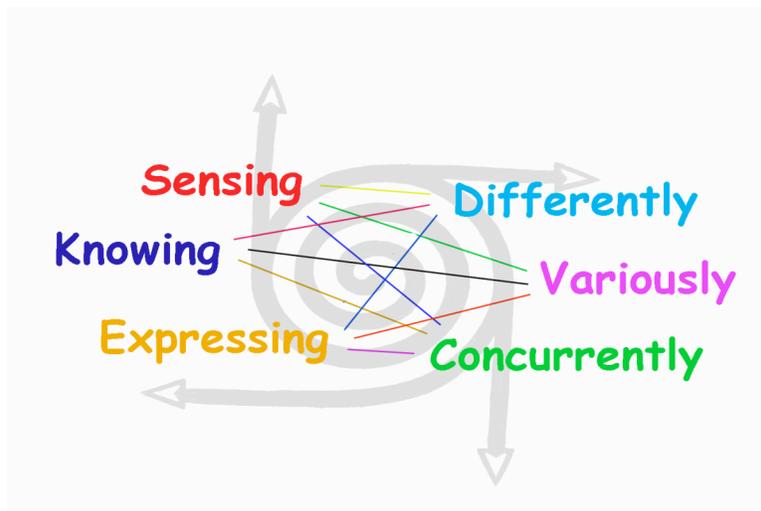




\* On Alchemical Yogas of Knowing \*

[www.mytho-logos.net](http://www.mytho-logos.net)

## Posing Alchemical Yogas of Knowing



This text explores a concept of enhancing human awareness through extra-ordinary practices of attention and interpretation. In so far as awareness is effectively pre-determined by habitual assumptions and expectations, which constitute a relatively 'ordinary status of things,' a question arises about how to extend it beyond those 'reduced conditions.' Enhancing awareness is examined here in reference to promoting more inclusive (or less reductive) cognitive strategies for understanding self and world. That effort is approached as differentiating modes of consciousness 'beyond' the habitual reductions of ordinary attitudes and toward more complex perspectives on relational interactivity. Thus the general effort is also referred to as 're-orientation of knowing.' This notion is explored in reference to historical cultural traditions that

appear to have had just such intentions and effects. Specific examples used here are the traditional practices of Hindu Yogas and Western Alchemy.

## Thinking and Feeling Extra-Ordinary Qualities of Being: Yogic and Alchemical Models

The concept of extending human awareness beyond its habituated attitudes is ancient. Notion such as ‘attaining enlightenment’ expressed in various cultural traditions suggests a ‘coming into inclusive awareness about self and world’ by ‘seeing what is not normally seen.’ Examining the ways such extra-ordinary consciousness has been pursued is helpful in understanding the issues involved. Thus some brief comments on Yoga and Alchemy are offered here as a means of orienting to the concept of ‘practicing more inclusive consciousness.’

The term Yoga derives from Hindu spiritual traditions. The Sanskrit root of this word, *yui*, has been translated as meaning yoke, union, joining together, coming into conjunction with, and also, bestow upon or grant. There are various traditional sets of philosophical concepts and practices associated with this term. In general, the aim of these is regarded as using specific disciplines of practice to assist in ‘transcending the limitations of individual consciousness’ so as to come into relation or union with a ‘universal spirit.’ The ‘move’ involved is thus from consciousness as separate individual status to pervasively participatory status. One seeks to experience being as ‘of the all inclusive thus infinite continuum.’

In both the traditions of Yoga and Western cultural practices of Alchemy, extremes of attention and contemplation are induced to enable engagement with a radically inclusive status of totality. These are conceived in relation to specific stages of development or process. There are evident correspondences between these stages of ‘coming into relationship’ with some extra-ordinary ‘greater than personal consciousness.’ Yogic practices are said to involve three basic stages: fixed attention, contemplation, and absorption. Alchemical stages for this process are titled (in Latin) as *consideratio*, *contemplatio*, and *excessus* or *raptus*. (There are other cultural versions of alchemical traditions, but reference here is specifically to Western ones.) In both traditions one begins with an unusually attentive *focus upon phenomena* rather than upon expectations or familiar assumptions about ‘how things are.’ The sense of discipline involved appears important. Some formal dedication to a specified context for practicing ‘perceiving, experiencing, and thinking extra-ordinarily’ is evidently essential.

