

**St. Stephen's College**

**Lived Experience of the Toltec Path to Personal Freedom**

by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF PSYCHOTHERAPY AND SPIRITUALITY**

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## ABSTRACT

Lived Experience of the Toltec Path to Personal Freedom examines the experiences of seven individuals who choose to follow the Toltec path to personal freedom, working together as a group. A single research question was posed: “What is the lived experience of following the Toltec path?” Interviews were conducted in two sessions and resulted in two themes that are central to the work of these individuals: the development of awareness and the central aspect of energy in the work they do. The group mostly viewed Toltec as a set of tools and a perception which guided them, and acknowledge that anyone practicing this work will interpret it differently. There is no describable outcome, but the outcome experienced is to live from a place of awareness in each moment. It was also established that using words to describe this work was extremely difficult. The researcher’s enquiry was also to establish whether Toltec work has a place in psychotherapy or spirituality or both. Various other philosophies are compared to Toltec philosophy and practice.

This study provided an opportunity to gather information about a modern practice of an ancient shamanic path towards personal freedom that has not been studied in the scholarly literature to date. It sheds light on the ancient path of Toltec priests and how their practices are translated into everyday practice in modern western culture through the wisdom and insight of present day Naguals, specifically don Miguel Ruiz. It also shows how this practice can provide deep healing and self-awareness for those who follow it.

**Key Words:** Toltec, awareness, energy, descriptive phenomenology, psychotherapy, spirituality

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## **Lived Experience of the Toltec Path to Personal Freedom**

### **Chapter One: Introduction**

#### **Introduction**

In this thesis I would like to introduce the practice of the Toltec path to personal freedom. The path is presented as more New Age than shamanistic, though the roots go back centuries. The system of understanding in Toltec is complex, too complex to present fully in this thesis. I will give a brief introduction to Toltec based on comprehensive readings followed by a study on a single group of practitioners. Chapter Three should describe Toltec adequately enough to allow the reader an understanding of the practice. Chapter Five, the research itself, should provide an more in-depth idea of where one group of practitioners have taken the practice. It is important to understand that there is much more to Toltec than can be explained and as many interpretations of Toltec practice as there are people who practice it and this cannot be covered within the scope of this study.

#### **What is Toltec?**

I have been working with a small group of individuals practicing Toltec philosophy in Vancouver for the last ten years. This group is connected to a larger community of Toltec individuals and groups based on the teachings of don Miguel Ruiz, a Nagual of the Toltec lineage (Nelson, 1997). Ruiz has chosen to present himself through the new age or popular community and has written several books about this work to reach individuals who are searching for a way to “personal freedom” (Ruiz, 1997,

2004, & Ruiz & Ruiz, 2010). The Toltec path is arduous yet probably the most fundamental path of personal healing and spiritual growth that I have ever experienced personally or investigated in scholarly readings through my training as a spiritual psychotherapist. Ruiz has taken the ancient teachings and lifestyle of the Toltec priests of Mesoamerica and brought them to present day in a lay language that everyone can understand and follow.

As a philosophy Toltec embraces all spiritual teachings (Rosenthal, 2005). Ruiz (in Nelson, 1997) makes frequent references to other traditions, reveres Christ and Buddha, and connects the Toltec way of life to Christianity and Buddhism in his own teachings. Ruiz says: “All paths are basically the same” (in Nelson, 1997, p.10). This philosophy will be expanded upon in Chapter Six. The beliefs of Toltec are that we are living in a dream that is created by our own thoughts, called a virtual reality. The reality we create in our minds is not the truth, since we are only seeing it from our perspective based on our own personal history and belief systems or conditioning. Toltec work encompasses learning to increase awareness of oneself by letting go of assumptions and beliefs. Toltecs also hold that we are light energy beings and, as energy, we can shift our thoughts and emotions by moving and accumulating energy (Rosenthal, 2005). Ancient Toltec wisdom was popularized for the lay public starting with the writings of Carlos Castaneda in the 1960’s (Castaneda, 1968) in his many books about a Yaqui Nagual he met and trained with in Mexico, don Juan Matus. Many other practitioners have developed their own interpretations and practices based on Castaneda’s work, but Castaneda’s work was ground-breaking for our understanding of modern Shamanistic, energy based practices.

A goal of this study is to orient those in psychotherapy and spiritual counselling fields to the Toltec point of view through the words of the participants of a group of individuals who practice it. Toltec practice encompasses aspects of both psychotherapeutic and spiritual practices and allows for the individual of any religious affiliation to participate. Toltec philosophy is not psychotherapy nor is it a religion. It is a way of seeing both the inner world and outer world, or the collective dream of billions of smaller personal dreams, called the “Dream of the Planet” (Ruiz, 1997, p.2). It is believed that each individual perspective is unique as each human being has been domesticated by different beliefs and their own set of experiences. Our stories are only true to ourselves. Each individual creates their unique story and sees others’ stories from their own unique perspective. However, the story each individual claims as their own is not the truth for others, because it is only their story, based on a limited set of beliefs. Toltecs understand the illusion we create in our minds as humans and that freedom is seeing the many layers of this illusion clearly enough that they can master the dream of their own life. Toltecs see that they are dreaming and this is the first step towards freedom.

Toltec teaches us that we are all Naguals, or Shamans. This is timely as in the 21<sup>st</sup> century so many ancient texts are being opened to the eyes of the public and religion and psychotherapy are more and more geared to personal responsibility and self-guidance.

Centuries ago in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica Toltec priests were considered artists and seers. The modern Toltecs consider themselves “spiritual warriors of personal freedom” (Rosenthal, 2005, p.15) and the creation of personal freedom is considered an art because one creates their own life through shaping their own beliefs and life practices. Toltec is a spiritual path and acknowledges a higher power or consciousness. Toltec considers what we most often refer to as God, as “the Infinite”, though any reference is considered acceptable given the meaning is the same. The Toltec philosophy looks for commonalities and seeks to “find the truth behind the myths and dogma” (p.18) of all traditions, philosophies and religions. God or the Infinite would include all of the duality - our positive and negative aspects. Toltecs hold that we are all made of energy from the light of the sun, as is all life, yet they do not worship the sun with rituals and ceremonies. The spiritual aspect of the Toltec path leads to our connection to the sun as particles of light - the life force. It is possible to practice Toltec philosophy and simultaneously hold to other beliefs and practices such as Christianity or Buddhism, seeking the truth in each system of belief.

Within a psychotherapeutic framework, Toltecs work to become aware of their thoughts and behaviours of everyday life and understand them as conditioning. They seek to acknowledge and embrace the shadow and explore the depths of the unconscious, bringing it into consciousness through awareness. Thus the Toltec warrior fights for personal freedom from the mind’s programming, referred to as “Parasite” (Ruiz, 1997, p.63), which consists of all of our domestication and social conditioning. The Parasite is only one aspect of who we are and the work is to become aware of this and learn to use the mind as a tool for reasoning. Because the dream held in the mind brings so much

suffering, practicing this philosophy means creating your own life with the freedom to be happy, no matter what presents itself in life, because the Parasite is not creating misery in the form of self-victimization, judgement and negative beliefs (Rosenthal, 2005).

### **Research Question**

This study will seek to answer the question: "What is the lived experience of following the Toltec path to attain personal freedom?" The question asks participants to share their experience of following Toltec as they have lived it. The goal of answering this question, it is anticipated, will result in an understanding of Toltec as a viable path for psychological and spiritual growth.

### **Definition of Spirituality**

The view of spirituality taken in this paper is that humans are all spiritual at all times. It is the connection we experience to the rest of the world, to our inner selves and to our God essence however we define it. My definition is very close to the definition ascribed by Meezenbroek et al (2010). They chose an inclusive multicultural definition: "one's striving for and experience of one's connection with oneself, connectedness with others and nature and connectedness with the transcendent." (p.338)

Spiritual healing or growth in Toltec means finding this connection and requires us to journey inward to know ourselves and to discover that all that is out there is a reflection of us as well. Ken Wilber (2004) generates a similar outlook on spirituality when talking about integral spirituality:

It would be a spirituality that claimed to leave nothing essential out. It would be a spirituality that in principle could be recognized and even practiced by believers in all the world's religions without abandoning their own essentials. It would be based on what

seem to be universal human capacities to interface with the Divine. It would be inclusive and comprehensive, touching on all the bases of this elusive thing called spirituality (p.1). Wilber proposes the generic idea of interfacing with the divine, and the unfolding of it being up to individual interpretation. Thus, the actual journey may vary but the goal is the same. Toltecs experience themselves as connected to the Infinite or Divine energetically and the ultimate work of Toltec is to open to that connection.

### **Personal Interest in the Subject**

I have practiced the Toltec path for ten years and have come to an understanding of myself and others that has surpassed anything I have learned through having undergone psychotherapy and through other religious practices or beliefs. I came to this practice skeptical that it could teach me anything new, yet after a period of time I made a commitment to myself to keep practicing. With each year I became more at peace and more free from the suffering that originates in my thoughts. I am not saying that I do not still experience the chatter of my mind and get attached to the stories it tells, but I have an awareness of why and I can choose to shift out of this type of suffering quickly. I have also gained an awareness of energy and how it works within and between humans and all life. I have worked with a group of individuals for these many years and we have learned so much from each other as well as from our mentor, who was an apprentice of dona Bernadette Vigil and don Miguel Ruiz. We have learned that we are all a reflection of each other and we have provided each other with mirrors in which we see ourselves more clearly. Each time we work together another layer of illusion peels away from me and I see the world and myself more clearly.

What I love about this path is that we can practice any belief system and come to understand it through the clear lens of awareness. We are all one and this path allows for the experience of this oneness. I would like to bring an awareness of this path to those in the psychotherapeutic and spiritual fields and to acknowledge this system of finding freedom from suffering in the scholarly literature.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Specific scholarly writings on the spiritual aspects of Toltec philosophy are limited to non-existent. Therefore, this literature review primarily consists of cross referencing the similarities of Toltec philosophy with those of other philosophies and practices. In this brief review, I will describe what Toltec sources exist in the literature. Then, I will explain some basic aspects of Toltec practice and philosophy and how they relate to other areas, such as Shamanism, humanistic and cognitive psychology, and integrative and transpersonal psychology. Toltec crosses boundaries in practice with all of the above areas but is unique in its philosophy. The question I am attempting to answer in my literature search is where do I position this research study in the scholarly literature?

### **Popular Literature: the Naguals**

There are several Toltec Naguals in the last fifty years who have written about their practices. The most popular of these is don Carlos Castaneda (1968, 1971, 1993, 1999) who studied with don Juan Matus. Victor Sanchez (1996) takes his work from his experiences with various indigenous Naguals in Mexico and from his first-hand experience with and interpretations of Castaneda's work. don Miguel Ruiz (1997), who has become popular in the new age literature, just as don Castaneda, has been teaching for the last two to three decades. All of these teachers have similar but not exactly the same interpretations and they all have strong roots in the ancient teachings of the Toltec priests through lineage and through philosophy.

### **don Carlos Castaneda**

don Juan Matus, a Yaqui Indian and a Nagual and teacher, was written about most extensively by his student Carlos Castaneda, himself a Nagual. Other students of don Matus -Florinda Donner-Grau (1991), Taisha Abelar (Abelar & Castaneda, 1992), and Ken Eagle Feather (1995) - have also written books about their experiences with don Matus. Within the course of this study, I will make some reference to the teachings of don Castaneda and don Juan Matus to indicate commonalities and differences within diverse interpretations of Toltec philosophy. In the scholarly literature, little is written about Castaneda's work with don Matus except to criticize and question whether there even existed a Nagual named don Juan Matus or whether Castaneda, a published anthropologist, made up the stories of his teachings based on communication with others he encountered while pursuing his research in Mexico. On this subject Sanchez (1996) comments: "The question of whether don Juan existed seems to me insignificant in comparison with the ideas set forth in [his] books" (p.xiii). Michael Harner (1980), a Shaman and anthropologist, and other anthropologists, praised Castaneda's work.

From the 1960's right up to the 1990's, people regarded Toltec philosophy as controversial, partly because of the references to the use of sorcery in Castaneda's books (Austin & Barrett, 2006). Their validity was also questioned because of references to the use of hallucinogens to experience alternative realities, which is a known practice of shamans in many cultures (Winkelman, 2011, p.55). Harner's studies of shamanism included the use of hallucinogens as well, as it is a known practice amongst shamans though not a necessary practice, as Harner testified through his own work (1980). Harner

also claimed people in western culture suffer from a narrowness in conscious experience which he termed cognicentrism. The only way out of this is to experience the shamanic journey oneself.

In the scholarly literature I found only a few articles about Castaneda's writing: a study by Krantz (2006) interviewing several people who follow or have followed the lifestyle proposed by Castaneda, and another by Forisha (1978) who argues that Toltec work based on Castaneda's experiences with don Matus is not humanistic. The use of hallucinogens to create altered states, as well as several situations don Castaneda was put in by don Matus in his training and the constant berating don Carlos said he received from his mentor, could be misunderstood by the public as negative and downgrading due to cognicentrism. However, with an understanding of the preparation of a spiritual warrior, it might not seem so negative. Many continue to practice based on Castaneda's developed guidelines.

### **don Miguel Ruiz**

don Miguel Ruiz, the mentor of my mentor, is a direct descendant of the Eagle Knight lineage, the highest fully trained Naguals. Naguals are in contact with Divinity every day and are in a state of constant happiness. He has had many ethereal journeys which taught him viable, authentic information about historic traditions, Toltec as well as from others, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity (Nelson, 1997). don Ruiz learned much from the many teachings of his maternal grandfather, also a Naqual. He connected through the dream world with the ethereal energy of Smoky Mirror, the Toltec leader of ancient Teotihuacan, sitting on the top of the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan. He envisioned the snake, which is a symbol of transformation in that

ancient place, and the translation of all of the ancient ways through this vision (Nelson, 1997). At the time of this vision he decided to teach what he had learned and began teaching apprentices. What he began teaching two decades ago has slowly evolved and continues to evolve. Each of his apprentices has interpreted his teachings in their own way and therefore those who study with them will have the essential teachings but with some variations.

Ruiz is a very popular Nagual at this time and has many apprentices who have branched out and continue to teach their understanding of Toltec philosophy. Based on my understanding and experience, all of don Ruiz' apprentices stay pretty close to the principle tenets of Toltec philosophy Ruiz taught, but all have their own personal perspective of what they understand and choose to teach. don Ruiz has written several books meant to support lay people in practicing Toltec principles. Several of Ruiz' students have written books, including Mary Carroll Nelson (1997), Bernadette Vigil (2001), Sheri Rosenthal (2005), and Alan Hardman (2007). Most of these books have been written for anyone who wants to follow the Toltec path. Rosenthal's (2005) *Complete Idiot's Guide to Toltec Wisdom* is an encyclopedia which explains much of Toltec philosophy and practice in a simple and practical way. Nelson is the editor of *Beyond Fear* which is a series of interviews with Ruiz about his life and beliefs.

Most people begin Toltec practice by following Ruiz's (1997) book *The Four Agreements*. These agreements: be impeccable with your word, don't make assumptions, don't take things personally and always do your best, are key strategies used to begin the practice of awareness and detachment from the conditioned mind, necessary for furthering one's work within Toltec practice (Ruiz, 1997). don Ruiz has now handed

down the Nagual lineage to two of his sons, don Jose and don Miguel Jr. Both of his sons have written books, don Jose adding *the Fifth Agreement* (Ruiz & Ruiz, 2010) – “don’t trust anyone, not even yourself”.

Besides all of the books found in popular, new age literature, there are many interviews with don Ruiz and his sons, don Jose and don Miguel Jr. and there are many workshops on-line, for example: *Living the Four agreements with don Miguel Ruiz and HeatherAsh Amara* (Ruiz & Ash Amara, 2011). Ruiz’s book *The Four Agreements* was on the New York Times bestseller list for seven years and a review was published in the *Annals of the American Psychological Association* (2008). don Ruiz has also been on talk shows on radio and television and has given hundreds of workshops.

In relation to what was indicated about don Matus’ teachings to Castaneda, don Ruiz’ practices are not harsh, nor do they involve the use of hallucinogens or sorcery. Ruiz follows the path to unconditional love with a very humanistic approach; however, his work is disciplined work and often very difficult psychologically. Regardless, there is a humanistic quality to the teachings of don Ruiz. He is patient and believes that we are the emanators of love and worthy of loving ourselves. He is authentic and unconditional in his approach. His message is always the same: loving oneself and lifting the veil of illusion leads to heaven on earth.

### **Anthropology**

Toltec philosophy has deep roots and is believed to go back 20,000 years (Nelson, 1997, p.1). Recent scholarly writings about the Toltec priests of ancient Mesoamerica are based in the anthropological literature and are descriptive of what has been discovered through translation, most frequently about Teotihuacan and Tula, ancient cities where the

Toltec priests lived. These writings most often describe the art and lifestyle of the people. Writings by Nicholson (2001) and Diaz (2002) go into detail about some of the mythical stories of the Toltec people. Diaz reconstructs the mythology from biographical and philosophical texts, including the writings of Hueman of ancient times, who wrote the secret text *Teomoxli* about prophecies, including prophecies about Quetzalcoatl's life (Ixtlixochitl, 1892). Diaz makes some footnotes about the spiritual significance of many of the stories, which are told as teaching myths about human behaviour in the spiritual culture of Toltequity (i.e. Toltec). The myths hold many similarities to the stories told by modern day Naguals. However, the present day Naguals interpret the stories based on their deep spiritual knowledge and practice as Naguals. For example, Quetzalcoatl, the Lord of the Toltecs, also known as the Feathered Serpent, was considered a magical and loving god-like prophet who has been likened to other prophets such as Christ and Muhammad (Sanchez, in Diaz, 2002, p.x). A sorcerer named Tezcatlipoca came to Tula and took over the people's minds, getting them to make human sacrifices and kill each other. Dark and tumultuous times fell upon Tula (Nicholson, 2001, Diaz, 2002). Tezcatlipoca was also referred to as Smoky Mirror because he showed Quetzalcoatl himself in the mirror and gave him the idea of the mind as illusion. When the Toltec people were in a period of negligence from their teachings, Smokey Mirror gathered many dissenters and outside Aztecs to rise up in war against Quetzalcoatl and, after years of confrontation and turmoil, he eventually pushed the Toltec people out of Tula (Diaz, 2002).

Ruiz (in Nelson, 1997) reframes this story on a more abstract, mythical level: Quetzalcoatl and Smokey Mirror were two brothers who sometimes changed places.

Quetzalcoatl was the Nagual who, carrying the energy of everything that exists that we cannot perceive, taught his people the peaceful way. Smokey Mirror carried the tonal energy or energy of what we perceive with our common sense or reason and the illusions of the mind. These brothers would shift back and forth, one taking nagual and the other tonal. Smokey Mirror showed Quetzalcoatl the illusion of the mind, perhaps by who he was, and from this Quetzalcoatl became clear. Ruiz states that Smoky Mirror or Tonal was the first of the Toltec priests. Modern Toltecs learn to see the Smoky Mirror in themselves and choose to live the life of a Nagual.

