung ihres eigenen Geistes erreicht, der sie auf eine gewisse Frequenz-Ebene bringt. Das bedeutet, sie sind auf einer Ebene der Transzendenz angelangt, wo sie einen sehr klar-sichtigen Geist entwickelt haben, der jenseits von Zeit und Raum die Bedürfnisse der Menschen, sie sich nahe und verbunden mit ihnen fühlen, wahrnehmen kann. Sie lesen unseren Geist, unsere Gedanken, unsere Motivationen für alles was wir tun. Wenn ich mir jetzt also wünsche, auch einem Weikza als lebendigem Menschen zu begegne, dann ist zweierlei ganz wichtig: Erstens ist es wichtig, alle Zweifel und Skepsis, die ich noch in meinem Geist habe, alle

Gedanken, die mir sagen, dass ich es nicht für möglich halte über 1000 Jahre alt zu werden, sich zu manifestieren an verschiedenen Orten und Kraft seiner Gedanken Raum zu überwinden, all diese Gedanken gehen lasse.

Der Weikza hat Kraft seiner Gedanken Raum und Zeit vollkommen transzendiert. Er denkt z. B. an die Himalaya Berge in Indien und er ist auf der Stelle dort.

Er kann sich in mehreren Körpern gleichzeitig an unterschiedlichen Ort zu unterschiedlichen Zeiten inkarnieren für eine temporäre Zeitspanne.

Solange ich also noch irgendeinen Zweifel in meinem Geist hege und mir denke, na ja, ist das eigentlich unmöglich, das kann doch nicht möglich sein. Und wo bin ich hier überhaupt hingeraten? Ich bin im Norden eines Landes, wo die Menschen mich anschauen, als wäre ich ein pinker Elephant weil keine Fremden in diese Gegenden kommen, weil es hier auch keine touristischen Sehenswürdigkeiten gibt.

Und wo auch immer ich hinkomme, erzählen mir die Menschen die vielen Erfahrungen, die sie hatten mit den Weikzas. Und dann erzählen sie mir, solange Du zweifelst und das in Deinem Geist unmöglich hältst, solange verhinderst Du dass sich Dein Geist soweit läutert und klärt, dass Du überhaupt die Schwingungs- und Frequenz-Ebene, auf der ein Weikza sich ja letztlich befindet - diese Realisierungs-Stufe, die kannst Du gar nicht erreichen, wenn Du zweifelst. Das ist einmal das eine.

Und das zweite ist, dass mir die Menschen immer wieder gesagt haben, dass Meditation und geistiges Training essentiell wichtig sind. Ich muss mich annähern, ich muss meinen Geist soweit klären und reinigen von all den zweifelnden, negativen und Ego-Gedanken, dass ich mich überhaupt annähere auf einer Bewusstseins-Ebene dorthin, wo ein Weikza sich natürlicherweise befindet. Und dann natürlich muss ich meine Motivation hinterfragen. Was ist meine Motivation, einem Weikza begegnen zu wollen? Das muss ich mich ehrlich fragen. Wenn die Motivation ist, dass ich mich selbst bereichern will, also der Wunsch aus einer Ego-Bereicherung heraus kommt, dann kann ein Weikza sich nicht manifestieren, weil, warum auch?! Wenn sich bloß mein Ego in seiner Eitelkeit daran bereichern möchte, dann hat das letztlich keinen Nutzen, für mich nicht und für sonst auch niemanden. Die Weikzas, Bo Min Gaung, haben eine komplette Klarsicht, und Einsicht in die wahre Motivation in meinem Geist. Und wenn das eine Motivation ist, wo ich mich auch nur im Entferntesten irgendwo selbst bereichern möchte, dann kann das natürlich nicht funktionieren. Das leuchtet ein. Meditationspraxis und chanten von Mantren ist also ganz wichtig, wie auch die Vipassana-Meditation. So, dass ich erkennen kann, was die Wirklichkeit ist, was wahr ist und was nicht wahr ist. Und was die wahre Natur der Dinge ist, hinter all dem Ego, hinter all dem diskursiven Gequatsche, das mein Geist jeden Tag von sich gibt, und hinter all den materiellen Formen und Manifestationen, die ich für real erachte. Ich glaube,

es ist dann, wenn unser drittes Auge erwacht und wir in der Lage sind, die wahre Natur der Dinge, die wahre Natur unseres Geistes erkennen zu können, die gleichzeitig die wahre Natur aller Dinge ist. Ich denke auf dieser Ebene wird es möglich, einem Weikza zu begegnen.“

In February 2009 four of my friends, three Burmese and one German, and I were travelling together to the famous Weikza monastery *Aungtamwu*, located in the village of Mebegon, close to the town Minbu in Magway Division. Magway is approx. 450 km Northwest of Rangoon and can be reached through an overnight bus journey.

When arriving at the monastery, tired and exhausted from the long and uncomfortable journey, we were immediately invited by the Buddhist monks, and myself by a nun, to be accommodated at the monastery and spend the nights there. The cult that originated in the 1950s is dedicated to the veneration of four Weikzas who are believed to appear at certain times in flesh and blood in front of their followers to distribute teachings and blessings. Our plan was to live at the monastery compound to might be lucky enough to witness the appearance of a living Weikza. But things turned out to work very different than we had imagined:

Field Journal Entry, Mebegon, 10.02.2009

„Wir wären eingeladen gewesen hier im Kloster zu übernachten, doch gibt es ein paar Schwierigkeiten warum das nicht möglich ist, haben uns die Menschen erklärt. Einerseits befindet sich das Klostergelände von Mebegon auf einem Ölfeld. Hier gibt es so drilling-, Pumpanlagen, die natürlich staatlich sind und der Regierung gehören, so wie das ganze Ölundternehmen. Das Kloster befindet sich demnach auf einem staatlichen Ölförderungsgebiet. Das ist schon mal das eine. Darum gibt es offenbar

spezielle Überwachungs- und Kontrollmaßnahmen, dem das Kloster unterliegt. Und das zweite ist offenbar, dass diese Weikzas sehr starke Kräfte besitzen und sich die Regierung und die Generäle bedroht fühlen von dem Potential, den Kräften und der Meisterschaft, die diese Sayadaws erlangt haben.“

The fact that we were not able to spend the nights at the monastery compound was highly regrettable since the Weikzas only appear at certain night times. I was disappointed, but decided quickly not to get discouraged, but instead follow continuously my daily practice of meditation and prayer that I had developed. Instead of spending the evenings together with the monks and nuns of the monastery I was practicing meditation at my small room in a guesthouse a couple kilometers away. I had been fascinated by these four Weikzas and was happy to be finally there.

Field Journal Entry, Mebegon, 12.02.2009

„Gestern bin ich nun mit meinen Freunden aus Rangoon mit dem Nachtbus nach Magway, genauer gesagt in den kleinen Ort Mebegon gefahren, ins *Aungtawmu* Kloster. Magway liegt auf der einen Seite des Irrawaddy Flusses, und Mebegon und Minbu auf der anderen Seite; man fährt über eine riesige Brücke, um den Fluss zu überqueren. Der Fluss führt zurzeit sehr wenig Wasser, er ist ausgetrocknet, es ist Mitte Februar und die Regenzeit steht noch bevor. Hier habe ich ein Kloster in Erfahrung gebracht und habe mir in den Kopf gesetzt, dass ich das unbedingt besuchen möchte, ein Weikza-Kloster, ein buddhistisches Kloster, wo die Menschen vier Weikzas hoch verehren. Vom ältesten, U Kowida, sagt man, er wäre schon über 1000 Jahre alt, U

Pandita, von dem meint man, er wäre über 800 Jahre alt, und Shin Uttamakyaw der ist ein bisschen jünger, so an die 400 Jahre alt und der vierte ist Botaw Bo Htun Aung, der ist 300 Jahre alt, sagen die Menschen. (Allerdings höre ich oft sehr unterschiedliche Angaben, was das Alter dieser Weikzas anbelangt). Das außergewöhnliche hier ist, dass es verschiedene kleine Höhlen gibt, die sie gebaut haben, die schauen aus wie kleine Pagoden, man kann aber hinein gehen, und drinnen beten und meditieren die Menschen rund um die Uhr.