The disciplines of Hindu Yogas include mental focus (meditations) and physical focus (Yoga postures). Related practices in Western Alchemical procedures involved paying

close attention to physical substances during processes of their recombination and transformation that were thought to reveal ‘stages of the emergence of spirit in, or from, matter.’ In both cultural contexts, these practices derived meaning in reference to various tales, images, and imaginal personifications of ‘forces’ that are characteristically mythical in their mode of representation. These provide more tangible references for the ‘sources’ of extra-ordinary ordering,’ such as ‘gods that exist within gods,’ locations of ‘types of consciousness’ in the body (charkas), or the “spirit Mercurius” who ‘works’ the transformations of matter and thus guides alchemical processes. These references were regarded as somehow exemplary of, or involved in the attainment of a ‘supra-normal’ status of conscious awareness about the nature of being and becoming. That awareness can be generalized as about ‘how the many are of the one,’ for Yoga, or that ‘matter is animated by transformations of spirit,’ for Alchemy.

In the broadest regard, then, these practices can be understood to promote experience and understanding of the *inter-relatedness* of things. Through them one could presumably experience a condition of consciousness that ‘connected’ the radical diversity and seemingly irreducible distinctions between particular, individualized phenomena into a continuum. That goal is expressed here as seeking the ‘complementarity of oneness in/as manyness.’ Yogic efforts tend to begin with an assumed condition of evidently separate personalized identity. Alchemical processes usually were conceived as beginning with a necessarily undifferentiated status of ‘primary matter,’ termed *Prima Materia*, and sometimes associated with the term *Massa Confusa*, indicating a similar condition of ‘compressed confusion.’ That initial, seemingly inert, singular ‘mass’ was subjected to transformations intended to differentiate its constituents, thereby releasing the ‘spirit’ that ‘moves through all things.’ One might regard that image as of the ‘energy of inter-relatedness’ that connects all aspects of material manifestation. It would seem then that Yoga and Alchemy both attempt to amplify awareness about ‘manyness-in/as/of-oneness,’ though in somewhat different modes. Yogic practices appear to work ‘from the particular toward the inclusive’ and Alchemical ones appear to work ‘from the unitary toward the diversified.’

Admittedly, people often interpret these and other related practices to be aimed at experiencing the obliteration of all particular individuality by way of a ‘union with the absolute’ or with a hierarchical status of ‘spirit’ as superior to and separate from matter. However, viewed philosophically and psychologically, they can be understood as epistemological and heuristic efforts to re-orient attention away from ordinarily reductive attitudes about ‘how things are related’ or interact. In the most general outline, both these contexts of ‘seeking extra-ordinary knowing’ involve efforts to combine mental understanding with physical experience or observation of empirical phenomena *in a way that induces* a sense of ‘conscious presence with/in a radically complex status.’

Thereby, their purposes are not the attainment of actual ‘transcendence’ of being singular or ‘as a physical status.’ Rather, there appears a seeking to know the interdependence of singularly separate and inclusively related, materially fixed and energetically dynamic states. The condition implied is a continuum of mind and matter, a complementarity of spirit (or soul) and body in an inclusive experience, rather than a reduction of one to the other. Such a condition is not dualistic in so far as its contrasts are not opposed but interrelated. Thus tendencies to interpret the aims of these practices as reductions to undifferentiated unity or hierarchical superiority of spirit are actually extensions of more familiar, ordinary cognitive strategies for composing identity and reality. Imposing those expectations on the practices effectively evades serious engagement with extra-ordinary modes of consciousness.

Among the Hindu references for Yoga there appears a condition of one’s having an individual self-status (*Atman*) that is also ‘non-existent’ as a separate status in so far as it is part of a universal one (*Brahman or Brahman-Atman*, ‘the All in all of us’). Both states exist and yet are one. This ‘absolute’ status is described as beyond human reason yet can be known as experience. There seems a clear acknowledgment in this view that the cognitive strategies of ordinarily rational consciousness are incapable of accommodating inclusive totality—yet it can be ‘known.’ In Western Alchemical references, conditions such as decay and death are figured as constituting both the termination of one’s status as ‘a particular being’ and yet also effecting a reorganization of one’s existence into a related but different, metamorphosed status. Thus transformations of matter involve reconstitutions of identity and consciousness along some continuum of relatedness.

