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**Consuming the Self: New Age Spirituality as ‘Social Product’ in  
Consumer Society.**

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# **Consuming the Self: New Age Spirituality as 'Social Product' in Consumer Society.**

## **Abstract**

In the late twentieth century there has been a proliferation, diversification and popularisation of New Age spiritual discourses and practices in Western industrialised nations. New Age spiritual thinkers such as, Deepak Chopra, Ken Wilber, Gary Zukav, and Shakti Gawain, have modified discourse and practices from Eastern and Western traditional religious beliefs, Western science and psychotherapy, to develop their own discourse and practices designed to assist individuals 'transform' themselves. This article discusses the 'commodified production of self-actualisation' in consumer society and discusses how the discourses and practices in selected texts from four New Age spiritual thinkers take the form of an ever-changing 'social product'. The analysis shows how the discourse and practices of New Age spiritual thinkers align themselves with consumptive behaviour by secularising, homogenising and over-simplifying scientific, social scientific and traditional religious discourse and practices into 'social products' for consumption. The analysis also reveals that New Age spiritual thinkers are engaged in a process that could be described as the 'consumption of the self'. The implications of the 'consumption of the self' will be discussed in terms of the way consumer society requires New Age 'technologies of the self' to be continually re-defined, restructured and re-packaged in new and different forms.

**Keywords:** New Age spirituality, social products, consumption behaviour, technologies of the self.

## ***Introduction***

New Age spirituality has been a growing social phenomenon in Western industrialised nations since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Heelas (1996: 2) has coined the term 'self-spirituality' to describe the myriad of discourse and practices that are encompassed under the term New Age. The social and historical developments responsible for the rise of the phenomenon involve a parallel between a rise in the importance of the theory and methods of psychotherapy and the increasing secularisation of Western culture after World War II. Lukes (1973:67-70) attributes the rise of an interest in self-development to the Romantic cultural era around the time of the Italian Renaissance but most fully elaborated by the early German Romantics, Goethe and Rousseau. According to Lukes, John Stuart Mill brought a 'theory of the right and duty of self-development' into the liberal tradition and even Marx had an ethical view of humans as beings with a wide range of creative potentialities whose 'own self-realisation exists as an inner necessity'. Woodhead and Heelas (2000:272) link the characteristics of post-modern religion with the 'free subject' who is positively encouraged to exercise their autonomy in choosing whatever has diffused through culture, from sometimes disparate codes or frameworks of meaning, to satisfy their own requirements for self-development or self-actualisation.

Couching their discussions in the terminology of the consumer market, Stark & Bainbridge (1985:124) conceptualise religion as a dynamic force forever changing and renewing itself. Referring to the 'unmet needs that plague human beings' they propose that a 'free religious marketplace' is a tumult of competing faiths differing in their tension with the dominant secular institutions and the degree to which they offer magic. They also suggest that when mainstream religion loses its authority religious movements, including those to do with inner spirituality, come to serve as compensators. In particular, secularisation stimulates religious innovation and/

or revival and, while the sources of religion are shifting constantly in societies, the amount of religion remains relatively constant. In their discussions of the ways in which religion changes and responds to social pressures over time, Stark & Bainbridge (1985) use the concept of 'market demand' to explain rising and falling interest in religious beliefs. Hunter (1987:71) supports this point by highlighting the stimulation of revival movements and aligns the 'fascination with the self' displayed by the detraditionalization of religion with the particular form of radical Evangelicalism observed in the USA commonly referred to as the Christian revival movement.

Various social theorists (Hunter,1987; Roof&Gesch,1995; Simmel,1976; Taylor,1991) have discussed the parallels between the move away from traditional religious beliefs in Western industrialised societies and the increasing interest in inner spirituality or the 'turn to the self'. Bellah *et al* (1985) made the connection between biblical religion and civic republicanism in the USA and a self-oriented, therapeutic ethic which generated a privatised spirituality autonomous of external obligations and driven instead by momentary feelings and the pursuit of short term hedonism.

Together with increasing secularisation, consumerism and the needs of the market have become dominant ideologies in Western culture. Luckman (1990) discusses a concept he calls the 'market of transcendence' where traditional religious views of Christian origin compete with religious orientations pertaining to the various levels of transcendence. Disseminated by the mass media in books, television, and by prophets and teachers in public and private places, in the burgeoning 'seminar' industry, religion becomes a privatised market commodity. Woodhead and Heelas (2000:273) link the rise in the importance of self-development with the rise in the activities of the post-modern consumer culture. They characterise the individualised deregulated religion of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as being dominated by the values of novelty, rapid change, individual

enjoyment and consumer choice. In other words, the central importance of self-development to Western industrialised cultures that depend so heavily on consumption has left traditional religious doctrines open to the choice of each individual hence creating a type of 'spiritual supermarket' from which each individual can choose (Roof, 1999). Belk *et al* (1989:13) also discuss 'the secularisation of the sacred and the sacralisation of the secular' in the behaviour of the individual involved in consumption practices. According to Belk *et al* (1989), the rise of individualism has made it possible to define the sacred as that which brings secular ecstasy to the individual and happiness becomes intrinsically implicated with the fulfilment of the self.