Wochen- und Monatelang schließen sich die Weikzas in den Höhlen ein, setzen sich ins Feuer und werden verbrannt. Aber wie durch ein Wunder verbrennen sie nicht, sondern kommen nach Monaten (wo sie, glaube ich, auch keine Nahrung zu sich nehmen, sondern nur Wasser, das ihnen immer wieder gereicht wird) gestärkt und erneuert wieder heraus. Und wenn diese Zeremonie erfolgreich war, steigen sie dann Monate später heraus und haben wieder 1000 Jahre gewonnen. Mit jeder solchen Zeremonie gewinnt der Weikza 1000 Jahre, er kann sein Leben um 1000 Jahre verlängern. Speziell im Februar ist für die Menschen hier eine wichtige Gedenkzeit an diese Zeremonien, die traditionellerweise immer in diesem Monat stattfinden.

Gestern Nacht um ein Uhr haben sich zwei Weikzas in der großen Gebetshalle, wo die Mönche, Nonnen und Laien gemeinsam beten – (und jetzt auch schlafen in der Festival-Zeit, und man jeden Meter ausnützt, damit die Menschen nächtigen können) —

in Fleisch und Blut manifestiert. Um ein Uhr morgens wurden etwa 20 Menschen wach; manche sind von selbst aufgewacht, andere wurden geschüttelt von einer unsichtbaren Hand um aufzuwachen, andere haben weitergeschlafen und haben von all dem gar nichts gemerkt. Und so haben sie gesehen, dass zwei von den Weikzas vom Nagama Hill durch ein Fenster hereingeflogen sind. Diese Halle befindet sich im ersten Stock des Hauses und das Fenster zeigt nach Nord-Osten. Das ist offenbar genau die Richtung, wo dann 30 km, 40 km oder 60km weiter sich dieser Nagama Hill befindet. Das ganze Kloster ist in einer gewissen Ausrichtung, in einer speziellen Himmelsrichtung gebaut, so dass der Buddha und die Gebetsrichtung immer nach Osten ausgerichtet sind. Die Weikzas sind hereingeflogen gekommen um ein Uhr früh und haben sich dann dort niedergelassen. Ihre Nase und ihren Mund hatten sie mit einem Tuch verdeckt. Wieso? Sie befinden sich auf einer Stufe der Verwirklichung -und das erklären mir die Menschen immer wieder, egal wen ich wo frage - dass sie die Ausdünstungen der Menschen nicht ertragen können. Sie können sich nur eine gewisse Zeit in der Nähe der Menschen aufhalten, denn die Ausdünstungen der Fleisch-essenden Menschen sind unerträglich für sie. Wenn man also enge und hingebungsvolle Schüler der Weikzas trifft, sind die dann natürlich auch alle strenge Vegetarier, trinken keinen Alkohol, rauchen nicht und essen natürlich kein Fleisch. So wird es einfacher für die Weikzas, mit ihren Schülern zu kommunizieren. Einen wirklichen Weikza kann man demnach auch daran

erkennen, ob er sich noch in der Nähe der Menschen aufhält oder nicht.

Zwei Weikzas haben sich also heute Nacht im Kloster manifestiert und sich, laut Aussagen der Menschen, dort für etwa 45 Minuten aufgehalten. Einen Weikza kann man nur sehen, wenn man in irgendeiner Form bereits eine Verbindung mit ihm aus einem letzten Leben hatte, das ist ganz wichtig. Anscheinend habe auch ich als Vroni, als Forscherin und als Mensch, irgendeine Art von Verbindung mit den Weikzas, sonst wäre ich gar nicht soweit eingedrungen in diese Materie, wäre nicht in diesem Kloster, in diesem Land und würde keine Menschen treffen, die mir davon berichten. Auch würde ich keine Geschichten hören oder Fotos sehen von den Weikzas. Ich konnte mit zwei Zeugen dieser Weikza-Erscheinungen heute genauer sprechen. Unter anderem war eine junge Ärztin dabei, die die Weikzas heute Nacht gesehen hat. Sie hat von ihnen drei goldene Amulette geschenkt bekommen, wovon sie mir eines gegeben hat und meinte, die Weikzas hätten ihr gesagt, dieses eine Amulett wäre für mich und sie solle es mir geben. Auf dem Amulett sind Bilder der Weikzas zu sehen. Einer der Mönche hat das Amulett an einen weißen Faden gebunden und mir sofort umgehängt. Die Menschen meinten, ich müsse es jetzt immer tragen, es beschützt mich gegen Negativität und unliebsame spirituelle Einflüsse, gegen Krankheiten und jeden bösen Geist. Das Witzige ist, dass ich seit Tagen eine Magenverstimmung und einen Durchfall hatte, weil ich offenbar nicht mehr ganz frisches Tauben-Fleisch,

das mir als Huhn verkauft wurde, in einer kleinen Gar-Küche am Straßenrand gegessen hatte. Seit ich dann heute Morgen gemeinsam mit den Mönchen essen durfte und dann das Amulett geschenkt bekommen habe, ist mir ganz gut zu mute, ich habe überhaupt keine Bauchschmerzen mehr und mein Durchfall ist wie weggeblasen. Ich weiß natürlich nicht, ob ich das in einen Zusammenhang bringen kann, aber in jedem Fall scheint es mir bemerkenswert.

Und ich frage mich einmal mehr, wie kann ich eine ordentliche wissenschaftliche Forschung über Wunder machen? Wie kann ich das verstehen, diese junge Ärztin beispielweise, die mir heute Nachmittag all ihre Schätze gezeigt hat, die Steine, die die Weikzas ihr mitgebracht haben aus der anderen Welt? Sie hat sieben Steine von den Weikzas, Stück für Stück geschenkt bekommen, daraus hat sie sich einen Ring anfertigen lassen. Und sie sagt zu mir, schau mal, durch diesen Ring bin ich mit meinen Meistern immer verbunden, sie können mich immer sehen, das ist ein bisschen wie eine Internet-Verbindung, eine Webcam, hat sie gemeint. Die Steine sind alchemisch erzeugt und fungieren als direkter Kanal zu den Meistern.

Ich muss in meiner Welt eine Wissenschaftlerin sein können, um meine Erkenntnisse nachvollziehbar kommunizieren zu können und transparent zu machen. Was soll man tun, wenn es zu einem gewissen Thema wenige oder keine Literatur gibt und meine einzigen Quellen die Erzählungen der

Menschen sind, die mir ihre Realität kommunizieren?
Ich glaube ich muss mich wirklich einlassen, um die Wahrheit der Menschen nachvollziehen zu können. Die Menschen sind zutiefst überzeugt, dass wir mitten unten Weikzas leben; sie hören und sehen uns und wissen alles was wir tun und denken. Und wir können uns immer an sie wenden, allerdings nur dann wenn es sich jenseits von Ego und Selbstbereicherung abspielt. Im Glauben der Menschen kann man sich in diesem Fall ganz konkret an die Weikzas wenden, und die Wünsche und Vorhaben werden in Erfüllung gehen und gelingen. Es gibt zahllose Beispiele, wie Weikzas Menschen geholfen haben, ich habe so viele verschiedene Geschichten von den Menschen gehört. Die Dinge nehmen dann auf übernatürliche, wundersame Weise einen wirklich positiven Ausgang, es ist ganz erstaunlich.

