

**US Self-help Literature and the Call of the East:  
The Acculturation of Eastern Ideas and Practices  
with Special Attention to the Period from the  
1980s Onwards**

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**For all those who dare to ‘think outside the box’.**



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**INTRODUCTION**

**A Cultural Study of US Self-help  
Literature and its Eastern Influence**



## **I.I General Aims: Vindicating Self-Help Literature as a Popular Genre**

Writing a doctoral dissertation on self-help literature and, specifically, on the adoption and adaptation of Eastern (mainly Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist) concepts and techniques is certainly not an easy task for several reasons. First of all, the ambiguity of the term ‘self-help’ makes it anything but easy to define the genre, as I will elaborate on in sections 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4. Secondly, when talking about ‘literature’ in this context, it is important to clarify that the texts I am going to analyse here have nothing to do with the traditional literary canon accepted worldwide in academic circles. Thirdly, when occasionally referring to the ‘popular genre of self-help literature’, I use the term ‘genre’ to cover a set of popular texts with a long tradition, which share various characteristics: a pragmatic, goal-oriented intention (with the reader in mind); certain shared structural similarities; and no pretence to claim a literary value.

My background of over twenty years as a Business English teacher at the Business School of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona has, without any doubt, been partially responsible for my great interest in motivational and managerial literature. After having read literally hundreds of different kinds of self-help books in the last twenty-five years, and aware of the lack of academic research in this field, I considered that a Cultural Studies approach to the topic could be a good starting point to fill up this disconcerting gap about a popular genre that is in constant expansion. Interestingly, for a number of reasons, ‘popular’ has often been interpreted as simple or unsophisticated and consequently unworthy of study. What ordinary people themselves have believed, experienced, felt, or thought has received little attention in the academic panorama before the appearance of Cultural Studies. Moreover, in relation to ‘self-help’, it has become customary among academics whose books find their way to the *New York Times* bestseller list, to deny that the book in question is a self-help book. Examples of this reluctance are sociologist Juliet B. Schor’s disclaimer in the paperback edition of *The Overworked American* (Schor, 1992: xv) or linguist Deborah Tannen’s objections to being categorised as self-help reading, as discussed in Deborah Cameron’s

*Verbal Hygiene* (1995: 194). According to sociologist Neil McLaughlin, writing a book that becomes a popular success, along with working in a cross-disciplinary fashion, ensures that one's work will lose its long-term legitimacy, since authors would be considered 'popularisers' rather than 'professional' academics (1998: 215-46). And, in fact, as we will see in these pages, this is precisely what most self-help literature authors are; that is, rather than academics, they are often popularisers of ancient (and not so ancient) philosophies and practices, making them more accessible to a wide public – often adding or changing some concepts – using characteristic self-help conventions such as easy language, repetition of ideas or the use of stories, to name just a few.

I consider that although *self-help* or *self-improvement* literature<sup>1</sup> (as it is often indistinguishably called) is not part of any literary canon, nor has any pretensions to be, it is worth studying because of its undeniable cultural importance and its extension as a socio-economic phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> However, few scholars seem to have explored self-help literature as a cultural phenomenon *per se* despite the fast growing body of self-help texts in such different areas as education, health, psychology, stress management, psychotherapy, relationships, sports and business, among others. Precisely because of this multidisciplinary reality I decided to inscribe this dissertation within the area of Cultural Studies. As generally accepted, Cultural Studies is not only multidisciplinary itself – drawing on many theoretical perspectives to offer interpretations of cultural phenomena – but it is also inter-disciplinary. Geography, Sociology, Social Studies, Communication and Media as well as “Anthropology, Literary Criticism (including studies on Feminism, the Post-colonial, Gender Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies), Language, Linguistics, History, Philosophy, Business Studies, Film Studies and Translation Studies” (Walton, 2008: 291) are only some of the many academic disciplines exploring the nature of culture. Within this variety of disciplinary sites my

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<sup>1</sup> Whenever I talk about self-help literature I refer to the wide selection of texts that one can find worldwide in bookstores under the various labels of self-help, self-improvement or personal development, amongst many others that have nothing to do with literature as a genre or with the literary canon as accepted in academia. From now on I will often refer to these texts as belonging to the 'popular genre of self-help literature' as used by Butler-Bowdon (2003) and many others.

<sup>2</sup> It was a \$9.59 billion industry as of 2005 and predicted to be a \$13.9 billion industry by 2010. See: Marketdata Enterprises Inc. <<http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview?id=786161>> (7 November, 2007).

study of American self-help literature provides the possibility of analysing a significant part of American self-help texts as cultural documents. I am, for this purpose, drawing on Raymond Williams' concept of culture:

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. (1989: 4)

In the process of analysing chosen texts as cultural documents, a change of paradigm is essential, that is, a 'Re-vision' of the text with new eyes, defined by the writer and essayist Adrienne Rich as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (1971: 18). Not in vain does Simon During affirm that Cultural Studies "has helped literary studies move on from the production of endless 'readings' of individual texts to examining reading as a form of life for different communities and individuals in different times and places" (2005: 30).

Because of my personal background and life experience I have from very early on in my life been drawn to Far Eastern culture (not only Japanese, but Chinese and Hindu, as well) becoming familiar with their traditions, belief systems and cultures in general. When I started reading my first self-help literature books, about twenty-five years ago, I realised that in many of them there was a remarkable Far Eastern influence in their choice of expressions, concepts and practices (chakras, mandalas, yoga, meditation) that steadily increased in subsequent publications as years went by. Occasionally these influences were acknowledged, but often there was no mention at all about their origin.

My interest in finding out to what an extent American self-help literature was drawing upon Far Eastern ideas and practices has led me to embark on this dissertation. This is, therefore, my main thesis: I intend to demonstrate that within American self-help literature texts, Far Eastern ideas and practices have been *adopted* and often

*adapted* to suit their own needs. Undoubtedly, the whole history of the US is impregnated with the message of self-help and personal improvement, the objective of which is, in most cases, implicitly or explicitly, the achievement of success and happiness (Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 1). Moreover, as we will see in this dissertation, self-help literature, far from being a trivial aspect of popular American culture, represents a basic pillar which has been present since its beginnings and continues to be present in American society and culture nowadays. Thus, since we could affirm that self-help literature, as we have come to know it, started in the United States and is an eminently American phenomenon<sup>3</sup> – judging by the number of publications of this type in the US – I decided to focus on America, in spite of the fact that there are also many self-help books published elsewhere, and that some of the authors selected for my analysis in Part Three are not American in origin, although they have published in the US and are currently living there. While also interested in self-help fiction, and in order to delimit my work, I chose to devote my dissertation to non-fiction self-help literature here, leaving fiction for future research.

I have to mention a major difficulty which arose when I started delving into the academic research on the topic of self-help. I realised that very little indeed had been written about it. This situation forced me to restructure what I had originally envisioned as my thesis in order to include within it a reasonably complete background to the topic of self-help, which, I am fully aware, could have been an entire thesis on its own. Therefore, I decided to divide my dissertation into three parts. Part One is an introduction to the topic of self-help, from a Cultural Studies perspective: its definition, the sociological, psychological and economic reasons for its appearance, an attempt at a categorisation considering different strands of thought, as well as a historical overview of the basic changes in the ideals of success and happiness as expressed in American non-fiction self-help literature through time. The attempt at a categorisation is entirely mine and it is mainly based on a clear shift in goal orientation throughout time, which helps us to understand self-help literature as an evolving socio-cultural phenomenon.

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<sup>3</sup> Following the Anglo-American usage, I utilise the word America/American as a free variation synonym for ‘United States’.



In Part Two, I offer a thorough cultural analysis of the growing Far Eastern influence in the United States of America<sup>4</sup>, from a historical, social, psychological, philosophical and scientific perspective, since this information is essential in order to establish the historical, cultural and social contexts in which self-help literature (and the Eastern influences within it) has developed. Without this work of prior contextualisation, it would be extremely difficult to approach specific authors and their writings in an intelligible or transparent way. And finally, in Part Three, I deal with my main topic of interest, namely the analysis of Far Eastern influence in a selected group of self-help texts, in the light of their discourses. This leads to the conclusion that the cultures of personal transformation that have become such an intrinsic part of American culture, frequently adopt and adapt ideas and concepts from very different sources – especially Far Eastern – often to suit their own needs, giving them an idiosyncratic, American touch. I will now pursue with an explicit acknowledgement of the academic works that I have used and that have been an invaluable, though frugal, help in the elaboration of this dissertation.

## **I.II Predecessors: First Attempts at Academic Research in Self-Help Literature**

Part One of my dissertation surveys the past and builds upon the work of other scholars and researchers who have examined self-help literature in the US. I have principally benefited from the works of Wyllie (1954), Cawelti (1965), Weiss (1969), Huber (1971), Rodgers (1978), Meyer (1980), Anker (1999), Butler-Bowdon (2003), McGee (2005) and Harrington (2008).

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<sup>4</sup> It should be mentioned here that, especially since the translation of ancient Eastern texts such as the *Vedas* and the *Dhammapada* at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has also been a growing interest in Far Eastern culture all throughout Europe (Ludden, 1993: 250-78).

The selection of the books I will mention greatly responds to the popularity of the materials. Like most studies of American popular culture, the study of self-help literature is also a reflector or index to American culture. While no complete comprehensive study of self-help literature has appeared so far, in recent decades there has been an ever-growing number of interpretive articles and books on historical and ideological segments of American self-help, related mainly to popular religion, which are of great value. This body of helpful, although often conflicting, histories and interpretations, has traced the currents and parameters of the self-help impulse in American culture as a whole; they provide a helpful sense of the immense scope of the territory before we start out to explore.

The first book-length academic study to appear on the subject was Irvin G. Wyllie's *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (1954). Wyllie confines himself largely to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and his approach is very general and modest. He ties the notion of *self-making* closely to economic success, affirming that Americans have historically given only 'lip service' to other sorts of success than wealth-getting, while their hearts were really after riches and money. Wyllie attempts to delineate "the saga of an idea that had power among the people" and explain its "origin, nature, and content", including "something of its relation to religion, education, and general movements of thought, something of its propagation, and its social uses; and something of the men who loved and despised the idea" (1954: 6).

John Cawelti's *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (1965) is also an emblematic reference book that must be mentioned here. It carefully chronicles the origins, distinctions, and changes in America's understanding of success. The book is, in large part, traditional intellectual history, with individual chapters on Jefferson and Franklin, Emerson, Horatio Alger, and John Dewey. Several other works published on self-help include *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* by Richard Weiss (1969), *The American Idea of Success* by Richard Huber (1971), *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920* by Daniel Rodgers (1978) and *The Positive Thinkers: Religion as Pop Psychology from Mary Baker Eddy to Oral Roberts*,

by Donald Meyer (1980). These works are all historical and comparative rather than critical.

Two of the few, thorough, full length critical works which are specifically devoted to research on self-help and popular religion are Roy M. Anker's two volumes *Self-Help and Popular Religion in Early American Culture* (1999a) and *Self-Help and Popular Religion in Modern American Culture* (1999b). These books constitute a valuable point of departure for my dissertation. They provide useful information on major self-help figures and movements that originated around popular religious movements. One of the main purposes of Anker's work is to point "to the particular intellectual, political, or religious perspectives that sometimes inform and shape historical treatments" (1999a: 5). For him "History is far more than 'just the facts' but, also crucially, the effort to suggest what the facts mean about people, societies, cultures, and history itself" (1999a: 5).

A further remarkable source for the study of self-help literature is Butler-Bowdon's recent book *50 Self Help Classics* (2003). It is a selection of key ideas and thoughts of fifty classical works that span different religions, cultures, philosophies and centuries. It examines and "identifies some of the most useful ideas from writings specifically devoted to personal transformation – from the inside out" (2003: 1). Finally, McGee's *Self-Help, Inc. Makeover Culture in American Life* (2005) offers a revealing look at the profound dissatisfactions that lie beneath our consumer culture, and suggests some reasons why the self-help industry has increased dramatically from the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Likewise, a number of articles on self-help literature and its value in present day America published in several academic journals by scholars such as Albanese (1988), Coleman and Ganong (1987), Nataraajan (1991), Lichterman (1992), Allison (1998), Rimke (2000) and Van Spanckeren (2006) only partially compensate for the dearth of specific publications on the self-help phenomenon as such. Whereas academic interest in self-help is slowly increasing, the articles and books mentioned above monopolise most of the critical work on self-help literature to this date. Some of them attempt to

understand self-help as a shaping myth in American culture (Wyllie, 1954; Cawelti, 1965; Weiss, 1969; Huber, 1971; Anker, 1999), others are markedly political in orientation, trying to assess what positive or negative effects different self-help proponents and movements have had in American history (Rodgers, 1978; McGee, 2005). Some try to convey meaning and invite popularity (Butler-Bowdon 2003). Last, still others look at bestselling self-help authors as mirrors to judge or evaluate the dysfunctions of American culture (Rimke, 2000; Albanese, 1981, 1990; McGee, 2005).

This brief account summarises the trajectory of the principal sources on self-help literature prior to my research project. As can be seen, although there is some remarkable research in this area, it has tended to be fragmented, incomplete, miscellaneous, and sometimes lacking a theoretical framework. The list of books and articles mentioned defines in a very clear way the present state of this research. As it stands, academic study on the matter is at its very beginnings.

### **I.III Heuristics: A Classificatory Approach**

In order to pursue the objectives previously mentioned and on account of the multi-interdisciplinary nature of this dissertation, I employ what Judith Halberstam defines as “a queer methodology”, which, in a way, is “a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who [and which] have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour” (1998: 13). So far, there is no specific method on how to study self-help literature; therefore the different tools that disciplines such as literature, literary theory, sociology, psychology, anthropology and history provide will enable us to delve into readings and histories on subjects and cultures that, as Halberstam puts it, have been for some reason excluded from academic study so far.

As is now generally accepted, the interpretation of a text (as book, film, advert, etc.) is really an excuse for opening up gaps and silences. I find particularly relevant to my topic David Walton's affirmation that the value of a Cultural Studies approach "is not so much in the contribution it makes to the interpretation of the text itself but in how it encourages questions about the social, political, economic and cultural world in which the text is produced" (2008: 218). Because of his clarity in promoting heuristic thinking and thanks to the encouragement to his readers to "tap into their own creativity to produce cultural analysis" (2008: 5) I decided to draw upon Walton's visual diagram heuristic (2008: 123, 176, 260), since diagrams help understand concepts visually, aid memory and synthesise the many ideas that one wants to convey. My work can easily be summarised in the different heuristic diagrams that I offer: 1.1 The Phenomenon of Self-help Literature (page 19); 1.5 Shift in Goal Orientation throughout the History of Self-help Literature in the US (page 29); 2.1 The Rise of Eastern Influence in America (page 89) and 3.1 Eastern Influence in Five Self-help Literature Books in the US from the 1980s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century (page 177).