Together with increasing secularisation and the dominance of consumerism, Western culture has been influenced by a rise in the importance of psychotherapeutic theory and practice. The convergence of psychotherapy and spiritualisation came about with the advent of Maslow's theories of humanistic psychology in 1970. Maslow coined the term 'self-actualisation' for the desired state or outcome of his theory related to human motivation. The state of self-actualisation was to be realised through 'peak experiences', including mysticism. The convergence of psychotherapy and spiritualisation has been criticised for its narcissistic self-indulgence and lack of social conscience (Lasch,1978: Schur,1976; Wolfe,1976). However, Puttick (2000) believes the dominant theme that arose from the convergence of spiritualisation and psychotherapy was that 'one must be able to love oneself before being able to love others' and that such a theme does not necessarily rule out a social conscience or commitment to public life.

The relationship of 'the self with itself' has been analysed by Hazleden (2003: 424-425) who discusses the ways in which self-help literature produces a self-reflexive citizen in a liberal democratic society. The self-reflexive citizen works constantly upon themselves to produce 'the effective, well-adjusted, autonomous individual in charge of their own emotional life who links

their personal goals and desires to social order and stability, and links power to subjectivity'. Hence the liberal democratic project is reproduced 'through the freedom and aspiration of subjects rather than in spite of them'.

This article furthers that discussion by aligning the specific characteristics of consumption practices with the discourse and practices of New Age spirituality. The article argues that the particular type of citizen produced by New Age discourse and practice in post-traditional liberal democracies is at the same time consumed by them. The discussion proposes that writers of New Age spiritual texts engage in a process that could be described as 'the commodification of the self'. They appropriate and combine aspects from both Eastern and Western traditional religions, theories and practices from psychology and psychotherapy, and Western and Eastern scientific theories to formulate what they claim are 'unique' meta-theories. The aspects appropriated by New Age spiritual thinkers are an eclectic mix of isolated parts of large and complex traditional religious, scientific or psychological theories or belief systems. Their partial and superficial treatment of such theories reduces and decontextualises their meanings. In this way, they engage in over-simplification, homogenisation, and a reduction in the meaning of the knowledge they use to develop their meta-theories. A similar process is involved in developing new products for consumer markets. Baudrillard (1998: 89) points out that a confusing tendency exists within the processes of commodification to both homogenise and differentiate human experience simultaneously. New Age spirituality and self-help books are involved in confusing and contradictory processes when they simultaneously homogenise each individual's response to spiritual experiences and differentiate their methods for reaching the promised goals of their packaged theorems.

The consumers of New Age texts have to be able to believe the promises given by New Age spiritual thinkers and their credibility is often established through stories of individuals having 'peak experiences' referred to in various terms as, for example, 'enlightenment' or 'ultimate consciousness'. The alignment of the packaged theorems of New Age thinkers with consumption behaviour opens up the possibility that new and different New age theorems will be constantly required to satisfy the never-ending needs of the individual consumer. Today's consumer is characterised by Bauman (1998:82) as an individual who prefers the constant state of moving or travelling from one new state to another over the stagnation and finality of a final destination or end goal. In their work on the differential effects of religion and spirituality on self and other orientations, Dillon & Wink (2000) operationalize and distinguish between the concepts of religion and spirituality as 'dwelling' and 'seeking' respectively. Their conceptualisation captures the distinction made by Bauman when he describes the constant 'seeking' undertaken by consumers and the 'dwelling' of traditional cultures not exposed to consumption practices. Social actors, therefore, are shaped by consumption practices due mainly to their need for constant stimulation and interest in new forms of self-development. Such stimulation requires, not a commitment from the individual involved in New Age spirituality but, an attitude of fun-loving experimental play with the proposed theorems an attitude aligned with a 'take-it-or-leave-it' approach. Trungpa's (1973) seminal text 'Cutting through Spiritual Materialism' recognised that the transplantation of traditional Eastern spiritual practices into Western culture exposes the practices to superficial treatment. The text outlines in detail the pitfalls spiritual seekers fall into when using their superficial 'ego self' to pick and choose between spiritual practices and beliefs. However, numerous decades later the proliferation of new ways in which to change and develop one's self in Western culture continues unabated.

The implications of such a constant need for new ways of ‘reinventing’ the self is that each new packaged theorem becomes outmoded or outdated over time and new theorems arise. The ‘uniqueness’ and ‘ground-breaking’ characteristics claimed by some New Age thinkers are no more than consumer fads when compared with the thousands of years of history and evolution of traditional religious doctrines or even the hundreds of years history of psychotherapeutic practices. However, as will be discussed, the ever-changing needs of consumer markets have become fertile ground for more, new, and varied New Age spiritual theories.

Selected texts of four New Age spiritual thinkers Deepak Chopra, Ken Wilber, Gary Zukav, and Shakti Gawain are analysed to compare and contrast their proposed discourse and practices with characteristics identified by social theorists to be indicative of the consumer society.