Ich muss in meinem Geist akzeptieren, dass Dinge möglich sind, die ich bis dato für schlichtweg unmöglich gehalten habe. Das scheint für diese Forschung ganz wesentlich zu sein. Manfred, mein verehrter Mentor, erinnert mich immer wieder und leitet mich an, dass ich mich selbst in meine Forschung miteinbeziehen soll und auch meine Wandlung, meinen Erkenntnisprozess, meinen Sinnhorizont und meine Zugänge reflektieren soll. Der Output dieser Forschung kann nur in Resonanz und in Korrelation mit meiner persönlichen Wahrnehmung gehen, ich kann schließlich nur soweit erkennen und wahrnehmen, soweit ich selbst einen gewissen

Zugang und eine Wahrnehmungsweise in meinem Geist kultiviert habe.

Heute konnte ich einen leisen Dunst bekommen, eine leise Ahnung, dass ich letztendlich eine komplette Hingabe in meinem Geist entwickeln muss, damit ich dieses Phänomen für mich persönlich auf einer Erfahrungsebene erschließen kann, die Schleier des Geistes, Wertmaßstäbe, Einschränkungen und Zweifel müssen fallengelassen und transzendiert werden. So kann ich mich als Forscherin nach und nach diesem Erfahrungs- und Sinnhorizont, dieser Weltsicht, dieser Wahrnehmung der Realität, die die Menschen hier haben, wirklich annähern, indem ich immer mehr selbst zur Forschung werde. Forscherin, das Erforschte und der Akt des Forschens verschmelzen zu einer Einheit. Alles verschmilzt ineinander. Die Forscherin ist von ihrem Forschungsthema nicht mehr getrennt. Ich werde selbst zu meiner Forschung, werde mein eigenes Forschungssubjekt. Die Grenzen heben sich auf, und alles was ich erforsche, wird selbstverständlicher Teil meiner eigenen erfahrbaren Realität. Wenn ich diesen Platz nicht freimachen kann, dass die Existenz einer Deva oder eines Weikzas, wie sie verehrt werden hier von den Menschen, wenn das nicht Teil meiner Realität und Teil meines persönlichen Sinnhorizontes wird, dann wird dieses Thema letztlich unerforschbar bleiben.

Ich beende jetzt dieses Protokoll. Ich bitte alle Weikzas diese Arbeit zu segnen, dass sie ein Beitrag sein kann zum Verständnis und zur Toleranz zwischen den Menschen. Vielleicht kann ich einen

Beitrag leisten, dass wir uns an unser Potential, an unsere Erkenntnis- und Einsichtsmöglichkeiten, die wir haben, erinnern.“



*Picture 39: A Banyan Tree at the entrance to the Weikza's caves,
Mebegon Monastery
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*



*Picture 40: Monk praying at the Weikza's cave, Mebegon Monastery
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*



*Picture 41: Followers selling pictures and books about the Weikzas, Mebegon Monastery
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*

After a couple of very inspiring days at Mebegon Monastery, and many conversations with Weikza witnesses and monks practicing alchemy, the journey continued further north to Mandalay, Sagaing and Amarapura. I don't want to report the different encounters I had with traditional practitioners and alchemists in the course of my travel, but focus instead, to conclude this chapter, on the most remarkable, insightful and touching experience I had. Again I want to refer to the original entries in my field journal:

Field Journal Entry, Mandalay, 20.02.2009

„Der Weikza Bo Min Gaung war der allererste der Weikzas, der von Anfang an meine ganze Aufmerksamkeit auf sich gezogen hat. Ständig habe ich seine Bilder und Statuen getroffen und bin Menschen begegnet, die ihn verehren, zu ihm beten, oder aber, im Falle von meinen Freunden TG und U UKH, ihm sogar schon lebendig in Person begegnet sind. Immer mehr und mehr haben die Geschichten rund um Bo Min Gaung angefangen, mich wirklich

auf einer tiefen Ebene zu berühren und zu faszinieren, so als würde mich dieser Weikza gar nicht mehr wirklich loslassen. Ich musste (und muss noch immer) ständig nach ihm fragen, will alles über sein Leben wissen, und am allermeisten interessiert mich, wie ich es schaffen kann, was ich zu tun habe, wenn ich wirklich einem Weikza, Bo Min Gaung, von Mensch zu Mensch in Fleisch und Blut begegnen will. Langsam aber sicher, sogar ziemlich sicher, habe ich während der letzten Tage, speziell in Mebegon im *Aungtawmu* Kloster und jetzt auch hier in Mandalay erfahren können, was es bedeutet, einen Weikza wahrzunehmen, was die Menschen meinen, wenn sie von Weikza-Power sprechen, was dieses helle Aufleuchten in ihren Augen meint, wenn sie beginnen, von den Weikzas oder von den persönlichen Beziehungen die sie zu ihnen haben zu erzählen. Es ist mir immer klarer geworden, zuletzt bei MT, der eine Krebs-Klinik hat in der Nähe von Mandalay, wo er einzig und alleine mit Weikza-Medizin behandelt, und das auch nur deshalb, weil Bo Min Gaung ihm in seinen Träumen seit Jahren die richtigen Rezepturen und alchemischen Prozesse übermittelt. Als ich ihm begegnet bin und er schließlich begonnen hat, über seine persönliche Beziehung zu Bo Min Gaung zu sprechen, hatte ich das Gefühl als wäre der Weikza wirklich anwesend. Es war, als würde ich in einem weißen Licht-Regen sitzen. Ein Energiestrom ging durch meinen Körper und es wurde mir einmal mehr bewusst, dass ich auf einer intellektuellen Ebene mit meinem Verständnis zu einem Ende gekommen bin - es gibt für mich

keine Einsicht mehr in meiner Ratio - das was intellektuell zu verstehen und zu lernen war, habe ich offenbar begriffen und gelernt, und nun besteht die Aufgabe darin, in weitere, andere Erkenntniswelten und Erfahrungszugänge vorzustößen.

Ich kann langsam erspüren, intuitiv wahrnehmen, mit meinem ganzen Körper, was Weikza wirklich bedeutet, was diese geheimnisvolle, Legenden-umwobene Kraft eigentlich ist, von der die Menschen ständig sprechen und über die sie sich in unzähligen, farbenprächtigen Bildern und Geschichten seit Generationen berichten. Wenn man eine Forschung über das Pantheon der Weikzas, über ihre Heilungen, Wunder, ihr Potential und ihre Fähigkeiten machen möchte, denke ich, muss man irgendwann seinen gewohnten, alltäglichen rationalen Geist einfach sein lassen, ihm und seinen Kommentaren immer weniger Beachtung schenken und beginnen, mit seinem ganzen Wesen, mit seinem ganzen Sein, mit seinem ganzen Körper wahrzunehmen, als würde man versuchen, sämtliche Wahrnehmungspforten die wir haben, aufzusperren und empfänglich zu machen.

Nun, heute habe ich anscheinend, so denke ich und habe ich es empfunden, zum ersten Mal wirklich einen lebendigen Weikza getroffen, ich nenne ihn einfach „den Weikza“⁵¹, einen alten Schüler von Bo Min Gaung. Er hat Bo Min Gaung getroffen, als er 16 Jahre alt war und ist mit ihm gewesen bis zu seinem Tod. Er lebt in einem Tempel in der Nähe von Mandalay in einem kleinen Dorf, in einer

⁵¹ All names of friends and informants, except U Shein, have been anonymised.

wunderbaren Gegend. Sein Haus ist ein einziger großer Schrein, mit zahllosen Nats, Buddhas, und Weikzas. Für Bo Min Gaung hat er sogar ein herrliches Bett stehen, da kann sich Bo Min Gaung ausruhen, wenn er zu ihm auf Besuch kommt.