Certainly there are narrative elements in the mythical representations of both traditions that give an impression of some potential conclusive attainment. But the processes for ‘altering consciousness’ proposed are metaphorically expressed and metamorphically figured. The reasoning used is paradoxically and dialectically inclusive, so that such notions as ‘beginning and ending’ remain ambiguous. *Atman* and *Brahman* are and are not the same thing. The ‘practice’ often appears to be a directed process, as if it were a formula to be solved, a literal effort engaged ‘out there’ in world and cosmos. But there are also indications that this ‘thing-like’ representation is acknowledged as a necessary device used to render tangible what are actually ‘acts of consciousness’ (or the psychical dynamics of knowing) involved in extra-ordinarily inclusive understanding.

Thus, whereas the ‘enlightened union with universal spirit,’ or the ‘distillation of philosophers gold’ are often posed as attainable goals of ‘the work,’ these appears to be a form of ‘enticement’ for the personal identity of ordinarily reductive consciousness. Accounts of those reputed to have fully mastered these processes are few. Thus the

point appears not to be ‘perfection of’ but rather ‘encounter with’ these altered states of diversified consciousness. The practices are on-going efforts that enable a recursive experience of being a singular self *and* being ‘of the all,’ or ‘as both matter and spirit.’ Thus it appears that one ‘succeeds’ in these practices in so far as they induce (at least occasionally) an altered state of embodied consciousness that constitutes participation in the ‘more than ordinary complexity of being.’ Such a ‘cycling’ of modes of consciousness is indicted by the figurative alchemical motif of the oroborous—the snake that devours its own tail.

The Yogic practitioner ‘performs’ this ‘psycho-mythic epistemic processing’ in his or her own consciousness and body. The Alchemist sought to participate in the metamorphosis of matter and spirit by conducting and paying radical attention to the processes of physical transformations induced in his or her laboratory. Thus Alchemy and Yoga are offered here as historical illustrations of the motif of ‘artfully’ and actively inducing dynamical awareness of, as well as participation in, concurrent being and becoming. The association of such efforts with archaic ritual practices for ‘embodying radical complexity’ are discussed further in texts on the **Concurrent Being** and **Concurrent Becoming** pages of this website.

Such cultural traditions provide references for the concept posed here of ‘arts of precipitating participation in concurrent status’ that constitute psycho-philosophical ‘enactments’ inducing more diversified qualities of knowing and understanding. Using the examples of Yoga and Alchemy, that general concept derived from these and other such pre-modern efforts to diversify consciousness is advanced here using the term ‘alchemical yogas of knowing.’ The task then arises of how to context such efforts within contemporary social and cultural milieus.

### [Modernist Reduction and a Need for 'Alchemical Yogas of Knowing'](#)

What then do these practices from ‘pre-scientific’ societies have to do with contemporary individuals? Are the categories and distinctions of those practices still appropriately ‘useful’ in diversifying the cognitive strategies of consciousness? Is there even any current need for such practices? In addressing such question some assessment of the relative values placed upon reductive and non-reductive cognitive strategies in contemporary assumptions about identity and reality is required.

One of the most important views presented in the work on this web site asserts that archaic and pre-modern cultures tended to establish some socially validated contexts in which ordinarily reductive attitudes were subordinated to the validity of non-reductive, mythical representations (such as ‘holy’ or ‘sacred days’ and ritualized rites of engaging

extra-ordinary or ‘super natural’ status). In contrast, modernist Westernized societies tend to idealize reductive modes of knowing and understanding in a historically exceptional manner. Technological mechanism, scientific empiricism, and rationalistic systematization have become the *de facto* criteria for *all* valid states of reality. In short, a pervasive (if not always conscious) assumption pervades this social context that ‘what is not quantifiable is not real.’”

Some observers claim that even the basis of religious faith has shifted under these conditions. That is, what in archaic pre-modern societies is described in terms of a ‘real metaphorically symbolic experience’ must, to be valid, become a literalistic belief in a historicized status of ‘miraculous events.’ That is, references for an extra-ordinary dimension of phenomena, once positioned in an ‘other world’ of mythical space and time, must now become ‘literal events in ordinary space and time’ (i.e., Christianity’s historical birth of a god rather than a mythically atemporal one). The point of primary concern here is that the preeminence of mechanistically reductive modeling as the only valid basis for phenomenal reality in modernist ‘habits of mind’ imposes severe restrictions upon our range of consciousness: reductive cognitive strategies are inherently privileged. Thus practices for inducing non-reductive modes of consciousness such as Yoga and Alchemy appear effectively irrelevant in this cultural milieu.