Characteristics such as,

- increasing secularisation,
- the central importance of self-development,
- the tendency for consumer products to homogenise and differentiate simultaneously,
- the continual need for individuals to ‘reinvent’ their self-identity,
- the ‘fad like’ character of the pre-packaged theorems of New Age spirituality.

The purpose of the analysis is to show how the continual need for new social products in consumer society ensures that the packaged theorems of New Age spiritual thinkers will continue to change and evolve according to the inherent dialectical character of such processes.

### ***The Self in Consumer Society***

Foucault (1994) believed practices of ‘self-care’ to be deeply ingrained in our social psyche. He described an experience of the desire of the individual in post-modern society as a continual negotiation of their self-identity when he said, ‘the main interest in life is to become someone else that you were not at the beginning. The



game is worthwhile in so far as we don't know what will be the end' (Foucault in Sawicki, 1994:286). Whilst eschewing an over-emphasis on the technology of domination and power in much of his early work, Foucault re-focused his research on the methods humans employ to understand themselves, their 'technologies of the self'. He came to believe that the process of psychoanalysis seeks what the Christian confessors and the Stoics sought long ago – not self-knowledge but a method of 'self care' (Foucault,1988:139).

Foucault pointed out that in some point in history there had been an inversion between the hierarchy of the two principles of antiquity, 'Take care of yourself' and 'Know thyself.' In Greco-Roman culture knowledge of oneself appeared as the consequence of taking care of yourself. While in the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle (Foucault,1988:22). Furthermore, in his examination of early Christian monastic life Foucault defines the technology of the self as a requirement for a 'sacrifice of the self, of the subject's own will ' through obedience and contemplation. Distinguishing between the Greco-Roman and Oriental origins of obedience (West versus East), Foucault points out that because of the impact of the Oriental origins of the technology of self-examination there is a much higher reliance upon the obedience and contemplation of an individual's thought patterns rather than their actions. He concluded that the most important outcome of the 'scrutiny of conscience' required by the continual examination of thoughts is that it implies that there is something hidden in ourselves and that we are always in a self-illusion which hides the secret (Foucault, 1988:43- 46).

Giddens (1991) also explores the social consequences brought about by feelings of uncertainty that can arise from over scrutiny of our conscience. He critiques the construction of the self in high modernity<sup>1</sup> for being contingent upon the ‘plurality of choices’ that confront the individual. In an analysis of the book *Self-Therapy: A Guide to Becoming Your Own Therapist* (Rainwater, 1989), Giddens identifies numerous influential factors that shape the plurality of choices operating in the social relations of the self that are applicable to an analysis of New Age spiritual thinkers.

Giddens proposes that due to the fact we are currently living in the post-traditional consumer society, the ‘signposts’ for human behaviour originally established by tradition are no longer used as points of reference. The context of post-modern social life is segmented and diverse leading to ‘lifestyle sectors’ that tend to dictate our actions. The allegiance to a lifestyle sector can cause individuals to feel uncomfortable if they move into a setting that places their own chosen lifestyle into question. Featherstone (1991:83) also makes the point that the term lifestyle connotes, not just the distinctive style of life of specific status groups but, individuality, self-expression and a ‘stylistic self-consciousness’. Not only our lifestyles but our beliefs are under scrutiny and this places each individual in a position of constant uncertainty as to their life choices because the reflexivity of post-modernity operates in a situation of methodological doubt rather than greater and greater certainty. A consequence of this has been that an increasingly temporal outlook has become the dominant outlook (Giddens, 1991:82-98).

Giddens also makes a clear connection between the need for continuous (re)construction of the self in high modernity and the commodified production of ‘self-actualisation’. He suggests that not only lifestyles, but self-actualisation is packaged and distributed according to market criteria.

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<sup>1</sup> Giddens uses the terms ‘high modernity’ and ‘post traditional order’ interchangeably. In this article these terms will be used to denote that society is operating from the basis of consumption rather than production interactions.

At the same time, Giddens suggests that self-help books stand in a precarious position with regard to the commodified production of self-actualisation. In some ways they break away from standardised, packaged consumption and at the same time they become marketed as pre-packaged theorems about how to 'get on' in life. Consequently, they become caught up in the very processes they nominally oppose (Giddens, 1991:198).

Bauman (1997:178-179) also believes that the uncertainties focused on individual identity, on its never complete construction and on a continual dismantling of the self in order to reconstruct it, haunts modern men and women. However, he points out that the experience of identity focused insecurity in consumer society does not cause a demand for religion but an ever rising demand for identity-experts who reassure individuals as to their behaviour and goals in life. Similarly Bordo (1997:51) argues that the practices undertaken by individuals when they are increasingly and continually exposed to the activities required for consumption is both inherently dynamic and de-stabilizing. The dialectical character of these activities means that the individual is not permitted to feel satisfied with themselves due to the fact that consumer capitalism, supported by advertising, cannot allow equilibrium or stasis in human desire. The consumer is only 'empowered' through fantasies of what could be. The consequence being that post-modern women and men need expert counsellors who can turn their uncertainty into self-assurance by offering them superior knowledge or access to wisdom that is closed to others.