In his writings Sanchez (1996) describes the living Toltecs and translates their ceremonies and beliefs. He writes about the WIRRARIKA, the Toltecs of the mountains:

The indigenous people of which I speak... .. do not share the same values that seem normal for us in modern society... ..What makes them admirable is that they love and respect the world of nature, not personal importance and its projections, like we do. They know and utilize pragmatically the nagualic aspect of human awareness and of the world, while we know little or nothing about it. They are admirable because they are different. Their difference makes them masters of a magical knowledge right before our eyes, although they have no interest in teaching us anything, since they are too busy learning... ..There is no imagination, explanations, complaints or judgements. Only impeccability.

(Sanchez, 1996, p.35 & 36)

In his writings, Sanchez describes his initiation with the two groups of surviving Toltecs, the Nahuas and the WIRRARIKA and talks about the personal work he has done using don Castaneda's writings.

## **Shamanism**

Positioning Toltec in the shamanistic research would depend on whether we are considering Naguals and Shamans in western culture to be the same as Shamans described in indigenous tribes. Would don Matus, don Castaneda and don Ruiz be considered shamans in the traditional sense? Within the scholarly literature there are various papers which address the role of shamanistic healing. Winkelman (2009) reviews the qualities of a shaman in a variety of hunter-gatherer cultures and outlines a set of defining criteria. These criteria include having performed a vision quest, ability to enter an altered state, the ability to transform into animals, having theories of illness and healing, an initiatory death and rebirth experience, having a spirit ally, having the power to connect with the spirit world and travel there and having the ability to do harm through sorcery. Shamans lead community ritual ceremonies as well as provide healing herbs and other physical healing remedies (p.462). Do Matus, Ruiz and Castaneda have some of these practices and experiences? They are all three considered Naguals and therefore Shamans. The energy work Toltecs do would therefore be considered shamanic. However, modern teachings are that all humans have a Tonal (everyday life in the Dream of the Planet) and Nagual (ability to see the energetic side of who we are as humans) and can learn to develop their Nagual.

don Ruiz had both a near death and many ethereal journeys during which he was enlightened with the wisdom of ancient Toltec healing (Nelson, 1997). He has the ability to see and move energy and to see the Nagual or spiritual essence of people. He is able to travel to other places and create his own dream. However, contrary to the criteria of shamanism reviewed by Winkelman, Ruiz does not use hallucinogens to induce a

spiritual state among his groups. Neither does he “heal” in the traditional sense of the word. He teaches how to develop awareness and heal the self. His approach includes an integration of psychological and deeper spiritual practices similar to those of cognitive behavioural psychology and Eastern meditative techniques, as examples. don Ruiz draws from many practices but uses them with a somewhat different intent: the intent is to become aware, transform your life and become the artist of your own dream.

Harner (1980), another anthropologist who became an expert in shamanism in his field, is acknowledged by many indigenous tribes as a Shaman. He too follows a path of living in unconditional love connected to all life and though he used hallucinogens initially, he now works through other rituals to get the same effects. There are many connections in the practices and beliefs between modern Toltec practice and other indigenous spiritual practices in Meso-America (Nelson, 1997). Castaneda said in an interview that what he practiced (his energy practice is referred to as Tensegrity) was rooted in shamanism and that the purpose of his work was shamanistic. His practice was to face infinity while alive rather than waiting until death to face it (Epstein, 1996). The goal in don Ruiz’ work is essentially the same. The goal is to live in heaven before we physically die.

### **Crossthreads with Psychotherapy**

Toltec practices have many cross-threads with psychological practices. Toltec acknowledges that the mind, body, and emotional self are all facets of who we are. Toltec practices include learning to uncover faulty beliefs and to change those beliefs and behaviours which do not work, as is done in cognitive behavioural psychology (Beck,

1995). As a practice Toltec practitioners must be aware of their own habits and challenge them to uncover beliefs and then shift behaviours.

Both Mindfulness and Toltec practices are interested in cultivating awareness, attention and remembering (Germer, Siegel & Fulton, 2005). Being mindful requires cultivating awareness and a focus of attention. Toltec is based on the principles of developing awareness, both inner and outer, and learning to focus attention and shift attention. In Mindfulness “remembering” is not about memories but the practice of remembering to shift one’s attention and awareness to current experience (p.6). The techniques of remembering and shifting perceptual lenses in each moment are very similar to that used in Toltec practice and both result in the ability to see from other perspectives.

The foundations of humanistic psychology based on Roger’s work are aligned with a premise of Toltec. Thorne (2002) states that in Rogers' later work, he acknowledged that at the root of healing was an awareness of interconnectedness that could initially occur between therapist and client but that opened the client up to their deeper connection to others. I believe this connection is brought about through the unconditional acceptance and authenticity that are hallmarks of the humanistic approach. Toltec acknowledges such principles in its practice as well. We are moved towards greater authenticity and we learn to accept ourselves and others for who we are, no matter what. Both practices acknowledge as well that self-love is central to happiness and peace and the good of society (Thorne, 2002; Rosenthal, 2005).

## **Integration of psychology and spirituality**

The integration of spirituality with psychology goes back in the literature as far as William James (1902). Today there is a school of psychology referred to as transpersonal psychology, which integrates personal psychology with spiritual development and mystical experiences:

Transpersonal psychologists attempt to integrate timeless wisdom with modern Western psychology and translate spiritual principles into scientifically grounded, contemporary language. Transpersonal psychology addresses the full spectrum of human psychospiritual development - from our deepest wounds and needs, to the existential crisis of the human being, to the most transcendent capacities of our consciousness. (Caplan, 2009, p. 231)

Transpersonal psychology has its roots with William James, then Abraham Maslow, Stanislov Grof and others in the 1960's, and is situated in the humanistic psychology movement. The integration of psychology with spirituality is described succinctly by A.H. Almaas (Davis, 2000), who developed the Diamond Approach. Almaas wrote in an article on his website about the approach:

...a contemporary teaching that developed within the context of awareness of both ancient spiritual teachings and modern depth psychological theories... ...this teaching recognizes the inherent synthesis between the spiritual and the psychological domains of experience. The spiritual and the psychological can be separated only in theory, for in experience they are two dimensions of the same human consciousness. Recognizing this truth makes it possible to approach the path to inner realization informed with modern psychological knowledge, and

thus allows the process of understanding one's psychological experience to open one's consciousness to the deeper truths of our spiritual nature. (Almaas, n.d., p.1)

Davis (2000) wrote about transpersonal as an ideology and practice which borrows from psychology, shamanism and spiritual aspects of many religions in its practice and its goal. In this sense it is like Toltec work, which draws from all paths, both recognizing the "unity that underlies all forms [and] ...the fundamental non-duality of the universe" underlying all forms (David, 2000, n.p.n.).

Both Almaas (Davis, 2000) and Toltec teachers (Rosenthal, 2005, Nelson, 1997) ascertain that we are beings of energy, though they might disagree on what energy is or what the purpose of our journey is as energy beings. Regardless, both would agree that the integrating phenomenon of the psychological and spiritual is energy. The Diamond Approach is a path of transformation to self-realization, "penetrating the false images and patterns and grounding our lives in an unrelenting love for our lives as they are... grounded in the present. Psychological growth is seen as an aspect of spiritual growth, inseparable from it. If this exploration of ourselves is deep enough and sincere enough, it will lead to spiritual awakening, development and eventually liberation" (Davis, n.d., n.p.n.).

Ken Wilber (2001a), originally a transpersonal psychologist and philosopher, separated himself from the transpersonal group and identified his philosophy as integral psychology; a psychology which he believes encompasses all aspects of transpersonal psychology and more. Wilber explains psychological development and spiritual development as being on the same "levels" and "lines" of consciousness development

(p.256). These lines include cognitive, moral, emotional, spiritual and other lines or strands (my word) of different levels which include body, mind, soul and spirit as well as others. Altogether he postulates a 12 level spectrum and states that these levels are not linear, but arranged as a spectrum and each level is available for development independent of each other. Based on his definition, psychology and spirituality are on a continuum, one not being necessary for the other, but the upper most levels of all psychological lines to be achieved, are spiritual (p.271). Wilber's developmental processes would include developing awarenesses and understandings in each area.

Toltec has three Masteries that are followed in training but development is overlapped. One must develop a strong and aware mind and an understanding of thought, emotion and behaviour. The Masteries include the Mastery of Awareness, in which one comes to understand that they are dreaming and they are more than their mind. The Mastery of Transformation focuses on increasing awareness of the energies of thought, emotion and personal habits and begins the process of putting awareness into action. Finally, the Mastery of Intent is where the intent of the individual becomes aligned with the intent of the Divine, or Infinite (Vigil, 2001, Ruiz & Ruiz, 2010). In Toltec the Masteries are revisited many times in the development of awareness, like a spiral, each time going deeper into awareness of the illusions brought on by thought and emotion. With the unlayering of illusions and increase in awareness of these aspects of who we are, we move forward to a deeper more spiritual place in ourselves. Toltec work sees the need, as do transpersonal and integral psychology, for both psychological and spiritual development. Both see the inseparable nature of the psychological and the spiritual. The end result in both practices is the same: spiritual growth culminates in the individual

connecting to the whole of life through unity consciousness (Wilber), enlightenment (Buddhism) or living in alignment with the Infinite (Toltec).

Many types of bodywork such as Therapeutic Touch (Krieger, 1979), Reiki (Usui, 2000), and Bioenergetics (Lowen, 1975), claim that healing can result from and be processed through moving energy. These practices indicate through their successes that energy is carried in the body and that we can heal through the movement of energy.

### **Location of Project in Scholarly Research**

For the purpose of this study, I am interested in finding a position for this research in scholarly writing. I would probably have to cross-reference Toltec somewhere between shamanistic writings and the integral/transpersonal writings which align psychology with spirituality. Toltec can be situated as a modern or popular shamanistic practice. It is undeniable, however, that all psychological and spiritual practices have in some way been embraced in Toltec practice much in the same way as in integral psychology. There are many paths one can take but they all lead one to the same place - oneness, connection, infinity, unity consciousness. In this outcome, Toltec is consistent with integrative and transpersonal psychology, shamanism, Buddhist practices and the practices of Christian mystics, plus many more. Toltec aligns most significantly with the westernized practice of ancient philosophy and with all of the above.

### **Chapter 3: A Brief Introduction to Toltec**

#### **Circle of Fire Prayer**

**today, the day of our Lord**

**when the divinity returns to me**

**when living my free will**

**and with all the power of my spirit**

**I decide to live my life**

**in free communion with God**

**with no expectations**

**I will live my life with gratitude,**

**love, loyalty and justice**

**beginning with myself**

**and continuing with my brothers and sisters.**

**I will respect all creation**

**as a symbol of my love communion**

**with the One who created me**

**to the eternal happiness of humanity.**

**-don Miguel Ruiz**

The lived experience of participants who practice Toltec work is presented in Chapter Five. I think however it is necessary to supply the reader with an understanding of the principles and concepts of Toltec work. Then readers can understand references made by the research participants. There is a basic philosophy of Ruiz' teachings that is compatible with that of Castaneda, but Toltec practice as described here will be explained from the point of view of Ruiz (1997) and two of his students, Rosenthal (2005) and Nelson (1997). There is a strong tie through don Ruiz's family to the ancient roots of the Nagual lineage.

It is important to note that although I take my information from external sources, my description of Toltec and my choices of what I present in this paper are through my perspective lens. I cannot describe everything nor can I describe it based on everyone's perspective. The description of Toltec concepts and other information about Toltec is through my lens as a practitioner and as researcher. In Chapter Five I will describe the perspectives of the participants. Here I write from my perspective and so it is my bias and interpretation that is presented. Each practitioner will see Toltec philosophy and work based on their subjective perception. This is in keeping with Husserl's natural attitude that supports all points of view being from a subjective reality (Findlay, 2011, p.47).

### **Who Humans Are**

Let me begin with the make-up of the human so that the orientation of how to move through dreaming and through awareness and stalking will have a structural premise. Diagram One below shows how the human is composed energetically. The spirit of the human forms a luminous egg around the physical body. Attached to the

physical body, and not necessarily where I have drawn it, is the body of the mind or emotion, which is made up of ethereal energy. Inside the mind is the black light, which is “pure love, or the love which purifies” (Nelson, 1997, p.102). It is the same black light of the sun. It is the essence of who we really are from the Toltec perspective.

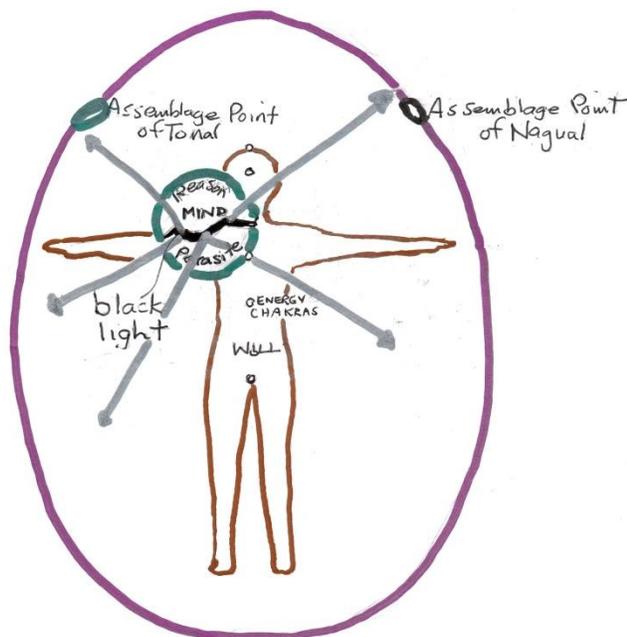


Diagram One: Human Energy Egg

When, through awareness and stalking, we crack open the mind, or eliminate the dominance of the Parasite, the black light shines through. Once the egg is cracked, there is no going back. The individual has learned to live free of the Parasite and from a different assemblage point. Rosenthal (2005) explains the assemblage point, a point on the outside of the egg of our energy selves which is our point of view. From different assemblage points we perceive different points of view and at different rates of energy. The Tonal perspective is very small and comes from our mind. From Rosenthal’s explanation, we learn to see from “heightened awareness”, by moving our assemblage point of perception to see from the Nagual, which is to see beyond reason. Here we see

ourselves as light beings (p. 47). Different practitioners will state that where assemblage points sit varies or is not important (P1 in conversation). Shifting perception, which is explained through the eyes of the participants in the study, is this shift in assemblage point.

As a person of perception, you have different points of view that can perceive different rates of energy. The assemblage point makes different fluctuations in the will, from deep in the will to the surface of the human “egg”. The assemblage point is the place where you perceive this reality. Emotions of anger, jealousy and fear occupy only a small range of this point of view. From other parts of your total point of view you do not perceive them. It is possible to move out of the range at which they can be perceived until you have almost no connection with this reality at all (Ruiz in Nelson, p.102, 1997).

Toltecs understand themselves as “persons of perception” with “different points of view that can perceive different points of energy” (Ruiz, in Nelson, 1997, p.102). There are different “assemblage points” of view with each chakra. One can only see certain things from different assemblage points. Moving out of the Dream of the Planet will shift the assemblage point to the point of view of the soul. “To make this shift, our reason sees the black light of unconditional love and lets the spirit flow out. Together reason and the spirit of love can do everything. This is the Christ and the Buddha part of the reason that is in complete alignment with the spirit” (p. 103).

As defined by Nelson (1997), the Parasite is composed of the Judge, the Victim and the belief system in the mind. This Parasite holds the belief system of the individual’s conditioning from family, community and society at large. The Judge judges

us and others for what we think, feel and do. The Victim receives the judgement and usually the Judge finds the Victim guilty (p. 62). The Judge lays blame, tortures the Victim with guilt, needs to be right, and creates drama through its incessant storytelling. The Parasite tries to protect itself and to be in charge. It tries to uphold learned beliefs and patterns of behaviour and is based on lies we tell ourselves about ourselves and others. The Parasite controls our reality as a virtual dream of fear using fear emotions. It has an ethereal energy. It is the Parasite which must crack open to allow the black light out.

The ancient Toltecs [and many other Meso American indigenous Naguals or Shamans] were aware of the Parasite's existence and they knew that humans have only two choices in regard to this invasive force. One choice [was] to surrender to the Parasite but the other choice... ..[was] to rebel, declare war against the Parasite and declare the freedom to be oneself (p.64).

The Parasite is an aspect of mind. The Parasites of all humans together create the dream of the first attention or the virtual reality of the Dream of the Planet. In the first attention, the individual does not know they are dreaming. They must realize this before they can move to the second attention. The second attention is when the dreamer is free of the domination of the Parasite in their lives. To do this they must master awareness and transformation.

### **Masteries and Essential Concepts**

Awareness is mastered by being able to see that you are dreaming. Thus the first mastery is to master awareness of the Parasite. This means to see the Judge and the Victim clearly and to detach or not react to its foibles and to take inventory of all beliefs.

To take inventory, the individual examines their beliefs to find those based on fear and works through stalking to eliminate those beliefs.

Stalking is the principle practice needed in the transformation of the individual from dreaming in the Dream of the Planet to being a master of the dream. Stalking is the way humans “wage war” on the Judge and the Victim. Stalking helps the individual see the energies and emotion which prevent clarity of seeing who they really are. “For the stalker, the personal needs to fall away a little bit as something deeper begins to grow, which cannot be controlled with the intellect” (Nelson, p.98, 1997). At a more advanced level, “stalking is a way to go into the higher realms and bring back help to lift human beings to a higher state of awareness” (p.101). It is believed that humans are moving to a heightened state on earth at this time.

The actual practice of stalking moves energy through the breath. The energy moved is ethereal energy. The movement of energy can be taking things back that were said or thought without awareness, or giving back to others things they said to the stalker. It can be letting go of a pattern of behaviour such as needing to be in control, or letting go of anger or fear. This act builds energy in the stalker.

“To a [Toltec] detachment means to move through life with an absence of prejudice or bias, and with a degree of separation from the things he’s involved in. Detachment gives us clarity...” (Rosenthal, 2005, p.103). Detachment refers to the process of not being attached to your beliefs or to past actions. Rosenthal claims detachment is the most effective weapon of the spiritual warrior and through the stalking process one becomes less attached to the beliefs that held them to the Dream of the Planet. Detachment does not mean one does not experience love, but love becomes

unconditional as the individual is not attached to outcome and so loving others is just for the sake of loving them and oneself, just the way they are.

