

ESALEN America and the Religion of No Religion By Jeffrey J. Kripal
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pp. 173-180 from the book for Claudio

(bottom of p. 173)

Tantric Shamanism of Claudio Naranjo

Along with Dick Price, Perls considered Claudio Naranjo to be one of his most gifted successors. Naranjo is a Chilean-born psychiatrist who made his first trip to the States in the early 1960's for family medical reasons (his mother needed an eye doctor). While in Boston, he met the psychologist

(top of p. 174)

FIGURE 14 Claudio Naranjo as Shaman of Thanatos and Transformation. Painting by Antonella Cappuccio, 2004 with permission of Claudio Naranjo

Frank Barron at Harvard. When Naranjo later won a Guggenheim fellowship, Barron invited him to Berkeley, where he was introduced to the anthropologist Michael Harner. Harner was working on the Jivaro Indians of the Amazon basin and their use of the yage vine as a psychotropic ritual substance. Harner in turn introduced Naranjo to a young graduate student at UCLA named Carlos Castaneda, who was working on similar subjects in Mexico, allegedly with a native shaman named Don Juan. Naranjo and Castaneda would become close friends. Castaneda even claimed that Don Juan had "smoked" Naranjo, that is, seen him in a vision.

One of Naranjo's first visits to Esalen involved a local television station (KRON), which had decided to film Murphy, Perls, Naranjo, Harner, and Castaneda discussing the subject of shamanism just after a seminar with a female Pomo Indian healer. Naranjo remembers arriving at Esalen and finally encountering one of his idols standing in the front door of the Big House, Fritz Perls. Having read *Gestalt Therapy*, Naranjo was somehow expecting young man. Instead he met what he calls "an old sea wolf." This old sea wolf moreover was not just old. He was old and feisty. Specifically, he objected strenuously to the "occult mud" that he felt Harner and Castaneda were dishing out to a gullible audience. Indeed, when at one point Castaneda asked something like, "How do I know that consensual [socially constructed] reality is real?" Fritz reached over and slapped him, not out of anger, but as if to demonstrate how reality is not *that* consensual. (page 175) Reports differ, but most say Castaneda responded with some version of "Fuck you, old man!"

Old man or not, slap or not, fuck or not, Perls made a profound impression on Naranjo. In one conversation that Naranjo remembers especially well, Perls pointed out to him that he could do all the same things the female Pomo Indian healer could do: if she was a shaman, well, then so was he. Observing first hand Perls's uncanny psychological powers, Naranjo could only agree with him: "I came away feeling that he really was a genius, a shaman in another culture." Indeed, he agreed so much with Perls's personal assessment of his own shamanic powers that he left his original psychoanalytic orientation and became a gestalt therapist. By 1969, Claudio Naranjo

was one of the second-generation gestaltists, along with Dick Price, Julian Silverman, Jack Downing, Bob Hall, and Jim Simkin. Esalen was quickly turning into a kind of gestalt mecca.

Certainly Esalen embraced Naranjo. Perls gave him a “free scholarship” to any of his gestalt sessions, and Price offered him a space on the floor anytime he wanted to come with a sleeping bag to Big Sur. Naranjo had effectively won a permanent invitation to Esalen. He was part of the inner circle. Naranjo remembers well what a tremendous impact the place’s spirit of experimentation and sexual liberation had on him in turn. Born Jewish and having grown up in a sexually repressive Latin American Catholic environment in which “the flesh” was more or less a synonym for “sin,” Naranjo found Esalen’s metaphysical synthesis of sensuality and spirit especially powerful.

Like Price but in a somewhat different key, what Claudio Naranjo became known for was a creative synthesis of Asian meditation (again, with a pronounced Buddhist accent) and western psychotherapy. Alan Watts, of course, had written and talked about this a great deal, but it was Naranjo who perhaps did more than anyone to act on these remarkable resonances and come up with models and exercises to realize them.⁴¹ He left Esalen in the early 1970s to found his own psychospiritual school along these same lines (SAT Institute, located first in Berkeley and now moved to Spain). Perhaps most interesting of all, however, is the fact that Naranjo’s path through Esalen toward his own psychospiritual community displays in some frankly astonishing ways many of the central themes I am tracking here, from the esoteric roots of western psychotherapy, to the felt energetic states of a distinct Tantric transmission. The later Naranjo understands such a transmission not as some ethnocentric Asian privilege, but as an always available gnostic contagion, a universal potential rooted in the physiology of the human body and its enlightenment.