Social scientific discussions surrounding the conceptualisation of the self are complex, numerous and on-going (Neisser & Jopling, 1997). The following analysis describes how New Age spiritual thinkers assume a normative concept of the self

which over-simplifies what is actually a complex and ever-changing experience for individuals. In the same way that traditional religious doctrines lose meaning if reduced to solitary aspects within their complex and comprehensive canons, the debate about unitary versus multiple conceptions of the self and the formation of one's self-identity loses meaning if reduced and over-simplified. The tendency for discourses and practices to be homogenised and over-simplified within the context of the consumer culture is replicated in the methods applied by New Age spiritual thinkers when they homogenise and over-simplify the conceptualisation of the self and self-identity.

### ***Method***

An analysis was undertaken of the discourse and practices prescribed for the development of the self in texts written by four prominent New Age spiritual thinkers. Deepak Chopra, Ken Wilber, Gary Zukav and Shakti Gawain, were chosen because of their claims to a uniqueness of their vision, their relative popularity in the New Age movement, their reference to both Western scientific, psychotherapeutic and traditional Eastern or Western religious doctrine, and their central focus on the need for the individual to 'transform' themselves using prescribed discourses and practices.

A content analysis of relevant texts was undertaken to outline the processes and methods prescribed by these spiritual thinkers in developing their meta-theories. The method of analysis was not applied in order to critique each specific 'truth claim' in the content of the theories but to show how their processes align with the needs of individuals in the post-traditional consumer society.

Many other New Age spiritual thinkers and writers display similar methods in developing the practices and discourse in their writings to the four chosen in this article for analysis. The method chosen for this article is an interpretive one and, as such, aims to highlight the parallels in meaning between how certain social theorists explain post-traditional consumer society and the popularity of ‘social products’ such as texts written in the style of New Age spirituality. The author makes no claims that the analysis used in the article is archetypal in terms of its ability to analyse the methods of others writing in the field of New Age spirituality. Furthermore, the texts chosen for analysis are not necessarily representative of all of the writings of the New Age spiritual thinkers represented in the article. In an article of this size it would be impossible to comprehensively analyse the full collection of the writings of prolific authors such as Ken Wilber or Deepak Chopra. The aim of the article is to show how the processes employed by the writers of the chosen texts align themselves closely with processes of consumption.

### ***An Analysis of Selected Texts of New Age Spiritual Thinkers***

The four New Age spiritual thinkers chosen to be analysed take specific aspects of various scientific, traditional religious doctrines and psychotherapy as the basis of their discourse and practice whilst at the same time they propose a specific, new and unique reinterpretation of those beliefs. The scientific beliefs most commonly referred to, by the texts analysed in this article, are those surrounding chaos and quantum theory related to physics and cosmology. The traditional religious beliefs most commonly referred to are taken from Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism. In all cases, whilst relying upon aspects of traditional religions as a basis for their discussions, they propose that old traditional paths of spiritual belief be reinterpreted and re-envisioned from their newly devised standpoint. I will now separately investigate some of the writings of each New Age spiritual thinker used as exemplars in the article.

## **Deepak Chopra**

Deepak Chopra adapts the ancient Hindu practices and beliefs associated with Ayurvedic medicine as the basis of his prolific writing and lecturing. Chopra has published 24 books on topics ranging from health and medicine to his philosophy behind New Age spirituality.

In *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, (1993) Chopra outlines what he describes as the ‘shared worldview’ as a perspective that limits the ways in which individuals conceive of themselves and their physical longevity. Reinterpreting this worldview into one whereby individuals have limitless possibilities, he puts forward the proposition that each individual can defeat their own physical entropy.

Because the mind influences every cell in the body, human aging is fluid and changeable; it can speed up, slow down, stop for a time, and even reverse itself. Hundreds of research findings from the last three decades have verified that aging is much more dependent on the individual than was ever dreamed of in the past (Chopra, 1993:5).

Chopra places the individual as centrally important to his unique claim of an achievable process of physical rejuvenation. When referring to traditional scientific data, Chopra himself concedes that he uses ‘vast assumptions’ when asserting his own version of scientific fact. After outlining ten old negative assumptions about the nature of reality, Chopra goes on to outline ten opposite new assumptions that he believes ‘give us the ability to rewrite the program of aging’. However, even though he concedes that he is making vast assumptions to a predominantly aging and

uncertain population, they are highly reassuring words. The following quote shows how many complex theories of physics are reduced and oversimplified in Chopra's writing.

These are vast assumptions, the makings of a new reality, yet all grounded in the discoveries of quantum physics made almost a hundred years ago. The seeds of this new paradigm were planted by Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, and other pioneers of quantum physics, who realised that the accepted way of viewing the physical world was false. Although things out there appear to be real, there is no proof of reality apart from the observer. Every worldview creates its own world. (Chopra, 1993:7)

In his book *Seven Spiritual Laws of Success: A Practical Guide to the Fulfilment of Your Dreams*, (1996) Chopra splits the conception of the self and makes a distinction between power based on the ego and 'Self-power'.