When mastering awareness the individual becomes aware of all fear based emotions and thoughts. The Four Agreements is a strong starting point to becoming aware and good rules of thumb to adhere to throughout the rest of the Toltec's life. Following the agreements is a pathway in to seeing that you are dreaming and that all that is happening to you as an individual is really of your own making. The following description of the four agreements is based on information from Ruiz's (1997) book *The Four agreements*.

1. Be impeccable with your word: don't go against yourself with your word. Gossiping is a good example of going against oneself. Believing that you are right can also go against yourself. The reason for this is that humans do not really know anything. Since you are always thinking/talking about yourself with the lens that you have, your own conditioned lens, going against yourself would be to believe that you really do know and to reflect that in your word. We see this when people believe they are right about something and end up arguing and getting into drama with others.

2. Don't take things personally: when people say things to you that are negative and hurtful or even positive towards you, it is really about them. It is said from their lens or perspective so it cannot really be about you. You can choose to take anything from what they say and use it if it serves you, but with the understanding that it is from their lens so ultimately, it is not the truth.

3. Don't make assumptions: We can never really be sure what will happen or how someone will act in any situation, even ourselves. Making assumptions can get you into

difficulty or drama with others when you assume they are or will do or say something.

We then get into telling stories and spreading gossip, as nothing is the truth since it is only coming from individual perspectives.

4. Always do your best: This means to do your best at anything you endeavor to do but always remember that there are extenuating circumstances that often prevent people from doing their ultimate best, such as being tired or sick, so doing your best means taking that into consideration.

The Toltec path is a path to freedom:

We normally become free of our human form when we physically die.

Participating in the Toltec process of losing the human form enables us to have the opportunity to become free *before* our death. It takes years of practicing being impeccable and saving enough personal power and energy through Dreaming and Stalking to break all the chains of our human form. But once that is accomplished, the results are wonderful (Rosenthal, 2005, p.271).

By human form Rosenthal is referring to our individual identity and story of this lifetime.

In Toltec philosophy, everything in the universe is energy, including humans. As mentioned earlier, energy is ethereal as in thought, emotion, and words and energy is connected to the breath. Energy is contained in the perspectives humans take about themselves and others. In other words, emotional reactions and judgement are energy based.

Much of the work done in this practice involves the breath. Meditations focus on the breath and the present moment, practicing acceptance, and opening up to the inner landscape. Breath is used to do stalking work. Stalking is the strategy used to increase

awareness and to move energy. Stalking one's thoughts and emotions like a jaguar stalks its prey is a practice in the first attention when the individual is still working with cracking the Parasite and recognizing that they are in a dream. Stalking practice is used to move energy, and to recapitulate energy wasted in the past. Different techniques can be used and all involve the breath and transferring energy into the earth.

Rosenthal (2005) uses the term "shifting" as a shift from perceiving the virtual reality of the mind, or the Tonal experience of the everyday, to perceiving the world as reflections of light energy, the perception of the Nagual. As stated earlier, the individual can have thousands of points of perception and when one moves from one to another that can be called shifting. Rosenthal says that to make shifts in awareness and practice using intent it is important for Toltec practitioners to store up and not drain their power or energy. Using various techniques such as stalking helps to maintain enough power to do the work as personal power is energy transformed over time.

In the third Mastery, Mastery of Intent, one becomes aligned with God or the Infinite or Divinity. Intent is life – we wake from sleep, flowers bloom, leaves on trees die. All that happens in life happens with intent. The Toltec learns to control their intent, and, being impeccable, their intent is always aligned with unconditional love. They have broken the hold of the Parasite and are in free communion with their true selves, God within.

Ruiz says we are always dreaming, 24 hours a day. During the day we engage in the collective dream which is the dream on earth. At night we may travel to other realms in the sleeping dream and we do not follow the rules of the collective agreement on earth. Dreaming was the name given to the work done by Ruiz apprentices. They learned to

transform the dream to the extent that they became Masters of Intent – meaning they have the power to change their dream. Naguals can change the dream just as Shamans do. They can move between the Tonal, everyday life and perspective and the world of the Nagual.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **Rationale for phenomenological research method**

Butler-Kisber (2010) states that phenomenological research generates a "common or shared experience[s] of a phenomenon and a deeper understanding about the features of a phenomenon" (p.53). The descriptive phenomenological research format was chosen for this study because of its applicability and simplicity in grasping the actual phenomenon of Toltec practice through the lived experience of the participants of the practice, and because the format is based on the perspective that individual perception is a valid measure of the truth of a phenomenon (Butler-Kisber, 2010).

The origins of phenomenological research stem from the philosophical phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger (Findlay, 2011). Husserl's theory aims to describe the actual phenomenon from a descriptive point of view while Heidegger proposes that one must apply an interpretation to the phenomenon being studied.

Phenomenological research demands that we see things from a subjective point of view. This type of research can only be valid if you take the stance that there is no external reality which has universal truths and which has an objective way of seeing. Quantitative research is based upon the premise that there is an external world on which to make observations and draw conclusions. Phenomenologists, as philosophers and researchers, validate their research based on the idea that there is only the point of view of each individual who is tied to the object of their focus of attention. Having a method that truly describes the experiences of individuals and gathers these points of view

together to find the invariances that exist in all perceptions provides one with a better idea of the true essence of an object, or phenomenon. Husserl called this idea the epoche of the natural attitude (Findlay, 2011, p.47).

Husserl developed a descriptive phenomenological research methodology from his philosophical perspective. He was interested in consciousness and the intentionality of consciousness, meaning how consciousness is aware and the “aboutness” of the objects it is aware of, be they thoughts, memories or externally perceived objects (Findlay, 2011, p.45). In phenomenological research, consciousness later became referred to as the lived experience of a phenomenon.

In order to be accurate in understanding the phenomenon studied, Husserl proposed that it was essential that one follow eidetic reduction. Eidetic reduction is to know the essence of a phenomenon by bracketing out the particular, the incidental and the accidental, focusing on what is invariant or the essence of the phenomenon. This is accomplished through a rigorous procedure called “free variation in imagination” which requires one to freely change aspects of the phenomenon in order to distinguish the essential features (Findlay, 2011, p.48). If a change of a particular characteristic of the phenomenon changes the identity of the phenomenon, then it would be considered an essential feature (Beck, C., 2013, p.134). Free variation is applied within the analysis of the phenomenon.

Giorgi (2009) follows Husserl’s assumptions about phenomenological study but rejects Husserl’s theory of transcendental reduction, which refers to the researcher transcending the perspective of human consciousness and viewing the phenomenon from a state of pure consciousness. Instead, Giorgi developed a descriptive phenomenological

research method that is geared to psychological studies in research. Giorgi believed that the researcher carrying out a psychological study should “bracket out” her past knowledge of what is being experienced, and focus on the lived experience of the participant, which is a reflection of the participant’s own truth (Findlay, 2011, p.75). The researcher should maintain a psychological attitude that includes special sensitivity towards the phenomenon being investigated. This means remaining open to what she hears and sees, and being empathetic towards, and developing trust with the participants to allow for an honest and open sharing of experience to occur, much as we do in therapy (Giorgi, 2009).

Both Butler-Kisber (2010) and Findlay (2011) state that bracketing is all but impossible to do completely. The researcher impacts the research participants, or co-researchers, and the participants impact each other by how they interact with the world with their bodies and their words and what their lived experience of the world is as they interact with it (Finlay, 2011, p.77). Based on the philosophical stance of Husserl’s phenomenology, the researcher is one with the object of the phenomenon and with each participant, sharing a space and a dialogue while in the process of researching. Research findings are co-created through that dialogue and shared space (Findlay, 2011, p.80). This is why a credible researcher must declare her biases and take measures or precautions to ensure that she influences the data with her own perspective as little as possible *throughout* the study. Garza (2007) says it is up to the researcher to share their point of view about the research to offer clarity about their influence:

While one may not fully be able to “place into brackets” one’s oft unthematized stance before the subject of one’s inquiry, one can endeavor to describe it as completely as possible so as to illuminate how it has affected what our inquiries disclose. (p.315)

Findlay (n.d.) states that the idea of bracketing is really for the researcher to attempt to be open and see the world differently throughout the research, “allowing the phenomenon to present itself to us instead of imposing preconceived ideas on it” (p.5). In this research study I must see the phenomenon with which I am so intimate with new eyes, suspending what I have experienced and come to believe through my own Toltec work. Psychological reduction and suspending beliefs are crucial to the phenomenological method. Interestingly, suspending beliefs and examining one’s own beliefs at all times is a natural part of being in Toltec practice.

Findlay (2011) points out as well that as researchers we need to “reflect reflexively on meanings arising in our research and upon our roles as researchers in constituting those meanings” (p.79). She states that we do a reductive reflexive dance where we are continuously in reflection about our assumptions on our experiences of the phenomenon being examined.

Colaizzi (1978), a student of Giorgi, developed a method of descriptive analysis which allows for researchers to study themselves being both researcher and participant, and participants as both participants and co-researchers. For this to be credible the researcher must be very clear about assumptions and self-reflection must be rigorous. Transparency is key to the credibility of the research. In this study, the researcher is involved in the discussion as both researcher and participant. Participants will be co-researchers and have the opportunity to ask different questions not thought of by the

researcher and to alter questions proposed by the researcher at the onset of the interview. Done this way, the researcher's perspective will form part of the data and add transparency to the researcher's point of view. Comparisons can then be easily made between the experiences of other participants to those of the researcher to clarify the tensions between those views. The tension created by this process will be noted throughout the process of gathering and analyzing the data. Findlay (2011) states that choosing exactly which method of analysis to use is no easy task. I have chosen a descriptive phenomenological approach because my goal is to find the essence of the lived experience of the phenomenon. This is a phenomenon that has not been studied before and this study must address the essence of what the phenomenon is. I have chosen Colaizzi's (1978) method of analysis because it allows for participants to be co-researchers. Also with this method, the research is dialogical, with dialogue occurring only among persons of equal levels, negating the distinction between participant and researcher (Beck, 2013, p.137).

### **Steps in Researching the Question**

Colaizzi's method provides a strong measure of validity (Edward & Welch, 2011). This method includes the following steps (Beck, C., 2013):

1. Read and re-read all participants descriptions to acquire a feel for them.
2. Return to each protocol and extract significant statements about the phenomenon
3. Formulate formal meanings for each significant statement
4. Organize formulated meanings into clusters or themes, looking for common patterns across experiences
5. Refer clusters and themes back to original protocols in order to validate them.

6. Write an exhaustive description of themes and check against original descriptions of participants
7. Note any discrepancies among or between clusters – are there any which do not fit?
8. Adding any new insights, integrate into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon
9. Formulate an exhaustive description of the phenomenon in as unequivocal a statement as possible
10. Conduct a final validation with each participant about findings. (p.136)

### **Procedure**

The plan for the research was one initial group interview to gather data about the research questions, however, due to circumstances it ended up being two group interviews of half of the seven participants in each interview. Two of the participants attended both interviews resulting in four in the first interview and six in the second interview. Participants met at the home of one of the participants, a place where participants frequently meet to do group work. The mentor was one of the participants and joined in both interviews. Before the initial interview meetings, each participant was emailed a copy of the principle research question: "What is the lived experience of following the Toltec path to attain spiritual and psychological healing?" and the additional questions (Appendix A) that were proposed for the interview. They were also sent an emailed copy of the consent form (Appendix B). The interview was audio-taped from beginning to end with a Zoom H2N audio tape recorder which has excellent sound quality for picking up speech from different points in a large room. At the beginning of

each interview the researcher opened with a discussion of the consent form and each participant signed their copy. The format of the interviews was then discussed and the participants received an explanation of the researcher as participant and participant as researcher and that as co-researchers they were involved in the formulation of the sub-questions, making changes and/or additions they felt were pertinent to understanding the primary research question. They then reviewed the sub-questions. It was explained that even though these could be altered the principle research question was to stay the same. The participants themselves did stray off a number of times during the interviews and were brought back to the primary research question by either the researcher or the mentor, who was very supportive in the process of interviewing. The participants also introduced other topics such as trust and truth, though these were explored within the context of the lived experience. The first interview lasted for three hours and the second for two and a half hours. Following the initial interviews, I transcribed the tapes word for word over a two week period, then reviewed a second time for accuracy. These transcriptions formed the content of the data from which the analysis was conducted. The participants were sent a copy of the transcribed data to review, allowing them an opportunity to comment on the accuracy of the transcriptions. This is not part of Colaizzi's method but I felt it as a good step to take to ensure validity in the study.

To clarify the themes and significant meaning extracted from the data as per step six of Colaizzi's method, a copy was emailed to each participant of the analysis and themes. This allowed the participants to provide feedback on the accuracy of the analysis in reflecting their meaning as well as providing an opportunity to provide further depth and clarity of meaning to the findings from their perspectives. While in the throes of

writing up the analysis, the researcher approached some of the participants to clarify a few statements made during the interviews to clarify the meaning of what they said.

### **Validity**

As a measure of researcher reflexivity, I reflected within the context of the study about my own perspectives and expectations of the research results as the research was unfolding, taking notes from the beginning of the study. After conducting the literature review and researching methodology, I knew that I already had some expectations and beliefs about what the Toltec path is from my ten years of involvement with it. I wrote those down in a note book for later reflection and guidance during the course of the analysis and have written about these factors in the data analysis.

As another measure, the participants collaborated on the questions important to them in revealing the meaning of the phenomenon, while adhering to the primary research question, during the actual interviews. The participants knew in advance that they could take liberty to shift the focus to address the lived experience of the phenomenon in a way that was meaningful to them. As a co-participant, I described my lived experience of the phenomenon with the other participants in the interviews. This group is a unified group, having met together for years to work on deep, spiritual processes. The researcher strived to clarify any statements shared by other participants that she herself believed to add clarity to others' lived experiences. This occurred a number of times during both interviews, with the researcher reflecting statements back to participants and asking for more clarification when she felt she wanted to hear something more to differentiate her views from the others. This clarity added transparency to the data.

## **Trustworthiness**

The participants have always been open and candid with each other, including me. However, because of the common history, I could potentially misinterpret findings simply by making assumptions as I listen to the participants' words or read the data, such as: "Oh that is what P means...I know how she usually talks about it". I was very clear about this possibility and so I listened to and re-read the interviews carefully with this in mind. As another example, there is one participant that I frequently do not understand. She can be very abstract and sometimes I am not clear on what she is explaining about her experience. Within the context of the interview, it would be essential that I ask her to explain anything that is not clear to avoid making assumptions or missing her point. Interestingly, during the interview she was one of the participants I felt I clearly understood. Trustworthiness was also built into the analysis process, as discussed by Colaizzi (1978) in his method, by returning to the participants for their input and feedback on the analysis and conclusions. This is referred to as "participant validation or member checking" and is known in phenomenological research as a strong measure of validity (Findlay, 2011, p.223).

Trustworthiness is enhanced by varying the participants, taking them from different sources and therefore increasing the diversity of the group (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p.14). I will use the extensive field texts or books written by other Toltec teachers describing the practices of the phenomenon. The group participants themselves have varied experiences and exposure to different Toltec teachers and experiences. Five of the seven participants have trained in some Toltec work with others teachers, going on a journey to Teotihuacan or other places, or belonging to an on-line network of Toltec

practitioners. This is useful because the group is close and our mentor has her own perspective on Toltec work, from which we all learn. Because most of us have worked with other Toltec teachers and have a broad understanding, we all have formed our own perspectives.

### **Participants**

There are thousands of individuals with many, many teachers all over North America and Mexico and in Europe who practice Toltec and there are just about as many ways to practice. The Toltec group being interviewed works with a mentor who herself was mentored by dona Bernadette Vigil and don Miguel Ruiz for twelve years. Ours is the only group which practices in Canada under a direct student of Ruiz. There are a few others who teach in Canada but none have the experience and connection with Miguel Ruiz for as long or as intimately. This group was chosen for this reason and because it is easily accessible. Of the seven participants, one has been living the Toltec path for 22 years (mentor), two have been with the group for ten years, three have been in the group for seven years, and one for four years. The participants are ages 42 to 64. One member is a male and the rest are female. The group attends gatherings monthly for two or three days. The group members participating in the study all attend these sessions with only occasional absences. The group is held at the home of the mentor and a few times a year the group is held at a participant's home in the country.

### **Ethics**

My relationship to each participant is one of emotional and spiritual intimacy as we have shared from the depths of our souls and hearts with each other. Toltec work is deep work. Each participant understands that my research is meant to provide an

understanding to readers of how we evolve in our healing and how we continue to evolve and they are aware that they are sharing of themselves on a deep and intimate level. Each participant joined the study of his or her own free will. The participants are all literate and of average or above average intelligence. No one is infirm or cognitively impaired in any way.

Informed consent (Appendix B) was first sent to participants through email for them to review before the interviews. It was then explained at the beginning of the interviews and their written consent was obtained. The consent form included permission to further publish findings of the study in journals or other print. The participants will additionally be informed of any further publication just before it takes place, even though they have signed permission for further publication. On the informed consent form there is a clause that states that a member of the group may decline to be involved and withdraw their contribution at any time during the process of gathering information through interviews. The participants will remain anonymous and the letter P plus a number will signify each participant: P1, P2...P7. Any other names referred to by participants in the data, including dog names, will not be identified.

Any reference that they made that would suggest their identity, such as cultural affiliation or place of work is changed within the thesis document. The mentor will be only identified as a participant though it will become clear through the discussion of the findings which participant she is. The advantage of having the mentor in the group, besides her experience and insight, is that, should any of the group members experience an emotional response to the interview process, she will be present to support them. The mentor herself has never, in the ten years I have known her, needed support with any of

the deep encounters we all experience under her guidance. My observation proved correct as she handled the two participants who did feel vulnerable during the interviews well, and she did not indicate any concerns of her own throughout the process. We all have a history of holding space for and being supportive of each other in the group, including the mentor. Overall, no harm came to the participants during the carrying out of this study. They have been given a high level of anonymity and were comfortable in the location where we met. They were reassured that data about the study including both tapes and written material would be safely stored.

I informed the participants that except for the principle research question they were free to alter the sub research questions. I told them that they must keep the primary question in mind at all times whether the sub-questions were altered or not.

### **Reflections on the Research Process**

My role as researcher and participant was sometimes difficult. On the one hand it was easy to immerse myself into the process of being a participant because I do have my own experience of what Toltec is and was able to participate in this. As researcher I had to simultaneously keep an eye on whether or not we strayed from the principal research question and support participants as they recounted their lived experience. The mentor of the group supported me significantly in this process. She repeated the words lived experience at key times when she felt participants were going off topic and she asked relevant questions that supported a deeper understanding of our processes. She also dealt with one participant, P5, who was unable to shift into a wider perspective from just being stuck in the mind. That this happened during the interviews was quite helpful because the mentor was then able to demonstrate the lived experience of shifting perspective,

within the context of the interview. During the second interview I noted that one participant was resistant to the process and another participant spoke very little. However, both of these participants did contribute to the data that was gathered.