However, if archaic societies found it important to create and sanction practices for diversifying modes of consciousness, then this issue would seem even more important for modernist ones. If there is some generally intrinsic need for human re-orientation of habituated attitudes toward self and world, then persons in a ‘culture of reduction’ would seem to be particularly vulnerable to any potential negative effects upon awareness resulting from unchallenged reduction. That is, it appears psychologically appropriate to assume that humans in modern contexts have an even more imperative need for ‘experience of irreducibly interactive complexity’ —or, ‘manyness-in/as/of oneness’ —that expands their capacities for ‘adaptive attention’ than did their predecessors.

Nonetheless, the shift toward non-reductive cognitive strategies of understanding appears logically impossible to validate in so far as the dominant cultural logic is exclusively reductive. The uniform imposition of mechanistic perspective obliterates the inclusive, ‘neither/nor yet both/and’ status of Yoga’s “Atman < > Brahman” or Alchemy’s spirit < > matter inclusions. Given the dominance of the mechanistic assumption in Western culture’s instrumental, techno-logical reasoning that necessarily excludes the possibility of such reality, how could one’s consciousness attain a validated status of non-reductive or inclusive diversification?

Logically, then, the only way to deconstruct the grip of modernist simplification appears to involve using its own reductive methods to destabilize it. The dominance of reductive logic can only be displaced by employing it to ‘prove’ that ‘phenomenal totality’ can only be known as non-reductively inclusive diversity composed by concurrently overlapping states or identities. Contemporary versions of ‘alchemical yogas for knowing variously’ would thereby seem to depend upon a ‘reductive logic of the limitations of reductive logic.’

Actually, such ‘self-reorientation of reduction’ has already occurred, though its implications remain obscure. As discussed elsewhere on this web site, scientific studies of such topics as complex systems and deterministic chaos in natural phenomena actually offer reductive validation of the irreducible interactivity of ‘things’ and the indeterminable complexity reality. This abstract scientific understanding, however, does not, as such, constitute a yogic or alchemical practice that induces non-reductive reorientation of ordinarily reductive human attitudes and identities. One can evidently study the ‘real mysteries’ of quantum mechanics or ‘chao-complexity’ yet still experience and interpret self, other, and world reductively. Logically elaborating the literal uncertainty and variability of phenomenal manifestation in reductive terms does not appear sufficient to ‘alter the fundamental conditions of our understanding’

But then, following the examples of Yoga and Alchemy, the diversification of consciousness to include a valid sense of radically complex interactivity as a basis of the being of self and world is not a ‘literal status to be attained.’ It is, rather, a ‘experience of irreducible dynamism’ involving the interplay of singularity and plurality. The reductive scientific logics affirming such a reality of non-linear, probabilistic but not predictable, fundamentally chaotic dynamism *impute* a validity to the need for non-reductive conditions of consciousness—but do not generate experiential engagement with it. There are two implications of this dilemma considered here. Firstly, that, though ‘the science of self-ordering chaotics’ poses the logical limitations of our reflexive privileging of mechanistic reduction, such implications require a less technical expression to render that insight more broadly accessible. Its logic needs to be expressed in more familiar terms and references. The second issue is that tangible experiences are evidently still required to induce extra-ordinarily inclusive modes of consciousness. As traditional Yoga notes: logic is not enough. The first issue is addressed by posing an archetypally diversifying mode of logical analysis. The second issue, regarding the experiential understanding of non-reductive or ‘concurrently diversified status,’ is approached through the notion of practicing ‘arts of precipitating participation in the radical complexity of concurrent being.’

## Conceiving a Contemporary Alchemy of Logic for Inclusive Understanding— Archetypalizing the Knowing of Being

In so far as logic tends to be reflexively regarded as necessarily reductive in contemporary society, then some ‘alchemical processing’ of how it is typically applied is required to support the validity of a non-reductive status for reality. A concept of such non-reductive logical differentiation offered on this website is termed archetypal analysis. That method promotes knowing things and phenomena in reference to non-linearly associated complexes of references, referred to as ‘archetypal fields.’ This approach enables the status of things and character of phenomena to be understood as expressions of many, often contrasting traits and originating factors. This reasoning evades the reductive ‘straightjacket’ of mechanistic modeling’s exclusive singularities and sequentially progressive conditions for causation. The ‘essence’ of any thing or event thereby becomes a concurrent interactivity or participation of multiple references, rather than a discrete, fixed entity. Logical reasoning is not abandoned in this method but ‘expanded’ so as to accommodate the reasonably non-reductive, if relatively extraordinary, inclusive status of any entity’s existence in the continuum of related, interdependent manifestations.