*Picture 42: Bo Min Gaung's bed in the Weikzas house
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*

Er hat nach wie vor eine konstante direkte Verbindung zu Bo Min Gaung, er hört ihn, kann ihn sehen, Informationen von ihm empfangen und meint, Bo Min Gaung lebe als geistige Entität in ihm. Auch ist er ist *Nat-Kadaw*, Wahrsagender, Heiler, und eigentlich wird er von den Menschen als Hochverehrter Meister betrachtet.

Heute durfte ich ihn mit meinen Freunden UWK und Dr. UM besuchen. Schon gestern ging mir ein Schauer durch den Körper als UM uns einlud, ihn gemeinsam aufzusuchen und mir erzählte, der Weikza wäre ein lebendiger Schüler von Bo Min Gaung. Ich bin ganz aufgeregt geworden und konnte

an nichts anderes mehr denken. Wie sehr habe ich mir's doch gewünscht, einem Weikza zu begegnen, so viele Male habe ich gebetet und meine Wünsche ausgerichtet. Der Weikza berichtete uns, dass er mehrmals heute Morgen auf den Markt gehen wollte, aber wann immer er tatsächlich aufbrechen wollte, kam etwas dazwischen, er konnte einfach nicht weggehen, bis ihm schließlich klar wurde, dass er zu Hause bleiben muss, weil jemand kommen wird, um ihn zu sehen. Er hat uns bereits erwartet. Erstaunlich... Nun, es wird noch viel erstaunlicher. Wir haben ein lebhaftes Gespräch mit dem Weikza geführt, ich bin fasziniert und berührt von ihm gewesen von der allerersten Minute an. Irgendwann dann hat der Weikza angefangen, Aussagen über mein Leben und meine Zukunft zu machen. Er hat mir vorausgesagt, dass ich ein langes und gesundes Leben vor mir habe. Und dass ich eine sehr starke Verbindung mit dem Land habe und noch viele Male hierher zurückkehren werde und auch hier leben werde. Ich habe ganz aufmerksam gelauscht.

Auf einmal, völlig unvermittelt und spontan öffnet er seine Hände, klatscht fest in die Hände, bläst drauf, öffnet seine gefalteten Hände wieder und überreicht mir einen makellos runden, schwarzen Stein, der mich anschaut wie ein riesiges Auge, das alles sieht. Er hat einen Stein manifestiert, aus dem Nichts. Ich war wie vom Donner gerührt. Und dann meinte er, dieser Stein ist für mich, er ist ein Geschenk von Bo Min Gaung, Bo Min Gaung schickt diesen Stein durch ihn an mich, ich muss ihn immer bei mir tragen, er ist die direkte Verbindung zu Bo Min Gaung. Und

dann meinte er, das passiert sehr selten und überhaupt nur, wenn eine eindeutige Verbindung aus einem vergangenen Leben da ist. Ich war Bo Min Gaungs Tochter in einem vergangenen Leben, meinte der Weikza. Deswegen bin ich hier, deswegen mache ich diese Forschung, deswegen bin ich so unendlich fasziniert von der ersten Minute an, deswegen bete ich zu Bo Min Gaung und habe mir so sehr gewünscht ihm zu begegnen. Der Wunsch ging in Erfüllung, er musste in Erfüllung gehen. Der Weikza hat mir prophezeit, dass ich Bo Min Gaung in Person treffen werde. Ich muss jedoch meine Praxis machen, täglich, wenn geht, und wirklich die Bereitschaft in meinem Geist schaffen - die Voraussetzungen für sein Erscheinen. Ich bin zutiefst berührt von dieser Begebenheit. Momentan fehlen mir die Worte und die Einsicht, dieses Erlebnis wirklich einzuordnen, ich kann mir natürlich noch nicht wirklich einen ganzen Reim draus machen, doch ich habe eine leise Empfindung, dass ich langsam, aber sicher begreife, worum es in meiner Forschung wirklich geht.

Und Dr. UM hat gemeint, als wir das Haus vom Weikza verlassen haben: *“Veronica, now, your thesis is complete!”*

When we left the house of the Weikza again, my friend UWK repeated and highlighted again:

“It was Bo Min Gaung who gave the stone to you through the Weikza. In the past life you have been a daughter of Bo Min Gaung. Normally foreigners never get these stones. You were Bo Min Gaung’s daughter in a previous life. Bo Min Gaung is waiting for you. You have to always share the merit with him. Strange happenings will come

to you in your life through this stone. You will believe when you see, you will find by yourself. Always remember the words of the Weikza.”

(UWK, Mandalay, 20.02.2009)

I was advised by the Weikza to bring the stone to a goldsmith and let it be manufactured into a ring that I will then have to wear always. According to the goldsmith in Mandalay, who was quite astonished about seeing such a stone, since its main places of discovery are Brazil, Mexico, USA, and Madagascar, the stone is meant to be a black onyx. Historically the black onyx was used to protect from witchcraft, black magic, evil spirits, and plague and had the ability to prevent severe diseases and catastrophes. Also the onyx is attributed strong physical healing properties, such as curing various skin sicknesses, strengthening all inner organs and preventing inflammation and funguses. (cf. Methusalem, 2006: 196 ff.)

I have been holding the ring with the black onyx in high esteem ever since and wear it almost every day. I am convinced that through this ring, which is Bo Min Gaung's eye, the Weikza is always with me, guides and protects me.

Before we will turn to the final chapter of this dissertation, the Embrace, anthropologist Edith Turner concludes accurately:

“The ethnographer's own experience of spirits and witches should be treated as anthropological data. Is it correct for our discipline to close itself off from what is of major concern to its field people? I am afraid there is a realm ahead for some of us – a rather frightening one – into which we must pass if we are to hold up our heads as anthropologists: the realm of spiritual experience.” (Edith Turner, in: Young/Goulet, 1994: 72)



*Picture 43: Statue of Bo Min Gaung in the Weikza's house
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*

4 Embrace

I thank you, appreciated reader, that you have gone all this way with me, that you have been accompanying me on my journey, that I was able to share with you my experiences and that you participated in my process of insight and transformation.

At this point I would like to remember and recollect the initial primary research question, examine in how far I had been able to answer this question satisfiably, determine what questions and dimensions demand further clarification and absorption, and assess the value and meaning of this research process and its findings on a personal as well as on a scientific level.

The objective and aspiration of this work was to present a research approach that united and connected my personal voice as an anthropologist of religion and consciousness, but also my personal voice as a sensitive and spiritual human being, with the voices of informants and friends in the field and the voices of fellow anthropologists and scholars on the subject of religion and spiritual beliefs in Burma. Referring to anthropologist Edward M. Bruner, who reminded us that “*field experience is indeed a personal voyage of self-discovery*” (Bruner, 1986: 15) I pursued to share and make transparent not only my personal experiences in the field, but also the experiences of my informants in order to provide a holistic, multidimensional picture of the fieldwork and its findings and create a polyphonic, multi-perceptual and multi-perspectival text.

Let us recall the primary research question of this dissertation:

What are the characteristics and advantages of a transpersonal approach in anthropology of religion and consciousness and how may these methodologies benefit and contribute to a multidimensional, holistic understanding of the Burmese spiritual worldview and related practices?