**Analysis.** Another factor which I found interesting and somewhat difficult to work with was the way our group members tend to finish each other's sentences and ideas. We are a close group and we do share many ideas about what we do. This happened several times over the two interviews, more so in the first interview, and while transcribing I noted that sometimes I could not really say that P2 felt this and P3 felt that. The actual experiences that were conveyed were definitely the experience of one individual but many of the group had had similar experiences. Experiences were often spoken of as shared experiences, which is the essence of the Toltec experience.

While transcribing I noted that we often talked generally such as "*you* experience this" or that happens to *you*". Because of the way Toltec works anything anyone says is really a reflection of what they feel and believe themselves. It is interesting to note that even though the research has seven participants, the group would unanimously agree that everything that is reported is all about me, the researcher! Each of the participants agrees that everyone else in the group is a reflection of themselves. In this manner of understanding, it is a self-study.

When the interviews were transcribed it occurred to me that they were not lengthy descriptions by one participant at a time. The group works as a whole and often what happened in the process was that everyone just talked and the explanations of lived experience came out as a group response. This did not work against how those in the group see themselves in their process. But given this state of affairs, pulling out quotes

from the study was a complex task of knowing when an idea was finished with and who agreed with it and who did not, since many participants would add something to each idea. Sometimes I wonder if I should not have done interviews with each individual separately, but I really believed that as a group I would get a larger sense of the work than talking to separate participants. I am not sure if there is a precedent for working with this type of interview within phenomenological research, but ultimately I need to quote conversations rather than individual responses to be able to gather the meaning of the phenomenon.

The process for analysis was modified from the analysis proposed by Giorgi(2009) and Colaizzi (1978), himself a student of Giorgi. Giorgi (2009) recommends that once the transcription is complete the researcher must transform the data into the third person. I decided that I would transcribe the data into the third person because I wanted to distance myself from the data and to look at it more objectively. I felt that if my own contributions were in the third person they would be more easily observed by me as one of the participant's contributions as opposed to my own contribution. This seemed to work, as I was reviewing the transcriptions, I noted that I did not even look at who said what.

I chose not to transform the data into psychological essences based on Giorgi's methodology, as I felt that this was not my task in describing what Toltec is. Toltec is not only a psychological experience, but a deep spiritual path. I wanted to provide a clear description with no additional lenses to those of the participants by using the psychological perspective. From then on I chose to follow more of Colaizzi's (1978) method, re-reading and re-reading the data. I marked repetitive ideas with a colored

highlighter and found between sixteen and twenty five different aspects to be considered when developing the themes.

The data was transcribed twice by the researcher alone over a two week period. This was a rich process where I found new ideas and connections with each exposure to the oral data. I found that after I had listened to it once, I had so much insight into what the data could provide. After the second listening, however, I did not find it as clear but I did note some connections between different aspects. On the first reading after listening to the data twice I felt as if I did not know anything at all. This movement from knowing to not-knowing contributed to my process and growth of understanding the essential nature of the phenomenon. Thus I gained something beneficial from the freshness of listening to actual words soon after the interviews and later I gained even more perspective after reading and re-reading the text that I had created.

**Interviews.** The interviews themselves were awareness building for all members of the group as we seldom talk about our process in such a way. The mentor also shared a lot about her process that we might not have otherwise heard. The interview process was enlightening and it illuminated, I believe for all of us, what we were doing and gave it more strength and us more conviction and understanding on a mental level.

My initial response when listening to the tape of the second interview was that the mentor, as one of the participants was taking away from the perceptions of the other participants. I asked the group after they had read the interviews and read about the themes of the research if they thought that having the mentor as part of the group interview may have skewed any of their answers. Their answer was no, yet a couple of them commented that during the second interview both I and the mentor were asking

questions rather than just me as researcher. Yes the mentor was asking about lived experience as she was trying along with me to keep everyone on track. They said that the mentor's role is to usually make us go deeper so asking the questions about lived experience was a dual role for her. Our way to respond to our mentor is to listen to her and go deeper into our process. The mentor is very direct and tunes into what we are saying, and knowing this, I as researcher gave her room to probe participants more. But this also made me step back and watch the interview unfold some of the time and not shift the process to where I thought it could go. I trusted that with her dual role we would come out with a richer and deeper conversation. I believe that this did happen. Did the group respond differently because of her presence? I think if anything it enriched the responses. It may have made us focus on the real work we do instead of what we might think we do from a reasoning perspective. So this was positive and did not take away from the research process and goal.

Beforehand and throughout the interviews, I was concerned about getting the participants to talk about their lived experience. There seemed to be three aspects to their lived experience: The internal lived experience, the lived experience of processing within the group and the lived experience in the lives of each participant with family, work and friends, etc. What the group made particularly clear to me on a couple of occasions during the interviews, was that they experienced no separation between how they lived within the group or outside of the group. This work required a commitment and living in awareness at all times. They believed that this work was fully experiential and it was impossible to do it any other way. However, I still felt that participants shared

more about their ideas of what Toltec was as practice in the group than about experiences they had outside of the group.

**The changing perspectives of research participants.** The participants were concerned about the words they spoke being considered their perspective for all of the time rather than just their perspective in that moment and context in the interview.

P6 If I say anything about where I am at with words then it is locked in and I don't want to lock in on anything.

There is an ongoing changing nature to this work. We are always in the process of continued awareness so that anything an individual thinks, believes or feels at one point may change in the next when a new awareness shows up and the old awareness dies. The participants' concern was alleviated simply by me stating that I would be writing this caveat in the document so that readers would know about this changing nature of our work. Nothing stays the same. As researcher, I addressed it by stating that nothing they say in the interview is set in stone as our awareness shifts and it will do so even in this interview process.

One example of the changing nature of how we talk about and experience life is the concept of narrower verses wider lens of awareness. This concept frequently spoken about in the interview is not necessarily new but our way of perceiving the concept through the expression of narrower verses wider lens *is* new. And the next time we meet it may have altered again. Still that does not mean there is no continuity to the work. It only means that we are constantly in the process of discovery.

While writing the transcription out I noticed there were sometimes words missing or un-clear. The reader will note use of [ ] within quotes of the participants taken from

transcripts. This notation means that a word was added for grammatical clarity or was surmised from listening to the text and making the most logical guess. This notation was also used when a name was said and was replaced with who that person was to the participant, such as [girlfriend]. If this notation appears blank, [ ], it implies that irrelevant text was removed. When used within quotes from other sources, its' use was already within the quote before it was transcribed to this document.

This researcher believes that the study was representative of the points of view of the participants that there was an established trust between us. The analysis was credibly thorough and at the end of the study the participants felt they had learned something and given something of themselves. They were satisfied overall with the themes produced and conclusions drawn from the analysis and they acknowledged in their feedback from their review of the conclusion drawn from the data that it was accurate and reflected their points of view.

## Chapter 5: Data Analysis

### What is the Toltec path?

**Does it matter?** When I began the interviews for this paper I had some preconceived ideas about what Toltec was and what it meant to follow the “Toltec path”. I had many reactions listening to the interviewees and later reading the data. I wanted to correct participants in the interviews when they stated that they did not believe they did Toltec work, that they were not Toltecs. One participant stated that she did not know what Toltec was. Two participants were clear that this was Toltec work to them and two others admitted that they used Toltec tools. While listening to their perceptions of their own work in the interviews, it was necessary for me to be very aware of bracketing my own perception of what Toltec was to me. I needed to stay clear and focus on the difference perceptions I was hearing. I was able to have my own perception as one of the seven participants of the group and this allowed me to let go of the need to push for my own subjective way of seeing Toltec practice.

Certainly the participants shared that they do so much more than strictly what one might surmise modern Toltec practice to be at this point in time and they do not do some things that some Toltec practitioners *do* do, such as dreaming in other realities. Interestingly, the members of the group actually used Toltec tools and were not always cognizant of where these tools came from or what their significance was. The practice itself is not cognitive work in nature at all, and so, for the group, the actual origin of different tools is not important. What is important is the actual process they facilitate.

By the end of the interviews the group was able to come to an agreement that they do use Toltec tools and that these tools are foundational in bringing them to where they are in the evolution of their process.

The participants made it clear that they were not concerned about whether they called it Toltec or not. They were using the tools, but what they called them was not significant. No one actually called themselves a Toltec, though P1 did say that she was Toltec, but she was also more than that. She said that she is the accumulation of all that has gone before in her learning, including Buddhism and her understanding from being trained as a therapist. She felt that who was doing the work shaped how the work was done.

P1 Our group is evolving in our own unique way. We all bring something “to the pot” and the chemical mix. The energy that we are, our evolution, is the way we do it.

The task I have undertaken by writing about the lived experience of Toltec is quite a difficult one. For as P1 said, quoting from the Tao te Ching (Mitchell, 1988):

The Tao that can be told  
is not the eternal Tao  
The Tao that can be named  
Is not the eternal Name.

-Lao Tzu

The essence of this work is the same as the Tao. It is everything and it is nothing. It is Toltec but it is not and it needs no name. Were they to be working with the Christian mystics, the Tibetan or Zen Buddhists, it would be a different practice but with the same

goal. They are practicing to attain something which cannot be identified with words. P5 asked P1 what Toltec was and she replied, “Does it matter?” P5 knew that it did not matter, but at the time of asking six years ago, he wanted to know into what he was getting involved. P3 felt the work the group does includes everything, but it is still Toltec. P7 felt she was not really clear what Toltec as philosophy was but that the tools from Toltec are very powerful. P2 said she sees Toltec as all-encompassing as it is a way of seeing and she believes that is what they all practice. There is no need for identification, except for the purpose of writing about the lived experience, and to do this words are the avenue of understanding.

Thus there was a general agreement that the participants use the Toltec tools. Even though participants did not always say so, through their conversation in the interview it became clear that their practice was based to a large degree on their knowledge of Toltec philosophy. They did not follow nor adhere strictly to the Masteries or other concepts, though they used these basic concepts and philosophy as a foundation. P1 added that there is an evolution to what she learned from dona Bernadette Vigil (2001), her first Toltec teacher, and don Miguel, and that the group is continuing the evolution in their own unique way. And that is what has happened. Her work with the group began with the four agreements workshops, and continued using the concepts and moved into richer and more varied practices. The group uses many other tools and engages the ideas of other philosophies from time to time. This was also the process by which don Miguel Ruiz trained his apprentices (Nelson, 1997). Again, it does not matter what it is called or the origin of the tools. The point is in the process and all participants demonstrated through their words their commitment to their own journeys.

Another interesting observation is what brought the participants to Toltec practice to begin with. Usually it was that they were searching for something to alleviate difficulties with relationships, or searching for spiritual depth in their lives. P5 started this work to alleviate “the pain in his life”. P2 wanted a spiritual teacher that she could learn from and found P1. P3 said that she was curious about the work and she felt a connection with the mystical aspect of a shamanistic path such as Toltec. P1 devoted years of travel on a monthly basis to work with don Miguel. Then she wanted a community closer to home and so she brought this group together.

P1 I was in the community with don Miguel. I felt that at the moment I was in that group it was where I was supposed to be and who I wanted to be with, without any concern for what I would get out of it. I started this group to have a community closer to me than California, where don Miguel’s group met.

**Toltec is experiential – practice!** Toltec is experiential. This is perhaps one of the reasons it is so difficult to actually talk about it. Everything the group spoke about is about the lived experience because the work infiltrates every moment of every day. For example, they said:

P3 It’s every day practice, it’s like a muscle, you kind of have to practice the awareness muscle.

The ‘practice’ of Toltec, or any deeper practice such as this, is to work with it on a moment to moment basis.

P2 I think for me the practice is just in every moment that I am in my body and in my head. And looking at and examining the internal dialogue. I spend a lot of time watching whatever comes up in my head.

P7 I think I make up stories about how I want the world to look and I find that this work helps me uncover the different layers that I've made up as to what is really happening ... bringing me to practice, practice in the present moment.

P3 It's practice. Not like going just once a month to a course.

P4 [This work is] constant reflection. It's how you direct ...every single minute, it's using the tools of awareness and the tools of the four agreements and being aware of that and using that in all your actions every minute of the day.

P1 I feel I have made a commitment to practice living it as best as I can.

Practice requires discipline. It requires a commitment to do this work every day, to live this work. The practice is internal and external. The internal work is personal. This is another reason it is difficult to explain. Once the internal work has moved through to a certain point then the external work, taking action, begins. But the internal work does not end. It is how they live their lives from that point forward, as some of the group said: "You can't go back." The group also expressed the difficulty of putting awareness into action, saying that it requires continuous work and a lot of struggle. In the following conversation, they express this:

P3 The other area our group has struggled with, it comes up now and then, is you can have the awareness but unless you take action...

P4 If we don't we'll just sit there.

P3 You are just entertaining yourself. And that's where I think we all end up feeling we are not taking the action even though we have all the awareness (P4 which takes discipline.) We're spinning our wheels and I think we've often said that to each other.

P4 We've all gotten mad [about it]. P5 I'm aware of everything. Now what?

P4 Action and discipline, those two go together.

P3 Sometimes I think I can't take action because actually I haven't had the internal transformation yet. I intellectually know what I can do but on some visceral level it hasn't really transformed.

P4 I think its' cause we haven't accumulated enough will ...and energy.

P5 You need to build up more energy to make the action.

The group has demonstrated discipline and tenacity because for years they continue to do this work, refining it, going deeper, despite the struggle. P1 has often said that it is more than just their efforts that makes change occur. She tried to explain that the struggle is another aspect of the mind, or Parasite and we have to let go of that struggle:

P1 It occurred to me that we are stuck on how hard things are and we struggle and we struggle and we struggle... that we perhaps forget that there is magic working *for all of us*, we forget that because we only are aware, perceiving struggle and how hard and difficult it is. Can we also at the same time do our best to perceive beyond the struggle and see where grace is in this? What can I be grateful for in this moment of struggle?

One of the questions that came up in the interviews was about different aspects of lived experience: lived experience within oneself, through the experience within the group gatherings, and experience out in the world with family and work. Everyone agreed that there was no difference except that of course when they came together they were focusing for an intense period of internal work. P1 stated she found no separation between the group work and her life in general. P6 said that the work they do together is

not separate from her life, just that the group is “a little more concentrated, agreed upon between parties”.

### **Emergent Themes**

A theme is an important pattern within the data (Findlay, 2011). From the beginning of transcription of the data awareness was a recurring theme in the words of participants. Everything was about awareness, it seemed. Reading and re-reading the data did not change this fact. The first sense that I had about the centrality of awareness as a key essence remained. Awareness “is Toltec lived experience”, as one of the participants proclaimed, and others agreed. Everything else is linked through awareness.

After some time the other integral element that was deeply essential came up. This was energy. Toltec practitioners not only see energy as the essential nature of our being, but also work with energy at all times, often directly. Energy, life, power, electricity – whatever it is called - energy runs through all life. It *is* life. Humans are energetic beings and Toltec work involves experiencing the self as energy and using practices that directly manipulate energy. Working with energy was an essential and integral part of this work for participants.

I noticed that there were a few other important “sub-themes” that seemed to be essential; however, I felt that they were actually features of the two themes of awareness and energy. One of these themes is the tools used in both awareness and energy work. Another integral part of most of the interview discussions was about shifting or changing perspectives. This is an aspect of both awareness and energy work, but I felt that it warranted a position as sub-theme given its’ essential energetic nature in going deeper into awareness. Without this ability to shift, the work would be meaningless.

The facts that the practitioners' work requires continuous practice and is experiential are also crucial sub-themes. I chose to address the experiential nature of the work separate from the discussion of the themes and sub components of the themes even though it is most certainly a sub-theme of this practice. The centrality of themes and sub-themes is indicated in Diagram Two.

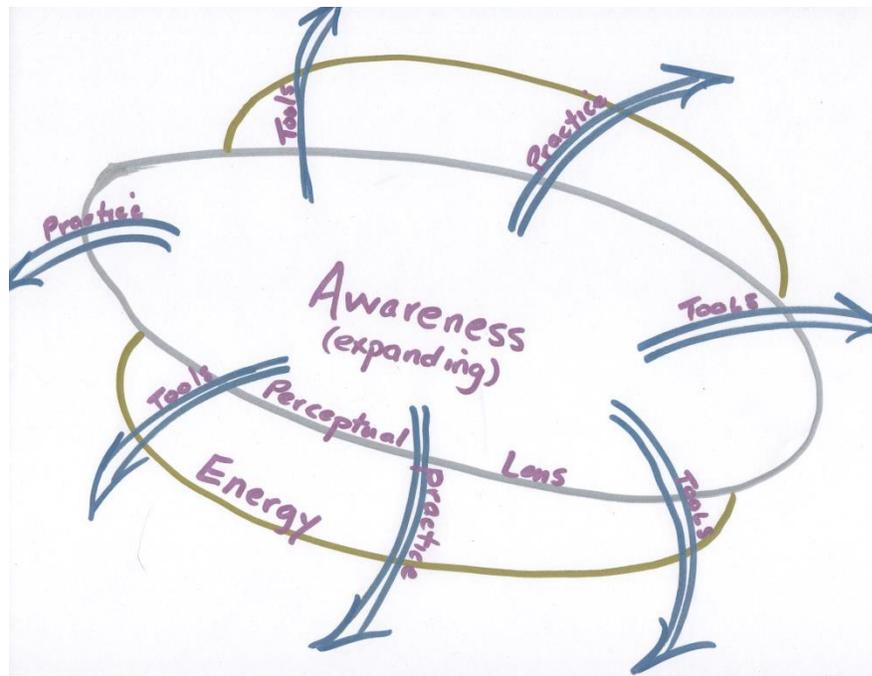


Diagram Two: Themes of Toltec Lived Experience

After the discussions about the themes and sub-themes there is a discussion about a goal of Toltec work: by practicing this work participants are artists of life.

When I applied imaginative variation, the practice of removing a key component of a phenomenon to see if it can stand on its own without that component, I asked if the lived experience of practicing Toltec work would be the same, first without awareness, then without energy. Neither of these components is removable from the essence of Toltec work. Neither is the sub-theme of transformation, of shifting perspective. Then I asked if the tools varied and the concepts changed, would the participants be

experiencing this path the same way? Perhaps not the same way, but one could go through this process differently with different tools and learn much the same thing, as P7 pointed out.

P7 I think I would have found another way to get to this point. I think I have always been searching for this, for years, but it's nice to have the group, reflect from each other, and the tools from the Toltec path or the tools from the Buddhist path or the tools from other paths I think help you come back, [and] try this so I think that eventually I would have probably been in the same situation even without the Toltec path. But I think it is a powerful tool, I guess I would call it, and that resonates with me.