In Part One a further classification heuristic is developed and used as a guideline throughout the dissertation: Out of a variety of competing versions of the ideals of success and happiness, my research into the history of self-help literature has led me to establish four main strands of thought, within the frame of a shift from a culture of 'industry and effort' – beginning with Benjamin Franklin until about the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century – to a culture of 'leisure and ease', especially after World War II. As I see it, the first strand has its origin in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and is heavily influenced by the puritan tradition and the belief in hard work to achieve success in life. The conservative tradition of the middle-class Protestant ethic stressed the values of hard work, frugality and honesty and assumed a social order in which one of the most important signs of success was the attainment of respectability in this world and eternal salvation in the after-life (McGee, 2005: 31). The exponents of this first strand were people like Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Smiles, Orison Swett Marden or Horatio Alger. This tradition of thought gradually declined with the impact of industrialism and an increasingly secular, scientific frame of mind. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some successful self-

help writers, like Norman Vincent Peale or Stephen Covey have attempted to re-establish a religious (Christian) base for the ideal of success.

The second strand is related to the boom of Positive Mental Attitude techniques as the main element to reach one's goals. Hard work is not considered a basic ingredient for success anymore but is now substituted by psychological techniques that can help to raise self-esteem or produce different positive effects on people. The unprecedented importance placed on the power of the mind to achieve one's goals, with prosperity and health as the main objectives to be achieved was heavily influenced by the religious movement called New Thought.<sup>5</sup> Success came to be seen as a birth right (Anker, 1999a: 210). With the success of industrialisation and capitalism we witnessed an ever-growing number of books which placed their main emphasis on the achievement of wealth. Even though this tradition was often mixed with elements of the Protestant ethic, such as hard work, frugality, piety and honesty, the new strand emphasised such secular qualities as aggressiveness, competitiveness, initiative and forcefulness. This type of self-help literature appeared toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when there was great enthusiasm about the progress of industrialism and about the possibility of social change. This strand continued through the times of the Depression, to encourage people and help them to gain self-esteem at a time of economic and political uncertainty.

Never in isolation but coexisting with the previous ones, the third strand is more concerned with themes of self-fulfilment and the use of mind power to maximise one's potential than with wealth or status. Starting with ideas first put forward by Franklin and Jefferson, this strand has become an important element of American thought, especially under the impact of 20<sup>th</sup> century social change and the influence of contemporary sociological and psychological thought. Already appearing with Peale in the 1950s, it is from the 1970s onward and especially in the 1990s when this third strand is in full swing. Self-fulfilment is now the main key to success. Nevertheless, as we will see, this

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<sup>5</sup> New Thought is a spiritual movement which developed in the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its main tenets were that people, through the constructive use of their minds, could attain freedom, power, health, prosperity, molding their bodies and all the circumstances of their lives (Lewis, 1992: 16-18).

attitude of constant striving for success can lead to utter exhaustion, since permanent self-development seems to have no limit and thus can easily create 'belaboured' citizens (McGee, 2005: 12).

Finally, the fourth strand deals with the emergence, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of a spiritually-oriented literature of partly Eastern influence devoted to the idea of self-knowledge and inner peace as basic factors in the achievement of happiness and success in life. The beginnings of this strand of thought can be found in Transcendentalist writers Emerson and Thoreau and their love of Eastern philosophy, in some New Thought ideas and especially in the changes brought about during the 1960s and the ever-increasing interest in Oriental practices and beliefs. In a world where economic crisis, lack of financial stability and growing stress are the norm, there is a clear change in priorities and a search for a more permanent kind of happiness, not only dependent on external factors. The extraordinary success of self-help books like Deepak Chopra's *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (1994), or Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* (1999), which have sold millions of copies and have been translated into more than 30 languages, is a small sample of a socio-cultural phenomenon in constant expansion.

As we shall see, these four strands do not stand in isolation from each other, but often overlap in time. The close connection between self-help literature and religion, and the role of spiritual and religious traditions in an increasingly technological and psychological culture, will be considered as an important background to my analysis of the literature of self-improvement culture. The type of reader and some characteristics of the authors of this kind of popular literature, together with an analysis of the turnover and economic impact that these texts provide, form the closing section of Part One.

Part Two of this dissertation focuses on the main reasons why the fourth strand of thought is growing at a fast pace in the self-help literature landscape (see heuristic diagram 3, page 89). There are important concepts and practices which are not American in origin, that are now widespread not only in self-help books, but in Western society at large. Eastern discourse and practices have infiltrated into all sorts of fields from literature to architecture, cinema, sports, business or health, to name just a few.

Thus, in order to understand this phenomenon, an analysis of the historical, sociological and psychological reasons for the emergence of this ‘different way of looking at reality’ is of paramount importance, as this will enable us to understand how and why American self-help literature has often been greatly influenced by Far Eastern teachings.

Part One and Part Two provide the historical and socio-cultural context for Part Three. Here a selected group of self-help texts have been classified and grouped into different topic areas with a view to examining the representation of our target issues. Briefly, the considerations for selecting the titles discussed in this research are the following. Since, on the one hand, the applications of the term ‘self-help’ vary considerably over time and field, and, on the other hand, there is a vast quantity of self-improvement literature that has been published up to now, these circumstances have made it extremely difficult to define the boundaries for this study at a theoretical, as well as at a practical level. If one defines self-help literature as a ‘mode of reading’, then almost any publication – fiction, philosophy, religion, history, poetry, autobiography or social science – could be considered a self-help book. For instance, people of many different cultures worldwide have turned to their religious texts for guidance, inspiration and consolation (Schneider and Dornbusch, 1958; Anker, 1999; Covey and Merrill, 2003; Butler-Bowdon, 2003). The self-help shelves in bookstores all over the world are growing at a fast pace, yet an attempt at a thorough categorisation is daunting, due to its vastness, diversity of topics and areas of knowledge that it spans. For this dissertation, in order to develop a list of self-help books from which to choose, I reviewed the *New York Times*<sup>6</sup> bestseller lists during the period from the 1980s to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and I tried to identify books that were designed to help readers improve themselves and their lives through practical prescriptions. I chose books that deal with success and happiness in many different ways, from worldly success to a more spiritual kind of success, deliberately excluding typical ‘How to’ books that mainly deal with practical tips to achieve one’s goals without much philosophical background to them, such as the ones about dieting, fitness, weight loss, beauty regimes, relationships, or sexuality.

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<sup>6</sup> I particularly selected books from the *New York Times* bestseller lists because these lists are often mentioned in self-help literature books as a reference of popularity (See Covey, 1989 or Robbins, 1991).



Thus, I selected a number of bestselling self-help books such as Louise Hay's *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984), Deepak Chopra's *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (1994), Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* (1999) and Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* (2006), all of which appeared in the *New York Times* bestseller lists between 1980 and 2009. I have also deliberately included a business and success-oriented self-improvement book (also from the *New York Times* best seller list), called *Awaken the Giant Within* (1991) in my analysis, because of my background in the Business School, and my interest in motivational and managerial literature, as mentioned at the beginning of this introduction.

Hopefully the present cultural study of self-help will contribute to 'widen the perspective' on the topic, giving it the importance it really has and deserves, contributing at the same time to a better understanding of the social, political, economic and cultural context in which the self-help literature texts are produced. It has to be mentioned that, while this study intends to be thorough, it cannot be exhaustive on such a broad and pervasive topic as self-help literature. It does not attempt a sweeping or detailed enumeration of every pertinent idea, figure, book, or movement from its beginnings to the present. The temptations to compile such a lengthy list of ideas and figures are great, but, as mentioned, the problem with this approach in the case of the United States is that the list would be almost endless. On the other hand, such a list would undoubtedly offer an invaluable aid in better understanding the scope and depth of America's self-help ethos. This is the reason why one of the aims of my dissertation is, precisely, to set the foundations for and to inspire future research on the topic of self-help, with a view to filling a gap or a void in the academic panorama.

I will begin, then, by defining the term 'self help' and subsequently I will move on to exploring the meaning of 'self-help literature', the psychological, sociological and economic reasons for its appearance, its boundaries as well as its intimate connection to popular religion and its historical evolution from the 18<sup>th</sup> through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as shown on the diagram which opens the following section:



**PART ONE**

**Self-help Literature and the  
Shifts in Goal Orientation**



## 1.1. A Cultural Studies Heuristic of the Phenomenon of Self-help Literature



Figure 1: Exploring different contexts in order to understand the emergence of self-help literature as a social phenomenon:

## **1.2. Definition of Self Help: a Challenging Endeavour**

*The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitudes*

William James

The term ‘self help’ has numerous descriptive uses – in law, psychology, business, education or technology, for example – and, at the same time, numerous strong connotations. Before entering into the topic of self-help literature as such, let us see how the *Webster’s Online Dictionary* defines ‘self help’. It is “the action or condition providing for or improving oneself without assistance from others; the taking of action on one’s own behalf”. In the United States, ‘self-help’ appears to have been first used in the legal context. In fact, when we talk about self help, the range of reference is so broad that it is almost without any clear semantic core. For example, it is a term in law that describes preventive or corrective measures taken by a private citizen. That is, “the possibility of redressing or preventing wrongs by one’s own action without recourse to legal proceedings”.<sup>7</sup> Common examples of self-help include action taken by landlords against tenants, through eviction and “removal of property from the premises and repossession of leased or mortgaged goods”.<sup>8</sup> Although people may use self-help remedies only where they are permitted by law, often these measures are controversial because they often mean taking the law into one’s own hands. Whereas opponents of self-help laws consider that they encourage unethical and sometimes illegal practices by creditors and that they diminish public respect for the law, on the other hand proponents counter that self-help, if performed peaceably, is a valuable feature of the American justice system because it gives creditors a chance to alleviate losses and, most important, it keeps small, simple disputes from saturating the court system.

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<sup>7</sup> Definition of self-help according to the *Webster’s Online Dictionary* <<http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/self-help>> (accessed January, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> A further definition of self-help in relation to its legal meaning, according to the *Free Dictionary* <<http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Personal+development>> (accessed January, 2008).

As far as psychology is concerned, there are a number of self-help groups and programs offered by commercial and non-profit organisations alike based on psychological principles overseen by mental health professionals; Alcoholics Anonymous with its Twelve Steps program is a clear example of this. Group psychotherapy has shown itself to be as effective as individual psychotherapy, for certain situations, such as adaptation to loss through death, or other similar circumstances (Kreeger, 1994:13). According to *The Columbia Encyclopaedia*, potential benefits of self-help groups that professionals may not be able to provide include friendship, emotional support, pooling resources, gathering information, offering mutual support, service, care and a sense of belonging (*The Columbia Encyclopaedia*, 2009: 43885).

As far as business is concerned, we can also witness numerous corporate attempts to offer systems ready with more or less pre-packaged solutions to instruct people seeking their own individual improvement, which have often been reported to have a positive impact on companies' profitability (Hill, 2004: xii, Carnegie, 2006: xiv). This is one of the reasons why, as part of their human resources development programs, many companies make or recommend tapes, booklets, and courses designed to teach the information available to their employees (Covey and Merrill, 2003: 328). We could also argue that another form of self help is now found in education through self access learning programs, which are educational facilities designed for student learning that are at least partially, if not fully self-directed (Klassen, 1998: 55-80). Moreover, nowadays, the use of the Internet, with the ever-growing range of commercial and information services which it offers, is yet another example of this movement toward self-help on a grand scale. So far we have seen that the term 'self-help' is used in many different contexts that have little to do with one another: from law to psychology, business, education and even information technology. However, there is an ever-growing body of texts that scholars such as Starker (1989), Anker (1999), Butler-Bowdon (2003) or McGee (2005) call the 'popular genre of self-help literature'. Here, we find the term 'self-help' again, but mainly as a synonym for self-improvement or personal development. It is obvious that this vast selection of texts have nothing to do with literature as a genre or with the literary canon as accepted in academia. Yet, a scholarly

approach to such a body of texts from a Cultural Studies perspective should not be underestimated and can, no doubt, be extremely enlightening to better understand this phenomenon, as I hope to make clear throughout these pages.

Echoing Simon During, I agree with the fact that often “elements of popular culture become an obsession or help form an identity” (2005:193). This is, certainly, one of the reasons why I consider there is great value in studying popular culture, “because it is by definition the main cultural expression of our time”, (2005:193) and thus, demands teaching and research, just because it is so *there* (Lewis, 2001: 320). Let us now move on to explore what has commonly come to be called ‘self-help literature’ in libraries and bookstores in the United States.

### **1.3 Self-help Literature: Where to Begin?**

The tradition of what is popularly called self-help literature is obviously a Western (American) tradition, but one could easily argue that its origins go way back in time, to what some authors call ‘wisdom literature’ (Covey and Merrill, 2003: 344). Under this heading we can find some of the oldest written literature, *The Wisdom of Ptah-Hotep*, written in Egypt around 2500 BC, or *The Vedas* (1500 BC), *The Bhagavad Gita* (400-300 BC), *The Dhammapada* (Buddha’s teachings 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC), the *Analects of Confucius* (500BC), Lao Tzu’s *The Tao Te Ching* (5<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BC), Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* (4<sup>th</sup> century BC), *The Torah* (1280 BC), the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius (2<sup>nd</sup> century), the *Distichs* of Marcus Porcius Cato (3<sup>rd</sup> -4<sup>th</sup> century), Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy* (6<sup>th</sup> century) the *Koran* (7<sup>th</sup> century), and the *Bible*, to name just a few. Within the Hebrew tradition, for example, the *Books of Job*, *Psalms*, *Proverbs*, and the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon* could, according to Covey and Merrill, be considered early precursors of self-help literature (2003: 344-5).



As we can see, the notion of instructing through books with the goal of personal improvement has been and still is an integral part of the heritage of different cultures throughout the world. In medieval times the self-help texts that were available were the lives of saints or the treatises on morality, called ‘conduct’ or ‘courtesy’ books. The term ‘courtesy’ book usually refers to prose treatises or poems inculcating the etiquette of the court (Ashley, 2001: x). Conduct books, with a long Christian tradition behind them, proliferated in the later Middle Ages: “The conventional interpretation of conduct books is that they function in a straightforward, prescriptive mode, subjecting their readers to a hegemonic regime of behaviour” (2001: x). The practical purpose of these books was to offer guidelines for people, or subgroups of people (nuns, hermits, priests), in their everyday lives. They were written with a clear pragmatically-oriented discourse, a discourse of moral behaviour. Interestingly, medieval conduct manuscripts share with modern self-help literature the fact that “The perceived non-literariness of [medieval] conduct literature – its didacticism, its supposedly simple rhetoric – has resulted in its marked absence until recently from literary histories” (2001: xi).