The primary assumption and foundation of transpersonal psychology is the idea that there exists a profound interconnectedness of all phenomena in the universe and that transpersonal or spiritual experiences are always in their essence participatory in their nature. Transpersonal psychology is therefore concerned with the study of these transpersonal experiences, i.e. with the “*recognition, understanding and realization of unitive, spiritual and transcendent states of consciousness.*” (Braud/Anderson, 1998: XXII). When seeking an understanding of these transpersonal states of consciousness, scientific research is perceived as being a “*spiritual quest*” (cf. Tart 2000: 22) and the work of the scientist is therefore meant to be a sacred practice guided by fascination, appreciation, delight, gratitude and the attempt to get involved in the topic under study on a personal level, emphasizing and recognizing the personal experiences and insights of the researcher at every phase of the research process. Still it is in this very attempt and orientation that a researcher is advised to become an ‘insider’, a participant in the life-world of his/her host-culture and ultimately a capable actor who realizes that knowledge is fundamentally and always created in interaction with the people in the field. It is in this methodological orientation that ‘intersubjectivity’ becomes of vital importance for the holistic production of knowledge. (cf. Knibbe/Versteeg, 2008: 52) As Amanda Coffey puts it accurately:

“The interconnectedness of researcher, researched, social actors and significant others is the very essence of fieldwork.” (Coffey, 1999: 56).

The journey through the whole research endeavour starts with oneself. I realized that, when truly trying to adopt a transpersonal approach, full immersion and identification with the subject of my research is a desired goal in order to recognize that I am affected and influenced on multiple dimensions by the topic under study. Sincere transpersonal research starts with the recognition and integration of the self in all phases and stages of the research process. A sensitivity, openness and appreciation of my own trans-/personal experiences arose and I was slowly able to sense their value and meaning, for myself on a personal level, but also for a complete understanding of the Weikza phenomenon that is the centre of my studies.

This research, my field residencies in Burma and the lessons I got to learn showed me on an experiential dimension that mind and perception can be shifted and oscillated to open perceptual channels that have previously been unknown, hidden and un-realized. I realized that knowledge and insight is not only and always necessarily gained through the perceptual channel of normal, waking consciousness, but that there is variety of perceptual processes and ways of perceiving and experiencing reality. As far as the generation of *knowledge* is concerned anthropologist Robert Borofsky draws the distinction between *knowing*, defined as dynamic, fluid and/or flexible, and *knowledge* characterized as structured, stable, definite and delineated. (cf. Borofsky, 1994: 335) The anthropologist is hereby perceived as being a key structuring agent of *knowing*, transforming the fluid and flexible *knowing* of everyday life experienced in a host culture, as well as in his/her own personal life, into structured *knowledge* in anthropological texts. (cf. Borofsky, 1994: 339)

When *knowledge*, in Borofsky's perception, is understood as specific, definite, unchangeable facts and *knowing*, on the contrary, refers to a development, a dynamic process, a fluid cognitive movement without definite goal or endpoint, then I can locate my recognitional path undoubtedly belonging to the realm of *knowing*. It is this *knowing* that sensitizes for a conscious recognition of the present moment and allows perception to be flexible, shifting and oscillating.

The instructions and advices that I was given from my informants and friends in the field remarkably resembled the basic principles and research strategies of transpersonal psychology or anthropology. I was invited to join prayers, meditations and rituals, to participate as fully and wholeheartedly as possible in order to experience the spiritual world myself. In the course of my personal involvement and engagement in the topic of my study I came to realize that the observer and the observed, the subject and the object, are not entirely separate entities, but they mutually and reciprocally participate in co-creating shared realities and joint experiences, realizing the fundamental dialogical, participatory nature of spiritual and transpersonal insights. I realized that I am myself an integral part of the research endeavour and that silencing my personal voice would

consequently lead to a loss of perspectives and prevent holistic understanding. Furthermore, I came to the realization that there are multiple realities, multiple ways of experiencing reality, depending on time, place, circumstances and, most crucial, the willingness and readiness to open different perceptual channels and surrender to the experience of transpersonal phenomena. It was my goal to show and make transparent in this work the different perceptual channels and experiences related that I was fortunate to discover in the course of this research. Aim and object is to provide a deeper and more substantial understanding of the Weikza phenomenon in the Burmese religious context by portraying and sharing my own experiences and encounter with the Weikza. I did not want to close myself off from the experiences that are of vital importance for my hosts, but instead perceive these experiences as a realm of research and possibility for myself in order to obtain an 'emic' perspective and to comprehend what is really relevant and meaningful for the people I study.

On the one hand it was my deep desire and wish to present the methodological and theoretical foundations of transpersonal anthropology, a subfield of cultural anthropology that has not yet received much scholarly interest and attention, practical engagement and concrete application in fieldwork settings. The willingness, on the side of the researcher, to undergo a personal transformation throughout the research process stands in the heart of the transpersonal research endeavour. Transpersonal anthropologists are encouraged to actively and wholeheartedly participate in transpersonal events in the field, like possession- or divination ceremonies, shamanic rituals, dream-work, meditative rites and the like. We want to remember once again how Charles Laughlin, one of transpersonal anthropology's pioneers, defines the aims and goal of this specific approach:

"Transpersonal anthropology is really just a natural extension of the grand tradition of "participant observation" that has made ethnology so unique among the social sciences. But it is an extension that requires the ethnographer to "suspend disbelief" in the native worldview to an extraordinary extent and to participate actively in those native

*procedures that guide one to the extraordinary experiences that give the worldview its spiritual grounding.”*⁵²

What was of vital importance for me on a personal level was the continuous ability and practice to ‘suspend disbelief’ in the native worldviews and modes of perception and subsequently gain the necessary trust, respect and willingness to surrender and devote myself fully to experience the spiritual worldview of my hosts. Anthropologist Edith Turner has been a great inspiration throughout the whole research endeavour since she strongly advocates an approach in which she highlights the possibility of ethnographers to actively get involved in events of ultimate concern to the subjects under study. The necessity and benefit of adopting and entering this *‘natives’ point of view* can be highly beneficial and fruitful in terms of achieving the ability of perceiving the spiritual world. Over and over again I was advised by informants and friends in the field to at least make an effort to view and approach the topic of my research through *emic* strategies and perspectives suggested by them. Meditation, paying respect to the Lord Buddha and actively practicing the five Buddhist precepts were always, among others, to be perceived as fundamentally important in opening the mind towards perceptual diversity and polyphasic consciousness.

This is exactly what I have tried with all my available means and the readiness and mental openness accessible to me at that time.

On the other hand it was a firm goal to share not only my very own personal experiences and make myself transparent not only as a scientist but also as an emotional, spiritual human being, but to successfully bridge the gap by being mutually aware of my individual personal experiences as well as of the experiences of my hosts and to find a way to let all participating voices in the process of knowledge-gaining be equally heard and shared. In order to fulfill this request I tried to compose a polyphonic text, where I did not only aim to reproduce and display ethnographical data in my own words, but instead let all the voices of my informants and

⁵² Laughlin gives a detailed description for a transpersonal anthropological training: <http://www.biogeneticstructuralism.com/tutcont.htm> (03.02.2012)

friends be heard and shared in their original tone, therefore using direct quotes from my interviews and direct speech. I wanted to let my hosts speak for themselves and provide a picture as authentic and sincere as possible. I wanted to give you, appreciated reader, a *feeling* of what it was like to be in the middle of the field, the ceremony or the alchemical practice, instead of providing you with abstract *information* concerning these topics.

Anthropology, as I understand it, is in its essence „*eine Wissenschaft vom Menschen für den Menschen, also eine dialogische Kulturwissenschaft mit Praxisbezug*”⁵³ and the primary task of this discipline is to be a bridge-builder between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the self and the other. Our task has always been that of *translation*, i.e. the communication of meaning of a given phenomenon, and we aim to translate and enlighten aspects of cultural practices previously blurred, obscure or unfamiliar. In how far we are able, in the course of our research and in the composition of the text, to transport and communicate a picture of the studied phenomenon as holistic, authentic and coherent as possible, reveals our skills as capable translators. Anthropologists are crossing borders, finding themselves at the interface between different cultures, worldviews and cosmologies and their own cultural, social and cosmological perspectives which, consciously or unconsciously, influence the whole research endeavour.