So the question becomes, what is Toltec? Is it a practice with ancient roots that is “a way in”, using awareness and energy? If one were to practice Tibetan Buddhism or Zen Buddhism the goal would be much the same – awareness of oneself as not separate from the whole of life. Toltec could be considered one of many ancient practices that support deep spiritual work towards the same end. Toltec is fundamentally a way of perceiving, a way of being in the world. Therefore any concept participants understand and embrace will be through that lens.

One example of this lens came during a discussion about the concept of truth. Why do individuals do this work? Is there a truth to be sought through this work? What is apparent is that Toltec practice attempts to eliminate illusion. The layers of awareness strip away illusion with each new understanding. But is it truth that is sought? And what is truth? Ruiz (1997) says that truth is different for everyone based on their perception. That is what participants decided after some discussion as well. The essence of this

practice is that, regardless of what comes up in this practice of awareness, the answer is that we as humans cannot know. So even with this conclusion: we really do not know what truth is.

This is truth through the Toltec lens, and yet it is not. What is unique about Toltec is its philosophy, its ancient roots, its perspective and the practice itself. Other than that, it is just another path.

### **Theme One: Awareness**

Awareness came up more often than any other aspect of the lived experience for participants. Awareness *is* the lived experience of this work, of challenging all that comes into consciousness. Awareness works to break patterns, re-program beliefs and tune in to and love the self. Awareness is knowing that you are more than the mind and personality. You are energy: you are life itself. And yet, awareness is knowing that you do not know anything. The following quotes embody the lived experience of always being aware, from the inner world of the individual to how that individual is reflecting out into the Dream of the Planet. Awareness is key from the very beginning of the practice. Awareness deepens and deepens one's experience. There is no practice if one is not always engaged in the process of being aware.

P2 My lived experience [of Toltec] is being constantly aware of what is going on inside and out and trying to challenge the Parasite, love the Parasite, and incorporate that into everything that is my daily life.

P1 We can talk about one thing [in the interview], but we find that awareness goes through all of this.

P4 It's so intense awareness, we're talking constant every second of awareness.

And that's what we're learning in our group in pure silence all the time now.

P4 Awareness extends to all life, goes beyond humanity, relates to everything. It is not about us.

P1 [Awareness] of what we're thinking, how we are, the awareness comes first in my sense. And then with that awareness I can become aware of how I perceive awareness itself. Because without awareness I have no idea - I'm just being caught up in the web [of stories] that I spin, about you and you and you and me. But with awareness then I know, OK, now what am I, what am I feeling, is this really what is happening? And sometimes I don't know, and sometimes I might be so convinced that this is what it is but actually it is not.

The idea of knowing that you do not know is an end product of awareness. Awareness practice leads to this understanding.

P2 Every time you think you know what is going on another layer peels off and you find that you don't know and then you perceive something else and your awareness increases.

As P2 points out, her idea of what enlightenment is changes with more and more awareness, to being in the present moment and experiencing that moment on all levels, including the energetic level:

P2 Being here now is what enlightenment is to me, and what this work does, it's being here now and that awareness of thought, that awareness of feeling, that awareness of the energy... ....[awareness] changes everything...

**The process of awareness.** The process of becoming aware is slow, and one often finds it is best done slowly, because letting go of beliefs is really quite a challenging thing to do. The group talked about taking ‘baby steps’. They talked about peeling away layers of awareness - “peeling off a layer” and getting to a place of not knowing, then opening up to a new awareness. Then the process is “cycled” again. This is the process and this process goes on in deeper and deeper ways, eventually allowing the individual to become aware of the infinite number of choices available to think, feel and act. The group often experiences a place where they do not deliberate in the mind to take the next action all of the time, but are experiencing the moment to moment response of just being with what is without analyzing it. As P1 expresses, it was not always like that for her. But this is where she is now in how she interacts with her surroundings: she simply makes a choice about where she puts her attention.

P1 I have not always been like this. I remember being the way everybody is... needing to plan ahead, needing to know... needing a goal or a result or an outcome to be a certain way. And it’s not that I’m not aware of it now, I am aware of that coming through my awareness, but I’m also aware that I am the artist and I choose where I put my attention. So it’s not so much my going, ‘I don’t want to think about it’; I’m going ‘OK, I am now choosing to focus here’.

As P6 explains, her experience of her dog being euthanized was something that she was able to choose in the moment, not something that her mind could dictate based on social beliefs or past experiences that she has learned from. She has the freedom to choose in the moment how she will experience the situation:

P6 So I'm only creating my experience. I'm actually not creating anyone else's experience. Through awareness ...the awareness is that it is up to me, it's more up to me, I don't have to have a reflex reaction that this is how you are supposed to react when your dog dies. I don't have to act that way. I can choose...to be unconditional and to explore other different ways of being and different perceptions. And then that brings in freedom. You're free to have different perceptions rather than there is only one perception that's true and you must have that one.

**Four agreements.** Everyone in the group has read the *Four Agreements* (Ruiz, 1997) and most have read the *Fifth Agreement* (Ruiz & Ruiz, 2010). The agreements are a tool for building awareness but they are very deep in their truth of how awareness moves through layers of depth over and over again. In the interviews the four agreements were expressed as a pushing off point and continue to be a valuable foundation of what the group does. Many participants spoke of them as essential to keeping them focused on their path in this work:

P3: The four agreements continue to be my guidepost – I always go back to them, going in deeper and deeper layers always in self-reflection.

P4: I use the tools of awareness and the four agreements in all of my actions in every minute of the day.

P5 I narrowed it down as to the most important ... the four agreements - to do my best with awareness.

P3 I try not to judge myself, but I do my best, I know I am not always going to be the best.

Each of the four agreements creates openings for awareness. For example, consider the third agreement, “don’t make assumptions”. Without assumptions, what do we really know? After a certain amount of awareness, participants eventually understand they do not know anything:

P1 So I think that for me the value of this work has been... in realizing that I don’t know. Because in the beginning I watched myself and all of us being so sure that we know. Then all of a sudden the realization strikes that truly we really don’t know. We don’t even know ourselves, let alone anybody else. Whereas in the past you would say “oh you are just like this”, or “I’m like this”. For me that is what has been so valuable. I can be with each person best as I can, not knowing, and just see what comes. How can I be with you... and that’s the hardest part I thought because we are so prone to making assumptions, that because you were like this yesterday, last month, that you would be like this now...

Speaking impeccably with awareness allows them to make choices of how they want to speak and act with others and consequently how they will be perceived, as P3 points out:

P3 Because I think it’s like what P1 would say you change your patterns so I always try to ask that question sometimes when I am about to go into a difficult meeting [at work], for example, I always ask that “Oh God what am I going to say?” “Do I have to speak with that [place she works] voice?” which I do because I’m playing that role, but how does that work with who I am as P3? I think that in any role as long as you’re impeccable about what you think you’re doing then maybe that’s the game because after all everything is on one level a game

here....For me it's more about recognizing that I can play many, many roles and I can respond many different ways. I have multiple different choices; it's up to me in that moment to decide and be aware if what I'm doing in that moment is or is not working... So it's tricky... I call it smoke and mirrors.

The four agreements are the tipping off point for building awareness in the mind, and from there the deeper processes of uncovering layers of beliefs begins. Maintaining awareness of the mind is important at all times. The mind is so used to being in charge of everything. Awareness increases the ability to see the mind for what it is and to move beyond the needs and wants of the Parasite, the Judge and the Victim. The belief system is strong and requires layers and layers of investigation. As P5 says, "The belief system is such a ride in the head." It requires vigilance and tenacity to take that ride and not get caught up in it.

All agreements have deeper and deeper layers of meaning and using them brings someone to a deeper understanding of their significance and a deeper layer of awareness.

P4 I use impeccability when I am rushing in the morning with my kids and it has changed the whole day.

P3 Impeccability comes from the heart – asking yourself who are you in that moment.

P1 I am able to be with anyone because I make no assumptions. We don't even know ourselves, we make assumptions about ourselves, and other people are not necessarily the way you think they are.

Using the agreements requires tremendous vigilance and members of the group admit they sometimes have difficulty with this.

P2 Not taking things personally and not making assumptions have been crucial in the changes in my life. Being impeccable is not always easy for me.

Not making assumptions leads to deeper and deeper levels of not knowing and not knowing is disconcerting to the mind since the mind always wants certainty. Not knowing is key to this work, beginning with simple assumptions of others around us to the deeper assumptions we make about who we really are. Twice within the second interview P4 said that she felt vulnerable when faced with the uncertainty that awareness and dissolution of beliefs leads to. And yet, as P1 states, the value of the work comes when not knowing.

P1: The work is not about you or me, so at this deeper level don't take things personally. There is more to this work than I can understand.

An aspect of not making assumptions is having no expectations. If they make no assumptions about who a person is or what they will do, then they can have no expectations of what they will say or do either. The group is familiar with getting caught up with expectations. A discussion about trust revealed that the ideas of what trust is to everyone is evolving. Without expectations trust changes. You cannot trust anyone to do or be the way you want them to be or they have said they will be.

don Jose Ruiz (Ruiz & Ruiz, 2010), don Miguel's son, wrote a book with don Miguel about the fifth agreement: don't believe, be skeptical but learn to listen. Don't believe yourself and don't believe anyone else. This agreement deeply explores the idea that they do not know.

**Other tools of awareness.** There are innumerable other Toltec tools, some of which are techniques and others which are beliefs that help dissolve the mind's self-importance. The group has used other non-Toltec tools, including Hindu and Buddhist chants, Sufi music, smudging, and they have made up their own tools. One example of this is the beauty chair. In this exercise, one individual sits in the middle and the others take turns telling them things about them. The individual in the middle must work with developing or heightening their understanding of "don't take things personally". With this understanding also comes the awareness of reflection, seeing others as mirrors of themselves.

P2 the beauty chair was an incredible exercise in looking at oneself and looking at others as a mirror of oneself. That was such an intense experience. But that one really to me brought it home. About when you're out there and when other people [say things to you], that it's a reflection.

The group often makes reference to "baby-steps". The difficulty of this work requires so often that group members do take baby-steps and saying this to themselves at difficult times allows them to move slowly and maintain their vigilance in their work. This is a tool. Words are very powerful.

Sometimes tools take the form of something just being perceived or coming to you in the moment of difficulty, such as P4's being in the moment with deep anger and saying "be comfortable with the uncomfortable":

P4 I was walking through my house and I was revisiting some kind of an emotion, ...it was a strong emotion mixed with anger, it had to do with relationship but I remember it came and no matter how much I tried to do laundry or clean and

ignore it, it was like, it's here. I smoked my brains out, everything was like, it's not going away. I remember I was walking down the hall in my apartment and all of a sudden I just felt like, OK, let it come and I don't know what triggered me to look at it that way but looking at it again this way with (wide arms) and it did this like I allowed myself to feel that intense so-called negative energy that I can't pinpoint why, and then I just allowed it to come in, and it felt almost like I'm going to die, it was so strong "rrrrsh", and OK then the words came "be comfortable with the uncomfortableness". And as soon as I just did that and realized this is going to be here all of the time, [that] you can't get rid of it, somehow that shifted it.

### **The Parasite.**

*Judgement.* The participants spoke frequently about the aspect of mind that judges and the aspect that is the Victim of the Judge. They understood that the mind judges from the moment humans perceive. Conditioning and language characterize these judgements. For example, we all agree in English to call a tree a tree. With this name comes all sorts of beliefs and judgements about trees. But can we see a tree and just be aware of that tree? Can we see it without naming, without judging whether it is a good tree or bad tree or one we like or do not like? The mind uses judgement to remove you from the direct awareness of what is. Yet, judgement is so instantaneous and so much a part of the human mind that to fight it would be futile.

P4 I had a profound realization once that as soon as we as humans look at something, we judge it, and we do this instantaneously.

The Toltecs declared war on the Parasite and are spiritual warriors, but the group came to realize that you must also love the enemy. Accepting that the mind is an aspect of our humanness is key to their work. The group felt that in the end it is really about whether you choose to focus your attention on judgement or not in each moment. It is impossible to not judge but it is possible to change the focus of attention in each moment.

P7 shared that she feels awareness in the moment is what this work is. She catches herself not being aware and justifying a second helping of food when she is trying not to eat too much, however, P1 reminds her, even in that justification, there is judgement. P6 finds that judgement is making a decision about something and it pulls her away from the awareness that life is what it is. She does not want to fight within her own mind with judgement because fighting with it is also judging it. She finds that even if she judges something is awesome “I want this to last forever,” that pulls her away from what is happening in the moment. P1’s interpretation is that whatever comes through the mind, do not fight with it, but choose not to pay attention to it.

P1 Don’t judge judgement as good and bad, [this] is only another judgement.

In Toltec philosophy the Parasite feeds on fear and creates a million ways to keep the human in its grip through self-sabotage and attachment to beliefs. For this group the idea is not to get rid of the mind but perhaps to stop it from its incessant chatter. In this type of work, we want to quiet or “stop the mind”, but we do not want to eliminate it, as the reasoning aspect of mind is a tool that is needed for human functioning on this planet!

**Creator of drama.** Drama refers to how thoughts and words create stories that are not true and how one gets caught up in the repercussions of these stories, by gossiping and taking action/reacting on false information. Self-sabotage refers to how you let the

mind tell you that you are not good enough or trick you into thinking you need something, like a drink of alcohol or a toxic relationship, in order to be okay. For P5 the work that the group does has reduced the drama in his life a lot. P3 says that with the mind it is so back and forth [from being caught up in the mind's chatter to not being caught up]. The "old pattern" is to be in the judging mind. Just by shifting her thinking to the wider lens of awareness that perceives the Parasite as only a small part of who she is, the world looks so different. This wider perception experienced in the moment creates the world as she now experiences it.

P4 says when you get drawn back into the drama, that's self-sabotage. You are pulled back into the drama and the Parasite justifies it all. P5 says if he didn't self-sabotage with guilt and judgement, he would be free. He has gotten drawn back into drugs and drinking at times. He reminds himself that he has to live from the heart, not the mind, but sometimes the draw of the mind's interpretation is too strong. Several participants commented on how it is "such a ride" when we get pulled back and forth from mind to wider perception. Many things do that including work, relationships and needing money. P5 reflects that the fear in the mind is what holds him in his old conditioned way. Things out in the dream can be triggers for going back into the mind, such as for P5 when he sees others in relationship. It draws him back into wanting the wrong relationship, into wanting the chaos. Other triggers for him are self-judgement and guilt about how he has lived his life. Sometimes he wants to stay in that chaos because it is familiar. These struggles were familiar to the entire group. Participants all experienced this journey as a movement back and forth between being caught up in the drama the mind creates to being able to moving into a clear larger perspective.

**Death of the Parasite.**

Quiet the mind

Be still

And watch the breath of God

Rise and fall

In all things.

Allow God's breath

To be your breath;

Allow God's nature to be your nature.

Then nature of God

Is to love and be loved;

Your desire to love creates intention,

Intention focuses attention,

Attention illuminates understanding,

Understanding manifest forgiveness,

Forgiveness is the fountainhead of love.

Intend to be Love

And know death for what it is:

The inbreath of God.

-Gerrald Jampolsky (Wilber, 2004)

The concept of dying before you die simply means that the Parasite does not run the program of who you are as a person anymore. You are there, but you are not identified with the mind's story and you know you are more than that story. You as life

has taken over and the mind does not make you its slave. This is what is referred to as freedom. The group expressed that their identity, what they knew to be who they were, dies with each new awareness. Ideas die as well. P4 felt her idea of what life was died as P1 spoke about life being formless. Believing life was form felt safe for her. So does being in your mind. There is a familiarity to what you believe and shattering beliefs means taking yourself out on an emotional limb. Going to a place of not knowing where you, as program, or you as how your mind and conditioning define you, is an illusion, can result in a feeling of vulnerability and being unsafe, as experienced by P4 and by all of the group at different times. But the forming of the belief system is a natural part of life. P7 shared that when she looks at her new grandson, she sees how he will start creating his beliefs and then as he gets older he will go back to breaking them apart realizing they are just beliefs. You go full circle. No matter how much you try to be gentle when you help him navigate his world, the belief system is being formed *by him*.

The benefits of detaching from the Parasite are freedom and creativity. The drama of life does not catch you up. You know that it is all illusion and that life is richer and deeper than the mind will let you experience. P5 reflects on how no matter how much you are at war with the Parasite, you must learn to accept it as a part of who you are. Being able to choose your perception, from only the mind, or from the whole being, that is freedom, P6 reflects. It is like being a knight in shining armour, a spiritual warrior who fights the Parasite, but with love says P3.

When the group talked about dying they were also talking about death in every moment. For every new awareness, an old belief or awareness is shattered. Dying before

you die is more the death of the control of the Parasite of the human life form, the death of a way of being.

P7 I think it's just letting go of, being able to realize that you are a set of beliefs and they're just beliefs. I think that would answer that... I guess maybe the truth is the layers. There's the truth, go below that, there's the different truth, there's a different truth, there's a different truth. So how attached you are to each layer, I mean you have to be at each layer to go through it to the next layer. That would be how I would describe that and so you're dying to each layer. Constantly dying to who you were. Truth is just another layer of death.

Uncovering layers of illusion is like experiencing a death and there is a grieving process that comes with letting go of beliefs. It is not always drastic and the process is not always painful. Sometimes the process is uplifting and sometimes the process leaves you with a feeling of vulnerability. It depends on how attached you were. And, the depth to which you can go with this is endless. This is the slow and continuous death of the Parasite. This is what the group has experienced.

This is also an exciting adventure. For P6 the death is about how she is in her boat, not looking back at the wake, at her history and what she has done before, but being in the boat and at the helm, forming life, creating life as it comes. The ocean is open. Perceptions and choices are innumerable.

**Detachment.** Participants shared that with awareness their beliefs are not as strong and they have become adept at questioning the true value of them. P6 got to the point where she could make the choices she wants and not be attached to beliefs, and she could have a different perception and choose the one she wants. P1 sees her role with the

group as the shatterer of beliefs. However, P1 also questions the group as to whether they actually ever let go completely of beliefs. P6 says that for her having that awareness that something is a belief means she can choose to go with it or not, that is the difference, and then sometimes she forgets the big picture and gets entrenched in the belief. An awareness of the beliefs and their origins facilitates detachment. Detachment makes it easier to not react with fear based beliefs.

How attached individuals are to each belief will determine how long it will take for them to let go of each one. Some beliefs are deeper and more entrenched, such as the belief we carry as humans as the Victim of the internal Judge: "I am not good enough". P7 reflects that there is a death to each belief as she lets it go. Nothing stays the same in this work, reflects P4, as she is in constant change in how she perceives life. Shedding beliefs is a part of this changing landscape.

In the same sense, P1 does not want the group to get attached to the idea of practicing Toltec or being Toltec. Identifying oneself as Toltec might mean that one is identified with or attached to a set of beliefs. This in essence defeats the goal of Toltec or any other path to enlightenment. This is the reason why the group was reluctant to identify what they do as Toltec.