This mode of non-reductive logical differentiation can be applied to representing both the material and symbolic qualities of things. ‘Dirt’ is a ‘status’ derived from an interactive mutuality of chemical compounds as well as a constellation of cultural concepts. These together indicate the inclusive if uncertain and archetypal field of its concurrently diversified status. It is suggested here that such an application of reasoning effects an ‘archetypal alchemy of knowing.’ That is, it diversifies how one knows self and world not only by pluralizing the status of specific things but by archetypalizing knowing itself. Knowing becomes awareness of archetypal qualities in concurrent relationships. By overtly applying this ‘logic of inherent diversification’ one implies an inherent diversification of consciousness.

Such activation of more complex awareness, described here as archetypal amplification, validates the possibility of pluralistic experience, and both these relate to notions associated with the terms deconstruction and phenomenology. Deconstructive method seeks to reveal unacknowledged oppositions and artificial hierarchies in human assumptions about ‘how things are.’ Phenomenological method seeks to specify and examine the primary basis of human experience, particularly as ‘phenomena of consciousness’ that are experiential. And the phenomena of consciousness are intrinsically configured by attitudes about identity and reality. Thus it is inherently difficult to begin to ‘know what one does not know’ or even ‘how one knows what one knows’ unless one can validate ‘knowing the variousness of things variously.’

Archetypalizing opens up the possibilities for how assumptions are configured and thus expands the range of logically valid experience.

Three aspects to such an archetypally reasoned alchemical yoga of knowing can be proposed. One relates to perception and reception of ‘the things of the world.’ The focus here is on ‘how we take it into consciousness.’ A second aspect focuses on psychical ‘processing’ of what is perceived—how the ‘incoming information’ is engaged and interpreted. This concerns the interplay of imaginal psychic representation (how things are imaged and conceived) with emotionally inflected physical experience and its role in constituting memory. The third aspect concerns ‘putting it back out there’ in acts of overt expressive re-presentation. In general, to diversify the cognitive strategies composing consciousness, an effort is made that archetypalizes knowing by promoting diversifications of perceiving/receiving, cognating/experiencing, and expressing/representing. To know variousness one must *know variously*. By thusly applying logical association reasonably but more inclusively, a relatively extra-ordinary awareness can be promoted.

This proposal might sound relatively simple and easy. But psychologically, such deconstructive, phenomenological, archetypalizing engagements with self and world necessarily conflict with established egoic assumptions about identity and reality. Who one assumes one is and how society says the world works can be seriously destabilized.

### What is the '*Prima Materia*' for these practices in Contemporary Society?

How to focus this generalized process of archetypalizing knowing can be informed again in relation to the traditions of Hindu Yoga and Western Alchemy. Writings on yoga refer to how the ‘existing’ state of mind and body are deliberately challenged by practicing unfamiliar mental and physical ‘postures.’ Consider the relatively ‘strange’ poses that physical yoga requires one to attempt to ‘form’ with one’s own body. By attempting these unaccustomed movements the body and one’s awareness of it ‘unfold’ into expressions of a greater diversity and potential complexity. One actually learns to move, stand, breathe in ways one had previously been unable to do. This process can be considered as an archetypalizing of the body’s variousness. The body’s range of expressions is diversified in ways that manifest its concurrent possibilities. One’s sense of self is thereby expanded and potentially reconfigured.

Returning to an overtly psychological and philosophical perspective on the practices of yogic and alchemical traditions, what those practices ‘do’ then is not ‘alter the nature of nature’ but rather the reflexively (and necessarily) reductive impulses of ‘ordinary human nature.’ It is not ‘matter’ that is being subjected to an alchemical process but more overtly one’s ‘habituated status of psychical embodiment’—how one’s reflexive

sense of self and reality limit one's 'way of being in the world.' Knowing, as well as that which is being known, are thereby diversified.