(page 176) Naranjo understands perfectly well that the original impulse for psychotherapy came from the altered states of Mesmer’s magnetism and Freud’s interest in hypnosis.⁴² Accordingly, he insists that psychotherapy is always more than what it purports to be.”⁴³ This is also no doubt why his mature teachings on psychotherapy-as a kind of “assisted liberation from the barriers of ego” through a yielding to the body’s “organismic” spontaneity⁴⁴- draws deep, not only on Reich and Perls (the “organismic” part) but also on his own mystical experiences of Hindu Tantra and *kundalini* yoga, which he intuitively (and correctly) understands to be related to Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Taoism.⁴⁵ It is hardly an accident, then that the very first workshop Naranjo led at Esalen carried an explicitly Tantric title: Sadhana for the West. In short, he has received the Esalen gnosis. *Naranjo* knows.

How he came to know through what he himself calls his “tantric journey” is a story very much worth telling here.⁴⁶ It involves Naranjo’s *kundalini* awakening, which he likens both to being possessed by a serpent and to an alchemical process that transfigured flesh and bones, “a kind of ‘kundalinization’ of the body from head to feet,” as he puts it.⁴⁷ Interestingly, such an awakening was transmitted to him not by the touch of a Hindu guru in the Himalayas, but in a gestalt session with Jim Simkin at Esalen. Simkin told Naranjo that he needed to work on his breath, to pay attention to his breathing. This led Naranjo to hyperventilate, then to a new awareness of his ongoing experience, and finally to a “*satori* lasting some two hours as I drove back to Berkeley from Esalen.” Naranjo felt he had received a kind of “wordless contagion” that allowed him to surrender to the spontaneous movements of his own body. This, he speculates, can happen through a formal initiation with a guru, spontaneously, or in groups conducted by a spiritual teacher who can inspire real surrender.

He is fairly certain such awakenings are not actual flowings of “subtle energies.” In a fascinating move, Naranjo suggests instead that, “blasphemous as it may sound,” the felt experiences of energy movements so common in so many types of psychospiritual experience (from Reichian therapy to the *shakti-pat* initiations of gurus) are in fact “an ever-shifting tonus dance that takes place in our muscle system in the situation of ego-dissolution.” One might feel that there is a literal flow, but “the anatomical fact is one of coordinated volleys of nerve impulses that follow preestablished patterns (according to the organization of our nervous and muscle systems).” But the key is not the metaphysical status of the subtle energies. It is the very real spiritual state of which all of this is a bodily response, that is, the spiritual state of surrender and ego-dissolution.⁴⁸ In the end, (p. 177) then, there is no literal Tantric transmission. There is the enlightenment of the universal body through the surrender of the social self.

Having noted Naranjo’s elaborate analysis of his own *kundalini* awakening, it would be a serious mistake to lock Naranjo’s teaching into any single historical tradition, including Indian Tantra. Hence Naranjo actively resists any use of Hindu scripture or mention of the yogic chakras to explain what happened to him, and he does not hesitate to turn to Taoist dragon or Mexican eagle and snake symbolism to explain his more mature shamanic experiences of his scapular bones as felt “wings” and his nasal region as a kind of experienced “beak” (and indeed in his own mind, it is finally a nontraditional shamanism, not Asian Tantra, that best describes his mature spiritual life.)⁴⁹ Twenty-seven years of meditation, psychotherapy, and altered states cannot be pigeon-holed into any “Hindu” frame for Naranjo. How could they be? The “inner serpent” of *kundalini* yoga is simply a South Asian construction of a universal neurobiology; it is “no other than our more archaic (reptilian) brain-mind.” The serpent power “is ‘us’-i.e., the integrity of our central nervous system when cleansed of karmic interference, “the human body-mind restored to its own native spontaneity.”