Self-power, (as opposed to ego based power), is permanent, because it is based on the knowledge of the Self. And there are certain characteristics of self-power. It draws people to you, and it also draws things that you want to you. It magnetises people, situations, and circumstances to support your desires. This is also called support from the laws of nature. It is the support of divinity; it is the support that comes from being in a state of grace (Chopra, 1996:12-13).

Chopra's theorems display the exact set of conditions Foucault outlines in his theory on the technologies of the self. Chopra envisages a set of conditions whereby an individual is under the self-illusion of being physically, psychologically and mentally limited and he promises a 'secret'

or unknown state whereby if we scrutinise our thoughts and decide to change we can have the power to realise the possibility of living forever.

I want to convince you that you are much more than your limited body, ego, and personality. The rules of cause and effect as you accept them have squeezed you into the volume of a body and the span of a lifetime. In reality, the field of human life is open and unbounded. At its deepest level, your body is ageless, your mind timeless. Once you identify with that reality, which is consistent with the quantum worldview, aging will fundamentally change (Chopra, 1993:7).

Chopra challenges the view of scientifically based reality in a very superficial and nominal way and replaces it with a personal reality that reassures the reader they are the centre of the universe. All the reader has to do is have faith, look into themselves for everything and follow Chopra's set of instructions that include dietary tips, meditation, visualisation, breathing programs, and physical exercise suggestions.

Apart from his appropriation of Ayurvedic philosophy Chopra has written a book outlining his broader spiritual philosophy entitled, *How to Know God: The Soul's Journey into the Mystery of Mysteries* (2000). Described as an exploration of the seven ways we experience God, the book sets out seven stages we experience when we want to know God directly. Chopra asserts the 'facts' of the universe and promises an ultimate reality:

Everything that we experience as material reality is born in an invisible realm beyond space and time, a realm revealed by science to consist of energy and



information. This invisible source of all that exists is not an empty void but the womb of creation itself. Something creates and organises this energy. It turns the chaos of quantum soup into stars, galaxies, rainforests, human beings, and our own thoughts, emotions, memories, and desires. In the pages that lie ahead we will see that it is not only possible to know this source of existence on an abstract level but to become intimate and at one with it (Chopra, 2000:1-2).

In this book Chopra refers to a wide array of religious traditions, particularly the Judeo-Christian tradition. He also takes the concept of the individual as the centre of the universe to his logical conclusion.

No one can shoehorn God into a single box. We must have a range of vision as vast as human experience itself. Atheists need their God, who is absent and non-existent, while at the other extreme mystics need their God, one of pure love and light. Only the brain can deliver this vast range of deities (Chopra, 2000:8).

Chopra's conclusions about God are based on his selective use of both scientific and traditional religious knowledge and he encapsulates God in the brain of each individual. Chopra's texts depend on a vision of 'the Self' as omnipotent. At the same time he makes a clear distinction between the 'ego self' and the more preferable or omnipotent 'Self'. His texts make the promise of a desirable state of 'agelessness' predicated on the development of total individual and personal power.

## **Ken Wilber**

Wilber is a prolific writer of philosophical texts on spirituality (a term he sometimes interchanges with personal growth). A proponent of a set of practices called 'Integral Transformative Practice' (ITP), Wilber derived the technology of ITP from a selective collection of various Eastern and Western spiritual and scientific practices and beliefs. According to Wilber (2000:126), ITP practices are designed to 'exercise the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions of the self, and to do so in relationship with others and with the larger world (including community and nature)'. Described as a 'practicing Buddhist', Wilber refers to what he calls 'the great wisdom traditions' in his discourse and sometimes uses Buddhist terms and practices when elaborating his specific blend of spiritual philosophy.

In his book *No Boundary: Eastern and Western Approaches to Personal Growth*, Wilber sets out to offer his own solution, or set of practices, to what he describes as the 'great deal of confusion today about where to turn for assistance and guidance in overcoming one's conflicts and battles' (Wilber, 1979:i). Implying that the inherent contradictions between many different schools of thought is the source of confusion, he attempts a synthesis of these views by interpreting them in his own way and collapsing some of their aspects into the set of practices he labels Integral Transformative Practice. Wilber himself points out that his book is neither technical or scholarly and that he generalises, simplifies and condenses selective information from cognitive behaviourism, Freudian ego psychology, Bioenergetics and Gestalt, Psychosynthesis, Jungian psychology, and the mystical traditions in general.

Stating that his vision is unique, Wilber establishes a preferred state he refers to as 'unity consciousness'. Unity consciousness is characterised as a 'sense of identity that expands far

beyond the narrow confines of our mind and body and embraces the entire cosmos' (Wilber, 1979:3). Using references to the written experiences of mystics (R.M. Bucke), and their psychotic visions (Traherne), Wilber claims that,

There is much evidence that this type of experience or knowledge is central to every major religion- Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – so that we can justifiably speak of the 'transcendent unity of religions' and the unanimity of primordial truth (Wilber, 1979:3).