This work is understood as an introduction into transpersonal anthropology by the example of my field research on the Burmese Weikza phenomenon. I am not raising a claim in any way on completeness of data or insight and I am well aware that a lot of further research on certain topics, e.g. the practices of alchemy and supernatural healing, is necessary to comprehend the phenomena in its complexity and richness.

It is my hope that I was able to succeed in presenting a transpersonal, polyphonic approach to the mentioned phenomenon and provide you, appreciated reader, not only with theoretical information, but also with the

⁵³ cf. Karl Wernhart, 1999: 23

possibility to empathize the whole fieldwork situation and the transformative development I was (and still am) going through.

Is this it? Have I really reached the end of my work? I am insecure and ask Bo Min Gaung, my personal oracle, for advice. ⁵⁴

I: Are you satisfied with this work?

Bo Min Gaung: Yes.

I: Is there still something missing, something which needs to be said?

BMG: Yes.

I: Did I write enough about you?

BMG: No.

I: Is there still a theoretical interpretation missing?

BMG: No.

I: Is there a personal interpretation missing?

BMG: Yes.

I: Is this last “Embrace”-chapter complete?

BMG: No.

I: Should I write about you?

BMG: Yes.

I: Should I write about us?

BMG: Yes.

I: Should I also write about my personal worldview and beliefs?

BMG: Yes.

I: Can I be completely honest and sincere?

BMG: Yes.

⁵⁴ As explained in chapter “3.2.2. Consulting the Personal Oracle”, Bo Min Gaung is answering with Yes/No on my questions through a pendulum dowsing technique.

I: Should I have fear of getting looked down upon?

BMG: No.

I: Are you still guiding me through this research?

BMG: Yes.

I: Should I include this transcript of our conversation in this chapter?

BMG: Yes.

Well, even at the risk of appearing naïve or fantastical, I will take Bo Min Gaung's advice to heart and share my personal worldview, conviction and belief to conclude this personal work on a personal dimension. Bo Min Gaung is the symbol for the possibility of human perfection and accomplishment, the gatekeeper to the spiritual, transcendental realm of awareness, inherent in all human experiences. He confidently reminds us that within ourselves lays the potential for full realization and accomplishment. I came to learn and experience in the course of my fieldwork and the subsequent work afterwards, alone behind my desk and computer, that the choice of a dissertation topic is first and foremost a highly subjective choice, teaching and revealing much more about myself than about the actual subject of study. As Clifford Geertz puts it: "*An anthropologist's work tends, no matter what its ostensible subject, to be but an expression of his research experience, or, more accurately, of what his research experience has done to him.*"⁵⁵

What has this research experience done to me? This research allowed a glimpse of an insight into a potential previous existence of mine showing me, through personal feelings and attraction to Bo Min Gaung, the past connection I might possibly have with the Weikza. This research allowed insight and experience of the seemingly infinite possibilities and capacities of the human mind, including the capacity to open and access different perceptual channels and allow information gained through intuition, imagination and meditation to be valuable forms of information and data

⁵⁵ cf. Geertz, 1971: VI

that enriches and enlivens the whole research process and allows holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study. This research was teaching me about the simultaneous existence of multiple realities, on material and fine- or non-material and subtle realms and showing me the possibility of being able to perceive these spiritual realities, being a multi-dimensional being. This research was, from the first moment on, guided by deep fascination, wonder, curiosity, devotion and the fundamental certainty that this life offers a unique possibility of realizing the infinite potential of being human, realizing the true nature of mind and finding peace, joy and love deep within.

May this work be a contribution for all those who are sincerely and genuinely seeking for the truth in themselves, for those who are ready and committed to taking full responsibility for every incident and encounter in their lives and every thought in their mind. May this work be an inspiration and support on our journey to ourselves.

“Knowing a thing requires loving it.” ⁵⁶



*Picture 44: Children at Mebegon Monastery
(Veronica Futterknecht © 2009)*

⁵⁶ cf. Anderson, 1998: 80.

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Index of Interviews

(Date of the Interview, Name, Place)

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2006-11-06, Prof. SHB, Rangoon

2006-11-10, AM, Rangoon

2007

2007-03-02, Dr. MMK, Rangoon

2007-03-03, Dr. NNS, Rangoon

2007-03-03, UKS, Rangoon

2007-03-12, UHM, Mandalay

2007-03-12, UTMS, Mandalay

2007-03-13, UWK, Mandalay

2007-03-19, Dr. AN, Rangoon

2007-03-20, Dr. KW, Rangoon

2007-03-25, AM, Rangoon

2008

2008-01-22, UMS, Rangoon

2008-01-23, AM, Rangoon

2008-01-26, AM, Rangoon

2008-01-29, UTO, Rangoon

2008-01-30, AM, Rangoon

2008-02-05, AM, Rangoon

2008-02-10, UWH, Rangoon

2008-02-11, TG, Rangoon

2009

2009-02-04, AM, Rangoon (1)

2009-02-04, AM, Rangoon (2)

2009-02-04, UWH, Rangoon

2009-02-06, AM, Rangoon

2009-02-08, Dr. NNS, Rangoon (1)

2009-02-08, Dr. NNS, Rangoon (2)

2009-02-08, TG, Rangoon

2009-02-09, UTMA, Rangoon

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2009-02-24, UKH, TTO, Rangoon
2009-02-24, UKH, UMHU, Rangoon
2009-02-24, UAN, Rangoon
2009-02-24, UTN, Rangoon
2009-02-25, USWU, Rangoon

Questionnaires

General Questions for Weikza-Practitioners

1. Can you tell me about your religious and spiritual background?
2. Do you believe in spirits?
3. Can you please describe the pantheon of spirits you are in contact with? How can this contact be characterized and explained to someone who is not in contact with different spiritual entities?
4. Do you have a relationship with the Weikzas?
5. What about the Weikza Bo Bo Aung? Can you tell about his life story?
6. In how far is the relation with the Weikzas important for the healing work in Myanmar?
7. According to history Bo Min Gaung died in the year 1952. But, when he is a Weikza, where is he now?
8. People told me that Bo Min Gaung currently has up to 5 different bodily manifestations. Is there any evidence about this?
9. I want to meet a Weikza personally. How is this possible?
10. Weikza Gaings in Myanmar? How many are there? What are their characteristics? And what are their aims?
11. Considering the present religious pluralism in Myanmar: What is the role and importance of the Weikza Cults?
12. The coming of Buddha Maitreya? The importance of his advent?
13. What is a Wisdom Stone?
14. Can someone, who is not an experienced alchemist, also work with them?

15. What reasons do you see for sicknesses in general?
16. Spiritually caused sicknesses: Payoga?
17. What is the cause for Payoga? Are there different forms of Payoga?
18. What about people who have done a vow or commitment in their past life which they do not fulfil in the present life? Is this considered to be a form of Payoga?
19. Is possession a form of Payoga? What are the root-causes from this form of Payoga?
20. Voluntary/Involuntary Possession? Permanent/Temporary Possession?
21. Concept of Ouktazaun? Please explain in detail.
22. What is the connection between Ouktazaun and Payoga?
23. Can you tell me about the importance of mind in the healing process?
24. What is the role of meditation and awareness in the healing process?
25. Importance of Buddhist principles?
26. If you personally were doing this research, how would you do it?