Ultimately not being attached to beliefs does lead to taking different actions in the world because one is free to choose which action they want to take at any given time.

P3 I can still get caught up in ego but I have awareness of doing this. There is a detachment from ego that allows you to separate from the drama around you even if you do get drawn in [you] can quickly pull out with no attachment – [you] need awareness to do this.

**Awareness and acceptance.** We also can become attached to outcomes. We want things to be a certain way and then when it does not happen, we are unhappy or we feel that we have failed. Letting go of outcome requires one to have no expectations and this in turn requires that one trust and accept whatever happens. As the group members learn more and more to accept whatever is, they are in a place of grace where they are in the moment with whatever comes up next:

P1 [Acceptance] is an awareness that things are moving in the way they're supposed to move. You know, P2 talked of it... perhaps as for me an accepting of things as they are. See often I don't do this work with thinking about and analyzing and perhaps that's the grace of it. I'm not thinking about what it is that I'm doing, or what is it that I'm experiencing. More often I just go in and do the next thing, whatever it's supposed to be.

**Moment to moment nature of awareness.** Awareness is experienced in the moment. If the mind is active in thoughts of past and future, and one is distracted by that, it is not possible to be aware in the moment. One can only be aware that thought is present, telling stories about the past and future. With awareness there is so much to perceive in the moment and decisions can be made with awareness. Participants shared many times how being in the moment was crucial to awareness.

P7 This work slows me down and gets me to be aware and live in the moment. I still go off into the future and create a story around something that hasn't even happened. The difference now is that I see that. And I spend more and more time really right here. [Awareness is] exactly that. ...just being aware moment by moment. That is the biggest part of this [work], just catching myself.

**Sub-Theme: Shifts or changes in awareness**

A repeated topic of discussion in the interviews was about shifting or changing from one perspective to another, more specifically from being in the mind to being in what the group referred to as being in a wider perception, demonstrating this by placing the hands on either side of the head, representing in the mind, to holding arms wide out to either side of the body representing the wider perception. The work of moving the focus of attention or awareness from the mind to the whole being seemed so prevalent in the work they do and came up so often in their discussions that I felt it was a crucial sub-theme of awareness and an aspect of the lived experience of doing this work. This movement is a shift in perspective, in awareness and it is also an energetic shift or movement. As Nelson and Ruiz point out in Nelson (1997), emotions such as anger are only perceived in narrower perceptions. Perceiving from the whole being, anger is not perceived. Thus, shifting from the mind allows a wider almost distanced perspective of the emotions and thoughts that flow through us.

The participants spoke about having many different perceptions. This will be seen again in the section on Dreaming. Their experience of shifting as they use the term in the interviews, is of shifting perspective from the mind to a larger perception which includes the mind.

The group spoke about perception being based on awareness. If they were perceiving from the mind, their perceptions are clouded by the stories the mind tells them about what they are seeing. If they perceive from their whole being there is much more room for clarity of perception and for a variety of perceptions to arise. They could even choose to listen to the mind's interpretations from the wider perception and still choose

with awareness and not-knowing. It is the lens with which they are perceiving that determines their choices and how they will choose to act.

**Being in the mind.** Everyone experienced the shift differently but there was a consensus that the perception changed and the mind becomes this smaller part of the perception. You know you have done it most often, but there is no one sign, just a knowing. The group described the two experiences:

What is the experience of being in your head? “Chaos, like a mitote (a thousand people talking at the same time and nobody understanding each other), sense of stuckness, comparatively loud.”

Generally when someone is in their head or shifts into their head it is because they have been hooked by the story they are telling themselves, or an emotion, such as guilt, or by judgement of themselves or others. Such was the case with P5 who felt guilt and shame around his words and feelings with his girlfriend (see Appendix C). There are many other ways the mind can hook you into its dialogue: wanting to be right, feeling you need to know something, addictions. These hooks are based on fear. Perceiving from the mind also is what humans are used to so they felt comfortable and safe there, even though there is this mitote going on in their heads that can be exhausting and draw them back in, cycling through illusion after illusion.

P4 This is when we narrow things down (hands together), this makes me feel safe. Storytelling is safe, concrete. When I go back to moment to moment and widening (hands apart), and trusting, grace or moment by moment living, it's the opposite of that... you're unsure, you don't know what will happen.

They did not shift away from the mind to the wider lens, but the lens of mind widens to encompass a wider, vaster perception. The ability to move from the mind to this wider space comes about through experiencing levels of awareness, working with the four agreements, meditations, stalking, and other practices. This group referred to any change in perception as shifting. P3 describes how the process works for her:

P3 If I am suddenly triggered by something that creates a feeling of anger - I get attached to that emotional state, and can't see past my immediate feeling. Instead of staying in a reactive mode, if I move inside myself with awareness, I start to open, explore and accept my feeling of anger, and that helps to shift me from my immediate mood. If I am able to step back, and observe my feelings without attachment, my mind relaxes and I start feeling relaxed, more comfortable, and less judgemental of myself and the situation. I am suddenly able to watch my thoughts and emotions like they are clouds in the sky, shifting and moving, rather than getting attached to one singular emotional state. Awareness is the catalyst to free me from the confines of my thinking mind, and I find the world opens up and I feel more connected to something bigger than myself. I start to feel more liberated and no longer trapped by my thinking and emotional patterns. My anger can suddenly shift into compassion when I am able to see the problem from a new angle or perspective. It is a subtle shift but powerful, and it can happen quite quickly sometimes.

P5 shares how being able to shift to the wider perception has allowed him to change old patterns of behaviour:

P5 I'm really listening/tuning in to my body more, such as eating

healthier, exercising more, moving the energy in my body by being more active. Also by doing this work I feel as though I don't mesh very well with my old friends, not a whole lot in common anymore such as getting together for drinks or doing certain drugs in my life. There is still a struggle with smoking cigarettes it seems when I do get stressed but I'm more aware of what I'm doing to myself when I need to turn to a cigarette. I have quit smoking with this space/awareness in the past and I know I can quit smoking for good ...it can be done with the deep awareness of this space. I feel I don't need to jump into another relationship to make me feel happy, my mind does tell me that oh it would be way better to have another relationship now and I have some opportunities to get into a relationship now, but there's a deep feeling that this is not the time for me. [For example,] there are times that I wanted to email [my ex-girlfriend] to see how she is doing but at those critical moments I would go to that space and a deeper knowing of not sending the email and letting it be, having trust in that. Also, when I did quit smoking and I wanted one really badly I would go into that space, feel that burning sensation inside of me and letting that sensation do it's thing without lighting one up is quite powerful, riding the wave of emotions without reacting while in that space.

P7 shares again about her experience with finding her dog as an example of shifting. She calls it stepping out of her story. Ultimately she chose to change the story she told herself and her habits of behaviour by being in the moment and stepping out of her story:

P7 Finding my dog sick is an example of me shifting. I arrived home tired, in my 'story'. As soon as I saw her, I shifted away from the story, to what was needed step by step. I made the dog comfortable, gave her water. I cleaned the house. I cleaned the dog. I cuddled the dog and reassured her. I did not go down the paths of worry, being grossed out, what if she dies? etc etc. I stepped out of my story. Shifted. I think the work we have done has helped me be able to shift. I also feel I am aware of this even when I am out playing in my day to day.

P2 also reflects how going deeper in awareness can lift out old stories and old patterns of behaviour. However, without the ability to shift from the mind and into a wider awareness, she does not see how she could do this:

P2 I know that I can shift and so this enables me to see things from a wider perspective. It allows me to develop more and more layers of awareness about things in my life, about patterns of behaviour I know do not serve me. For example, I did not realize this pattern until I meditated about it and stalked it for some time, but I came to see that always having to be hypervigilant as a child because of an abusive parent, I was continuing the pattern even now in my later adult life! Wow, I could see that everywhere I lived I was waiting for him [father] to come home and wreck my enjoyment of my quiet space. And so even now every time a neighbor would make noise, I would adopt the belief that they were trying to bother me, wreck my enjoyment and I was going crazy with this! Why couldn't I find a place that was quiet? Why couldn't people be more respectful? But this is pattern. I had to stalk it, watch it for a long time, experience it over and over in my life, a reflection of me, until I finally got it. So

now I can shift out of it, I just send them love, whoever is making noise, know that it is not about me, and carry on...but it has been very difficult! The shifting requires that I observe my emotional reaction and listen to the old story the mind is bringing up and choose to find an alternative more expansive way of perceiving it, choose a different point of view...one without assumptions... one of acceptance...

In one interview the mentor demonstrated that shift in conversation with P5, who has shifted into his mind and wants to shift back out. This conversation is noted in Appendix C as an illustration of moving from one lens to another because words cannot demonstrate how energy shifts in the body occur and it is not possible to demonstrate this clearly in writing. The pointers or catalysts, such as detachment from the story, are there but the actual shift is energetic. Doing the work enables this ability to see differently.

P4 Experiencing this work is where true shifting occurs!

P4 (Talking about urge to smoke and trying to see it differently) So all this is going on [in my head], and as soon as I go into...right here in this moment and I think it is when you explained it when I do this (hands on either side of head meaning just mind) so it's something to do with this (hands wider to either side of body) something bigger. It's a calming, there's something, there's something else present. It's a little bit different than the other times quitting smoking.

**Wider perception.** What is the participants' experience of being in the wider whole being lens? "Peace, energy flowing through the body, freedom, expansion of love, expansion of sense of body or self, less weight in the mind, a lightening of the whole self, a subtle quieter energy.

P2 You know when your awareness is in the bigger space – you feel it as your thoughts have expanded and love has expanded, like sitting in a big energy field of love. I could be sitting there feeling sorry for myself and my energy is spiraling down and I am telling myself all the reasons my daughter and I are moving farther and farther apart, then I see it, the shift.... I see it is all the way it is meant to be. I let go of the story and go into a feeling of acceptance, of peace with what is, and I feel so much love for her and for myself!

Moving to a more expansive place is a hallmark of most styles of meditation. With shifting however, one does not have to go into a meditative state to experience this change in perspective. There is something energetic about it that is not easily explainable. It happens. As can be gaged from reading Appendix C about P5's shifting experience, it is difficult to see how the shift occurs. Participants shared about markers that can assist or catalyze a shift. Sometimes the mere suggestion of shifting creates the shift, such as detachment and recognition that the story is just a story but not the truth. The group found that many different things can shift someone from the narrower lens of mind to the wider lens: "Grace, gratitude, meditation, connecting with something bigger - the earth, sound, music, art, fire, smoke, just letting go, the energy of the group, just the suggestion. P1 says when you are in that place in your head it is a perspective. It is not that you are stuck or that you do not have the other energy there in you, but your perception is there, in your head. Asking yourself "What else is there?" besides this perception in the mind is a simple but very powerful entry and may be all that is needed to change perspectives. It is something magical that shifts. It is where you go in your

awareness, such as being in gratitude. There is also a sense of something there, a presence.

P4 It's amazing how what I am seeing right now is... I'm using smoking for an example. It literally comes down to the second, I'll feel feelings rushing through my body, oh God and I stop paying attention [to the discussion] and I've got to go outside, I start a plan, I will go to P5: Do you want to come outside? (laughs) So all this is going on, and as soon as I go into right here in this moment, and then I am doing this (hands in front of either side of head meaning just mind) so it's something to do with this (hands wider to either side of body) opening to something bigger - it's a calming, there's something else present. Because there's something else present, I don't know what it is...[grace].

P1 ...perhaps we forget that there is magic working *for all of us*, we forget that because we only are aware of perceiving struggle and how hard and difficult it is. Can we also at the same time do our best to perceive beyond the struggle and see where is grace in this? What can I be grateful for in this moment of struggle? Grace is one thing, but a sense of gratitude... ...for ourselves for doing this. Can [ ] we can try not to put our awareness and our focus on how hard anything is... Be aware of it, ...[ ] the mind not the whole lens, but just widen our perspective and go... ...Yes it's hard but what else is here? Is all I'm saying. I'm suggesting grace, I'm suggesting gratitude, could be anything for each of us.

### **Theme Two: Energy**

Participants stated that energy is not always felt directly. Sometimes it is not felt at all. However, participants did experience energy changes in shifting perspective

through changes in bodily sensations, in mood and in a sense of deepening. Everyone experienced energy differently. Participants referred to energy as “a feeling, a vibration, personal power, breath, life itself, and electricity”. The group did equate energy with power, meaning that when you have built up energy you have more personal power, and when energy is diminished you have less. Participants shared that practices such as stalking and meditation did build up personal power for them.

Energy has also been equated with life:

P6 I can really see a difference in how I would have acted [when having to euthanize my dog] without all this work and being aware of energy, but I see energy, or life, as precious.

Shifting was discussed in the last section on awareness, but shifting was experienced by participants as energetic work, not just a change in awareness. Shifting or changing perspective from the mind to being in the wider lens is experienced as an energetic shift. In reference to Appendix C where P5 was having trouble shifting, there is no specific marker for when he shifts. P1 says “tune in” and uses the power of suggestion, telling him that he cannot be in his head because that is not possible, only a perception. P5’s feeling was that while he is “in his head” that he is physically “out of his body”. When he shifted he could not express any specific thing that shifted him other than his own tuning in to his energy.

P5 “With the practice I tune in [to that wider place], and when that does happen, then I shift.”

P1 will ask the group or individuals to pay attention to their awareness and their energy when they want to shift it or to understand what it is:

P1 Have you an awareness of what this fuzziness is about? What is the learning in it? Don't think about it, just tune in. Tune in to your energy.

There was an understanding demonstrated by group members of this shift as energetic as well as perceptual.

P2 ...when we're shifting we are shifting our point of view, right, but we are also shifting our energy... And I see it all as connected, and I like that thing we were saying about, or what I was saying to you, how about our ego or our Parasite is only this little tiny dot in this great big thing that we are. But it's still very powerful and we give it that power. But it's energy so...we let that energy kind of take over the rest and then we lose our power. But really we are losing our energy. Anyway that is how I see it and so many things in my life where I have shifted...

P3 ...we can shift ourselves we're shifting right now as we speak [in the interview]... and we're redeeming our energy...

P5 P1 asking us to [use] the tools to quiet our minds and see where it leads us to, is very powerful for me because, I get a full mind [being in the head]. It's a big log jam for me and when I clear those programs ...Parasite... I feel this flowing of energy within my body, I feel it right now.

P7 shared an experience that demonstrates how her experiences in life have changed due to her shift in energy.

P7 The other day I came home, walked in the house, I was really tired. And my dog had diarrhea all over and then laid in it, and walked in it and she was really looking sick. And so I went into this energy of dealing with that, I wasn't

throwing up or I wasn't freaked out. The dog was dying, I was like OK. I dealt with the dog, cleaned the dog, cleaned the house. All the things I did were exactly right in that exact second. So, by the time it was all over I thought, oh, really there would have been times I would have just like totally freaked out, called the vet, thrown up, but I went into this space of energy that I was, did everything and... I don't really know how to describe it other than that.

P6 ...if I go in that way and try to give you words about it it's very subtle. And it's coming from, let's say I live in a conditioned self and a conditioned world quite loud let's say. And big. And then to tune in to this other way of perceiving and being, is very, very quiet and subtle.

P2 I feel it but it's more my thoughts have shifted to something else it's not the actual energy has shifted. But the way that I perceive it is that the thoughts are energy. The feelings are energy. That I'm not actually experiencing when I blow out [in stalking] that that breath is going over there and apologizing to everybody or whatever it is. There's no energy there I just see and feel the reaction I have to that. But it's not energy-like or electricity.... It is a shift in my perception and a lightening in how I feel overall.

When P5 experienced shifting from his wider lens to his mind as an energy shifting out of his body, he experienced it in the mind as an energy of fear. P4 experienced negative emotions such as anger as energy. When she invited the energy in, it shifted to a different vibrational energy:

P4 I allowed myself to feel that intense so-called negative energy that I can't pinpoint why [I was feeling it], and then I just allowed it to come in, and it felt

almost like I was going to die, it was so strong “rrrrsh”, and OK then the words came “be comfortable with the uncomfortableness”. And as soon as I just did that and realized this is going to be here all of the time. You can’t get rid of it. Somehow that shifted it. I could feel it in a vibrational way...

**Intent as energy.** Intent can be a very abstract concept in Toltec work and the participants’ discussion about it reflects the esoteric nature of the concept. Some participants were not really clear about what it actually was. Several of the participants agreed that intent was making a decision that you were going to focus on accomplishing an action, or becoming aware of something. Each participant reflected a different understanding and use of intent. P3 said learning about energy is learning about personal power. When she connects with her energy she can hold space for someone who is sad. She can hold the energy for them until they shift and she believes that is a responsibility that you would not have if you were not aware of your energy.

P3 We have the ability to control our energy and put it with intent. You could use your energy to abuse situations or manipulate but you have to have integrity with your energy and learn where to draw the line about how you will use it. We are not always conscious about how much our energy can influence.

Setting intent meant focusing awareness or attention on something specific.

Participants agreed that setting intent does focus your energy. Group discussion revealed that not everyone had the same idea of what intent meant, but everyone felt that they set intent. Stalking, described in the next section, is a form of intent where energy is moved through the use of the breath. P2 pointed out that in the group they often set out intent before a meditation and at the beginning of gathering as a group, when they are asked to

set their intent on what they wish to become aware of or accomplish during their time together.

P2 You cannot have any expectations when you set intent. You put the energy out there and you wait to see what you come to see.

As P3 explained as well, it is possible to set your intent to *do* something and then put your energy on that. You can also set your intent to increase your awareness about someone and, no surprise, P2 reflected, you will also get back a better awareness of yourself, since others are a reflection of you. P5 saw setting his intent to do his best at all times with awareness as putting intent into action.

### **Energy as practice: stalking.**

P2: To me, it's all tied up together, and when we do our stalking, when we do our energy work, I find it very powerful in terms of giving something back to somebody, taking something back, so incredibly powerful and the weight and the energy that, the stuck energy that we're holding, right? - you can let go.

Stalking is a powerful practice that is used by Toltec practitioners from every orientation. There are many practices and interpretations of stalking. In the group, stalking is used for letting go of energy you are holding of others, be it their anger, words they have spoken to you that you have taken on by taking them personally, jealousy or other emotions. Through the use of the breath you give the energy back to them with love. Stalking also is the practice of taking back energy that you have given to others through not being impeccable with your thoughts, words or actions. As a group participants usually do practices set out by Bernadette Vigil (2001) – standing stalking and star formation stalking. Participants have also used re-capitulation, which is the

practice of going back into the past and lifting off old energies from childhood and other past experiences one has been carrying around for years or maybe lifetimes. This is a way of getting your energy or power back. Always this practice is done with love, sending and receiving the energy with the breath and sending it to the earth. One can also give back emotions or difficulties one has been carrying within themselves, such as fear, anger, attachment, needing to be right, self-importance.

