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28 June 2018

Frederick P. Lenz Merit Scholarship

Understanding the Process of Enlightenment

Dr. Frederick Lenz was a talented meditator and spiritual teacher. His teachings drew upon multiple different lineages — most notably Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, and Advaita Vedānta. As someone who synthesized elements of multiple ancient Asian spiritual traditions in the context of 20th century America, Dr. Lenz’s teachings represent a modern outgrowth of primordial wisdom that he adapted to suit the culture in which he grew up and spent much of his life. For example, in his book The Enlightenment Cycle, Dr. Lenz discussed a meditation practice involving meditating on the cakras to awaken kuṇḍalinī,¹ sans diacritic spellings of transliterated Sanskrit words. Similar ideas relating to a seven-cakra system and kuṇḍalinī can be found in Śaiva, Śakta, and Buddhist Tantrik texts from the past several hundred years. However, Dr. Lenz also wrote of music albums that he and some of his students recorded on cassette tapes— modern music created with the specific intention that it would be used to assist his students in the aforementioned cakra meditation.² Although his approach evolved and adapted to a new context, the essence of the experience that he sought to impart to his students is eternal — the awakening to a light that never goes out. Through consistent contemplative practice, it becomes possible to experientially realize the interpenetration of uncreated light with the vivid spectrum of colors we experience in the created world of change and vibration.³

¹ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 10-15.

² Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 149.

³ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 74-75.

One word which Dr. Lenz refers to repeatedly in his teachings is *kundalini*, or kuṇḍalinī with diacritics. This word is derived from Sanskrit, meaning something like “coiled energy” or “bulb,” and is used frequently in Hindu- and Sikh-derived forms of Tantrik yoga to refer to a variety of vital energy that is found in the *suṣumṇā*, an energy channel in the subtle or astral body that roughly corresponds to the spinal cord in the physical body.⁴ Tibetan Buddhism and various other related traditions have similar teachings regarding this energy, but use different words to refer to this energy. To better understand this concept, we can look to one of the traditions in which it plays a role of central importance: Śakta Tantra. Śakta and Śaiva Tantrikas revere both the transcendent reality, frequently personified as the ascetic yogin Śiva, as well as the primordial power or energy of nature, personified as the Goddess, one of whose names is Śakti. Ultimately, Śiva and Śakti are inseparable; their relationship is likened to that between fire and its power to burn. Which deity or deities are favored depends on the individual and their guru. In Śakta Tantra, the Goddess, in one form or another, is worshiped as the Supreme Reality, and is believed to contain all of the male deities within herself. The name ‘Śakti’ denotes the Goddess’s transformative power to create, preserve, and destroy on both macrocosmic and microcosmic scales.⁵

The *Kuṇḍalinī Śakti* is the power of individual consciousness, a fragment of the primordial Śakti that self-identifies with a particular body and mind. It is a highly concentrated form of *prāṇa*, the vital energy of consciousness. When kuṇḍalinī lies dormant, it mostly manifests as *ahaṃkāra*, literally the “I-maker,” or the ego, symbolized as a snake coiled at the root cakra, an energy center in the subtle body that roughly corresponds to the location of the

⁴ Frawley, David. *Tantric Yoga and the Wisdom Goddesses*, 30.

⁵ Frawley, David. *Tantric Yoga and the Wisdom Goddesses*, 30-31.

perineum in the physical body.⁶ Ego, though facilitating our embodied existence, also causes us to believe that we are only the physical body and mind, and to forget from whence the body and mind arise. However, as Dr. Lenz’s kuṇḍalinī-based meditation techniques⁷ imply, the very same power that creates our individual identity can be transformed via spiritual practice; ego can be sublimated into wisdom.

Wisdom is far different from theoretical knowledge; it is rooted in direct, experiential insight into the nature of reality, rather than in anything that can be verbally transmitted via everyday conversation. Yet, at the same time, wisdom can be extremely down-to-earth.