In Victorian times we find advice books especially addressed to the female public. In her article “The Wide, Wide World, Conduct Literature, and Protocols of Female Reading in Mid-Nineteenth Century America” Suzanne Ashworth tells us that

Essentially, appropriate female reading was supposed to initiate and advance a systematic quest for self-improvement, moral betterment, and an ever-receding horizon of ideality. Reading advisors gauged the process of self-cultivation or character development, which reading was supposed to enact, according to its capacity to produce an exemplary woman. (2000: 4)

The author comments on the title page of the 1846 edition of Harvey Newcomb’s *Young Lady’s Guide*, which features a classic portrait of a woman reading:

Her feet are bare, her hair curls around her shoulders, she half reclines against the back of a luxurious sofa, and she looks directly at the tablet before her. Her obvious interest in the text suggests that she finds a certain pleasure in her reading, but her upright posture and her feet resting firmly on the floor resist the assumption that she reads idly or passively. Indeed, she might be engaging in a regimen of self-education or self-improvement, and the words that encircle

the image – ‘Young Lady’ and ‘Christian Character’ – contain her reading within the lexicon of ideal womanhood. (Ashworth, 2000: 1)

The 19th century was also the great age of etiquette education in the United States and saw the publication of hundreds of manuals on manners and behaviour. Kasson notes that “the most complete (but by no means definitive) bibliography of American etiquette books” includes 236 separate titles published in the United States before 1900 (Kasson, 1990: xii). The middle-class people who were empowered by democracy – middling farmers, clerks, well-to-do artisans, and school-teachers – laid claim to their own version of gentility. Americans started to buy books instructing them in comportment and etiquette as “What drove this transformation was a popular desire to emulate those who stood at the peak of society and government, to dignify one’s life with a portion of the glory that radiated from the highest and best circles” (Bushman and Morris, 1996: 4). Genteel values were propagated through etiquette books, magazines, and novels, so that “The tidal wave of print flooding the country bore images of genteel life into every corner of the land. All literate persons were exposed to good manners, and even more were exposed to the ornaments of genteel existence by shopkeepers, peddlers, and, later, mail-order catalogues” (Bushman and Morris, 1996: 5). The demand for etiquette manuals was immense because so many Americans were unsure of themselves, on the one hand, and, because they were characteristically determined to improve, on the other.

In the same vein, sermons can arguably be considered self-help texts as well, in the sense that they offer tools for personal improvement. A sermon is supposed to offer guidelines, that is, it is aimed at conditioning one’s behaviour: if one gets the lesson from it, and if one tries to apply it, it helps one to be virtuous according to the conventions of the times. During the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, women are often idealised in sermons on domestic duties, many of which were collected and published. These were invariably titled “Duties of Masters, of Husbands, of Wives, of Children, of Parents, of Servants” (Langland, 1995: 48). Women in the sermons appear only as dutiful wives. In her book *Nobody’s Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*, Elizabeth Langland informs us that “The Reverends Frederick Chalmers and F. B. Ashley advise that ‘the rule of the wife’s submission [to

the husband] is absolute' and that women must avoid a mistress' chief temptations: 'self-sufficiency and independence'" (1995: 49). The interesting point here is that these 'personal improvement' sermons rather than 'helping' and giving power to women – through 'self-sufficiency and independence' – do, in fact, do the contrary: they 'help' to perpetuate the male-centred system of dominance as something unquestionable.

We could argue that all of the previous examples in literature aim somewhat at self improvement, but would not be found under a self-help label in a bookstore. Some of the titles of the list of 'wisdom literature' or 'religious literature' previously mentioned would only in very rare cases be found under a self-help label, and so would the remaining examples mentioned so far. Nevertheless, the list of perceived characteristics which places together books on personal growth (dealing with career development, creativity, health and wellness, self-esteem and assertiveness, spirituality, stress management and relaxation, success and personal effectiveness and even yoga and Pilates) with books on personal challenges (such as death and dying, divorce, family issues and sexuality), on ecology (renewable energies, sustainable agriculture), or on mental disorders and their treatments (dealing with addictions, eating disorders, abusive relationships, anger management or post-traumatic stress disorder, to name just a few)<sup>9</sup> is so random that it deserves a closer analysis. There is certainly no agreement on where the boundaries should be placed. One can easily find a book on dieting beside a book on mindfulness and cognitive behavioural psychology in the self-help section of any bookstore in the US.

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<sup>9</sup> This information is taken from a website called *The Guide to Self-help Books* which has a classification of self-help books according to four categories: mental health concerns, challenges in living, personal growth and saving the earth <<http://www.books4selfhelp.com/>> (accessed January, 2009).

## **1.4 Self-help Literature in the Bookstores: An Array of Different Labels**

As we will see in the coming chapters, the term self-help literature not only lacks terminological, but also historical precision and connotative neutrality. Under the same definition we can find other labels such as: self improvement, personal development, personal improvement, personal growth and even ‘New Age’, motivational, success, spiritual or ‘religious’ literature.

Within the range of self-help titles in the market a large number are included under the label ‘success literature’ (Butler-Bowdon, 2004: 10), rather than under ‘self-help’. The success literature of the 1850’s gained a popularity which has since persisted. Success books have constituted “perhaps the most flourishing of all branches of American literature” (Lynn, 1955: 2). There is even an area of study related to self-help, with ever-growing popularity worldwide called ‘Happiness Studies’. Over the past decade, the study of happiness, which used to be the domain of philosophers, therapists and gurus, has developed further into a university discipline. It is possible nowadays to find ‘professors of happiness’ at leading universities,<sup>10</sup> self-improvement and ‘quality of life’ institutes all over the world, and thousands of research papers on the topic. Happiness even has its own journal, the *Journal of Happiness Studies* and there is also an online World Database of Happiness.<sup>11</sup> Success and happiness have been two of the major objectives of most self-help literature throughout time, but there are, undoubtedly, many more themes that are included under the umbrella term of ‘self-help’. So far, a clear scholarly categorization of this popular genre has not been attempted, except for the division between ‘ethics of character’ and ‘personality ethics’,

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<sup>10</sup> As an example, let me mention the record-breaking attendance of 1,400 students at Harvard University professor Tal Ben-Shahar’s class on happiness during 2005. Apparently, that amounted to more students in just one semester than students attending any other class with any other professor in Harvard’s history (more in section 2.2.2).

<sup>11</sup> The following websites offer hundreds of academic articles on happiness: the *Journal of Happiness Studies* (JOHS) <<http://www.citeulike.org/journal/springerlink-104910>>, affiliated with ISQOLS: International Society for Quality of Life Studies (accessed November, 2007); and also the World Database of Happiness - Continuous register of scientific research on subjective appreciation of life <<http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness>> (accessed November, 2007).

which I will deal with in section 1.5.2. Most certainly the scope, complexity, ‘melting pot’ quality and the ‘low-to-middle-brow’ popularity of self-help literature are partly responsible for this gap in the academic world.

I have analysed a wide variety of hundreds of so-called self-help books throughout the last twenty-five years and tried to categorise them, mainly based on what I call a shift in goal orientation throughout time. This helps us to understand self-help literature as an evolving socio-cultural phenomenon. Since it is vital in any analysis of contemporary phenomena to think historically, when establishing the historical boundaries of self-help literature as such, its appearance and its evolution, we come across different belief systems, values and practices that depict the underlying culture of the time. Things are made to mean differently by people according to their beliefs and values, or, as the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz affirms, according to the “conceptual world in which individuals live” (1973: 24). This is one of the reasons why it is almost impossible to study the history of self-help literature without an appreciation of the powerful religious dynamic that affected and still affects the attitudes and behaviour of people in the US: “The relationship between these two has long been regarded, often with very good reason, as a mainstay of American historical understanding” (Anker, 1999a: 1). There seems to be a strong relationship particularly between ‘popular religion’ and the self-help tradition in American culture. A traditional supposition has been that at times in American history, “popular religious ferment has, in response to conditions in the larger culture, fostered distinct and very important configurations of attitudes, values, and meaning on which historians have subsequently bestowed the label of ‘self-help’” (1999a: 1). Unfortunately, it is often assumed that ‘popular’, especially when it comes to religion, necessarily entails superstition, credulousness and a number of attitudes that intellectual elites have considered of little historical interest, implicitly unworthy of study, or plainly unhealthy, mainly because they oppose the predominantly rationalist values of secular elites.

What is widely accepted is that when referring to self-help literature, “on the one hand, the term self-help recalls the sober, ascetic discipline of what is called the Protestant Ethic and, on the other, what some see as its opposite, the attitudinal ‘feel-

good' conditioning of mid-twentieth-century positive-thinking strategies" (Anker 1999a: 2). In other words, there is a clear division within self-help literature, marked by a shift from a culture of 'industry and effort' – beginning with Benjamin Franklin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century until approximately the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century – to a culture of 'leisure and ease' – especially after World War II – where prosperity, on the one hand, and self-mastery and self-fulfilment, on the other become the main goals. As we will see, this strand within self-help literature which focuses on self-mastery and self-fulfilment – often as an anti-dote to economic uncertainties, according to McGee (2005: 191) – has become an important element of American thought, especially under the impact of 20<sup>th</sup> century social change and the influence of contemporary psychological and sociological thought. For Covey, 'mastery of the self' in the face of great difficulties or profoundly asymmetrical power relations becomes the mark of the hero (1989: 73). For Robbins, on the other hand, if you don't have a plan for your life, someone else will have it for you (1991: 65); unless one 'awakens the giant within', one is destined to join the herd. The idea of self-mastery is by no means new, and certainly not restricted to the United States. For instance Foucault talks about the progression of concern with self-mastery among the Greeks, in his "Genealogy of Ethics" with these words:

To be a master of oneself meant, first, taking into account only oneself and not the other, because to be master of oneself meant that you were able to rule others. So the mastery of oneself was directly related to a dissymmetrical relation to others. You should be master of yourself in a sense of activity, dissymmetry, and nonreciprocity. Later on... mastery of oneself is something which is not primarily related to power over others... you have to be master of yourself not only in order to rule others, as in Alcibiades or Nicocles, but you have to be master of yourself because you are a rational being. And in this mastery of yourself, you are related to other people, who are also masters of themselves. And this new kind of relation to the other is much less nonreciprocal than before. (Foucault, 1983: 241-42)

In the following diagram we are able to see graphically the development of the four strands within self-help literature in the US as I conceive them. Each strand is briefly defined, especially in relation to its view on the meaning of success; showing its time-span, as well as a short list of representative authors. As I mentioned before, nonetheless, no strand has a clear beginning and ending, as one could imagine, but they all coexist and overlap at any particular time.

# 1.5 Shift in Goal Orientation throughout the History of Self-help Literature in the US

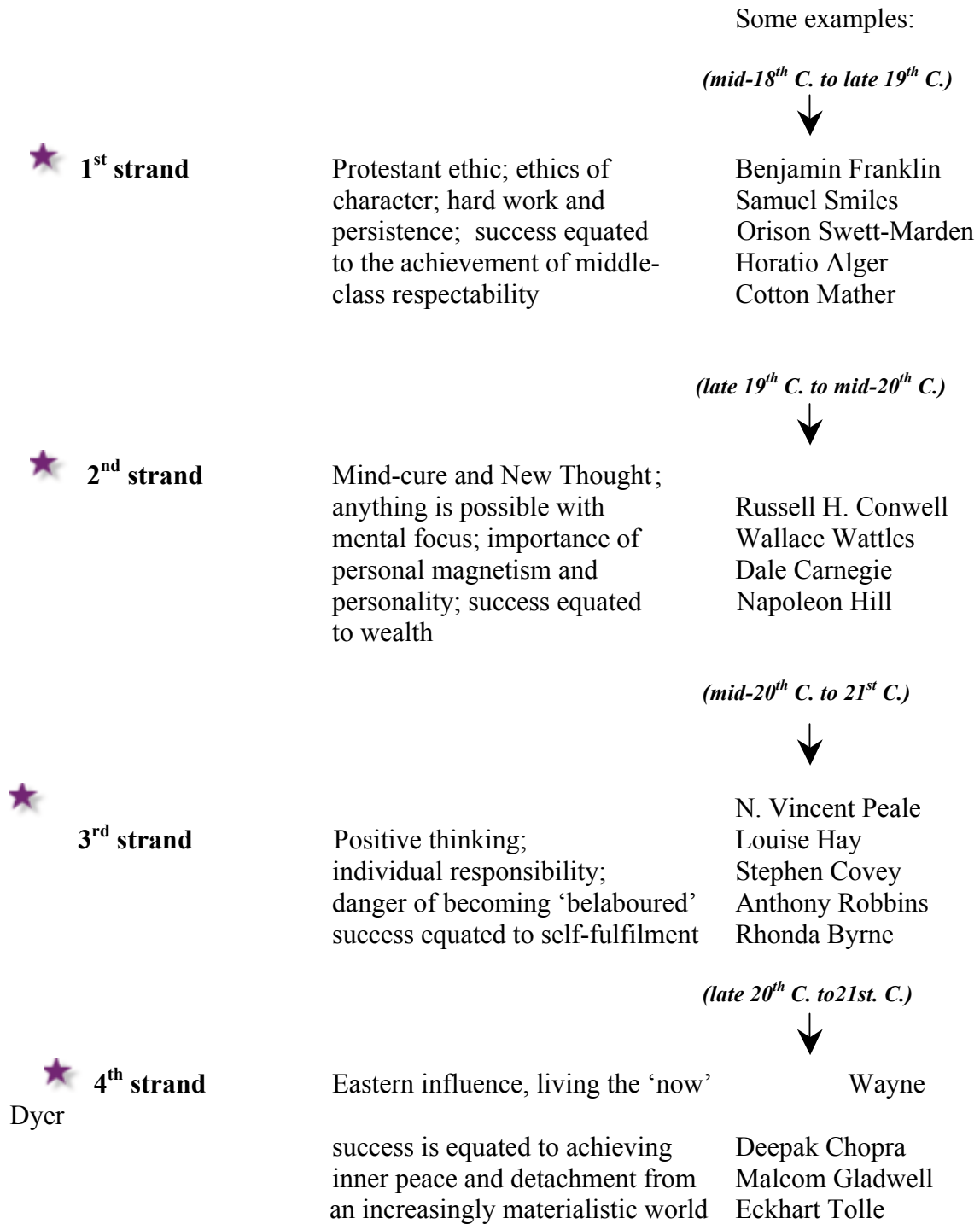


Figure 2

Let us now look at the first phase of this popular genre with the purpose of understanding the social, political, economic and cultural contexts in which these texts are produced.

### **1.5.1. First Strand: Franklin, the Protestant Ethic and the American Dream**

*Diligence is the Mother of Good Luck*

Benjamin Franklin

Historically, the United States' religious tradition has been dominated by Protestant Christianity. A strong puritan tradition, with its emphasis on hard work, education, the need for self examination, discipline and frugality was the soil upon which the beginning of the nation was built. In order to understand the development of the concept of self-help literature and the shaping of what is called the American Dream, it is essential to take a look at the history of the United States and its evolution.

The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America (1776) marked the opening of a whole new world of possibilities ahead. The break from the old continent and its stagnant and oppressive ways forced the new colonisers to unite forces in order to build the foundation upon which the new nation was going to develop. As Charles Sanford expresses in *The Quest for Paradise* (1961), "America and its inhabitants represented to many Europeans a recapitulation of the Garden of Eden" (121). America was considered the perfect place for individual and social development, a paradise with open possibilities where one could realise all of one's potentialities. The Declaration of Independence expressed what life in this 'Garden of Eden' would be like: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" (1979: 1). Goals such as freedom, success and



justice no longer depended on where one was born, whom one knew, or what some distant king or priest commanded. People could take charge of their own destiny and build something with the sweat of their labour, without the help of anyone else but their own family and friends. The concept of self-making and taking charge of one's destiny, undoubtedly, helped to shape what we call the American 'self-identity', and is also closely linked to the belief in traditional American values such as the search for justice, liberty, fairness, democracy, equality (Lewis, 1992: 94).