Questions for SAYAGYI U SHEIN

1. Can you tell me about your religious and spiritual background?
2. Do you believe in spirits?
3. Can you please describe the pantheon of spirits you are in contact with? How can you explain this interaction and communication to someone who is not a shaman?
4. Can you tell us about your relationship with the Weikzas? What is your relation to Bo Min Gaung? Did you ever meet him in person? What was this encounter like?

5. What about the Weikza Bo Bo Aung?
6. In how far is the relation with the Weikzas important for your healing work?
7. Would you consider yourself to be a Weikza?
8. According to history Bo Min Gaung died in the year 1952. But, when he is a Weikza, where is he now?
9. People told me that Bo Min Gaung currently has up to 5 different bodily manifestations. Is there any evidence about this?
10. I want to meet a Weikza personally. How is this possible?
11. Weikza Gaings in Myanmar? How many are there? What are their characteristics? And what are their aims?
12. Do you belong to a specific Weikza Gaing?
13. Considering the present religious pluralism in Myanmar: What is the role and importance of the Weikza Cults?
14. The coming of Buddha Maitreya? The importance of his advent?
15. What is a Wisdom Stone? How many do you have? Do they have different qualities? If yes, what are the differences?
16. Can someone, who is not an experienced alchemist, also work with them?
17. Please explain in detail how you were getting these stones.
18. What about the Gold Stones that you are able to produce? What about their healing qualities?
19. What reasons do you see for sicknesses in general?
20. Spiritually caused sicknesses: Payoga?

21. What is the cause for Payoga? Are there different forms of Payoga?
22. What about people who have done a vow or commitment in their past life which they do not fulfil in the present life? Is this considered to be a form of Payoga?
23. Is possession a form of Payoga? What are the root-causes from this form of Payoga?
24. Voluntary/Involuntary Possession? Permanent/Temporary Possession?
25. Concept of Ouktazaun? Please explain in detail.
26. What is the connection between Ouktazaun and Payoga?
27. Can you tell me about the importance of mind in the healing process?
28. What is the role of meditation and awareness in the healing process?
29. How important are Buddhist principles?
30. Since you have been visiting Europe for many times, do you have any advice for the people who solely know and trust the biomedical system?

Questions for Patients

1. How do you feel today?
2. Where do you come from?
3. Since when are here?
4. How long are you planning to stay here?
5. Why are you here?
6. Have you been calling on different healers in different places?
7. How did you get to know about Sayagyi U Shine?

8. Have you had any previous knowledge concerning shamanism or Buddhism when you arrived?
9. Do you consider yourself to be a Buddhist?
10. What does your day look like, here in the centre?
11. Do you take any medication?
12. Do you examine your blood results regularly?
13. Can you notice an improve?

Pictures of Sayagyi U Shein ⁵⁷



SAYAGYI SHEIN (AT THE AGE OF 15) Serving in British Army Field engineer battalion. As Lance-knight.



SAYAGYI SHEIN. (AT THE AGE OF 22) In 1952. As a Sergeant Rank in North west Command Maymyo



SAYAGYI SHEIN. (AT THE AGE OF 50) constant taking of gold Ash powder. He becomes rejuvenile



SAYAGYI SHEIN (AT THE AGE OF 72)

⁵⁷ The following pictures were sent to me by Sayagyi U Shein at the beginning of February 2012. It was his wish to include these photographs in the dissertation.



Dr Shein, M.D (CM.A) (AT THE AGE OF 83) Vijjadara naya - distinction, in traditional Medicine - certificate.



Dr Shein, M.D (CM.A) (AT THE AGE OF 85) Hair becomes dark, eye becomes bright, complexion becomes wet and soft, because of constant taking of Gold Ash Powder.



Dr. SHEIN- M.D (CM.A) (AT THE AGE OF 86) Still young and fresh, because of Gold Ash Powder.





Mr Wolf gives Shamar-nism & Healing certificate to Sayagyi Shem (21-10-2004)



Professor Dr Lim gives Sayagyi Shem . M.D. (CMA) Certificate in Munich . Germany - Beside of Sayagyi Shem is Lim's wife (June - 2006)



Sayagye Shem with - Professor Dr. Lim
 & his wife and with Lt-Colonel (Retd)
 Thein So. and also with friends.



Professor-Dr-Jestilim gives "Grandmaster"
 Certificate to Sayagye Dr U Shem (MD (MA))
 at the temple of A-MA-YA-SA.
 (11-11-2000)



Dr. SHEIN, M.D. (M.A.) holding
Grand Master for natural Medicine
Certificate.



Dr. SHEIN, Grand Master for Natural Medicine
with - Brigadier General (Retd) THEIN SEIN,
and Lt. Colonel (Retd) Hla Moe



Dr. SHEIN, Grand Master for natural Medicine
with Lt. Colonel THEIN SOE and Director (Retd)
BSI Aung Myint

Abstract

This dissertation aims to portray a transpersonal, autoethnographic research approach for the study of Burmese religious syncretism and traditional medicine, and can be understood as an introduction to transpersonal anthropology by the example of Burmese beliefs in Weikzas, supernatural healing and alchemy.

Transpersonal research methods, inspired by transpersonal psychology, emphasise the personal voice of the researcher at every phase and stage of the research process and demand the comprehensibility and transparency of personal developments as far as transformation, cognition and insight are concerned. Transpersonalism as a movement in science is concerned with the recognition and understanding of humanity's potential to be able to experience altered states of consciousness, experiences that transcend the personal biography, and are hence labelled transpersonal phenomena. The dissertation portrays the rise and development of Auto-Ethnography within social and cultural anthropology, the emergence and main concepts of transpersonal psychology which had been constitutive for the development of transpersonal anthropology and the experiential approach in anthropology, as advocated by Edith Turner and others.

The empirical part of the dissertation "*Experiencing Ethnography*" shall be read and understood as an attempt to merge and unite theoretical and methodological considerations with concrete ethnographic data, gained through fieldwork in central Burma. A polyphonic, multi-perspectival text serves to illustrate and make transparent the different voices having participated in the research process; the voices of informants, hosts and friends in the field shall be brought together to let all participating voices be equally heard and shared. Moreover, it is a clear goal to honour the experiential, autoethnographic aspiration and unveil the personal process of cognitive development of the researcher throughout the research endeavour and consequently throughout the whole text. By sharing and making transparent the subjective, personal voice, experiences and insights of the researcher, a holistic picture of the Weikza phenomenon and its related beliefs and practices, shall be drawn. The overall goal of this

dissertation is to evoke in the reader a *sensation* and *impression* of the phenomenon under study, a *feeling*, which transcends the sole accumulation of data and provision of facts and figures. As a human being, the scientist is capable of uniting the intellectual, rational dimension with the *realm of the heart*, thereby providing her readers not only with objective information concerning Burmese beliefs and practices in the Weikza context, but also trying to reach and touch the audience on a heartfelt, emotional level.

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit thematisiert und porträtiert einen transpersonalen, auto-ethnographischen Forschungszugang zur Untersuchung des burmesischen religiösen Synkretismus und der traditionellen Medizin und soll als eine Einführung in die transpersonale Anthropologie anhand des Beispiels des burmesischen Weikza-Glaubens, der übernatürlichen Heilungen und Alchemie verstanden werden. Transpersonale Forschungszugänge, inspiriert von der transpersonalen Psychologie, betonen die persönliche, individuelle Stimme des/der Forschers/Forscherin in jeder Phase des gesamten Forschungsprozesses und verlangen Nachvollziehbarkeit und Transparenz der persönlichen Entwicklungsprozesse im Kontext der Forschung. *Transpersonalismus*, als eine Bewegung innerhalb der Wissenschaft, kann grundsätzlich als eine Forschungsrichtung wahrgenommen werden, die sich mit der Anerkennung und dem Verständnis des menschlichen Potentials im Zusammenhang mit veränderten Bewusstseinszuständen und religiösem sowie spirituellem Erleben befasst. Die vorliegende Dissertation stellt die Entwicklung der Auto-Ethnographie innerhalb der Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie dar, schildert die zentralen Konzepte, Ideen und Theorien der transpersonalen Psychologie und Anthropologie um sich dann der Darstellung einer „Erfahrungs-basierten“ Anthropologie anzunähern, wie sie von Edith Turner und anderen vertreten wird.