Wisdom is the ability to do two things at once — to be in the world and of it, and enjoy it and participate in it fully and successfully and, at the same time, to not be here at all, to be in realms of light, to be in the super-conscious state, to be in samadhi, beyond all this. That’s true wisdom.⁸

This quality has less to do with things like age, gender, or religion, and more to do with depth of spiritual practice. When a practitioner of yoga makes a consistent effort to meditate every day, they begin to experience planes of reality that are perceived to be “outside” of the physical world we experience through the senses— subtle/energetic/astral planes, causal planes of light, and, eventually, the source of all things. This ultimate plane is referred to by Lenz in the same page as both nirvikalpa samādhi (a Hindu term) and nirvāṇa (a Buddhist term).⁹

From one perspective, this primordial essence of reality is utterly transcendent. It is completely beyond name and form, and beyond the grasp of the intellect. From another perspective, however, this essence is omnipresent, and cannot be separated from the reality we experience in our daily lives.

Nirvikalpa samadhi means you’re sitting in meditation and you go beyond just the planes of light to nirvana, total in nirvana, in complete perfection, and there is no sense, of course, of that — it’s all on the

⁶ Frawley, David. *Tantric Yoga and the Wisdom Goddesses*, 165.

⁷ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 10.

⁸ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 67.

⁹ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 72.

other side. But then, you're sitting in meditation, then you come back, the eyes open and gradually you go back through the planes of light and here you are, back in the saddle again.

Sahaja samadhi — you've just gone back and forth so many times that there's no back and forth for you. All you see is enlightenment and this world and the other side. Well, there's no other side anymore. You're in a condition of perpetual wakefulness. Which doesn't mean, by the way, that you know everything. It means you're wakeful.¹⁰

This means that, at some stage of practice, the veil between our perception of the physical world, the planes of light, and the unfathomable essence of light becomes so thin that the practitioner becomes aware of all planes at once. In fact, these various dimensions may be experienced as being in constant union with each other.

The process by which such a realization comes about frequently begins with the introversive withdrawal of self-awareness into its formless essence (as in closed-eye, focused-attention meditation), and concludes with the systematic unification of that enlightened awareness with external reality. In a Śaiva/Śakta text called the *Pratyabhijñā-hṛdaya* (*Heart of Recognition*), this kind of introversive-cum-extroversive spiritual process is termed *krama-mudrā* – literally, the “seal of the process/sequence/cycle” of enlightenment:

By means of the *krama-mudrā*, whose nature is internal, the practitioner becomes immersed even while focused outward. [How?] In this process, first one enters within from the external; then, because of that Immersion, from the interiorized state an ‘entry’ into external forms comes about.¹¹

Hence, once a practitioner's awareness has been unified with its innermost essence, the realization that that same essence pervades all things comes about much more easily.

In Sanskrit, the introversive stage of this cycle is called *saṃhāra*, and has connotations of death or withdrawal from worldly experience. This withdrawal is the means by which we become aware of our essence. Whether *saṃhāra* is represented as a vertical ascent of the spirit— as in the upward movement of kuṇḍalinī— or as a movement towards our metaphysical center (e.g. symbolized as movement towards the bindu or point in center of a maṇḍala), it is precisely

¹⁰ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 74.

¹¹ Kṣemarāja, *The Recognition Sūtras*, 389.

this stage of the process of spiritual transformation that is brought about by focused-attention meditation. Through consistent practice, the constant arising and passing away of thoughts can be mastered and brought to a pause. When a mind is cleared of finite mental and sensory impressions, its innate luminosity has an opportunity to shine, unadulterated. This allows us to experience the profound spiritual bliss of the causal planes, and, eventually, to go beyond bliss to the non-dualistic center of the cosmos, to a plane which contains within itself all polarized experience, e.g. life and death, bliss and suffering, self and other, etc. These planes are experienced in the stages of the cycle following *saṃhāra*, called *anākhya*, literally the “nameless,” and *bhāsā*, “Pure Light.”¹² These may be compared to the *bardo* states between death and rebirth referred to in the Tibetan Book of the Dead.¹³

Practicing focused-attention meditation on a daily basis is a way of habituating the mind to the process of withdrawal, which will make the transition into the posited next incarnation much smoother.

If you’ve done a good job in your current lifetime, if you’ve put your time in, then your next lifetime will be set up for you. Think of it like school. At the university, if you study all semester and you do a good job, finals — if they’re a cumulative exam — are not a big deal. You just have to lightly review because you’ve studied all along. When everyone else is stressing out and studying countless hours and getting mediocre grades, you’ll get an A with a light review because you’ve been progressively on the case.¹⁴

Furthermore, the meditation and other spiritual practices that individuals have done in previous life times facilitates a greater depth of spiritual insight in their current lifetime, once they become reattuned to their previous mind-state to some degree. Although, with very few exceptions, it usually takes some time for people to begin to consciously align themselves with the accumulated wisdom of past incarnations, some individuals can make very rapid spiritual

¹² Sanderson, “The Śaiva Exegesis of Kashmir,” 77.