The first one to use the term 'American Dream' was historian James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* (1931). For him, self-making or being self-made suggests that anyone can be whatever he or she wants to be if they work hard:

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. ([1931] 2001: 214-15)

Interestingly, the concept of the American Dream can be traced back even further, to the late sixteenth century. It was from this time, and especially during the seventeenth century, that English promoters were attempting to persuade Englishmen to move to the colonies. According to George Samuel Scouten, "their language and promises about what the colonies were like were simultaneously laying the groundwork for three separate, but interrelated persistent myths of America: America as the land of plenty, America as the land of opportunity, and America as the land of destiny" (Scouten, 2002: 2).

Toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813), a French aristocrat who owned a plantation outside New York City before the Revolution, and who was an outstanding Enlightenment figure in the new nation, contributed to the inspiration of the American Dream in 12 letters that praised the people's industry, tolerance, and growing prosperity and described America as an agrarian paradise. His

*Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) “gave Europeans a glowing idea of opportunities for peace, wealth, and pride in America. (...) This vision would inspire Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and many other writers up to the present” (Van Spanckeren, 2006: 1).

Thus, in this first phase of American history, the achievement of the American Dream of happiness and success was only possible through plenty of hard work, frugality and discipline. Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) is remembered as someone who best embodied these qualities (Silverman, 1986: i). He represented the emergence of a new ideal of human excellence and virtue and of the belief that “the individual’s place in society should be defined by his ability to perform useful actions and not by his rank in a traditional hierarchy. By wearing the dress of an ordinary man, Franklin implied that he was to be judged solely on the basis of his achievements, his ability, and his individual character” (Cawelti, 1965: 12). We witness the dawning of a new paradigm of thought, a profound shift in human attitudes. For the first time this meant that white men were starting to think of themselves as individuals instead of as members of a traditionally defined group with an established social role. It also fostered the emergence of the dream that any individual, if industrious and perseverant, could aspire to any social position they would be willing to work for. Rather than given an identity by birth, people had the possibility of creating their own identity for themselves. Such was the historical background for the appearance of a popular genre which can be considered genuinely American: the self-help, self-improvement or ‘success’ genre (Van Spanckeren, 2006: 1). According to Butler-Bowdon (2003: 145), it is generally accepted that the popular genre of self-help literature started in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1790).

In Kathryn Van Spanckeren’s words, Franklin “tried to help other ordinary people become successful by sharing his insights and initiating a characteristically American genre – the self-help book” (2006: 1). Called America’s ‘first great man of letters’ by the Scottish philosopher David Hume, Franklin was a “writer, printer, publisher, scientist, philanthropist, and diplomat, and was one of the most famous and respected private figures of his time” (Van Spanckeren, 2006: 1).



*Here we can see the portrait of Benjamin Franklin on a US \$100 note*

In fact, one of Franklin's most valuable contributions to society was the fact that he inspired millions of people to focus on self improvement, to which he devoted one or two hours each day (Franklin 1986: 87). The first part of his *Autobiography* was written as a moral guide to show his son the way to success, and the second part was a kind of short treatise on virtue, which offered efficient and firsthand testimony "that man is not even at present a vicious and detestable animal, and still more (...) that good management may greatly amend him" (1986: 84). Franklin's *Autobiography* announced the emergence of a view of man as good and capable of becoming better. He took the puritan characteristic of self-scrutiny to its highest degree by contriving a method in which he set up his own chart of virtues, and methodically tried to acquire them one after another until they became a habit. By doing so, he tried to show how someone's life and character could become noble through constant self-assessment: "I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into" (Franklin, 1986: 90-91). Thus, first he would focus on temperance: "Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation". The next week he would avoid trifling conversation, the next he would try to be orderly, then resolute, then frugal, industrious, sincere, and so on down the list, through justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquillity, to chastity and humility (1986: 91-92). Using a system of graphs and daily self-appraisal, he constantly tried to achieve these thirteen qualities or virtues. Here we have an early forerunner of so many contemporary self-help books which contain practical exercises to aid readers in achieving their desired goals,

whatever these may be (money, health, weight loss, self esteem, etc). Even though in his youth and ever after Franklin discarded all puritan religious commitments (Franklin, 1986: 89) his life and thought made him the first example of the fruition of the Protestant ethic (Wyllie, 1954: 20).

For Franklin, the reward of inner happiness and peace is achieved through action and discipline rather than just through the achievement of the end goal: “I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was, by the endeavour, a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it” (Franklin, 1986: 99). There are three episodes from his *Autobiography*, which serve to indicate the narrative of different kinds of ‘successes’ within Franklin’s own life. The first and most famous one recounts Franklin’s first entrance into Philadelphia as a penniless young man eating a large loaf of bread with two others tucked under his free arm (1986: 21). Dirty and ragged from a rough boat trip, he is laughed at by a young woman standing in a doorway. Seven years later, we are told, a now prosperous and respected Franklin marries the very same girl who had scorned him on his arrival in Philadelphia. In this sequence, the American archetype for rags-to-riches prosperity and marrying the boss’s daughter is born (Anker, 1999a: 115). A second important event is the manner by which Franklin attained his initial success as a printer in Philadelphia. Here he describes his efforts to appear always respectable and industrious before his neighbours, even if he only used such an appearance in order to impress them. After some time, he goes back as a winner to see his family and his brother James for whom he had worked as an apprentice some years earlier:

My unexpected appearance surpris’d the Family; all were, however, very glad to see me, and made me Welcome, except my Brother. I went to see him at his Printing-house. I was better dress’d than ever while in his Service, having a genteel new Suit from Head to foot, a Watch, and my Pockets lin’d with near Five Pounds Sterling in Silver. He receiv’d me not very frankly, look’d me all over, and turn’d to his Work again. (Franklin, 1986: 33)

The third episode where we see Franklin ‘working hard’ for success appears when he tries to construct what he called an “Art of Virtue” (1986: 100), which was an attempt to design a pathway to moral perfection. As mentioned earlier, Franklin isolated thirteen personal virtues for the purpose of prolonged ethical development, with the

intention to create the habit of each one of them by concentrating on one per week, thus allowing for four repetitions of the complete list each year. His project has been attacked as self-serving, arrogant, naive, and socially myopic. (Anker, 1999a: 116)

When we try to analyse the goals that motivated American citizens and the ever-growing readership of self-help literature books (from authors like Franklin to Cotton Mather, Samuel Smiles, Orison Swett Marden, Horatio Alger, to select but a few examples) we find that constant messages about striving for success had one consistent concern during the first phase of American history: a preoccupation, shared by Franklin and his public, with obtaining wealth while, at the same time, emphasising the importance of living a virtuous life. Nonetheless, the centrality of this interest in the pursuit of wealth has bothered Franklin's critics for centuries (1999a: 111) and has been one of the most important areas of dispute about Franklin's place within the history of self-help literature, opening up larger questions about the nature of Franklin's philosophy of ethics. Wealth-getting appears with great prominence in his popular writings and has attracted a variety of interpretations. For instance, Franklin has been criticised for "his advocacy of what might be called a prudential ethic that makes material and social status morality's chief end" (1999a: 110). Certainly, this seems to be true for many of the maxims contained in *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1732-1758) and for all those that were collected in *The Way to Wealth* (1758) and have since been passed on orally for many generations and now form a part of America's folk wisdom. It is very difficult to see both *Poor Richard's Almanac*, and especially *The Way to Wealth*, in any light other than as a strong support of the individual pursuit of wealth. But it is important not to forget that this perspective shows that Franklin's work ethic was sensibly and purposefully geared to the needs of the times. America was largely an agricultural, frontier society. The demands of domestic agriculture were great and hard even in its more settled communities, and carelessness and sloth led to personal failure: "Sloth makes all Things difficult, but Industry all easy, as Poor Richard says" (Franklin, 1986: 217). The demands of circumstance most certainly did not allow settlers to think about purity of motivation or social altruism, because there were more immediate matters of urgency, such as physical survival and basic material improvement. One could not label these ends excessive or greedy in themselves. It is, therefore, important

not to see the emphasis on attaining wealth in the colonial period as in *Poor Richard* and the *Autobiography*, in the same light as in the Gilded Age,<sup>12</sup> when the easy justification for a heartless work ethic became more prevalent (Cawelti, 1965: 184). If Franklin's ethic of labour and prudence seemed to emphasise the practical routes to economic well-being, such a model was well and, one might say, "humanly suited to quite specific and pressing social exigencies" (Anker, 1999a: 113).

Throughout the twenty-five years of publication, the *Almanac's* fictional narrator, poor Richard Saunders, counselled a calculated and careful management of all of one's resources. Money, time, energy and friendship were all carefully directed toward the goal of raising one's status both economically and socially. The same is true of Franklin's *Autobiography*. From the perspective of this self-interested philosophy of life, certain kinds of behaviour were justified according to their effectiveness in attaining personal security or according to how well they worked, apart from their religious or moral worth. In his *Autobiography* he explains, for example, that 'honesty' is wise because it brings more advantages, whereas 'dishonesty' is likely to bring more trouble and disadvantages than ease, especially if it is discovered:

... it was my Design to explain and enforce this Doctrine, that vicious Actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful, the Nature of Man alone consider'd: That it was, therefore, every one's Interest to be virtuous who wish'd to be happy even in this World; And I should, from this Circumstance, there being always in the World a Number of rich Merchants, Nobility, States, and Princes, who have need of honest Instruments for the Management of their Affairs, and such being so rare have endeavored to convince young Persons, that no Qualities were so likely to make a poor Man's Fortune as those of Probity and Integrity. (Franklin, 1986: 101, capital letters in the original)

Similarly, pride is condemned not because it is intrinsically wrong but because it can lead to personal misfortune in the loss of friends and diversion from one's necessary tasks: "And after all, of what Use is this *Pride of Appearance*, for which so much is

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<sup>12</sup> The Gilded Age was a "period of gross materialism and blatant political corruption in US history during the 1870s that gave rise to important novels of social and political criticism. The period takes its name from the earliest of these, *The Gilded Age* (1873), written by Mark Twain in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner. The novel gives a vivid and accurate description of Washington DC, and is peopled with caricatures of many leading figures of the day, including greedy industrialists and corrupt politicians" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica.com*).

risked, so much is suffered? It cannot promote Health, or ease Pain; it makes no Increase of Merit in the Person, it creates Envy, it hastens Misfortune” (Franklin 1986: 222-23, capital letters and italics in the original). Briefly expressed, it is not useful for building up material well-being, and its expression can often push people into material excess and thus into debt. Franklin’s prudential ethical counsel followed quite naturally from his vision of an ideal frontier society. He saw life on the small farm as the foundation for the achievement of personal and social wealth in a new culture. While industriousness and frugality were necessary for frontier farm life, these virtues also constituted routes to personal and civic virtue. Franklin could certainly not have imagined Gilded Age industrialism or modern agricultural business; for him, the modest prosperity of farm life was the best way to attain personal physical well-being. Moreover, the kind of life at the farm was also considered a good barrier against the excess and opulence that had corrupted the European social order, since it was highly unlikely that one could achieve great wealth from it. The didactic intent behind his *Autobiography* and behind Poor Richard’s methods and attitudes of hard work was “not only to provide a way to wealth, at least on a modest scale, but to foster an agricultural pattern for a new society of seemingly endless frontier” (Anker, 1999a: 113). Nevertheless, Franklin could not foresee “the extent to which his ethic for the yeoman would also be a model for the tradesman and entrepreneur” (1999a: 113).

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century British cultural analyst Matthew Arnold considered that culture served a very important ethical purpose. In his book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) he wrote that culture had its origin in the love of perfection; in his words: “it is a study of perfection. It moves by the force (...) of the moral and social passion for doing good” ([1869] 1971: 205). Similarly, Franklin’s conception of self-improvement also placed great emphasis on the search for perfection and was based on his belief in the need for an elite which would be self-selecting and self-disciplined, men of virtue voluntarily assuming the leadership of society (Franklin, 1986: 105, 112).

For Franklin social welfare and human happiness were dependent on two factors: on the one hand, on teaching the benefits of hard work, prudence and self-restraint to the mass of men, and, on the other hand, on encouraging the development of

a new self-made leadership composed of men of practical ability and disinterested benevolence (Cawelti, 1965: 15). His *Memoirs* are an example of this: in them Franklin clearly stated the ethical purpose of his *Poor Richard's Almanac*:

Observing that it was generally read, scarce any Neighbourhood in the Province being without it, I consider'd it as a proper Vehicle for conveying Instruction among the common People, who bought scarce any other Books. I therefore filled all the little Spaces that occur'd between the Remarkable Days in the Calendar, with Proverbial Sentences, chiefly such as inculcated Industry and Frugality, as the Means of procuring Wealth and thereby securing Virtue, it being more difficult for a Man in Want to act always honestly, as (to use here one of those Proverbs) *it is hard for an empty sack to stand upright*. (1949: 242, original emphasis)

Certainly, apart from Franklin there were many other authors who preached self-improvement through industriousness and frugality. And they did so mainly through story writing, which was the method most self-help authors used at the time to communicate their messages best to a wide, mostly under-educated public.

Towards the mid- 19<sup>th</sup> century we find that the first person who consciously used the term 'self-help' in a personal development book was the Scottish writer Samuel Smiles (1812-1904). Very much influenced by Franklin, his book, published in 1859, was simply entitled: *Self-Help*. It starts with the sentence: "Heaven helps those who help themselves", which provides a variation of Benjamin Franklin's maxim "God helps them that help themselves", that appeared previously in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1733-1758). In many Victorian homes the book *Self-Help* had a status second only to the *Bible*. It was published simultaneously in England and in the United States. Today it is still considered a classic display of Victorian values (Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 271). In his book Smiles shows that history is full of people who achieved amazing things by sheer will and persistence, and that these values are basic to the shaping of one's character. He asserted that "Character is power, more than knowledge" and that education, wealth, or noble family does not come close to replacing character (2006: 195). For him the puritan ideals of hard work, self-examination, discipline, frugality and virtue were necessary ingredients for the development of the nation at that time. Like Franklin before him, Smiles, too, believed in the need to inspire his readers to do good



and to work hard within a world that was changing dramatically from an agricultural to an industrial scenario: “National progress is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness, and vice” (2006: 2).

Heavily inspired by Franklin and by Samuel Smiles’ *Self-Help*, another prolific writer, Orison Swett Marden (1850-1924), founder of *Success* magazine and considered by some the founder of the American success movement (Butler-Bowdon, 2004: 20), published *Pushing to the Front, or Success under Difficulties* in 1894. Again, the message of the book is that there are few things that cannot be achieved by strong determination and effort: “Read the story of any successful man and mark its moral, told thousands of years ago by Solomon: ‘Seest thou a man diligent in his business, he shall stand before kings’. This proverb is well illustrated by the career of the industrious Franklin, for he stood before five kings and dined with two” (Marden, 2006: 18). The book inspires the reader “not to make the most money, but to pursue a career that excites, enriches intellectually, and uses talents to the full” (Butler-Bowdon, 2004: 205). In Chapter VI, Marden expresses the spirit of self-improvement with these words: “The world does not demand that you be a lawyer, minister, doctor, farmer, scientist, or merchant; it does not dictate what you shall do, but it does require that you be a master in whatever you undertake” (2006: 95). And later he adds: “The slow penny is surer than the quick dollar. The slow trotter will out-travel the fleet racer. Genius darts, flutters and tires; but perseverance wears and wins” (2006: 341).