What is being 'unfolded' here is an existing but previously 'hidden' complexity. As mentioned, the practices of Western Alchemy often refer to the 'subject' of their processes as an initially undifferentiated condition or status. The term *Prima Materia*, as in 'prime matter,' is used to indicate such a condition that in a sense 'contains everything.' This 'subject of alchemical processing' is represented in some instances as the relatively ordinary condition of things or even human consciousness in which various contrasts, including 'spirit' and 'matter,' are 'confused.' Thus this notion is appropriate to consider when seeking to amplify and diversify one's sense and understanding of 'how things really really are.' That is, the 'prime matter' for efforts at archetypal diversification of ordinarily reductive logic is one's own habitual assumptions about self and world. We are all *prima material* waiting to be elaborated. However, the intensive procedures of both the yogic and alchemical traditions indicate that considerable effort and perseverance are required to 'render' ordinary states of understanding into more extra-ordinarily differentiated ones.

To reiterate then, the '*prima materia*' for contemporary versions of alchemical and yogic reconstitutions of consciousness are: First, the condition of one's existing attitudes, thought patterns, behaviors, and understandings; Second, the general corollaries for these personal conditions in the social collective. That is, the 'compressed' attitudes and expressions that reductively define status in the society around one—whether as aspects of popular commercial cultural or scientifically asserted 'facts.' Any social context provides examples of compressed or 'reduced' diversity and complexity constituting a condition of '*Massa Confusa*.' Subjects such as movies, social behaviors, fashions, governmental policies, and contemporary art can be 'submitted' to a reflective process intended to further differentiate complex elements and archetypal traits without reducing these to linear self-consistencies.

It is important to note that Alchemical references indicate that the *Massa Confusa* or *Prima Materia* which 'holds the most potential' for developing more archetypally complex and inclusive understanding *often appear as ordinary and uninterestingly simplistic*—until it is subjected to alchemical processing. Thereby, even the most mechanistically minded reductionists among us might prove capable of radically inclusive understanding.

## Figuring the Ways it Really Really Is :

### Practicing the Arts of Precipitating Participation in Being Variously

Just as an archetypal alchemy of logical analysis can be proposed, so can one for experiential engagements with diversified states of being and consciousness. In this effort one seeks to ‘literally manifest’ expressions of radically dynamic manifestation by generating metaphorically metamorphic or extra-ordinary representations that archetypally amplify the concurrently diversified status of things. In so doing, one ‘participates. in non-reductive dynamism by ‘precipitating’ expression of it. Concepts for such ‘artful representations’ that can potentially precipitate a *sense* of participation radically interactive status are discussed on the **Arts of Precipitating Participation** page. This issue of experiential validation of concurrent plurality is also discussed in relation to a ‘mythical dynamism’ induced by ritual practices on the **Concurrent Becoming** page.

‘Knowing differently’ through figurative representation is approached more specifically on the **Images and Enactments Page**. Under that heading some comments are offered on how images and gestures can stimulate more complex conscious awareness of the radically interactive dynamics of seemingly singular entities and phenomena. Approached as mythically dynamic practices, such making of images and gestural enactments can be regarded as another basis for contemporary practices of ‘alchemical yogas of knowing and understanding.’

## Telling The Differences: Practices of Thinking and Speaking the Concurrency of Being and Becoming

A category of ‘knowing differently’ through linguistic representation is approached on the **Tales, Tellings, Poetics** page. Under this heading, consideration is given to how extra-ordinary language usage can induce heightened awareness of concurrent status by elucidating the radically interactive composition of consciousness in language. Practicing such usage of words in meaning-multiplying semantic and grammatical arrangements to ‘tell the irreducible interactions of singular statuses’ poses another context for practicing ‘alchemical yogas of knowing and understanding.’

## Specific Exercises and Practices for Diversifying Modes of Knowing and Understanding in Conversation, Relationships, and Analysis

Some specific ways of contexting and engaging one's habitual modes of knowing, and how these might be diversified, are offered in the **Specific Practices** text link on the **Alchemical Yogas of Knowing** page. A variety of related and somewhat overlapping approaches to 'increasing the flexibility' of one's understanding (or epistemic and heuristic methodologies for concurrent consciousness) are discussed.

\*\*\* Related notions are available in Chapter Nine of **Manifesting the Many in the One** and the "Trans-forming Tantra" paper on the **Various Analyses Page** \*\*\*

\* \* \* \* \*

© Copyright June 3, 2005  
Leslie Emery