¹³ Rinpoche, Sogyal. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, 11.

¹⁴ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 108-109.

progress once they begin to tap into the karmic impressions of centuries of daily practice.¹⁵

Hence, death and withdrawal are not necessarily an end in themselves, but a means to a more favorable rebirth.

In contrast to some more traditional forms of Buddhism, Dr. Lenz's American Buddhism does not generally promote withdrawal from participation in a broader society into a monastic setting for the majority of people's lives. Rather, he taught people to practice spirituality while working and living in a less-secluded environment. By practicing seated meditation in the morning and evening, it becomes possible to align one's career with spirituality. Although Dr. Lenz particularly favored computer science (which develops particular abstract and rational faculties in a manner comparable to certain Buddhist practices), he stated that it is possible to turn any work into a meditation. Once the kuṇḍalinī has been aroused through seated meditation, it becomes easier to access in daily life. Therefore, for someone who meditates regularly, any experience in the world can be used to facilitate awakening if it is done with a certain awareness and focus. Whether someone is working as a computer engineer, as a janitor, as a somatic counselor, or in any other field, the vast amount of time most adults spend at work can be transformed into an active meditation.¹⁶

This kind of practice-at-work trains people to maintain awareness of other planes of reality while being grounded in the physical world. The withdrawal of awareness into formless light in seated meditation leads into a stage of the enlightenment cycle called emission or creation (*śṛṣṭi*), in which that primordial light is unified with created forms. Eventually, with much practice over many lifetimes, the experience of the blissful interpenetration of the various

¹⁵ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 121-122.

¹⁶ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 121-122.

planes of reality can be maintained (*sthiti*) indefinitely, until the next phase of withdrawal.¹⁷ This mode of enlightened perception is so different from ordinary modes of perception that it cannot truly be understood until it is experienced for oneself.

Reality is not this world. It's not the world as you perceive it. It's this world, but reality is the world as perceived through enlightenment. It's the same world, but it's not the same world. When you are in a condition of light everything is ecstatic, everything is joyous, everything is beautiful. Your attention field is subtle. And you are not assuming too much importance, if any at all. The ego is quiet. The mind is still. Your heart is happy, and then you go above all to the fields of light.¹⁸

What makes enlightened individuals extraordinary is not their grandeur, titles, social status, or academic education, but rather their humility, wisdom, and unconditional love. These qualities are direct derivatives of their experiential knowledge that absolutely everything, no matter how seemingly difficult or painful, is a beautiful expression of divine perfection.¹⁹

Enlightened qualities are not directly dependent on any conditioned, contextual factors. They are dependent on that which is beyond all conditions. They are dependent on nirvāṇa, or the total withdrawal of all created mental modifications, until even withdrawal itself is withdrawn into its essence. That is the most advanced stage of meditation, wherein time, space, and ego are completely transcended; the individual self dissolves into pure, eternal light. Then, after eternity, the cycle begins again. The self is reborn, purified and intimately aware of the essence of creation.²⁰

This state is easy to read about, but not so easy to deeply grasp. It takes lifetimes of meditation, of practice in dissolving all limitations, to begin to approach this stage.

This is the key — directing yourself towards the light, not towards other people, not towards places, things, but towards light. What is light? What is this light I talk of? Light is awareness — awareness without mental modifications. If you can stop your thoughts and allow nothing else into your mind, you will experience light... Just on the other side of sense perceptions is a beautiful, perfect light. It's so close

¹⁷ Dyczkowski, Mark. *The Doctrine of Vibration*, 160.

¹⁸ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 135-136.

¹⁹ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 138.

²⁰ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 141.

to us. It's always around us, yet we're relatively unaware of it because we're distracted by the images of life, by the world of physicality.

There's nothing wrong with the world of physicality. There's nothing wrong with existence. It's perfect. But it's terribly transient... Enlightenment is the alternative — to enter into a condition of perfect light, to have complete peace and stillness in your mind, to not be frustrated when things don't go your way, to go a different way than the people of this world.²¹

There is no experience that can compare to dissolution into pure light; it is the absolute zenith of *satcitānanda*, or truth-consciousness-bliss.