Put a bit differently, Naranjo’s “one quest” is a religion of no religion that has come to realize how “instinct” is really a kind of “organismic wisdom” and how libido is more deeply understood as a kind of divine Eros that can progressively mutate both spirit and flesh once it is truly freed from the ego.⁵¹ This, of course is yet another version of what we have learned to call the Freudian Left, an enlightenment of the body that has passed through both a Western psychotherapy (that is always somehow more) and an Asian meditative discipline (that is more often than not Tantric). Such was the Tantric journey of Claudio Naranjo to and through Esalen.

Oscar Ichazo and Arica

Naranjo’s last major impact on Esalen was an indirect one. Oscar Ichazo was a charismatic teacher from the Chilean seaport city of Arica (pronounced a-ree-ka).⁵² He claimed to be initiated into a legendary Sufi lineage called the Sarmouni or the School of the Bees. Naranjo helped Ichazo establish a community in Santiago, mostly by supplying him with many of his earliest disciples, who had earlier gathered around Naranjo himself. Subsequently, Naranjo returned to Esalen and brought back to (p. 178) Santiago many of the place’s central players (around fifteen, according to Naranjo) to apprentice with Ichazo. There was a psychiatrist and a pal of Price, Jack Downing. There was a psychologist and human-dolphin interaction researcher John Lilly, who among many other remarkable things, gave dolphins LSD and told the almost believable story of a dolphin named Dolly who seduced a man into making love with her in a holding tank.⁵³ There was also encounter group leader Steve Stroud. All came with Naranjo back to Chile to study with Ichazo, whose influence on Esalen is now legendary. Heider’s

journals, for example, record that Steve Stroud sold his house for \$5, quit his Esalen job, and “gave away all his stuff” to travel down to South America.⁵⁴ As for Heider himself, he didn’t go. He felt that those who did go were “copping out” to an external authority. Cop-out or no, “Arica cleared our bench,” as Price put it.⁵⁵

It also enriched their catalog. The winter Esalen catalog of 1972 included its own section called Arica Training, a series of workshops with titles like Arica Awareness Training and The Human Biocomputer taught by Esalen regulars who had traveled to Chile to study with the new master.

This event would go both well and not so well for Naranjo. Ichazo, like so many other guru figures, turned out to be a highly authoritarian teacher. He also had a way of turning the tables on his original generous host. After secretly sending Naranjo out to the desert for a special forty-day retreat designed to rapidly spiritualize Naranjo’s life, Ichazo gave the community the impression that Claudio was a megalomaniac who had disdained the community and was on a kind of Jesus trip. In actual fact, Ichazo had sent him out and Naranjo had experienced the desert retreat as “a kind of rebirth, a true beginning of a spiritual life.” It would be the first of many lessons for Naranjo in the spiritual potentials, ethical dangers, and psychological limitations of charismatic leaders.

Even Dick Price would come to study with Ichazo, this time in New York, only to learn similar lessons. One day in the early months of 1971, price came up to Silverman and said, “It’s yours. Take it.” And then he walked away and left New York City to take part in a three-month-long Arica training session. Price’s Esalen ethic of never coercing a student or seminarian were violated again and again during his own retreat. The final straw was an exercise in which the group members were asked to perform a mudra (a Tantric yogic term for a hand gesture symbolizing a particular state of consciousness) that happened to be identical to the Nazi *Heil Hitler!* Salute. There is no such mudra in Hindu or Buddhist yoga. Price having grown up in postwar America in a Jewish family fearfully pretending not to be, was not impressed with such an exercise. He had (p. 179) had enough and left eight days before the retreat was scheduled to end. Other Esalen figures, however, would stay, and still others would take up Arica in various ways over the next four decades, indeed until this very day. Ed Maupin, for example speaks warmly of how his own Arica training from 1972 to 1973 in New York began his “karma cleansing about sexuality.” He believes Arica’s turn to such a focus was “a fundamentally new departure in alternative spirituality and in the human potential movement” and “had effects far beyond the borders of Arica.” More personally, it helped him come to positive terms with his homosexuality. Such feelings could be adequately processed now. He thus ended an affectionate but somewhat troubled marriage and, in 1974, met his partner, with whom he has lived happily for the last thirty-three years.