These are just some examples of the voluminous self-help literature that spans from the late 18<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which there was rarely any assertion that wealth was a sufficient end in itself. In part we can most likely attribute this to “an unwillingness to avow materialistic motives where public profession was a *sine qua non*, but there is no reason to doubt that the majority of Americans sincerely believed what they publicly professed: that individual economic advancement and productivity was the best way of assuring both the individual and the general welfare” (Cawelti, 1965: 45-46).

A central premise of social theory which cannot be overlooked is that different economic systems correspond with different cultural, social, and interpersonal formations. The social theorist Max Weber affirmed that the emergence of European and American entrepreneurial and industrial capitalism was made possible by the frugality and industriousness fostered by Protestantism. In fact, he noticed that “business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labour, and even more the higher technically and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingly Protestant” ([1922] 2008: 35). It is important to understand, nevertheless, that not all the colonists at the time, either farmers or townsmen, were members of a common religious group. What seems to be widely accepted is that despite the existence of many different religious sects, there were striking similarities in the religious life and outlook of all the colonies. As Carman explains, “The Virginia planter, for example, no less than the New England farmer, was, during the seventeenth century and even after, largely under the influence of certain ideas and restrictions essentially puritanical in character: he was expected and on occasion virtually compelled to be a church-attending and God-fearing man” (1930: 105).

*Maximilian C. E. Weber*  
(1964-1920)



Max Weber was the first one to set forth the idea of a Protestant Ethic in 1904-1905, which was then published in book form as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1922). Weber considered that the Protestant Reformation gave rise to a new spiritual ethos that was greatly responsible for the rise of capitalism. For him, “the Catholics show a stronger propensity to remain in their crafts, that is, they more often become master craftsmen, whereas the Protestants are attracted to a larger extent into the factories in order to fill the upper ranks of skilled labour and administrative positions” ([1922] 2008: 38-39). His primary purpose in the book was to suggest that religious ideas do have cultural and social consequences: “Weber’s thesis has largely been accepted as a truism. Puritanism in Europe and America, but especially in New

England, was a major catalyst for the rise of economic individualism, the rationalization of business and the marketplace, and, following upon those two, the rise of capitalism” (Anker, 1999a: 8).

As regards American historiography, Weber’s hypothesis was adapted by American progressive historians like Vernon Parrington and by Henry L. Mencken, who, among many others, promoted the image of the puritans as “calculating misers who used their religion as a cloak for religious and financial self-aggrandizement. Some contended the puritans’ goals were also religious but only so because they supposedly sought economic success to prove that God liked them and that they were saved” (Anker, 1999a: 3). Other historical works, mainly by social historians of puritan New England, consider that there are large holes in Weber’s construction of seventeenth-century New England and its social and religious ethos. According to Weiss, Benjamin Franklin was the first one to offer a real departure from the Protestant Ethic, because he secularised it and encouraged social and economic mobility (Weiss, 1969: 28, 29). This was a possibility that was contrary to the medieval social vision of puritan culture. Nevertheless, Weber’s assumptions persist in the culture as a whole and among many historians. In Huber’s *The American Idea of Success* (1971), for example, he argues that, the puritans succeeded in inverting traditional Christian values: “what had been considered a vice in the Middle Ages (...) had to the Colonists’ economic system become a virtue” (1971: 11). According to him, Franklin differs from the puritans only insofar as he secularises “the puritan belief that God was a means to success”, which puts an unprecedented level of economic utility in puritan religion (1971: 19).

Most American success literature will from its early beginnings and ever after be affected by this puritan ambivalence toward wealth-getting, while at the same time supporting the virtues likely to achieve financial increase and success. According to Wyllie in *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (1954), within its mythic configuration of values, the key to success was character, not economic good luck or opportunity, and poverty soon became “the equivalent of sin in Calvinist theology, an evil to be struggled against and overcome” (1954: 22). Nevertheless, Wyllie says, poverty was also glorified as a great incentive to rise in life.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Franklin's model of the self-made gentleman-citizen gave way to the forces of industrialisation, as a new model of success which emerged in the characters of Horatio Alger's morality tales. The typical hero of many of the stories contained in *Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York with the Bootblacks* (1868); *Slow and Sure; The Story of Paul Hoffman the Young Street-Merchant* (1872) or in *Struggling Upward; or, Luke Larkin's Luck* (1868), for instance, was a fatherless son whose extraordinary good luck (chance meetings with wealthy benefactors or their distressed daughters) resulted in his progress, not from rags to riches, but from "rags to middle-class respectability" (McGee, 2005: 31). In McGee's words, "While his characters are bound by convention to choose a moral path, success is more a function of good fortune and social opportunism – 'luck' and 'pluck' – than of a commitment to industry and self-improvement" (2005: 32). Moreover, towards the late 19<sup>th</sup> century most Americans started working relentlessly hard in mines, stockyards, and factories but did not advance at all. Therefore, a new formula for success had to be improvised, and hard work and diligence were substituted by nerve, confidence, willpower, and initiative. The prize now went to those who dared, those who risked. The decisive balance had shifted away from "traditional moral virtues" to the "qualities of personality" necessary to acquire riches" (Cawelti, 1965: 184).

As we have seen so far, the changes in the labour scenario as well as an appreciation of the powerful religious dynamic that lies behind the attitudes and behaviour of people in the US are basic elements to fully understand the evolution of self-help literature since its beginnings. Amid the westward expansion and early industrialisation in America came two movements that constituted radical departures from puritanism, and with them profoundly new ways of conceiving life and reality: first, the very large evangelical Christian revival of the Second Great Awakening<sup>13</sup> and

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<sup>13</sup> The Second Great Awakening was a religious revival in the United States that began in the late eighteenth century and lasted until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially between 1800 and 1840 (Anker, 1999a: 147). While it occurred in all parts of the United States, it was especially strong in the Northeast and the Midwest. As a result of declining religious convictions, many religious faiths sponsored religious revivals which emphasised human beings' dependence upon God. Many of these religious revivals occurred as camp meetings.

second, Transcendentalism,<sup>14</sup> an American expression of the intellectual movement known as Romanticism. From this markedly different ‘mood’ in the young United States emerged the mental healing movement generically known as ‘mind-cure’, which later evolved into what is known as the New Thought movement. This, in turn, is one of the sources of the New Age movement of the late 1970s (Harrington, 2008: 111-19).

Let us mention, for example, the influence of American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) who, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote an essay called *Self-Reliance* which was, according to Butler-Bowdon “one of the key pieces of writing that helped carve the ethic of American individualism, and forms part of the intellectual bedrock of today’s self-help writers” (2003: 127). Without a doubt, Emerson’s major contribution to the self-help movement was philosophical in providing a theology for the later New Thought and positive-thinking movements (see section 1.5.2). He had the strong “belief that the truly self-reliant individual could be transformed by uniting himself with powerful universal forces” (Cawelti 1965: 97). In *Self-Reliance and other Essays* (1841), Emerson supported the pursuit of one’s individual talents regardless of the demands of society or the labour market:

Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life’s cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous, half possession... That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him.... Do that which is assigned you, and you cannot hope too much or dare too much. (1993: 35)

Likewise, by 1870, in an essay called “Success”, Emerson affirmed that specialisation, rather than occupational flexibility, constituted an expression of individuality and thus, of personal success:

Each man has an aptitude born with him to do easily some feat impossible to any other. Do your work. I have to say this often, but nature says it oftener. ‘Tis clownish to insist on doing all with one’s own hands, as if every man should

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<sup>14</sup> Transcendentalism is a term associated with a group of new ideas in literature that emerged in New England in the early-to-middle 19<sup>th</sup> century (especially between the 1830s and 40s). The movement developed as a protest against the general state of culture and society and its most prominent figures included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Elizabeth Peabody and James Freeman Clarke, amongst many others.

build his own clumsy house, forge his hammer, and bake his dough; but he is to dare to do what he can do best; not help others as they would direct him, but as he knows his helpful power to be. ([1870] 2007: 14-15)

Let us not forget that America throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a “remarkably diverse, unpredictable, and often discordant patchwork of people, practices, ideas, and attitudes in just about every sphere of its life – whether social, political, economic, religious, or medical” (Anker, 1999a: 145). As mentioned, apart from the influence of Transcendentalism in self-help literature, religious revivalism was a dominant feature of the social landscape at the time.<sup>15</sup> According to historian Mary P. Ryan, revivalism provided a discourse that helped to relate to the shocking economic and political changes that were occurring without addressing the economic basis and social implications of the changes. While, on the one hand, families were fractured by the ‘corrosive power of commerce’, on the other hand, Ryan observes that they were inclined not to “express concerns in economistic terms... but rather in the language and central ideological structure of their time, that is, in an essentially religious mode of thought” (1981: 65). Thus, this religious revivalism was basic to ease the transition to an industrialised society. In her study of Gilded Age success literature, Judy Hilkey affirms:

Insofar as the puritan notion of a calling evoked a presumably stable and pious albeit idealized past, it suggested that which was comfortably familiar and accepted in rural and small-town America: a view of work characterized by long-standing patterns of father-to-son occupational continuity and self-employment in farming, the trades, and local commerce. On the other hand, the more modern concept of choosing rather than inheriting one’s life work opened the doors to a world of new possibilities... *Success writers helped to bridge the gap between these two different worlds of work* when, by likening the selection of an occupation to a ‘calling’, a Godly summons, they suggested that young men setting forth to find their fortunes were not roaming, drifting, or rejecting the values of parental household, but rather were making a ‘choice’ determined by the prayerful and thoughtful exercise of judgement. (Hilkey, 1997: 101, emphasis added)

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<sup>15</sup> According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, revivalism is a “renewed religious fervour within a Christian group, church, or community, but primarily a movement in some Protestant churches to revitalize the spiritual ardour of their members and win new adherents. Revivalism in its modern form can be attributed to that shared emphasis in Anabaptism, Puritanism, German Pietism, and Methodism in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries on personal religious experience, the priesthood of all believers, and holy living, in protest against established church systems that seemed excessively sacramental, priestly, and worldly. Of central importance, however, was the emphasis on personal conversion” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica.com*).

This leads us to the second strand of thought within the self-help literature landscape, in which many success-writers were aware that, contrary to what had been common practice before, large corporations were becoming the dominant element in American life. In the midst of a complex and impersonal industrial world, men were no longer satisfied that the old beliefs of individual diligence, self-discipline, honesty and piety would lead them to ‘Acres of Diamonds’.<sup>16</sup> In Cawelti’s words, “The imperatives of attracting attention in a large organization and winning notice and patronage among myriad competitors put a further premium on self-confidence and dynamic personality” (1965: 183). This is one of the main reasons why, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and through at least the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, self-help books were dominated by the ethos of salesmanship. Rather than hard work, now one of the main keys to success seemed to be ‘personal magnetism’, a quality which supposedly enabled a man to influence and dominate others.

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<sup>16</sup> *Acres of Diamonds* is, in fact, the title of a best-selling self-help book written by Russell H. Conwell in 1921.

## **1.5.2. Second Strand: The Emergence of New Thought and the Belief in Prosperity as a Birthright**

*If you think you can, you can. And if you think you can't, you're right*

Henry Ford

As we have seen, while the puritan tradition was present in self-help literature until approximately the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was, as we will see, by no means the only influence which shaped this popular genre. It is important to understand that what we call self-help or self-improvement literature is not a monolithic kind of literature at all. Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many different types of self-help literatures co-exist, overlap and compete. On the one hand the puritan message is widely used and does not suddenly stop to give way to a completely different kind of discourse, but continues to be present all through the century. We can still find deep puritan values in the late 1970s, for example, in Scott Peck's bestseller *The Road Less Traveled, A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (1978), which describes a world where "original sin does exist; it is our laziness" (1978: 15), a world where goodness comes from self-discipline, hard work, delayed gratification and honesty. Its phenomenal popularity and its Christian themes made it a bestseller, especially among the Bible Belt readers (McGee, 2005: 56). At the same time, we witness a proliferation of books which provide plenty of techniques and quick, easy solutions to one's problems. According to Covey and Merrill, there is a vast difference between the self-help literature produced from Franklin's time until the beginning of Industrialisation (from the late 18<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and the literature produced from then on (2003: 181). In the first phase, authors were more concerned with what has been called by various authors (Wyllie, 1954; Cawelti, 1965; Huber, 1971) the 'ethics of character'; these were books which followed the puritan tradition, where "the most fundamental ingredients to success were such things as honesty, integrity, humility, fidelity, justice, patience, and courage" (Covey and Merrill, 2003: 181).



According to institutions such as the American *National Character and Education Center*, or initiatives such as *Characterunlimited.com*<sup>17</sup> ‘character’ is defined as:

- The action you take to carry out the values, ethics and morals that you believe in.
- Consistency between what you say you will do and what you actually do.
- Putting the ethics into action.
- What defines, builds, or breaks your reputation.
- Moral strength. It takes moral courage to do what is right when it may cost more than you are willing to pay.
- Who you are and what you do when no one is looking

According to Covey, in most of the self-help literature produced from industrialisation onwards the main concern is with personality ethics, rather than with character ethics. This means that there is a greater interest in techniques of Positive Mental Attitude (PMA), and also in public relations or public image. Here people are sometimes encouraged to manipulate other people for their own benefit using certain techniques in order to be accepted, or to ‘pretend’ that they are interested in topics they do not really care about, all to achieve a certain goal. This, from Covey’s perspective, can never be permanent, nor can it bring peace or happiness because it is not based on solid principles like integrity, honesty, rectitude or dignity (1989: 26).

Let us now take a look, from a Cultural Studies perspective, at the central cultural changes that prepared the soil for this shift from ‘character ethics’ to the ‘ethics of personality’. Industrialisation no doubt accelerated the fast erosion of rural and small town life that had characterised the previous century. In spite of the fact that the American mythology of the self-made man infused working-class people with hopes of entrepreneurial wealth and high achievement, the working conditions at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century were often extremely hard. Many people had to work up to sixteen hours a day to make a very precarious living. Their survival

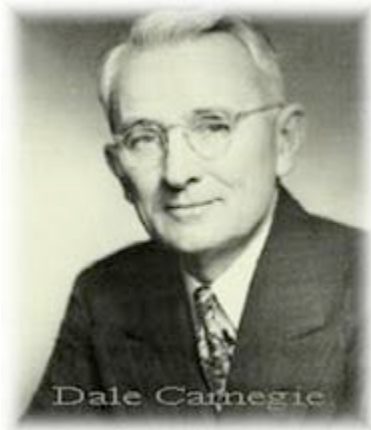
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<sup>17</sup> According to the *Character Unlimited* website, there are different ways of defining character <<http://www.characterunlimited.com>> (accessed March, 2008). Moreover, The National Character Education Center (CA) offers teachers and children practical ideas and reference points for Character Development. This is their website <<http://www.ethicsusa.com>> (accessed March, 2008).

depended on participation in the labour market. They had become proletarians, selling their work and their time. In sociologist Juliet Schor's words a great deal of workers, men as well as women, "were perched perilously close to the line between survival and starvation" (1992: 57). As an example, she mentions that

In New York City tenements, women all but sewed themselves to death. They often toiled fifteen or sixteen hours a day in cold, badly ventilated tenements. The introduction of the sewing machine further drove down rates, by increasing productivity and consequently the supply of garments. (1992: 58)

Moreover, in 1914, for example, Henry Ford devised a sophisticated approach to labour discipline which would forever change the face of the workplace around the world. His first step was a technical innovation, using machinery to set the pace of work. He also instituted a new financial strategy: the 5 dollar day. The going rent at the time was about \$2 a day. By paying his men \$5 a day, Ford gave them an employment rent of \$3 – the difference between working for someone else or working for him. Schor asserts that when a job pays a rent, a worker is less willing to lose it: "there is more willingness to work hard, show up regularly, and follow company rules" (1992: 62). Nevertheless, soon people realised that they were unable to enjoy the benefits of increased economic prosperity and a higher standard of living, since the stressful jobs, with their long work hours and often unpaid overtime implied less time for family life and/or friends, leading to a generally unhappier workforce. In spite of this, the desire for a more prosperous life was the beginning of the so-called 'rat-race' that trapped people into a treadmill where the accumulation of material goods seemed to be the banner of success; this, to be achieved at all cost, in a world where individualism, stress and anxiety in all sorts of disguises started growing at an alarming pace (a point which will be dealt with in more detail in section 1.5.3). The regimentation of factory labour as repetitive work, time-discipline, and wage labour finally managed to break the tie between "work and godly virtue" (Rodgers, 1978: xi-xiii). Character ethics clearly gave way to a different kind of ethic based on personality within the self-help literature landscape, where salesmanship became the focus of this kind of literature for several decades, with books such as Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) or Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* (1937), as we will see later on.