However, this sort of rarefied experience is largely meaningful with regard to the impact it has on a broader context than one individual sitting in meditation. Hence, the very foundation of Tantrik Buddhism is *bodhicitta*, the “awakened mind/heart” that seeks to help suffering beings to know that everything is perfect, regardless of transient appearances suggesting the contrary. This is important, not just for the community, but also for the success of the individual practitioner in meditation because it curbs selfish tendencies. The bliss of enlightenment is not meant to be clung to, but to be utilized for the greater good of all beings. Cultivating this selfless intention makes it easier to dissolve the ego.²²

The use of particular symbols or tools in meditation, when combined with selfless intentions, further enhances the efficacy of the practice. The mind begins to take on the qualities of whatever it focuses on. Therefore, focusing on a symbol that is aligned with the goal of meditation — e.g. a mantra, an enlightened teacher, spiritual music, etc. — makes it far easier to train the mind to actually meditate, as opposed to quietly daydreaming.

What we have learned in intermediate meditation is the use of symbols, not abstractions. A symbol is something alive. It's a connector. It's a hyphen between one reality and another. We're in one room. We have to go to another room. We need a doorway to go through. We open the door. We pass through, and we're in another reality. These symbols are doorways to other realities...

And eventually we will develop a habit, a good habit that we will use not only during the period of meditation but 24 hours a day. The answer is not to try and sit in emptiness and just have the good

²¹ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 143.

²² Govinda, Lama Anagarika. *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, 108.

intention that you're going to hold your mind in a perfect state. Nonsense. Get real. Get a life. That's not going to happen.

Good intentions are not enough. You have to know what you're doing. You need the techniques. By having a number of symbols, doorways that you can focus on from one moment to the next, there will never be a gap during the period of meditation. At times you may go through the doorways and enter into the light.²³

In the Sanskrit terminology of classical yoga, the term for this continuous, uninterrupted flow of awareness towards an object of focus is *dhyāna*, or meditation. This is also the etymological root of the name of the Chinese Buddhist school Chan, which in turn became Zen in Japan.²⁴

When this continuous focus occurs for an extended period of time, the perceiving subject becomes totally absorbed in the object of meditation; both eventually dissolve into infinite light — a superconscious state called *samādhi*.²⁵

The top is enlightenment — the complete awareness of life without any mental modifications, the highest viewpoint. Not the best, but the highest unobstructed viewpoint. And if that's your interest, if you seek enlightenment, then the practice of meditation is the pathway to enlightenment, along with the practice of mindfulness. These are the two things that we do in Buddhism to become enlightened.

Enlightenment exists in everything. Enlightenment is every-thing. It's around everything, it's through everything and it's beyond everything. It sounds more complicated than it is, actually.²⁶

Hence, by cycling one's awareness between the highest level of reality via focused-attention meditation and mindful awareness of the material world, it becomes possible to experientially realize the interpenetration of uncreated light with the vivid spectrum of colors we experience in the created world of change and vibration. As Dr. Lenz wrote,

God is within your mind.
God is within all things.
As a matter of fact,
There is nothing that is not God.²⁷

With the caveat that I do not have enough personal experience with Lenz, or the omniscience, to make any definitive statements about him or his enlightenment, I will say that

²³ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 161.

²⁴ "Zen, Chan: 3 Definitions." *Wisdom Library*. Web.

²⁵ Rama, Swami. *Choosing a Path*, 144.

²⁶ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 165-166.

²⁷ Lenz, Frederick. *Insights: Tantric Buddhist Reflections on Life*, 41.

the teachings of his to which I have been exposed to are very coherent and insightful. As implied by the numerous comparisons I have made between Dr. Lenz's work and some of the Śaiva/Śakta forms of tantrik philosophy and praxis to which I personally adhere, I would tend to believe that his teachings on the subject were accurate and well-intentioned. Like Lenz, experiential insight has led me to believe that no one tradition has a monopoly on truth. I also utilize practices from multiple lineages, including focused-attention meditation on cakras in combination with sound — usually a mantra, in my case. What I do know with certainty, from personal experience, is how efficacious that kind of practice is for generating the kind of enlightened states of consciousness which Lenz describes in great detail.