Together with broad references to traditional religions, Wilber uses the concept of 'personal boundaries', borrowed from psychology, and highlights it as central to 'our misconception of ourselves'. The way in which Wilber uses the concept of boundaries is fundamental to his meta-theorising. Using the concepts of identity, self, and self-image interchangeably Wilber develops his argument for the limitations of boundaries on the basis of 'levels of identity'. The levels he describes are 'not theoretical postulates but observable realities – you can verify them in and for yourself.' He goes on to state that, 'As regards these different levels, its almost as if that familiar yet ultimately mysterious phenomenon we call consciousness were a spectrum, a rainbow-like affair composed of numerous bands or levels of self-identity' (Wilber, 1979:9).

The rest of the book uses the basic concept of 'levels of identity' to build an elaborate theory of levels that build towards the desired state described in Chapter 10 as 'The Ultimate State of Consciousness'. Much like the methods and practices developed by the other writers analysed in this article, Wilber's interpretation of 'the great wisdom traditions' build hierarchically to deliver an ideal state he labels, 'The Ultimate State of Consciousness'.

In a later commentary on ITP Wilber identifies two types of self and distinguishes between them. He describes the various practices surrounding ITP as practices that integrate the relative (or small) self and the enlightened (or pure) Self. He generates these distinctions by aligning the relative self with the distinction made between relative truth and absolute truth in Hindu philosophy. 'The great traditions generally make a distinction between absolute truth and relative truth. Relative truth deals with the manifest, ordinary, dualistic world – the world of samsara and absolute truth deals with the infinite, unbounded, unqualifiable, ultimate truth – the truth of nirvana' (Wilber, 2000:37). Like Gawain and Zukav discussed later in the article, Wilber uses the term 'transformation' to describe what he proposes is a more rare form of religious function, that of radical transformation and liberation. Wilber makes a distinction between religious practices that,

Create meaning for the separate self by offering myths, stories, tales, narratives, rituals and revivals that, taken together, help the separate self make sense of, and endure, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. This function of religion does not usually change the level of consciousness in a person; it does not deliver radical transformation. Rather, it consoles the self, fortifies the self, defends the self, promotes the self. However, the other type of religious practice utterly shatters the self. It does not console the self but devastates it (Wilber, 1997:36).

Here Wilber is discussing the 'death of the ego' that is referred to quite frequently by spiritual thinkers who focus on the integration of the lesser self with the higher self and align the ego with the small or lesser self. The purpose of focusing on the self in this way is to learn practices to transform it from an undesirable to a more desirable state.

In an article this length it is impossible to analyse the very prolific writings of Wilber, the analysis is merely focusing on ITP which is a central recurring theme in his writing. From the very beginning of his discussions Wilber, like Chopra, purposefully collapses the knowledge and experience inherent in complex and historically rich traditions, centuries of social science and the physical sciences to develop his own 'unique' meta-theory. Apart from the reductionism and the juxtapositioning of knowledge and traditions that lose meaning when over-simplified, both Chopra and Wilber's meta-theorising fits Giddens' description concerning the contradictory nature of theories of self-actualisation. Wilber's theories are in a precarious position with regard to the commodification of self-actualisation, in that, whilst he challenges the normative pre-packaged theorems offered by other authors, he himself prescribes the pre-packaged theorem of ITP and directs individuals in how to 'get on' in life (Giddens, 1991:198).

The parallel between these methods of theory development and consumptive practices is how they can be aligned with the characteristics identified by Baudrillard in the development of new 'social products'. As already discussed, Baudrillard points out that consumption practices and their products have a tendency to simultaneously appear similar and different. Both Chopra's theories related to the reversal of the aging process and his seven stages to God, and Wilber's Integral Transformative Practice could be seen as 'social products' as they display these contradictory characteristics.

### **Gary Zukav**

Gary Zukav is the author of numerous books but most notably two worldwide best selling books, *The Seat of the Soul: An Inspiring Vision of Humanity's Spiritual Destiny* (1990), and *Soul Stories* (2000). Zukav, refers to both selective scientific knowledge and traditional religious behaviour and practice, such as the behaviour of Jesus Christ, and Hindu terms such as 'karma'

in his writings. Mahatma Ghandi is referred to a number of times and there is a chapter entitled 'Karma' in his book *The Seat of the Soul* (Zukav,1990:27&45). However, of all the spiritual thinkers discussed in this article Zukav is the one who most frequently refers to Christian terms and ideas. For example,

Every soul that agrees consciously to bring to a level of human interaction the love and compassion and wisdom that it has acquired is trying through his or her own energy to challenge the fear patterns of that collective. This is the archetypal pattern that was put into place within our species by the Teacher, Jesus (Zukav, 1990:174).

Zukav's first book *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics*, is a completely personal and unique interpretation of the science of physics. Based on his interpretation of the theories of quantum mechanics and relativity, the book takes many of the competing debates about the two strands of physics and inter-disperses them with broad statements about the philosophies of Eastern religions. Similar to Wilber and Chopra, Zukav implies that Eastern and Western philosophies and science should come together in one meta-theory.

It would be a mistake to equate Hinduism, for example, with Buddhism, even though they are more like each other than either one of them is like the religion of the West. Nonetheless, all Eastern religions (psychologies) are compatible in a very fundamental way with Bohm's physics and philosophy. All of them are based upon the experience of a pure, undifferentiated reality which is that-which-is (Zukav, 1979:326).