Stalking was discussed in Chapter Three as an essential practice for recapturing energy and gaining your power. P4 found that in her daily practice stalking was key for change, and P3 found that it is the stalking that provided a way of regaining power and she believes that stalking is a practice that builds energy in Toltec practitioners that allows them to move energy outside of themselves. She shared an experience she once had with a Toltec mentor who, with a group, moved the clouds in the sky and created a huge wind on a relatively calm day. P3 believed that accumulated awareness and energy from stalking and setting intent to do so allowed that group to bring up the wind. Collective energy was considered more powerful than individual energy and many participants agreed to this. The work that is done in the group is enhanced by the presence of each other all focusing their intent simultaneously. Participants basically agreed that awareness and use of energy are both essential skills that you hone and practice. They also agreed that collectively there is more energy, especially with disciplined practitioners.

**Life as energy.**

**P1** *We are life, not we are alive.*

Energy was viewed as energy, electricity, life itself. P1 said that how we perceive life is up to each one of us based on our lens. The practice of not knowing extends to our knowledge about what energy and life are. Ultimately, we do not really know.

**P1** We are life beyond our perception. We think that we know what we are but we do not. It is beyond our perception.

There seemed to be a general consensus that not getting caught up in the mind allowed the energy to flow freely in the body. P3 felt from her experience that there are different types of energy – physical, emotional, spiritual and ethereal. She believed all energy creates forms and patterns. P1 shared her view of life as being formless, undone, like electricity.

Other experiences of the group signify the meaning they have accumulated about energy and life. Different participants have experienced life forms blending and shifting. For example, P5 went through a tree, sensing the bright light inside the tree, losing the boundaries of his body and the tree. This experience demonstrated to him how humans and other objects are all different forms of the same life force, the boundaries being created by the mind. Some group members experienced the vibrant, constantly shifting nature of energy of water and wind. They could feel nature's energetic presence.

P2, when mediating at the mentor's home, woke from a deep meditation to see herself sitting in the chair in front of her – it was the mentor who was sitting there before she began her meditation. P2 interpreted this experience as her mentor and she were the same life force in different forms. P4 experienced the mentor splitting into two selves

when P4 was with her in meditation practice. The mentor wanted to turn off the phone but did not want to leave her side. P2 experienced herself as the breath breathing into her body, a beautiful, deeply loving energy rushing through her body. Through practices of meditation and stalking, the mentor has brought this group to a place of deep understanding about themselves as life itself.

**Dreaming.** One of the controversial aspects of Toltec that came up in the interviews was the concept of dreaming. There were different references to dreaming. Toltecs call the collective reality on the planet of humans and all life forms a dream and we are dreaming this dream awake. The group spoke about other dreams that are “outside of the form that we take here on earth” (P1). This is dreaming in alternative realities. When they spoke about dreaming in the interviews, it was difficult to get an agreed upon answer. Everyone had their own idea of what dreaming was:

P3 ...the big thing I got out of Toltec like no other tradition is that we're dreaming all the time. And that's quite liberating cause it just means that right now, this conversation is a dream that we've co-created by getting together and we're dreaming this, we've sent the intent and then that's the dream.

The group mostly agreed that they live in a collective dream, but they also stated that they do not go collectively as a group to other formless realities. However, P1 has had these experiences and some other group members have also. The point P1 made was that doing this work did not serve the group.

P1 I mean we go into alternate realities all the time ...even in my waking dream. We can all go into alternate realities and play there and we often do. And so when I say, how does that serve me? Is this adding something to my life or not?

So for me that's always that question. Is it adding something to my life or somebody else's, the others, the life on earth. You can access [other realities in your mind]. But it's not just perceiving in a different way. My sense of perceiving it from a different perspective is that we do step into a different realm. Right now in this frame, this is solid. But I could connect with my father who's dead. Really connect, as if he were not dead. You know so there's that kind of thing. Is that leaping off a cliff? It is in some ways. [There are alternative realities]... ...a reality some of you have experienced in the work with imagery and music, you know we experience a world where these normal frames of references we have are not there, it's not the same as it is here. [Also] that kind of alternate reality where I can be here and I can be there at the same time. I can be in a different time zone. So we go into a different state of consciousness. And we become aware of ourselves in a different way... ...as we evolve and become more and more aware, my sense is that, and I have talked about this before, when we are at a point of perception we can see multi-dimensions, we can see all these realities we are talking about...

A few of the group members had had an understanding that Toltec work encompassed gaining energy to travel to other realities and to move around this reality at will. Such was the work that Castaneda wrote about his time with don Juan Matus. P7 said that when she thinks of Toltec she thinks of Carlos Castaneda (1971) in his book *A Separate Reality*, where the Naguals could travel to the top of a mountain through energy alone. The Naguals in Castaneda's writing could also shift into an entirely different reality. P4 wanted to do this work with P1 but P1 said to her that she did not want to do

this work with the group. P1 did not teach the group dreaming in other realities because she felt their time was better spent serving themselves and others as life on earth.

P3 felt that her own work was individual dreaming. What each individual does when they go inside through meditation practices could be that. The group focused their meditation time going into the inner landscape, being in the formlessness of the life force.

There was a consistent belief with most of the participants that they are dreaming awake in the dream on earth, the shared reality. Their practice focused on inner work where they tried to loosen up the connection they have to form in this shared dream. When they practiced mitote, for example, where they move repetitively through cycles from waking to sleep to waking to sleep, they gained the understanding that they were dreaming and of how they could change the dream. There was also an understanding with most participants that the Dream of the Planet exists inside of them as opposed to out there in their perceptual field. They spoke about others being a reflection of themselves and learning about themselves from their interactions with others. Their work focused on creating and changing the dream by changing their perception of it. Others in turn would be affected by this change they project out into the world. Because they learn to see with clarity and unconditional love and acceptance, the change they project would be beneficial.

### **Humans as Artists of Life**

From awareness and from the ability to shift awareness and to move energy, the group could create their life through changing their perception. don Ruiz talks about how Toltec work is creating heaven on earth (Ruiz & Ash Amara, 2011). How we see life certainly can make life heaven or hell. Life is created through living at the helm of your

ship, as P6 points out, not knowing what is next but being in the moment as it unfolds. Does the group perceive themselves as artists of life? The work they do, regardless of what it is called does support their ability to create the life they want, through choosing their perception and response in every moment. P1 concluded that yes the work they do could be in a broad sense considered Toltec, if they are artists of life, if they are life as life itself not “as if” they are life.

### **Toltec: Working Definition**

Eidetic reduction, bracketing out all that is not invariant or the essence of the phenomenon, can be applied to the central themes of what lived experience of Toltec is for the participants. The following working definition was derived from these themes: Toltec is the moment to moment practice of moving towards the unknown, lifting illusions through the practice of building awareness, shifting perceptions, and accumulating and moving energy using a variety of tools. There is no set goal to the practice, but ultimately it is an experiential practice of coming to know oneself beyond the mask of the personal, as life itself.

Imaginative variation applied to this definition should result in a strong essence for Toltec lived experience. There is no question that if I remove awareness from the definition it will not stand. The practice of awareness is an essential piece. The accumulation and movement of energy is integral as well though different practitioners appear to use it differently and work with it at different levels. Most other aspects are intrinsic to energy or awareness and so perhaps they cannot be separated from these. Living moment to moment is necessary to be aware. And practice is also necessary in order to work with both of the themes. The final piece is about being life itself. This also

can vary and perhaps it is not essential. But where do you go and how do you be beyond the personnel, beyond the mind's definition of who you are? This group's practice is to come to an awareness of being life itself, or at least that is where the mentor guides them. Other Toltec groups may not consider this essential to what Toltec is, though don Miguel has written that that is who we are, light or life energy in form. Perhaps this last piece could be eliminated from the essence. But for this group, I see being life itself as a strong focus of the work of the group.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Participants Review of Findings**

As part of Colaizzi's (1978) method and validation of research findings, each participant read the thesis document, in particular Chapters Four and Five, to verify that conclusions the researcher drew from the interview data were accurately represented. They agreed that the conclusions drawn by the researcher were accurate and represented their experience of this practice. They affirmed that the data fully represented the voices of the practitioners and that various caveats about what they believed about their work have been included. This refers to their understanding that what is said at one point in time is not necessarily what they would say at another point in time, allowing for change in perceptions. Another point covered in Chapter Four was that the participants, including myself, did not necessarily feel tied to Toltec practice definitively but were comfortable with the foundation we began with and the tools we currently use as being most often Toltec in origin. I conclude that Toltec from their perspective is only one way to do the work of journeying inside and doing deep spiritual work and that each individual will come to the place that they come to, but that this place is not the same for everyone nor is it definable with words.

### **Have We Healed?**

The question asked was "what is the lived experience of following the Toltec path?" and Chapter Five goes into detail about those lived experiences of participants. However, we did not talk explicitly about this as healing work. Given the reasons for

starting this path and the many issues that have come up and been addressed by members within the process, there is no doubt that this work addresses personal healing. Many times participants struggle and many times they find bliss. They travel a path that is constant work and because of this their lives are both psychologically and spiritually involved and evolving.

In the literature review I examined some psychotherapeutic and spiritual viewpoints to see the intersection of Toltec work with other philosophies and practices. I would like to address these from the point of view of the shared lived experience of the participants. When I look at the words of the participants, as a spiritual psychotherapist rather than as one of them, I see how the process has provided healing in both psychological/emotional and spiritual dimensions. Looking at the themes of awareness and energy there are many indicators that participants have undergone psychological healing. These include their level of self-acceptance, their ability to go deeply within themselves without denial or defensiveness or with the desire to see past denial, their ability to deal with strong emotions and to change their perspective when they get stuck in narrow perception of negativity, their willingness and striving to understand themselves and life better. Though deeply rooted in self-awareness, participants still sometimes struggled with the Parasite in their everyday lives. However, they did so at a more accepting level based on love, or at least seeing fear as an emotion that passed through them with a detachment to fear, anger or other “negative” emotions. I see individuals who are highly conscious and aware of their cognitive and emotional selves and therefore they have tremendous resiliency, and this is due at least in part to being solidly on a path of spiritual depth. The mentor, who is in a place of “awakened being”,

though she might call it something else, such as deep awareness or grace, supports them in their process.

Knowing this work, I can also address this process from my own experience as a member of the group. I have started practicing as a psychotherapist and I see the differentiation of thought and emotion as well as the ability to move through these aspects of self as a huge component of my own resiliency. I see that even though I want to continue to pursue this path to the point of being fully awake, where my mind is but a tool and I am most often living in each moment from my whole being as life itself, I am aware of my relationship with thought and emotion in every moment of the day. I am happier and more in touch with my own authenticity and I am more compassionate to others. I see others as I see me - caught in the workings of the mind. I can see myself and others with more clarity because I have lifted layers of illusion from my perception. For example, when I think about my boss, the illusion has always been that she is a bully and that she is trying to mess things up for us all and manipulate us so that she can wield control. What I have come to understand is that I do not really know what she is doing and why she is doing it. She has many of her own issues, brought up in a strict military family and having a huge responsibility to cut her department down in size and reduce the budget. I can see her as a fellow human being with no need to feel bullied or manipulated. I detach from the problem by understanding it is mostly illusion and not taking her behaviour and words personally.

I fall down in my own happiness and stability when I choose not to be impeccable with my word, to make assumptions or to take something personally. There are many times that I go into the mind and get caught up there, like a tangled web, but my insight

and my practice brings me back relatively quickly to a deeper place. I see others as a reflection of me yet I have no expectations of them. I have no expectations of this work either. I just live it. I think that most probably the other participants would concur to a large extent with my experience of it. They have shown through their words that they struggle yet are in a place of comfortableness in not knowing much of the time. They are challenged with this work but they are also committed to it. They have incredible resilience and can face their own foibles with great acceptance, and if not with great acceptance, then with a willingness to work at these areas until they do accept them.

Does following this path result in psychological and spiritual healing? That depends on the definition of healing. If healing means that one is not suffering or experiencing emotional pain, I would say that yes there is emotional pain some of the time experienced through what participants refer to as their struggle. However, because of the non-dual nature of this work, emotional pain is but an aspect of the human experience. It is your perception of how you experience it which decides if it would qualify as suffering. Perceiving suffering as just a wave in the ocean of who you are which comes and goes, and not getting attached to it creates a much different experience of life's pain. It is getting hooked by the Parasite which creates the layers of suffering and pain and all of the participants often get hooked. Detachment allows for separation from emotions and thoughts which were habituated through conditioning. This loosening also reduces suffering as one is not attached to outcome. Toltec work alleviates this suffering simply by having the ability to change the perceptual lens. Understanding the non-duality of life is needed to perceive suffering in this way. Wilber (2001b) says "When the opposites are realized to be one, discord melts into concord, battles become

dances, and old enemies become lovers. We are then in a position to make friends with all of our universe, and not just one half of it (p.29). Wilber quotes the Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu scripture, which tells us that “liberation is not freedom from the negative (suffering, pain, anger, shame), but freedom from the pairs” (p.28):

Content with getting what arrives of itself  
 Passed beyond the pairs free from envy,  
 Not attached to success nor failure,  
 Even acting he is not bound  
 He is to be recognized as eternally free  
 Who neither loathes nor craves;  
 For he that is freed from the pairs,  
 Is easily freed from conflict.

-Bhagavad Gita

Toltec offers another way of understanding non-dual nature.

Looking at Chapters Three and Five comparing Toltec to what participants have shared, the vocabulary is the same and so are many concepts. How these are understood by participants of the study is probably not the same but then the Toltec concepts are not understood exactly the same by any practitioner. Even within the practice of Toltec there is a freedom to be yourself and have your own perception. Thus even though some of the group may have a similar sense of the concepts and philosophy of Toltec and believe that they are practicing it, others may not and that does not diminish the path they are following nor the depth to which they can go.

## **Psychotherapeutic Qualities of Toltec Work**

**Self-acceptance and self-awareness.** Self-acceptance and self-awareness are important goals in psychotherapy and there are many layers to knowing oneself and letting go of false beliefs about the self. Knowing oneself is a path on its own but knowing the self and then letting go of the self to align with God, the Infinite or life itself, can be a natural next step in this process. Generally in psychotherapy we do not tread beyond the psychological into the spiritual. Rogers (in Thorne, 2002) in his later works explores how the therapeutic relationship between one human being (in his reference, the therapist) and another (the client) leads to “the experience of a relational encounter which is transformational because it touches the essential core of the personality” (Thorne, 2002, p.6). This deep connecting is authentic, unconditional acceptance and when experienced by the client through the therapeutic context, he or she can then bring that relational depth to other relationships. The relating is from authentic self to authentic self. Toltec work does that at its very deepest - total unconditional acceptance of the self and others as aspects of the self. Loving the self is an ultimate goal. Thorne, again discussing Rogers’ later work, states that Rogers also hypothesized that “relational depth can lead to a sense of connectedness to the infinite resources of the cosmos” (p.37). This extension to all life, Thorne conjectures, might be something many therapists are not prepared to work with in their practice. In our practice as spiritual psychotherapists, we have the capacity and skill to move clients from the relationship with themselves to that deeper relationship with others, then with all life and the cosmos. Toltec work, through its simplicity and conceptual framework - the four agreements, for example – is a process that transcends the personal of psychotherapy and connects individuals to others on a

deeper relational level. It does this through detachment from identification with the ego as a basis for who we are.

**Perception.** A key aspect observed about the work of the group was perceiving from the wider lens. This opening of awareness, or growth in consciousness as Wilber (2001a) describes it, is “growth... [involving] the relinquishing of a narrower and shallower level of awareness in favour of an expansion into wider and deeper and higher modes” (p.133). Wilber also points out that we move around these different levels of consciousness or awareness and as we do our perception changes. The movement is therefore not just from the ego to the wider lens, but a back and forth as our attention changes. In the eyes of the participants, it is the awareness and ability to be able to move back and forth that is important. Knowing that you are in your mind and that you have a choice to be there or not be there is a huge freedom.

In a sense this is what Carl Jung means when he refers to the higher Self. Pascal (1992) explains Carl Jung’s description of ego consciousness verses the Higher Self:

Discovering the Self creates in us a whole new awareness, an entirely new attitude toward life.... ..The moment we find this genuine center called the Self, or more precisely when it finds us, we begin distinguishing egotistical desires from genuine needs. We suddenly find ourselves transcending fears, false expectations and ambitions based on delusional thinking.... ..We somehow begin feeling more “at home” and at ease in the entirety of our beings... ..These new experiences begin to open us up ...to intimacy and relatedness [with others] (p.108).

With this huge awareness of our Higher Self or whole being, the ego is not in control but still present. The Self-Actualization or realization in the individual is this state of ego within the whole being, just as the participants endeavour to do with being in the wider lens.

...the Self would be an ideal factor, which embraces and includes the ego” (Jung, *Psychological Types*, p.706 in Pascal, 1992)

We are also more comfortable with being in the ego state or mind because we are not attached to it, and because we have an awareness of being something more and have access to that in our everyday lives.

**Cognitive therapy and Mindfulness.** When participants examine their thoughts, practicing detachment and looking at their own set of cognitive distortions – the four agreements – they are peeling away disillusionment and untruth. In cognitive therapy one well known cognitive distortion is “jumping to conclusions” which means the same as one of the four agreements, “don’t make assumptions” (Burns, 1980). All of Burn’s ten cognitive distortions would be aspects of “don’t make assumptions”. In Toltec work distortions of thinking are taken to a deep level of awareness. The difference between cognitive therapy and Toltec is basically philosophy. In practice the same occurs. Cognitive therapy uses structured observation and slow progression as part of its framework. In Toltec work it is simplistic and one comes back to the basic agreements over and over again, developing awareness in each waking moment of the practitioner’s life. In both approaches, practitioners are developing an awareness of the ego and all of its tricks and are diligent “every moment of every day” in doing so. This is the mainstay of cognitive therapy. Constant examination of the mind’s stories and the stripping away

of these illusional thoughts and emotions ends up in a change in action or behaviour. This is the behavioural component of Toltec work. The focus of the Toltec work is not equivalent to what cognitive therapy purports to attain, however, but goes deeper. As P5 stated, he was enduring months and months of depression before he started doing this work and has now learned to shift and focus his attention out of the ego in only a few minutes.

Mindfulness has now been well researched as a viable therapy for anxiety and depression and for developing resilience in life by being grounded in the present (Germer et al, 2005). The type of meditation that we do in Toltec is not identical to Mindfulness but the awareness of the breath, maintaining attention and focusing on what is present in the moment are hallmarks in both practices. The philosophy of Mindfulness is to create detachment from the thinking mind by grounding in the deeper self. Mindfulness practice is taken from Buddhist practice and there are many congruencies between Toltec practice and types of Buddhist practice which will be examined next in this chapter.

### **Spiritual Qualities of Toltec Work**

When we are dead

We are like the snake

Slithering in the dust,

The dust of emotional pain.