Der empirische Teil der Arbeit, *„Experiencing Ethnography“*, soll als ein Versuch gelesen werden, theoretische wie methodische Überlegungen sowie konkrete ethnographische Daten, die in eigener Feldforschung in Burma gesammelt werden konnten, miteinander zu verbinden. Ein polyphoner Text, der den unterschiedlichen AkteurInnen im Feld gerecht werden will, soll die verschiedenen Sprach-, Ausdrucks- und Wahrnehmungsebenen veranschaulichen und nachvollziehbar machen; die Stimmen von InformantInnen und FreundInnen im Feld werden transparent gemacht um alle Beteiligten gebührend und ehrend zu Wort kommen zu lassen. Darüber hinaus ist es ein erklärtes und ausdrückliches Ziel der Arbeit den persönlichen kognitiven Entwicklungsprozess der

Forscherin in jedem Stadium der Forschung offenzulegen, umso ein möglichst ganzheitliches, holistisches Bild der erforschten Phänomene zu liefern. Das übergeordnete Anliegen der Arbeit ist es, den LeserInnen ein *Gefühl* der untersuchten Phänomene zu vermitteln, das das unbeirrbare Streben nach Daten und Fakten transzendiert. Als ein menschliches Wesen ist die Forscherin in der Lage die rationale, intellektuelle und pragmatische Dimension des wissenschaftlichen Forschens mit dem *Herzen* zu verbinden umso die LeserInnen nicht nur mit objektiven Informationen zu versorgen, sondern letztendlich auf einer herzlichen, menschlichen Ebene *zu berühren*.

Curriculum Vitae

Contact and personal information

Name: Veronica Futterknecht, Mag. phil.

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E-Mail: vroni@metta.at

Born: September 25th 1977 in Vienna

Children: Leonhard (born 06/2010)

Education

1984-1988	Primary School Gumpoldskirchen, Lower Austria
1988-1993	Secondary School, Frauengasse 3-5, 2500 Baden/Vienna
1993-1996	Secondary School St. Ursula, 1230 Vienna; Matriculation
1996- 1997	Residency in Boston, USA, as Au pair
1997-1999	Europa Wirtschaftsschulen, Emphasize: Tourism Getreidemarkt 16, 1010 Vienna, Diploma.
1999-2007	Enrolment at the University of Vienna: Cultural and Social Anthropology, Spanish, Science of Religions, Buddhist Studies.
11/2007	Master's degree (Mag. phil.) with honours;
Since 12/2007	Ph.D. Candidate at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna.

Academic Experience and Lectures

11/2007:	Contributor to the conference "Healing in Religions" (Austrian Society for the Science of Religions) paper presentation: "Heilung im Buddhismus: Schamanismus und Rituelles Heilen in Burma"
03-06/2008:	Tutor at the Dept. for Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna: "Introduction to the study of consciousness and religion"
10/ 2008-03/2012:	Scientific Assistant, Department for the Science of Religions, University of Vienna
03-06/2009:	Tutor at the Dept. for Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna: "Introduction to the study of consciousness and religion"

- 01/2009: Co-Founder of the Study Group Awareness Research Group: Research Group for the anthropological study of consciousness www.bewusstseinsforschung.at
- 03-06/2009: Lecturer at the Dept. for the Science of Religions, University of Vienna: "Religious Syncretism in South-East Asia with emphasize on New Religious Buddhist Movements" (Seminar)
- 10/2009-01/2010: Lecturer at the Dept. of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna: "Shamanism and Ritual Healing: Etic and emic research-approaches in Anthropology of Religion" (Seminar)
- 04/2009: Contributor to the panel "Open anthropology" at the "Tage der KSA 2009" (junior researcher's conference in social and cultural anthropology); paper presentation: "Anthropologie als Paralleluniversum: Anthropologischer Wissens und Erkenntnisgewinn in außer-alltäglichen Bewusstseinszuständen und parallelen Erfahrungswelten"
- 05/2009: Paper Presentation: „Traditionelle Medizin, Alchemie und Rituelles Heilen in Burma: Religiöser Synkretismus und seine Einbettung im gegenwärtigen militärischen Regime“ (ÖAW Zentrum Sprachwissenschaften, Bild- und Tondokumentation, Phonogramm-Archiv)
- 05/2009: Paper Presentation: "Weikza-Cults in Contemporary Burma: Characteristics and Potential of „Messianic“ Buddhism" (4th Viennese Conference on South-East Asia, SEAS. Wien)
- 04/2010: Convenor and organizer of the panel "Anthropological Studies of Consciousness" at the "Tage der KSA 2010" (see above)
- 03-06/2010: Lecturer at the Dept. the Science of Religions, University of Vienna: "Shamanism and Ritual Healing: Etic and emic research-approaches in Anthropology of Religion and Science of Religions" (Seminar)
- 03-06/2011: Lecturer at the Dept. of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna: „Decade of the Mind" - Anthropological Study of Consciousness in Theory and Practice (Seminar together with Prof. Dr. Kremser, Mag. Dr. Luger, Mag. Vogl)
- 10/2011-01/2012: Lecturer at the Dept. of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna: "Shamanism and Ritual Healing: Transpersonal research-approaches in Anthropology of Religion" (Seminar)
- 03/2012-06/2012: Lecturer at the Dept. of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna: "Anthropology of Happiness" (Seminar with Prof. Dr. Manfred Kremser) "On the Effectiveness/Evidence of Healing Rituals in

Shamanic Contexts” (Seminar with Mag. Dr. Michaela Noseck)

Fieldwork

- 07/2000-12/2000: India and Nepal, study of Buddhism and meditation
06/2001-08/2001: Peru and Bolivia, study of shamanism
07/2003-09/2003: Peru and Bolivia, study of shamanism
06. 2005-11. 2005: Ladakh, Northern India, „Ladakh Project” of ISEC (International Society for Ecology and Culture, Nonprofit Development Organisation)
09/2006-04/2007: Burma and Thailand, study of shamanism and traditional medicine
01/2008-02/2008: Burma and Thailand, study of shamanism and traditional medicine
02/2009: Burma, study of shamanism and traditional medicine

Publications

- 2007 „MeditatHiV Praxis der Heilung“: Krankheit und Heilung aus buddhistischer Perspektive mit Schwerpunkt HIV/AIDS am Beispiel Thailands. Diplomarbeit, Universität Wien, Oktober 2007
- 2008 In einem Land der vielen Geister: Gelebte Religiosität und traditionelle Heilkünste im gegenwärtigen Burma.
In: Gruber, Bettina. Rippitsch, Daniela (et al). 2008. Jahrbuch Friedenskultur: Internationale Krisenherde und Konflikte. (S. 189-194) Zentrum für Friedensforschung und Friedenspädagogik der Fakultät für Kulturwissenschaften an der Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt. Drava.
- 2011 Neo-Schamanismus: Wissenschaftliche Diskurse – Transpersonale Forschungsansätze- Spirituelle Dimensionen. In: Religionen nach der Säkularisierung: Festschrift für Johann Figl zum 65. Geburtstag.
In: Veronica Futterknecht, Hans Gerald Hödl (Ed.) Wien, Lit-Verlag.
- 2012 (forthcoming) Heilung in den Religionen. Veronica Futterknecht, Manfred Kremser (Ed.) Wien, Lit-Verlag.