In this way Zukav's texts are reductionist. However, his texts also display contradictory tendencies when in the following quote he confirms the inadequacy of the physics theory he proposes.

It is ironic that while Bohm's theories are received with some skepticism by most professional physicists, they would find an immediately sympathetic reception among the thousands of people in our culture who have turned their backs on science in their own quest for the ultimate nature of reality. If Bohm's physics, or one similar to it, should become the main thrust of physics in the future, the dances of East and West could blend in exquisite harmony. It is possible that physics curricula of the 21<sup>st</sup> century include classes in meditation. (Zukav, 1979:327)

Zukav (1990:155) refers frequently to the need for individuals to monitor their 'personal power'. Preferring to give suggestions on how individuals can transform their personal power into 'authentic power', Zukav sets out practices so individuals can circumvent their 'weaknesses' along the way.

Walk yourself through your reality step by step. Make yourself aware of the consequences of your decisions, and choose accordingly. When you feel in yourself the addictive attraction of sex, or alcohol, or drugs, or anything else, remember these words: You stand between the two worlds of your lesser self and your full self. (Zukav, 1990:155)

The distinction between the 'lesser self' and the 'full self' is repeatedly referred to and sometimes the 'full self' is referred to as the 'authentic self'. Zukav describes the lesser self as the 'five-sensory' human being and describes the authentic self as the 'multi-sensory' human being. He makes the point that the multi-sensory human is 'not better than the five-sensory. It is simply more appropriate now' (Zukav,1990:13). However, the distinction automatically implies that the multi-sensory human being is a more desirable state than the five sensory human being. Zukav's promise of the desired state of the 'authentic' human who integrates their personality with their soul is similar to when Chopra promises an experience of God and the possibility of everlasting life and Wilber promises total integration of our being when we reach 'the Ultimate Consciousness'.

Of the four spiritual thinkers discussed in the article, Zukav's theories are the ones that have achieved the widest audience as he is a regular guest on the worldwide syndicated television program 'Oprah'. Here his ideas are exposed to an audience conservatively estimated to be 20 million.

### **Shakti Gawain**

Author of the bestselling books *Creative Visualization* (1979), *Living in the Light* (1986), and *The Path to Transformation* (1993), Shakti Gawain, a white caucasian North American woman, has assumed a traditional Hindu name in her role that has been described on one of her book covers as a 'pioneering force in the world consciousness movement'.

In *The Path to Transformation*, a chapter entitled 'The Path of Transcendence' critiques the 'traditional spiritual approaches' for creating a growing chasm between spirit and form, between who we are as human personalities in physical bodies (Gawain,1993:46). Gawain criticises the



traditional religious approaches to spirituality for not engaging with the material world and envisions a communal development of consciousness where the individual embraces their ego, recognises it for what it is and sets about to heal the 'split that has existed between spirit and form' (Gawain,1993:53). Gawain inter-disperses her textual discourse with practices in the form of exercises that combine creative visualisations, remembering and envisioning dream states, asking your inner self for guidance, listening to and developing your intuition, and writing a journal. Outlined in her 'seven steps on the path to transformation' (Gawain, 1993:177-185) the practices suggested use a mixture of Eastern and Western religious practices and practices related to psychotherapy.

An overarching similarity between the discourse and practices of these spiritual thinkers, which is of central importance to this article, is their emphasis on the volition of the individual if 'enlightenment' or 'self-realisation' is to be achieved. All of these thinkers make distinctions in terms of the number and type of selves each individual human possesses. For example, Gawain has a chapter in *The Path to Transformation* entitled 'Discovering our Many Selves'. Like Wilber, Gawain writes about the need to integrate the different parts of each individual's personality in order to achieve the 'promise' of a growth in consciousness.

The fact is that within each personality are many different sub-personalities, or selves. To better understand our own inner conflicts and inconsistencies we need to become aware of these. The process of consciousness growth involves getting to know our many inner selves and bringing them into balance and integration in our personalities (Gawain, 1993:117-118).

In *Living in the Light* (1986) Gawain uses various practices taken from Hinduism, Buddhism and psychotherapy as exercises for every part of an individual's life, there are chapters on relationships, children, sexuality, work, money, and health. The exercises are designed to assist each individual to become 'a channel for the creative power of the universe'. The title of her first popular book *Creative Visualisation* (1979) became the 'social product' for which she became famous. Like the practices prescribed by the other spiritual thinkers in this article, the techniques in the book were based on an eclectic mix of practices from both psychology, and Eastern and Western religious traditions such as visualisation, meditation, journal writing, affirmations, singing and chanting, treasure mapping, imaging and goal setting. The goal of the practices is described clearly in the subtitle of the book, 'The inspirational best-seller that has led thousands to the fulfilment of their desires through the art of mental energy and affirmation'.