*(1888-1955)*

These books suggested a pathway to success, sometimes using what seemed manipulation and well thought-out strategies to achieve certain self-satisfying goals that were very different from the old character ethic (Huber, 1971: 95-96). Carnegie,<sup>18</sup> for example, described a world in which good cheer and smiles were a kind of currency, and in which every person was able to advance by understanding that all others were only out for themselves.

We should not forget, nonetheless, that especially in the America of the 1930s, affected as it was by the Depression, people needed some hope which would help them through their often bleak reality. In general, workers were more focused on avoiding poverty than on becoming wealthy. They had to be shown the way to believe in themselves again, and an easy style with practical guidelines and principles that worked was what people were looking for. Authors like Carnegie (1936) and Hill (1937) were seminal in helping people to gain self-esteem again. With inspirational anecdotes and easy-to-follow rules, they encouraged their readers to keep constantly focused on their goals. At the same time they offered easy techniques that helped an often under-educated readership to behave properly and learn manners, which, if applied, would be beneficial, both at a personal as well as at a financial level. Pieces of advice such as “Remember that a person’s name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language” or “Show respect for the other person’s opinions; Never say, ‘You’re wrong’” or “Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves” (Carnegie, 1936: 116, 139) can be interpreted as manipulative and individualistic, but, in fact, are no more than a later version of the etiquette manuals or

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<sup>18</sup> Dale Carnegie (1888-1955) was an American writer and lecturer who developed famous courses in self-improvement, salesmanship, corporate training, public speaking and interpersonal skills. He was originally called Carnagey (until 1922), but changed his name to Carnegie at a time when Andrew Carnegie (unrelated), the industrialist, businessman, entrepreneur and a major philanthropist was a widely revered and recognized name.

conduct manuals of the past, aimed particularly at aiding people overcome the difficult financial times of the Depression.

In Carnegie's book, "old-fashioned good manners and etiquette became utilitarian" (Anker, 1999b: 22). While success literature had always had a utilitarian undercurrent dating back to Franklin, never before had it been so direct, thanks to a mixture of New Thought and Applied Psychology (1999b: 22). On the other hand, Hill claimed he possessed the "money-making secret which has made fortunes for more than 500 exceedingly wealthy people" whom he "carefully analyzed over a long period of years" (Hill, 1937: 1). One of Hill's objectives in *Think and Grow Rich* was to encourage people to become leaders. In spite of fomenting individualism, he did not just give self-satisfying frivolous advice, but he informed his readers of their vast inner potential to achieve any goals that they set themselves to achieve, always warning them of any ill use of their actions: "Without a sense of fairness and justice, no leader can command and retain the respect of his or her followers"; or, "The person who lacks self-

*Napoleon Hill (1883-1970)*



control can never control others. Self-control sets a mighty example for one's followers which the more intelligent will emulate" (Hill, 1937: 109).

We could say that the important transformations brought about by industrialisation, and made more evident during the Depression, favoured the emergence of 'self-culture' as never before. The competitive spirit, the need for survival in an unfriendly environment, and the desire to climb the ladder of success at all costs were all basic ingredients which, found in some of the self-help literature discourse of the time, were what many people were looking for. Self-help literature, thus, contributed a great deal to the formation of this individualism that lies near the centre of American character (Gergen, 2000: 44), although probably many historians would now question the accuracy and usefulness of this sort of generalisation about America and Americans, or a unique national character.

Indeed, the concept of self-help as part of a distinctive American individualism is still strongly imbedded in the nation's civil discourse. In spite of the hardships of the era of industrialisation, the most common feeling was that far from restricting or eliminating individual opportunities, the social and economic changes of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had multiplied opportunities for success. The individual had the chance to create and re-create himself, aspiring to any occupation and social position he had the courage, energy and abilities to fight for. This was expressed over and over again in self-help literature books such as *Captains of Industry* (Parton, 1884), *How to Get on in the World or A Ladder to Practical Success* (Calhoun, 1895), or *The Science of Getting Rich* (Wattles, 1910). Yet crucial to the achievement of one's goal was the "acquisition of the qualities of will and personal magnetism which would make the individual an effective participant in the *struggle for success*" (Cawelti, 1965: 174, emphasis added).

Thus, we witness a notable change in the form of self-help literature as the philosophy of success developed. Even sermons, with their detailed discussion of virtues, their attention to moral discipline and their rejection of temptation, were replaced by dramatic stories which stressed the possibility of success and the thrill of achievement. Sermons were transformed "from the careful exposition of virtues and vices to a quasi-scientific explanation of the 'laws of success' and the ease and certainty of their application" (Cawelti, 1965: 176). Financial success, will-training, self-confidence and initiative were emphasised by authors who shared ideas which had started to become popular with the movement called 'mind-cure' that emerged in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and later developed into New Thought. This represented a marked shift from Protestantism to a movement which stressed the power of the mind as never before. This new movement came about through a variety of religious denominations and churches, especially the Unity Church, Christian Science, Religious Science and Church of Divine Science (Lewis, 1992: 16-18).

Nevertheless, the changes from a Protestant ethic focused on hard work and industry to a movement which stressed the power of the mind, and the capacity to take risks certainly did not happen overnight. Suffice it to mention, for example, that at the turn of the century there were two popular middle-class magazines *The Saturday*

*Evening Post*, under the editorship of George Horace Lorimer, and *Success*, under Orison Swett Marden, (as well as their imitators *Colliers* and the *American*) which reached unprecedented heights of circulation with their treatment of the theme of business success, suggesting a close connection between “the new urban middle class, the major audience for these publications, and the new philosophy of success” (Cawelti, 1965: 176). *The Saturday Evening Post*, for example, presented the new philosophy of success in its popular series, “Letters from a Self-Made Merchant to his Son”, catching the mood of the middle class. On the other hand, *Success* magazine (in its first few years) attempted to develop a formula which combined the older gospel of self-improvement with the new philosophy of success. By doing so, it caused plenty of confusion to its readers, who, on one page, learned that the road to success was ‘rough and rocky’; on the next, that “the surest way to win success is to get into the right niche, in a congenial environment where we can work without friction, and where all our powers will find quick and responsive expression”; on another, that “one of the greatest dangers that threaten American institutions, today, is commercialism”; and on yet another that “the businessman was the true hero of the age” (Cawelti, 1965: 177). These times of obvious contradictions, where one author stressed the necessity for integrity, honesty and industry, while another insisted on qualities such as boldness, initiative, capacity to take risks and originality, have never really ended completely. Texts following either trend have coexisted in American self-help literature all the way to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Clearly, by the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the vast accumulation of wealth that marked the Gilded Age changed the meaning of success itself. Historian Richard Weiss observed the increasing equation of wealth with success: he noted that the first definition of success in terms of wealth occurred in the 1891 *New Century Dictionary*, whereas the first mention of wealth in terms of success occurred in the 1885 *Oxford English Dictionary* (1969: 98). Andrew Carnegie’s *The Empire of Business* (1902) and Russell H. Conwell’s *Acres of Diamonds* (1921) suggested that creating wealth was a moral obligation and a sign of virtue: “To make money honestly is to preach the gospel” ([1921] 2005: 10). Interestingly, during this period of entrepreneurial upward mobility, success was also increasingly divorced from the idea of hard work and from any

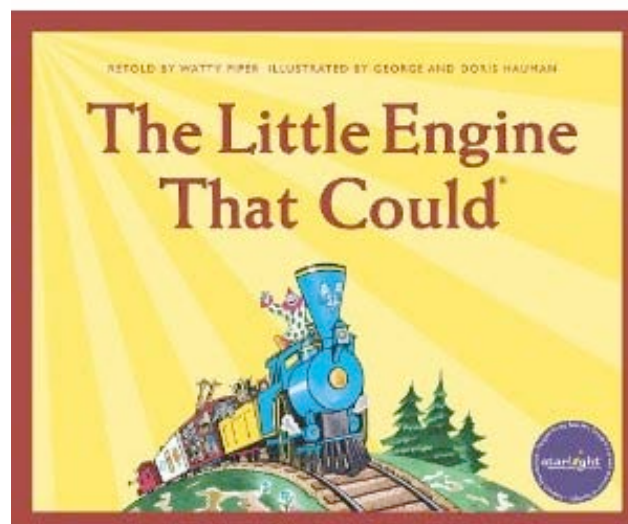
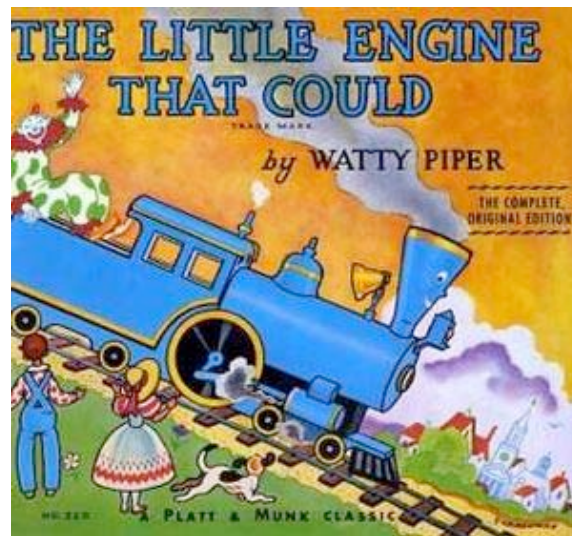
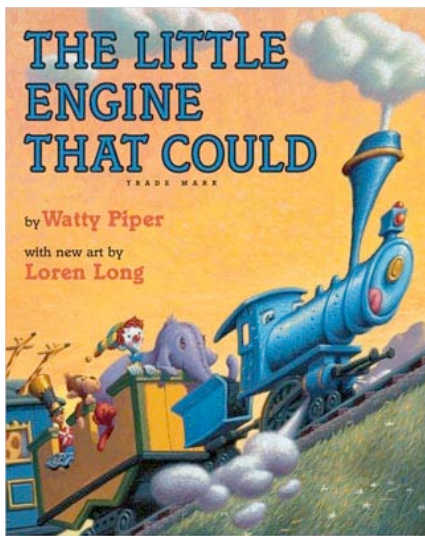
commitment to serving the community, and was instead more focused on personal achievement. The emergence of New Thought, or a belief in the infinite potential of “mind-power”, even justified disparities between the wealthy and the poor by placing all the responsibility of what happened in one’s life on the individual. According to this movement, people possess great powers deep inside themselves that they can draw upon for any situation, especially for health and healing. Also, they can open the doors to those powers by filling their minds completely with the conviction of wellness, and refusing to dwell on anything negative (Harrington, 2008: 116). The main tenets of New Thought were that people, through the constructive use of their minds, could attain freedom, power, health, prosperity, molding their bodies and all the circumstances of their lives (Lewis, 1992: 16-18). Personal magnetism, a quality which supposedly enabled one to influence and dominate other people, became one of the major keys to success. We see how this belief system gave an unprecedented power to the mind within an increasingly mechanised and calculating industrial society. Mind-power replaced a self-discipline work ethic with a vision of natural ease and prosperity, making way for a consumer culture focused on fantasies of boundless abundance. In Huber’s words, “Philosophical idealism” was, paradoxically, going to be used to achieve a “worldly materialism” (Huber, 1971: 333).

Even children in those days were offered versions of the new success-minded New Thought. In 1906, a Sunday school publication called *Wellsprings for Young People* published a little story called *Thinking One Can*, which was about a little locomotive that agreed to pull a heavy load over a great hill after all the big engines refused to try. Finally the little engine succeeded because it believed it could. In 1930 the story was published by House Platt and Munk under the title *The Little Engine That Could*. In this version, the little engine struggles up the hill chanting its mantra: “I think I can, I think I can”, over and over again, until it finally succeeds (Plotnick, 1996).<sup>19</sup>

*In the next page we can see the book covers of three different editions of this popular American story for children (Grosset and Dunlap, 1990; Philomel, 2000; Grosset and Dunlap, 2009):*

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<sup>19</sup> The same spirit can still be felt nowadays, when US President Barack Obama popularised the slogan “Yes we can” during the 2008 US presidential campaign.



New Thought ideas had many supporters amongst all kinds of different public. Automobile magnate Henry Ford, for example, was totally persuaded that the power of New Thought could help to facilitate worldly success, and for this purpose he ordered bulk copies of Ralph Waldo Trine's 1919 *In Tune with the Infinite*, and had them distributed to various high-profile industrialists (Harrington, 2008: 118). Trine was a key proponent of New Thought and his book was a turn-of-the-century bestseller, in which he made it clear that the power of the mind could affect people positively or negatively depending on how it was used:

Don't talk of sickness and disease. By talking of these you do yourself harm and you do harm to those who listen to you... Never affirm or repeat about your



health what you do not wish to be true.... Stoutly affirm your superiority over bodily ills, and do not acknowledge yourself the slave of any inferior power. (Trine, 1919: 82-84)

Likewise, Wallace Wattles expressed the New Thought belief that it is people's birthright to have all the abundance that they wish for:

Whatever may be said in praise of poverty, the fact remains that it is not possible to live a really complete or successful life unless one is Rich. No man can rise to his greatest possible height in talent or soul development unless he has plenty of money; for to unfold the soul and to develop talent he must have many things to use, and he cannot have these things unless he has money to buy them with. (Wattles, [1910] 2007: 4)

And, as mentioned, the power of the mind was considered imperative: "Man can form things in his thought, and, by impressing his thought upon formless substance, can cause the thing he thinks about to be created" (Wattles 2007: 14). Or: "THOUGHT is the only power which can produce tangible riches from the Formless Substance. The stuff from which all things are made is a substance which thinks, and a thought of form in this substance produces the form" (2007: 13, original emphasis).