But when we awake

The wings of our divinity unfold

And we become the feathered serpent

Who flies to heaven -

Quetzalcoatl.

-Miguel Angel Ruiz

**Eastern systems – Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism.**

“Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into the nature of one’s own being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom.” (Suzuki, 1956, P.3).

What is in a name? The participants were reluctant to identify what they do as Toltec. To them, what they do comes from many sources and is about process. They understand that there are many roads or practices that can lead to this one goal – to return to the source of who you are. P1 stated in the interviews that we are in this process discovering who we are as life itself. The reluctance of practitioners to identify what they do as Toltec is easier to understand when we look at other practices with the same goal. In Zen the goal is essentially the same, seeing one’s true nature (Suzuki, 1956). How these practitioners see this true nature may be as life itself. Ruiz (in Nelson, 1997) states that we are artists of life and as Toltec learn to see themselves as light beings. P1 said that with meditation we will go to the place where thoughts originate. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is the nature of mind that is sought, but this enlightened awareness is no different from what is sought through Toltec practice:

“...the nature of mind is the very root of understanding. In Tibetan we call it Rigpa, a primordial, pure, pristine awareness that is at once intelligent, cognizant, radiant and always awake. It could be said to be the knowledge of knowledge itself” (Rinpoche, 2002, p.48)

Tibetan Buddhism also has a similar view of the mind as Parasite, though they believe that the mind has many aspects. The one akin to the Parasite is the aspect called

Sem. Sem is the aspect that “thinks, plots, desires, manipulates, flares up in anger, that creates and indulges in negative emotions and thoughts, that has to go asserting, validating and confirming its ‘existence’ by fragmenting, conceptualizing and solidifying experience... ..[it is the] ceaselessly shifting and shifting prey of external influences, habitual tendencies and conditioning....” (Rinpoche, 2002, p.p.47)

In the Tao te Ching, meaning the “book of the Way” (Mitchell, 1988, p.vii), there are pointers to the indescribability of the path. This we also know when we write about God, the Christian-Judaic representation of the essential nature of mind (Rinpoche, 2002). We write and we write or we talk and we talk, but we can never really know God through our words. The Buddhist or the Toltec practices are essentially the same. There is no name that can be given to the aware state arrived at through the lived experience of this work.

**Integrative psychology.** I briefly explained Wilber’s (2001a) in-depth diagram of how we move through lines and levels of personal growth to eventually attain enlightenment or what Wilber calls unity consciousness. Wilber is very flexible in his writings about how one can attain unity consciousness. Wilber’s entire integrative theory is about the integrative connection of the psychological with the spiritual. I agree of course with his synopsis, yet I believe that there are numerous practices that provide the way and though he provides a detailed non-linear structure to growth, I do not think it needs to be so complex. Both Almaas’s (Davis, 1999) transformation psychology and Wilber’s theory for integration psychology are fundamental philosophies presenting a psychological-spiritual continuum. Toltec process and the lived experience of going through this process is only different in its method. In their refusal to say that they adhere to the Toltec philosophy, participants indicate that whatever works is what their

process is. Wilber himself has states that “all roads lead to Rome”, or to heaven on earth, in this case (Wilbur, 2001a). Ruiz (1997) has claimed this work to be just that – living heaven on earth.

Transpersonal psychology has two central insights: “the intrinsic health and basic goodness of the whole and each of its parts, and the validity of self-transcendence from the conditional and the conditioned personality to a sense of identity that is deeper, broader, and more unified with the whole” (Davis, 2000, n.p.n.) This is in essence the same as in Jungian psychology where one must transcend to the higher Self, in Buddhism and in Toltec, where the challenge is to stop the mind and go deeper into the true nature of the self. All the above practices include some form of meditation as a tool for the journey and each path also requires stopping the mind or moving beyond the mind or ego. As Vaughan-Lee (2000, 2013) writes:

...the spiritual path requires the complete stilling of the mind, and for this meditation is necessary. In order to have real spiritual experiences, we need to stop the thinking process, for it is the mind that cuts us off from love’s oneness and the infinite ocean of nothingness. Going beyond the mind, we enter the inner dimension of the heart, the meeting place of lover and Beloved (p.32).

This journey is about living from the heart, the whole self, the Higher Self. It is about seeing the self as part of one being. We are all one, and within the practice of Toltec this is how we practice, all of us as one. The awakened state is this knowing, this awareness.

### **Shamanic Qualities of Toltec work**

**We are all Naguals.** There is a place for modern practices of shamanism in the scholarly literature given that there are Naguals or Shamans who exist and teach at this time in the Western world. Not all Shamans work within their own cultural communities with indigenous peoples. Harner is well known in the world of shamanism, and before him, Castaneda is known for opening up the West to alternate realities as practiced by Naguals as well as to other ways of perceiving life on this planet. Ruiz continues this work with a gentler yet still disciplined practice of finding the core of light and love in each of us. The work of Shamans in ancient societies was to heal and to travel between this world and the other worlds. According to Castaneda, Sanchez, Ruiz and so many others, we are all capable of this: we all carry the Nagual inside of us and with work we can be aligned with it. Society is changing from patriarchal and hierarchical to everyone being their own guide and mentor, with the support of others who have developed this in themselves. Modern Naguals are Shamans who provide mentorship and a pathway that has ancient shamanistic roots to support individuals in awakening. Each of Ruiz' apprentices practice their own interpretation of this work and teaches based on their own interpretation. Toltec is open in accepting all belief systems to find that deeper Self, that connection to the divine within, the goal of mystics and Buddhists alike. It comes from the Naguals descended from ancient Toltec priests and from others who have trained and have developed their own Nagual. Modern Naguals are Shamans in that they are able to energetically be in other realities and they are capable of using energy to heal. Rather than healing per se they teach. As I have said previously, this work is about aligning and

identifying oneself as life itself. What other goal is there in any system of belief or journey?

There are many other overlapping spiritual practices in other sects of Meso-American spiritual or shamanistic practices. Sanchez (1996) states that in his travels with various indigenous peoples, including the Nahuas, the Mazatecs, the Mixtecs and the Huicholes, he found many similarities between their concepts and those written about by Castaneda. It would be tantamount to explaining Christianity from Catholicism or Presbyterianism alone to explain all of Mesoamerican spiritual practices from Toltec or, for that matter, all of Toltec practice from the perspective of the group interviewed for this study. Our work has many common threads that I have found with other Toltec practitioners and with other Naguals of other practices in Mesoamerica, but that is not within the scope or purpose of this paper to explain. This paper purports to only describe the lived experience of those who were interviewed, members of one group of practitioners.

**Energy movement.** The shamanistic aspects to this practice seem to be tied to the energy aspects of the practice. However one chooses to believe or perceive energy, and even though science is still coming of age in its understanding of energy as one life force, it is dominant in many mystical and modern systems of beliefs. The ancient Hindu religion refers to energy as Prana or the “breath of life”. Yoga also adheres to the power of the breath and the flow of energy. In China the life force energy is referred to as “chi” and in Japan as “ki”. Two practices of clearing energy that have their roots in Egypt are Reiki and Sekhem. Energy fields in these Egyptian based practices are also referred to as “unconditional love”. Everything in the universe is energy (Ruiz in Nelson, 1997). The

work Toltecs do involves transforming that energy into power over time, with impeccability through shifting and stalking. My understanding is that our experience in the group is only the tip of the iceberg of what many Toltec practitioners experience in transforming energy. However, with this taste, we have an understanding that we are energy.

### **Implications of Study**

The implications of this study are first of all, to address the need for a place for modern shamanistic practices in western society within the scholarly literature. After researching and carrying out this work I conclude that perhaps Toltec could be placed within shamanism, but it could be placed within the psycho-spiritual category as well. Perhaps if more was investigated about Toltec from the individuals who actually practice it than from cognicentric critiques of it as just another new-age self-help concoction (Graydon, 2007/2008), the reality of the practice and its meaning would truly come out. In other words, more research of this nature is needed with other practitioners.

This study also purports to acknowledge that healing or therapy can occur in a variety of different ways, regardless of whether it is within the scientific research or whether it is within accepted western theories of psychotherapy practice. It is important to look again and again at how we view spirituality within the framework of psychotherapy. In pastoral counselling, we address and support an individual's spiritual self, helping people/clients sort out how their spiritual beliefs and practices support them in times of difficulty. But in many therapy practices we still tend to separate or compartmentalize the well-being of the psychological self from the spiritual self rather than integrating the two. I would argue that more psychotherapy could occur on this

deeper level. I feel that clients live with this fear of themselves, fear of life out there, meaninglessness and fear of death. They do not understand that by changing how they look at fear they can disarm it and learn to have it as an ally. This comes with learning that there is more to who one is beyond their thinking, ego self. We do address this in psychotherapy, but I believe personally that we get clouded by theories and techniques when it is really quite simple. Healing comes through awareness and perception. My learning of the Toltec path has taken several years as I was as conditioned as anyone else into the Dream of the Planet, but this does not mean that we cannot lift those attachments to our beliefs and be more aware of who we are at a deeper level of consciousness. I believe that humanity as a whole is moving in this direction. We do not want to get left behind because of our desires to uphold traditional points of view. In saying this I am not slamming traditional theories in psychotherapy. They have been tremendously beneficial for so many. I am saying that given what we know, we need to use that as a take-off place to go deeper into the needs of humanity at this time.

### **Limitations of Study**

This descriptive phenomenological study can only speak to the lived experience of those who participated in it. The idea of generalization is not a characteristic of qualitative research. This study only offers a starting place for others to explore modern, alternative ways of self-healing and spiritual growth.

The participants of this study alluded many times to the belief that they did not think what they do is Toltec. Is this a good description, then, of what Toltec is? In my understanding, that is exactly what Toltec teaches: any way is the way; non-attachment to method or practice or to naming what it is. It is also important to remember that what we

do is only our perception of Toltec practice. There are many other teachers who focus on it differently. This study does not represent all those who practice Toltec. Even though, there is a thread that runs through all Toltec modern and indigenous practices. Based on this research, it appears that the themes of awareness and energy would be found in them.

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## **Appendix A: Research Questions**

### **Principle Research Question**

What is your lived experience of the Toltec path?

### **Research Study Sub-Questions**

1. What is your lived experience of awareness?
2. What is your lived experience of energy?
3. How has your understanding of Toltec changed over the course of your work with the group?

## **Appendix B: Consent Form**

Consent to participate in a research study named: Phenomenological/narrative study of the Toltec path to personal freedom as psychotherapeutic and spiritually deepening.

This study addresses the following research question:

"What is the lived experience of following the Toltec path to attain psychological and spiritual healing?"

In order to address this question, participants of the study will act as co-researchers and together create the questions and provide the answers in audio-taped interviews. The purpose of the interviews is to share information of a personal, experiential nature and to also offer personal points of view of the phenomenon being studied – the Toltec path.

This study is being conducted as part of the requirements of the degree of Masters in Psychotherapy and Spirituality at St. Stephen's College and so will benefit the researcher in this way. The researcher is also a participant of the group who will provide data in the interviews. The researcher will benefit from learning more about the Toltec path through the comments of her fellow participants and will increase her awareness of Toltec through the carrying out of the study.

The study is a phenomenological study which relies upon the information gathered by those who have experience with the phenomenon to describe the phenomenon. In order to accomplish this, the participants are all individuals who have experienced the Toltec path.

There will be one group interview session and one follow-up individual interview and discussion, which will be either by phone or in person. Prior to the first interview the participants will receive a synopsis of the study via email which will include the goal of the study and the principle research question on which the study is focused as well as a list of potential questions to be discussed during the interview. Participants will be requested via email to read these and contemplate the questions, thinking about whether these questions adequately address what Toltec is to them through their lived experience of it.

The initial interview should take anywhere from two to four hours. During this time we will discuss the research sub-questions, making any necessary changes (additions, alterations) to the focus of sub-questions but not straying from the principle research question.

After the initial interview the researcher will transcribe the words of all participants and look for common themes among the words. After this process participants will meet a second time to review the transcripts and threads or themes found through analysis of the data and have the opportunity to offer further information to clarify points made in the first interview and the analysis.

The first interview will be held at the home of our mentor, where we meet most often as a group. Refreshments will be available. In order for our two participants living out of town to participate, long distance travel costs will be reimbursed for those two members. An audio tape recorder will be running to collect the data and allow for transcription, as well as to ensure accuracy of what was said during the interview. The

transcripts will be returned to the participants after the interview session for their review and to ensure that they were quoted with accuracy prior to the second interview session.

Each and every participant has the right to confidentiality of all shared information. In the final thesis, all names of participants will be referred to as an initial and these initials will be changed. For example, if a participant's name is Barbara, the initial would be B. but B. would consistently be changed to D in the final writing of the thesis. Any information referring to ethnicity, occupation or location of home would also not be entered in the final study.

Each participant has the right to opt out without penalty at any time and have data destroyed/returned and not included in the study.

Each participant will have made available to them the final submitted thesis for review.

Participants are asked to agree to the above conditions of the study described in this document. In addition you are asked to consent to secondary use of the data generated in this study in additional writing of articles, such as in scholarly journals, and/or conference presentations. In any of these cases, data will be handled under the same ethical provisions as in the current study. For the purposes of the thesis evaluation, the document will be read by the thesis supervisor, Dr. Jean Waters (contact: xxxxxxxxxxxx), and a panel of thesis evaluators recruited by Margaret Clark, thesis coordinator, MPS Program (contact: xxxxxxxxxxxx). The final thesis is a public document made available through the National Library of Canada and is therefore available to all graduate students at St. Stephen's College.

I give my informed consent to the above conditions as a participant in the research study being conducted by Clare Fuller for the purposes of thesis for the degree of Masters of Psychotherapy and Spirituality at St. Stephen's College, Edmonton, Alberta.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix C: Conversation about shifting:

P5 My experience is the more I dismantle, the so-called P5 the conditioning of who I am, it's like the log jams are getting released. And this energy flows through my body.

P1 Can you be more specific through an example?

P5 For an example? This one that's been with me for quite some time, this [girlfriend] situation. Our relationship, and the relationships that have been before [girlfriend], are very similar. And I've created this belief in relationships that, I just see clearly what I don't want in a relationship. And I see that within myself? And that to me is a release, which gives more energy? I don't know if I am explaining myself... [That takes some of the log jam away]

P1 Can you be specific? What is it that you don't want?

P5 It changes so frequently, right now I feel really good. Perhaps later on in the restaurant I might have a feeling 'oh look at that couple, oh, beautiful, why can't I have that'... Something can trigger me and just being aware of those triggers, like perhaps I'll [have] loneliness and it'll mess me up and I'll want that chaos back. I'll think about her and I'll miss her... I want to go back to that, I just see clearly that it's not meant to be. I'm not meant to be with her.

P1 That's a conclusion you've come to? Is it hard for you to go into this place?

P5 I just confuse myself. [Then] I don't know what to say...

P1 What is your awareness? How is this connected to awareness and energy?

P5 I guess it all boils down to the relationship with myself. ..The judgements towards myself, the criticism, the guilt, why haven't I lived a certain way.

P1 Somehow I'm feeling like you're somewhere here (in head) and you're not feeling a coming in to here? (heart area) I don't know.

P5 Because I can feel the fuzziness in my head because it's a question like, I brought up relationships right? And I'm listening to myself and it's not making sense, what I'm saying.

P1 Have you an awareness of what this fuzziness is about? What is the learning in it? Don't think about it just tune in. Tune in to your energy.

P5 One thing that I see clearly with relationships is I took on a lot. Taking on for example her Mom has pancreatic cancer? We tried counselling and tried to make it work, I felt I needed to be there for her, and there's no way I could leave her. It would be so mean. And then she was going through a surgery [herself]. And I needed to be there to take care of her cause she asked me numerous times are you going to be there for me. And then the next morning we had a huge blow-out. I made a comment to her. Her back was really sore. And I was massaging it but I didn't really want to massage it. And I made a comment that if perhaps you didn't watch TV all day you wouldn't have this issue. And then she just flipped. So I mean I wasn't being impeccable with my word at that moment. And then there was a part of me as well, that maybe she needed to hear that. When I was speaking those words I could see, I was speaking to myself. Because there are times I can be very lazy as well too. So with this more awareness and how it points right back to myself and... ..I just see that I can be very critical to myself. And the energy of [girlfriend] she can be very critical of herself and that's the result, a

connection there, perhaps. It's interesting I just brought up this situation in my life and now I'm not feeling so good. Because before I was I'm OK with it right? Energy's flowing in my body and I was feeling pretty good. And I can do a number on myself.

P1 So is that your way of protecting yourself?

P5 Oh, I'm sure. I'm in my head. 15 minutes ago I thought I was more in my body. So it's triggers...

P1 Having said that you're aware of something happening for you like your energy shifted out, is that how you would describe it?

P5 Yeah. Like I would be out of my body and I'm not in my body.

P1 OK. So with that awareness, this is lived experience, with that awareness that you have shifted out of your body and your back to your head, when you become aware of that...

P5 What to do, that's a good question. And that's where I get confused.

P1 So now you're here in your head (hands together), what happens when this happens (hands go wider)? When you widen, see now when you are in your head this is your perspective (hands together). The head perspective, but when you go, let's open it up and see what else is here... Don't say anything just go there and tell me... Do it. Practice.

In this moment.

SILENCE

P5 I don't really know what the question is.

P2 Shifting.

P5 I know it's going in my body but... when I'm in my head either with work or with [girlfriend]. It's the same cycle. I get caught up in it.

P1 Yes. So with that awareness... .. that you're in your head, OK, because that was what you said right? You've become aware that you've shifted from your body to being in your head?

P5 It happens quite quickly, if it's a trigger.

P1 In this moment?

P5 Right now.

P1 You [experience] yourself in your head. So now this is an opportunity. With the power of the group, you have an opportunity now, a learning opportunity to go, I'm right here, this is my perspective being in my head, to what else is there, can I widen my perspective? Because the truth of the matter is you're not just in your head. You cannot be. It's just how you perceive it. You see what I am saying? You cannot be just in your head.

P5 My head gets quite full and to say how do I let go of this.

P1 You perceive that. So can you perceive more can you see more than just in your head? Can you allow yourself to just close your eyes perhaps...

P5 With the practice I tune in, and when that does happen, then I shift.

P1 Can you go in this moment? Go back to where you were 15 minutes ago. Can you do that? Try it in this moment.

P5 I'm already there.

P1 You're back?

P5 Yeah.

P1 What happened?

P5 How do you explain it in words? It's... that's the problem right?

P1 Uh-hm. What else am I aware of in this moment? Like for you it was hard to be there so acknowledge that. Like for you acknowledge that I am in my head but what else am I? Because the truth of the matter is... ..it's only a perception. Because I can perceive myself just in my head, or I can become aware that I'm more than just in my head. [The truth is], you're always in all of your body.