### ***Discussion***

The importance of the concept of 'self care' as a technology employed by individuals in post-traditional consumer society to dominate or act upon themselves is a crucial starting point for the explanation of the ever-increasing popularity in the ideas of New Age spiritual thinkers. The specific changes in Western and Eastern religious practices and the application of psychotherapy are two crucial historical aspects of this changing set of practices. The sacrifice of the self, of the subject's own will through obedience and contemplation is a central feature of the new technologies of the self. The introduction and influence of certain Oriental (Eastern) religious practices, obedience and contemplation has strengthened the 'turn to the self' that has found fertile ground in the uncertainty of the post-traditional consumer society. The scrutiny of conscience practiced in this new technology of the self implied that there was a hidden potentiality that was difficult for individuals, who were constantly in a state of self-illusion, to achieve.

There are parallels between the concept of technologies of the self and the discourse and practices of the four New Age spiritual thinkers discussed in this article. Chopra's promise of longevity and his seven stages to know God, Wilber's Integral Transformative Practices, Zukav's authentic self, and Gawain's transformed creative visualiser are all predicated on the promise of a hitherto unknown but highly desirable state. These 'transformed' selves all require the sacrifice of the lesser self through specific practices of (inner) obedience and contemplation in order that the promise of the hitherto unknown secret state be achieved. Our existing state of reality is problematized and we are offered solutions via eclectic mixes of 'self technologies' such as visualisation, breathing exercises, meditation, etc, that claim to assist us realise our 'true self'.

Each of these examples of New Age spiritual thinking engage in the promise of transformation from one state to another via a teleological process. They display similar tendencies when they highlight the inadequacies of a purely scientific view of the world, whilst at the same time appropriating and re-envisioning specific aspects of traditional religious beliefs and esoteric psychological, philosophical and scientific theories and reconstructing them to suit their different but 'unique' meta-theories. In prescribing these processes they reassure individuals, experiencing the pressures of the consumer society, that the current explanations for their lived reality are flawed (and as such can be discounted) and their unique vision of reality superimposed. If, as the social theorists in this article propose, each individual in consumer society feels uncertainty as a pre-eminent aspect of their existence the meta-theories of New Age spiritual thinkers fulfil the needs of consumers. Consumers are delivered a 'promise' that can never be fulfilled and therefore requires them to be in a constant state of 'seeking'.

The way in which the four New Age thinkers profiled in the article write about similar subject matter with a slightly different emphasis for each book is an example of how ‘social products’ that appear basically similar can be continually reinterpreted and slightly differentiated for the need of consumers. Their writings can be seen as variations on a methodological theme. The social products created are relatively undifferentiated in the methods they apply to reinvent the self and the consumer of the product can use the prescriptions to constantly strive for an impossible state of existence at the same time feeling reassured they are ‘working on themselves’. The inherent contradictions in the methods of New Age spiritual thinkers align themselves with the characteristics of consumer products that tend to homogenise and differentiate human experience simultaneously.

### ***Conclusion***

The aim of this article was to show how the meta-theories proposed by certain New Age spiritual thinkers arise out of a process that could be described as the commodification of self-actualisation or put more simply, the consumption of the self. The analysis showed that the discourse and practices prescribed in the New Age spiritual texts chosen for analysis align themselves with characteristics inherent in the post-traditional consumer society. The historical materialist basis of an increasing focus on ‘self-care’ leads to the discourse and practices of New Age spiritual thinkers becoming institutionalised in the processes of consumption. The article discusses how an individual’s experience of uncertainty in their everyday life is constituted and re-constituted through the context of the consumer society. Once appropriated and commodified, the initial purpose of such New Age discourse and practice is lost and new ways of discussing and practicing self-care must emerge. The alignment of this process with the built-in redundancy of consumer products is obvious. Redundancy being the inevitable outcome for any social product in a commodified world.

The implications of this for individual self-identity in the context of the consumer society is that it is always in the process of 'becoming', New Age spiritual thinkers promise self-actualisation but their prescriptions never fully satisfy market needs. Once a self-identity is formed it is immediately appropriated, eventually consumed, and a different form of self-identity must be reconstructed. It is the imperative motivating this process of construction and reconstruction of the self that calls into question the end goals and truth claims of New Age spiritual thinkers. The commodified character of the discourse and practices of the spiritual thinkers analysed in this article tend to heighten not ameliorate the uncertainty felt by individuals who are constantly exposed to the need to renegotiate their self-identity. The requirement of consumer society to constantly regenerate new social products for the consumer market means that the packaged theorems offered by New Age spirituality will continue to change in order to promise satisfaction of consumer needs in a never-ending cycle.

Consumerism and market needs have become fertile breeding grounds for more, different and new pre-packaged New Age spiritual theorems. What forms New Age spirituality will take in the future is highly debatable. Psychologists, such as Nicholas Emler, believe the phenomenon will diminish while others believe it will burgeon and change direction moving more towards an interest in psychic powers and mediums (Butler-Bowden,2003;Vernon,2004). As long as society remains dependent on consumption interactions as a defining organising principle the market need for new and differentiated forms of 'consuming the self' should continue unabated. Whether we are consuming ourselves using technologies prescribed by New Age spirituality or other forms of self-technology, the principle of the need to consume the self will continue due to the specific cultural conditions of the post-traditional consumer society.

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