Such convictions continued to echo throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in New Age self-help literature, as well as in many other bestselling titles such as in Suze Orman's 1999 *The Courage to Be Rich* or in Rhonda Byrne's 2006 *The Secret*. Proponents of New Thought embraced an idealism in which wealth and opportunity in life were equally available to all through a kind of 'cosmic abundance'. Moreover, wealth was seen as a sign of goodness or attunement with the Infinite, while poverty was equated with sin and vice (McGee, 2005: 35). As will be expanded upon in more depth in Part Two of this dissertation, the origin of many New Thought ideas was taken from Eastern philosophies, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which aroused great interest among certain circles throughout the mid- and late-19<sup>th</sup> centuries and then emerged again, during the 1960s and 1970s. Especially after World War II, the United States experienced a new prosperity period. A consumer culture blossomed and Americans became more preoccupied than ever before with material goods. It was an era of unprecedented prosperity. There was a rise of materialism fomenting over and over again the 'easy way' to get rich and to achieve one's objectives, and the person who did

more than anyone else to take the basic New Thought message, dissociating it from any esoteric roots and making it feel “as American as baseball and apple pie” (Harrington, 2008: 119) was preacher Norman Vincent Peale, author of the bestseller *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). As turn-of-the-century fortunes were consolidated, the opportunities for entrepreneurial advancement decreased considerably. This situation, coupled with enormous new corporate structures, demanded additional adjustments to the ideal of success for American men. The positive thinking of Norman Vincent Peale, and also of French psychologist Emile Coué,<sup>20</sup> tried to counter-balance the entrepreneurial aggressiveness of the time, by which people were immersed in an economy of competitiveness and selfishness. Like most New Thought writers, Peale strongly believed that positive thinking could be used for anything, from renewing health to getting a better job, to saving one’s marriage. Following the self-help literature story-telling style, in his book he relates numerous examples of people who used the techniques of positive thinking, and whose lives dramatically and effectively changed thanks to that. The effort now, rather than a physical one of hard work and long days, was going to be mental discipline: “In the busy activities of daily existence thought disciplining is required if you are to re-educate the mind and make of it a power-producing plant. It is possible, even in the midst of your daily work, to drive confident thoughts into consciousness” (Peale, [1952] 2006: 13).

With Norman Vincent Peale we enter what I call the third strand in self-help literature, where prosperity is not the main sign of success anymore, but it is substituted by the idea of self-fulfilment, that is, reaching one’s highest potential in life. Self-fulfilment is now the goal within an ever-growing materialistic society. And trying to stay ‘positive’ in spite of the outer pressures and the generalised stress in all areas of one’s life is, from now on, going to be one of the greatest challenges offered to self-help literature readers.

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<sup>20</sup> Émile Coué (1857-1926) was a “French pharmacist who in 1920 at his clinic at Nancy introduced a method of psychotherapy characterized by frequent repetition of the formula, ‘Every day, and in every way, I am becoming better and better’. This method of autosuggestion came to be called Couéism” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica.com*).

### **1.5.3. Third Strand: The Age of ‘Anxiety’ and the Search for Self-fulfilment**

*It is not what we get. But who we become, what we contribute that gives meaning to our lives*

Tony Robbins

“Change your thoughts and you change your world”, this is the message of Norman Vincent Peale in his *The Power of Positive Thinking* ([1952] 2006: 220), in which he tried to convince his readers that ‘we are what we think’ or ‘whatever the mind expects, it finds’. As we have seen, this idea started appearing in self-help literature with New Thought philosophy, the difference now being a shift in emphasis toward a less money-oriented goal to counter-balance the changes in the economic scenario of the time. The bulk of self-help literature from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through to the times of the Depression was almost totally focused on encouraging people to achieve financial success. Success was equated to having money. Just a look at some of the titles of that period makes the point I have just made obvious: *The Art of Money Getting* (Barnum, 1880), *Everybody’s Guide to Money Matters* (Cotton, 1898), *The Science of Getting Rich* (Wattles, 1910), *Think and Grow Rich* (Hill, 1937). We saw that one of the reasons for this emphasis was that millions of people suffered the hardships of Industrialisation and needed a support system that would give them hope (Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 2). As mentioned earlier, many Americans laboured relentlessly hard in mines, factories, and stockyards but advanced not at all. So, the new formula for success that was offered to them was courage, self-esteem, nerve, confidence, willpower, strength of mind and initiative, rather than the mere focus on hard work and virtue.

But, as we will see, things changed considerably after World War II. The new prosperity period in the United States found people immersed in a race where ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ became often a priority. There was a rise in materialism fomenting the ‘easy way’ to get rich and to achieve one’s objectives. For Matthew Warshauer, in his article “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire: Changing Conceptions of the American

Dream” (2003), the original idea of the American dream began to erode, and was to be replaced with a philosophy to ‘get rich quick’. We witness an increasing fixation on material goods and on the models represented to foment consumerism, together with what in reality are only limited possibilities of a society which is thoroughly developed, and in which there are considerable difficulties in moving ahead. The entertainment industry, the hours spent in front of television for amusement and/or escapist reasons, absorbing the new consumer ideology, as well as the lack of real possibilities for many people of getting ahead or progressing in their lives, have not managed to suffocate the myth of the American Dream, which is still there (Mur, 2009: 131). A whole new generation grew worried about the educational system, as experts asked themselves whether the Baby Boom generation had grown lazy and indifferent from watching too much TV and listening to rock’n’roll music. At a time when more money was spent on science education, parents worried that their children “would become beatniks who never held steady jobs, grew their hair long, and hung out in coffee houses snapping their fingers to free-verse poetry” (Hullar and Nelson, 2001: 164). As with all counterculture movements, the beat generation was a small minority, but it seemed threatening to the placid suburban atmosphere the middle class hoped to cultivate (2001: 164).

Also around this time, ‘make it big’ was often translated as ‘make it big’ *the easy way*, by luck, without effort. As Warshauer notes, “consumed by desires for status, material goods, and acceptance, Americans apparently had lost the sense of individuality, thrift, hard work, and craftsmanship that had characterized the nation” (2003). According to Robert Wuthnow, the American Dream is in danger, not so much because of economic conditions, but because its moral underpinnings have been forgotten. In the past, the vision of the American Dream implied a moral perspective that framed Americans’ thinking about work and money in terms of broader commitments to family, community, and humanitarian values. It was not simply a formula for success. But nowadays, people are working harder than ever, and yet many feel that they are not realizing their higher aspirations as individuals or as a people (Wuthnow, 1996: 15).

In her award winning book *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (1995), Jennifer Hochschild demonstrates how the promise of the American dream faces severe challenges from real and perceived barriers of class and race. There are numerous people who will never be able to achieve their dreams due to their particular position within the social landscape. This author feels the good health of American society depends not only on belief in the American dream but on its realisation, and in particular on repairing its central failure, which is the inability of so many black Americans, especially, to participate in what it promises (1995: 4-5).

The Great Depression ended thanks to the massive mobilisation of the US economy to supply the vast needs of the military during World War II, bringing not only new prosperity to the American people, but also considerable unease: “Graphic depiction of the aftermath of the use of the atomic bomb had convinced many that war must never happen again if the human race was to survive” (Hullar and Nelson, 2001: 152-53). After World War II the United States was immersed in the Cold War, with almost fifty years of constant tension between the US and the Soviet Union.

Thus, for many Americans, the developments which came after World War II produced less happiness than they expected. The 1950s was not just an era of great economic growth, but also, as many historians have observed, the “age of anxiety” (Johnson, 2006: 459-65). Expressions like “rat race” and “treadmill”, which were coined during this decade, “brought attention to the dehumanizing costs of maintaining middle-class lifestyles” (Harrington, 2008: 159). Starting around this time through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we witness a proliferation of books which provide quick, easy solutions to one’s problems. Countless authors offered (and offer) all sorts of seemingly easy answers to a large variety of topics, such as how to make money, raise your children, be a good manager, be a better parent, lose weight, stop worrying, lift your depression or get a date. Many people seemed to be drawn into seeking easy ways to obtain their dreams by buying books which supposedly would offer them a wide range of solutions, but that would not necessarily be easy to put into practice.

Also from the 1950s onward, we see within the self-help literature genre a desire to counter-balance the entrepreneurial aggressiveness, competitiveness and selfishness characteristic of the time. Norman Vincent Peale (1952) believed, like countless other authors up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Covey, 1989; Robbins, 1991; Byrne, 2006) that we are responsible for our thoughts and for our lives. Peale was one of the first authors who told his readers of the urgent need to do something about a growing problem of modern society, namely, stress ([1952] 2006: 176). He was “the primary conduit for the entrance of the mental-healing tradition into the mainstream of American culture in the mid-twentieth century” (Anker, 1999b: 9). His books appeared at a time when more and more people started suffering from high levels of stress, especially occupational stress, not so much because of their demanding workload, but because of the endless demands they placed on themselves. They were competitive, obsessed with deadlines, always in a hurry: “The evidence seemed clear that, unless they changed their ways, such men risked a tragic end: premature death from heart failure” (Harrington, 2008: 162). In fact, by the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, heart disease had come to be called the ‘silent epidemic’ of the times, responsible for about 30 percent of deaths in industrialised countries – the largest single cause of death from any disease (Duin and Sutcliffe, 1992: 216).

By the 1980s, when the “link between the workaholic lifestyle and heart disease seemed about as solidly established as one could hope for; the relaxation industry was in full swing” (Harrington, 2008: 169). We are told that almost any disease could potentially be at risk of being made worse by stress. This explains, at least in part, why there is an increasing attention paid to new narratives of self-help literature which focus on ‘mind-body medicine’. These narratives often claim that happiness and success can only be gained when there is physical, emotional, mental and spiritual balance inside. And they also warn that “Tension blocks the flow of thought power. Your brain cannot operate efficiently under stress” (Peale, 2006: 176).

The simple techniques that Peale teaches are no more than applied Christianity to him (Peale, 2006: 5). For instance, he recommends that to survive in a world full of pressure and negativity the first thing to do is to start speaking positively. Rather than

speaking in negatives or in an indifferent, lukewarm way, he encourages the reader to begin, instead, to speak in positives, since how we speak has a profound effect on how we think:

Words have profound suggestive power, and there is healing in the very saying of them. Utter a series of panicky words and your mind will immediately go into a mild state of nervousness. You will perhaps feel a sinking in the pit of your stomach that will affect your entire physical mechanism. If, on the contrary, you speak peaceful, quieting words, your mind will react in a peaceful manner. (2006: 28)

He encourages his readers to affirm the Good, to look for every opportunity during the day to speak the good word; to say something hopeful and optimistic to everyone, to insert a positive into all conversations. That is, to speak always in positive terms, never talk negatively or in a half-hearted way, for in so doing one tends to develop negativism in one's thoughts. By the process of positive speaking one will, in time, become a positive thinker. He asserts that:

Any fact facing us, however difficult, even seemingly hopeless, is not as important as *our attitude toward that fact*. How you think about a fact may defeat you before you ever do anything about it. You may permit a fact to overwhelm you mentally before you start to deal with it actually. On the other hand, a confident and optimistic thought pattern can modify or overcome the fact altogether. (2006: 18, emphasis added)

Also, by thinking positively, he reminds us that we “Set in motion positive forces which bring positive results to pass. Positive thoughts create around yourself an atmosphere propitious to the development of positive outcomes. On the contrary, think negative thoughts and you create around yourself an atmosphere propitious to the development of negative results” (2006: 212).

Thus, from a historical and cultural perspective, it is interesting to note that self-help literature has contributed to raising awareness of the fact that stress was becoming “man's silent enemy” (Harrington, 2008: 140). It is becoming increasingly obvious that modern life makes demands on us that are fundamentally unnatural. When confronted

with a threat, our ancestors could rise to meet it; and when it was mastered they could rest again. But for people nowadays, things can be quite different:

The queue at the supermarket checkout and the traffic jam can become the fangs of the sabre-toothed tiger and when confronted by these threats we respond just as if the tiger were there – by activating our caveman stress response. Having activated our body for an immediate physical response, there is often no need or opportunity for physical action! (...) We cannot fight the queue; we cannot run away from it either. So we become impatient and irritated; we become angry; we fume! (Looker and Gregson, 1989: 26)

It was precisely in the 1950s, coinciding with the appearance of Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, that the term 'stress' was coined by Czech physician and biochemist Hans Selye. The term was taken from metallurgy, where 'stress' referred to the forces that act to deform or weaken metals (Selye, 1979: 61). Working as an assistant to endocrinologist James B. Collip, in the Department of Endocrinology at the University of Montreal, Selye was "assigned the tedious task of injecting" extracts of ovaries of freshly slaughtered cows "into female rats and looking for any kind of change produced that could not be ascribed to one of the known hormones of the ovary" (1979: 59). When the autopsies were performed they realised that there had been no change in the rats' sex organs but that all of them suffered from three symptoms: enlarged adrenal glands, shrunken immune tissues and peptic ulcers in the stomach and upper intestine. He began to ask himself whether any other kinds of trauma would result in the same outcome and decided to experiment, making life very unpleasant for many rats. "It gradually turned out", he said later, "that no matter what type of damage I inflicted on the experimental animal, if it survived long enough and the stressor was sufficiently strong, the typical combination would be produced: adrenal hyperactivity, lymphatic atrophy and peptic ulcers" (1979: 60). From his observations, Selye concluded that the response of the rats unfolded in three stages: in the first, the 'Alarm Stage' the animal perceived itself as under threat and prepared for action, either fight or flight. Thus, heart-beat and respiration accelerated, blood sugar rose, digestion stopped, perspiration increased and pupils dilated. In the second stage, which he called the 'Resistance Stage' the body increased resistance to the event that had originally caused its stress and tried to repair any damage caused by the previous stage. In the third one, which he called the



'Exhaustion Stage', animals began to show signs of exhaustion and, in the most severe cases, the outcome of this stage was death. With this experiment Selye managed to prove that an organism usually does not break down by a single, sharp experience of stress, but rather by a number of cumulative experiences over time.

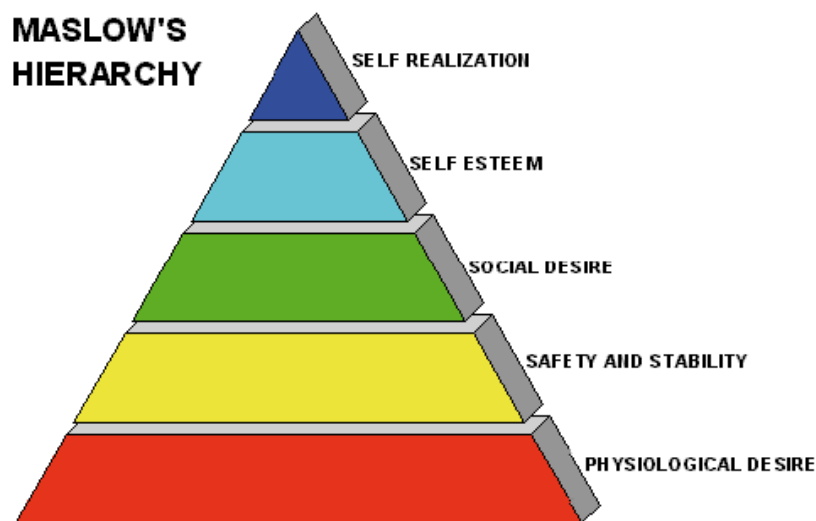
What I find revealing about this cruel experiment are the implications for humans in modern times. Selye saw that in a fast changing world filled with stress, there were only two possibilities: we either learn to adapt or we risk illness or worse. "The secret of health and happiness", he asserted "lies in successful adjustment to the ever-changing conditions on this globe; the penalties for failure in this great process of adaptation are disease and unhappiness" (1979: xi). In 1956, one commentator deemed that Selye's ideas had "permeated medical thinking and influenced medical research in every land, probably more rapidly and more intensely than any other theory of disease ever proposed" (Mason, 1975: 10). As years went by, already in the 1970s, discussions related to stress had become very common in advice columns, popular magazines, social analyses and self-help literature. In 1981 the Institute of Medicine estimated that around \$35 million had been spent on stress research in 1979 alone, pointing at the 'thriving industry' of remedies and literature designed to help alleviate the problem (Institute of Medicine, 1981: 2-3).