When Price left Esalen for New York, Silverman became, initially, the new director of Esalen. He quickly learned that he would now have to deal with Will Schutz, the emperor of Esalen, not to mention a whole bunch of hippies who had camped out on the famous grounds and were tripping on God only-knows what. Everyone may have been “tuning in,” as Timothy Leary would have put it, but they were also driving poor Julian crazy. Silverman called a community meeting to try to take some control of things. He began by telling people what they were going to do. Richard Tarnas raised his hand and asked in his typically gentle fashion, “But isn’t this a democracy?” Silverman erupted, “This is not a democracy! This is a damn business!”

Schutz’s response to Silverman’s business meeting was to organize “an experiment in democracy” with the kitchen staff. Essentially, this was an implicit form of mutiny (or, as some

have it, a desperate attempt to improve the quality and diversity of the menu). Silverman went along with it anyway, to a point, and then declared the experiment over. In Silverman's words, the two men then "went at it" but ultimately survived each other. As did Esalen. In the end, though, it was gestalt psychology, not open encounter, that would come to dominate the Esalen catalogs well into the 1970s and beyond.

As for Julian, he stayed on for a full and fruitful seven years. Silverman finally stepped down as director in January of 1978, but only after he had penned with Wendy Ovaatt a manual on how to manage Esalen: Notes from and Esalen Director's handbook. 56 This document, which was typeset and even illustrated but never professionally published, provides a clear window into the kinds of institutional changes Esalen underwent between 1971 and 1978, complete with salaries and budgets (Silverman's director's (p. 180) salary was \$1,100 per month in December of 1977). In 1971, Silverman points out, the place was staffed by "transient hippies," "male chauvinism" was the norm of the day, and Perls's dictum, "lose your mind and come to your senses" had been translated into a dysfunctional and rampant "emotionalism." Not surprisingly, the institute was also a quarter of a million dollars in debt: "In all but legal declaration," Silverman sighs in his introductory remarks, "we were bankrupt." By 1978, however, the place was in excellent financial shape and the key managerial terms were now self-responsibility, co-operative processing, and nonhierarchical decision making. Things had changed quite a bit. Schutz was gone and Silverman was leaving too. But Esalen would on, and it would continue to change.

Notes on Chapter 7 at the end of the book:

41. Hence his first book, published in Esalen's Viking Series: Claudio Naranjo and Robert Ornstein, *Psychology and Meditation* (New York: Viking Press, 1971).

42. Claudio Naranjo, *The Way of Silence and the Talking Cure: On Meditation and Psychotherapy* (Nevada City: Calif.: Blue Dolphin, 2006), 73.

43. Ibid., 69

44. Ibid., 73.

45. Ibid., 38 Actually Naranjo takes this pan-Asian Tantra even further, to ancient Greece, but noting that there is some reason to believe that the Greek Dionysus and the Indian Shiva are cultural manifestations of the same underlying Indo-European mythology (ibid., 40). In this context, then, even Naranjo's Apollonian/Dionysian typology of early Esalen possesses a rather clear Tantric subtext or secret. Dionysian Esalen is Tantric Esalen.

46. ibid., 60

47. ibid., 43.

48. Ibid., 57-58.

49. Naranjo's Esalen-related "tantric journey" to a nontraditional shamanism strongly echoes that of Terence McKenna, discussed below in ch. 17.

50. Ibid., 51.

51. Claudio Naranjo, *The One Quest* (New York, Viking press, 1972), published in Esalen's Viking Press series. According to Seymour Carter, this was an especially important book for the Esalen community, as it gave the community an early "map" or frame through which to understand itself (52-53).

52. For further discussion of Arica and its pass through Esalen, see US 223-29, 241-43, 262.

53. For Lilly's personal reflections on life, including his experiences with LSD, sensory deprivation tanks, Arica and Esalen, see John C. Lilly, *The Center of the Cyclone: An Autobiography of Inner Space* (New York: Julian Press, 1972).

54. HJ, 74.

55. US, 227

56. My sincere thanks to Steve Harper for sharing a copy of this document with me. There are no pages and publisher listed, only a copyright date: 1978.