Another comparison between Dr. Lenz's teachings and those which directly inform my personal practice is the importance of experience in society-at-large as an opportunity for spiritual practice. I personally have an introverted, almost monastic predisposition, but also find great value in connecting to other people and the natural world. Lenz spoke of this kind "practice-in-the-world" in terms of turning one's career into a practice in mindfulness. Despite my previous inclination, at one point as an undergraduate, to leave school and take up more of an ascetic lifestyle, I have chosen to continue my academic career with the belief that this education will be of significant benefit to the spiritual growth of myself and other beings.

Fairly recently, a professor piqued my interest in the field of somatic counseling, which uses a combination of body-based contemplative practice and psychotherapy to treat mental illness. While Lenz favored computer science, my path is becoming more focused on personal interactions in a therapeutic context, for the moment. Many of the abstract models and theories that are involved in the academic study of contemplative religions, while interesting and helpful to an extent, can be (and are) applied in a real-world context to help real people who are

suffering.²⁸ By applying mindfulness in this path towards sharing therapeutic practices with others, I believe that my future career will be of great spiritual benefit to many beings.

One contrasting point between Dr. Lenz's teachings and my personal practice is that, at least in *The Enlightenment Cycle*, there are really two primary practices being discussed: focused-attention meditation (with many variations) and mindfulness in daily life.²⁹ There are, indeed, a plethora of practices from many different traditions with varying degrees of efficacy for particular individuals in particular contexts. In classifying these various practices, Dr. Lenz's teachings on meditation are fairly comparable to working with the eight supports of classical/Patañjala yoga (i.e. ethical restraints and observances, posture, breath, resting the sense organs, focus, meditation, and Samādhi)³⁰ with added elements of tantrik/kuṇḍalinī yoga.³¹ His teachings on mindfulness-at-work are comparable to karma yoga, in which a practitioner performs their social duties with awareness, selfless love, and non-attachment.³² However, there are also many other forms of practice.

This array of contemplative practices includes (but is not limited to) chanting (be it monotonal recitation, devotional kirtan, or other forms), ritual worship in tantrik and non-tantrik varieties, many different styles of haṭha/physical yoga, open-monitoring meditation, analytic meditation, art and music-based contemplative practices³³ the contemplation and meditative integration of spiritually-aligned concepts, and formless meditation on the pre-cognitive impulse that gives rise to our finite awareness.³⁴ Lenz may or may not have been aware of some or all of

²⁸ Shannahoff-Khalsa, David. *Kundalini Yoga Meditation*, xiii-xiv.

²⁹ Lenz, Frederick. *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 165-166.

³⁰ Rama, Swami. *Choosing a Path*, 119.

³¹ Rama, Swami. *Choosing a Path*, 157.

³² Rama, Swami. *Choosing a Path*, 87.

³³ Rama, Swami. *Choosing a Path*, 25-27.

³⁴ Wallis, Christopher, *Tantra Illuminated*, 345.

these techniques, but, for whatever reason, the focus of *The Enlightenment Cycle* is relatively narrow in terms of practice instruction.

My personal practice includes all of the aforementioned techniques in varying degrees, which I tend to understand as contributing to a holistic development of consciousness by addressing the various facets of our individual, social, and universal selves. When I teach yoga, however, I tend to focus on a few basic practices at a time, suited to the individual(s) receiving instruction, so as to avoid overwhelming or confusing anybody with too much unnecessary complexity. My first yoga teacher frequently emphasizes the importance of working with the body as preparation for meditation, so that tends to be where I advise others to start. For his part, Dr. Lenz may have emphasized those practices which seemed especially relevant to him, his teachers, and his students.

Dr. Lenz seems to have been a remarkable individual, whom I would have liked to have met. Perhaps then we could have discussed the esoterica of spirituality and compared/contrasted personal practices. As it is, his legacy has been of great benefit to myself and many other students and seekers on the path. He was a pioneer in American Buddhism— a still-developing expression of ancient wisdom in a new context. The teachings that he has provided indicate some direct insight into both the peak experiences of ancient spiritual traditions and the reality of modern American culture. Bridging the gap between these worlds of experience is no easy task, but Dr. Lenz's efforts have helped to pave the way for a new generation of practitioners.

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