After World War II, the United States had consolidated its position as the world's wealthiest nation, with a growing number of middle-class Americans holding 'white-collar' jobs, working as middle-class managers, office workers, salespeople, service employees, and teachers (Harrington, 2008: 158). Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier on, the 1950s with all its unprecedented prosperity was considered by many historians the 'age of anxiety', not only because of people's competitiveness and endless demands they placed on themselves, but also for political reasons. Some of the reasons for this anxiety were the fears of a communist invasion, the widespread belief that democracy and freedom were being put at risk by spies within American society, and the fears of the atomic bomb threat (2008:158).

Self-help books by psychologists, neurologists or psychiatrists like Abraham Maslow (1954), Viktor Frankl (1959), Muriel James (1971), John Whitmore (1992) or Daniel Goleman (1995), written in a simple style in order to reach the mainstream, contributed to counterbalance the effects of a deep-seated anxiety, which was often a reason for the rise in addictions as a way of coping with the mental and emotional turmoil people experienced in their daily lives. This rise in addictions certainly plays a costly and devastating role in the US labour force. For example, the National Institute on Drug Abuse estimated that 25 percent of the American labour force was affected in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century by chronic alcoholism, drug addiction, or substance abuse – either their own (10 percent) or that of a member of their immediate family (15 percent) who, in many cases, may be acting out problems endemic to the whole family (Wrich, 1988: 120-128). Yet these are by no means the only addictions which are increasing at a fast rate in the United States. Schor urges us not to overlook the shopping craze, which she calls the “insidious cycle of work-and-spend”. In her words, “Once a purely utilitarian chore, shopping has been elevated to the status of a national passion” (Schor, 1992: 107). According to Szalai in *The Use of Time: Daily Activities of Urban and Suburban Populations in Twelve Countries*, Americans spent three to four times as many hours a year shopping as their counterparts in Western European countries (Szalai, 1972: 114 table 1). For some people shopping is an addiction, like alcohol or drugs. Schor informs us that “‘enabled’ by plastic, compulsive shoppers spend money they don’t have on items they absolutely ‘can’t’ do without and never use. The lucky ones find their way to self-help groups like Debtors Anonymous and Shopaholics Limited” (1992: 108). She adds that the ‘shop ‘till you drop’ syndrome started in the 1950s and seemed particularly active during the 1980s, a decade popularly represented as one long buying spree (1992: 108).

I will expand upon this topic later on in this chapter, but we should certainly not forget that during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Freudian psychoanalysis and behaviourism tried to give scientific explanations for human behaviour in a society where science and technology were foregrounded, while overtly religious discourse receded into the background (Walsh, 1993: 48). It was not until the 1950s that psychologist Abraham Maslow, still working within the boundaries of the scientific

method, sought to form a holistic view of people as expressed in his book *Motivation and Personality* (1954). In Butler-Bowdon's words, "rather than being simply the sum of our needs and impulses, Maslow saw us as whole people with limitless room for growth" (2003: 205). It was this clear belief in human possibility that has made his work so influential. Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' is a famous concept in Psychology. He organised human needs into three broad levels: the physiological – air, food and water – the psychological – safety, love, self-esteem – and, finally, what he called 'self-actualization'. For him, human beings seek self-actualization, or self-realization, only when their basic bodily requirements are met, and when they reach a state where they feel they are loved, respected, and enjoy a sense of belonging, including philosophical or religious identity. According to him, 'self-actualizing' people have attained "the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities and the like" (1954: 150).



Maslow used the term 'self-actualizing' to describe individuals who were self-motivating, self-directed, and devoted "fully, vividly and selflessly" to some cause or vocation (1971: 45). According to him, these are the people who are really successful in life, while "the average man is a full human being with dampened and inhibited powers and capacities" (1974: 91).

*Abraham Maslow (1908-1970)*



The founder of Humanistic Psychology, and its extension, Transpersonal Psychology, Maslow is considered a key figure in the self-help literature genre. Certainly, his hierarchy of needs has been seminal to understanding motivation in the workplace. The self-actualization of the employee has also become a serious concern in business (Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 207). Maslow “foresaw the trend toward personal growth and excitement replacing money as the highest motivator in a person’s working life” (2003: 208). Moreover, he introduced his work on human motivation to industrial managers and laid the groundwork for subsequent management gurus who would focus on worker satisfaction and participation (McGee, 2005: 42). The ideal of a self-actualizing worker provided a discourse by which individuals were urged to search their souls to find their proper place in the social division of labour. Thus, “work on the self – *the quest for a path, the invention of a life, or the search for authenticity* – is offered as an antidote to the anxiety-provoking uncertainties of a new economic and social order” (2005: 43, emphasis added). Maslow’s philosophy set the basis for numerous other works within the self-help literature landscape, in which authors often used scientific and quasi-scientific discourse to inform their readership about the latest discoveries of the mind and human potential. For example, Steve Andreas and Charles Faulkner’s *NLP: The Technology of Achievement* (1994) based on the work of Richard Bandler, and Dr. John Grinder, on Neuro-Linguistic Programming, opened up a new understanding of the workings of the mind. In 1995 Dr. Daniel Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ* catapulted the idea of emotional intelligence to the forefront of mainstream awareness, showing through impeccable academic research that IQ is not a particularly good predictor of achievement, owing to the fact that it is only one of many ‘intelligences’, and that emotional skills are statistically more important in life success.

Contemporary to Maslow, another very influential work was *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1959), by Austrian Holocaust survivor and psychologist Viktor Frankl, the

developer of Existential Psychology and Logotherapy. The most famous of Frankl's 30 books, *Man's Search for Meaning* was named one of the ten books that "made the most difference in people's lives" in a study conducted by The United States' Library of Congress.<sup>21</sup> In it, Frankl stressed man's freedom to transcend suffering and find a meaning to his life regardless of his circumstances. Frankl's wife, father, mother and brother died in a concentration camp of Nazi Germany. He endured extreme hunger, cold and brutality, both in Auschwitz and in Dachau, and was under constant threat of being sent to the gas chambers or the crematoria (Frankl, 2006: 16). In his book he expresses that even in the most terrible circumstances people still have the freedom to choose how they see their circumstances and create meaning out of them (Wong and Fry, 1998: xiv). This takes us back to Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, where he affirmed that "Any fact facing us, however difficult, even seemingly hopeless, is not as important as *our attitude toward that fact*" (2006: 18, emphasis added).

Up to this point, we have seen that after World War II, on the one hand, society experienced a 'consumerist craze' thanks to the economic boom of the time, and, on the other hand, that the need to alleviate feelings of stress, anxiety and fear rose to unprecedented levels with coronary disease surging as never before. The changes in the literatures of self-help or self-improvement over the course of the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, considered later in this dissertation, reflect the complexity of a genre in constant evolution and expansion, like the society it addresses. At least since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to McGee,

psychoanalysis had infused the ideal of individual self-making with a new psychological component. Emotional well-being, the subjective experience of happiness, and the pursuit of pleasure, rather than the accumulation of wealth, community involvement, and moral rectitude, began to be equated with success. (2005: 19)

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<sup>21</sup> The list of the most influential books appeared in *The New York Times*, November 20, 1991 on <<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/20/books/book-notes-059091.html>> (accessed September, 2008). On this list there are at least three more books that are commonly considered self-help books, namely: *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) by Dale Carnegie; *The Road Less Traveled* (1978), by M. Scott Peck, and *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981), by Harold S. Kushner.

Toward the 1990s, working harder just to climb the corporate ladder and acquire more economic resources no longer seemed as appealing as it once did. Instead, concerns were being expressed with increasing frequency about the ill effects of working too hard, of subjecting oneself to relentless job pressures, and of becoming single-mindedly focused on material pursuits, neglecting other human values. The benefits of family life, community service, spiritual pursuits, and self-realization, in opposition to the search for material success alone were being reconsidered (Wuthnow, 1996: 18). There is now, according to some authors, considerable evidence that work and the pursuit of material possessions is taking its toll on the American population, as “More time spent at the grindstone, even when work itself is meaningful and enjoyable, leaves us exhausted, feeling pressured, and wanting more from life than material success alone” (Wuthnow, 1996: 36).

Thus, within the popular genre of self-help literature, we see that people were encouraged to find a deeper meaning to their lives and to look for self-fulfilment to counterbalance the superficial life-style many were devoted to. Already in the 1960s this search for a deeper meaning was reflected in self-help literature as a turn towards Eastern philosophies and Oriental practices. I call this the beginning of the fourth strand of self-help literature, which overlaps and coexists with the third strand all the way through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A deeper insight into the fourth strand will be dealt with later on in this section and expanded upon further in Part Three of this dissertation.

As years went by, especially around the 1970s, the concept of self-improvement underwent an important shift. Amongst the most dramatic features in the social and cultural landscape of this decade was a renewed sense of scarcity (Lasch, 1984: 23). Here we witness another ‘age of anxiety’, so to speak. The changing economic circumstances with the 1973 oil crisis, a decline in wages, and an increased uncertainty about employment stability and opportunities, created a context in which one of the only reliable insurances against economic insecurity seemed to be self-improvement (McGee, 2005: 18). According to some social observers, the profound changes regarding permanent jobs and lifelong marriages, as well as the dismantling of social welfare programs, all contributed to an increasing sense of insecurity, where it was no

longer sufficient to be employed or married, but rather it was imperative that one remained constantly ‘marriageable’ and ‘employable’ (Wallulis, 1998; McGee, 2005). The need for constant improvement was increasingly required for participation in the labour market. Managing, promoting, and advancing were critical to remaining simply employable. Thus, we witness how the constant striving for improvement, which used to be mainly a personal quest, becomes something expected from society.<sup>22</sup>

Anthony Robbins, one of the most prolific and popular self-help ‘gurus’ of the moment talks about ‘constant and never-ending improvement (CANI)’:

When you set a goal, you’ve committed to CANI! You’ve acknowledged the need that all human beings have for constant, never-ending improvement. There is a power in the pressure of dissatisfaction, in the tension of temporary discomfort. This is the kind of pain you want in your life, the kind of pain that you immediately transform into positive new actions. (Robbins, 1991: 96)

With the emergence of an emphasis on self-fulfilment, one can find that there is no end-point for self-making, individuals can continuously pursue criteria for success that are constantly changing and are, ultimately, subjective. Moreover, success is understood as the result of one’s own efforts, meaning that the responsibility for any failure must necessarily be individual shortcomings or weaknesses (Merton, 1968: 122). This puts even more stress on the self, which could lead people into a “new sort of enslavement: into a cycle where the self is not improved but endlessly *belaboured*”<sup>23</sup> (McGee, 2005: 12, emphasis added).

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<sup>22</sup> One superficial manifestation of this, oriented to improving one’s image, is the proliferation of so many television programs in the United States (also starting in Europe) which offer ‘magic transformations’ through plastic surgery, exercise, improved grooming and diet such as *Extreme Makeover* (aired from 2002-2007), *The Swan* (2004-2005), *Ten Years Younger* (2004-2008), as well as *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* (2003-2007) and *Trading Spaces* (2000-2008), which suggest home renovation as a route to self-improvement. *What Not to Wear* (2003-2010) is another example that focuses on wardrobe advice as the fastest way to a “new you” (McGee, 2005: 17). And, of course, as mentioned earlier, we witness an obsessive need to shop and acquire as many things as possible in order to quench an insatiable thirst for more and better products and services. Unfortunately, rather than empowering people, in many cases, these attitudes, programs, and literatures of self-improvement, “serve as constant reminders of our ostensible insufficiency even as they offer putative solutions” (McGee, 2005: 18).

<sup>23</sup> I will develop this theme further in Part Three, section 3.2.2.

According to a survey carried out by Robert Wuthnow, precisely people who were most concerned about their values, like spending time with their families or taking care of themselves, but who found themselves dragged into a circle of constant work and self-improvement, experienced more stress in their lives than their colleagues who did not place as much importance on these things as they did:

One thing that stress relates to more powerfully than anything else... is thinking about basic values in life and trying to juggle commitments to a wide range of values. In the labor force as a whole, for example, 29 percent said they think a lot about their values and priorities in life; but this proportion rose to 40 percent among persons experiencing stress almost every day in their jobs and was 56 among those who felt they were working themselves to death. Moreover, the more frequently respondents experienced stress, the more likely they were to say they attached value to other commitments such as family, morality, taking care of themselves, and relating to God. (Wuthnow, 1996: 40)

Not all readers of self-help literature books would agree with this view, though. Self-improvement literatures can be extremely inspiring for many people (Anker, 1999; Butler-Bowdon, 2003; Covey and Merrill, 2003). Throughout the period of the 1980s, for example, in an attempt to help people face the painful realities of their daily lives in a contracting economy, Robert Schuller updated Peale's 'positive thinking', re-coining it *possibility thinking* in his four books *Tough Times Never Last, But Tough People Do* (1983), *Tough-Minded Faith for Tender-Hearted People* (1985a), *The Be (Happy) Attitudes* (1985b) and *Be Happy You Are Loved* (1986), 'helping' and 'inspiring' millions of people by particularly embracing the notion of self-esteem as a means to psychic and spiritual wholeness (Anker, 1999b: 147).

We see that readers are offered a myriad of tools to control their time (Schwartz, 1959; Covey, 1989; Chu, 1994; Smith, 2003) and their thoughts (Peale, 1957; Hay, 1976; Cousins, 1979; Chia, 1985; Schuller, 1985; Robbins, 1991; Demartini, 2002). Control of one's life in order to gain peace of mind seems to be one of the major concerns at this time. And the obvious surge in revenues of this segment of the publishing market tells us that there is a growing receptive readership which finds solace in this kind of literature. It should be mentioned that the trade publication *American Bookseller* reported that self-help book sales rose by 96 percent between



1991 and 1996 (Allison, 1998: 49). Self-help sales were said to total over \$581 million by 1998, making profits in the publishing industry in an era of bottom-line publishing faced with declining sales (McGee, 2005: 11). What is obvious is that the self-help genre has been growing steadily in scope and depth since its beginnings and has now become a mass phenomenon. As Heidi Marie Rimke tells us in her article “Governing Citizens through Self-Help Literature”:

Consumer culture has witnessed a growth of psychocentric self-help media towards the end of the twentieth century. Internet communities, magazines spouting advice and television chat-shows are just some of the cultural vehicles through which counselling on self-improvement is offered. (2000: 61)

As we will see, this ever-growing public who are looking for alternative belief systems in a materialistic-oriented society, devoid of the religious support systems of the past, start focusing their attention on psychology, Eastern philosophy, science and technology to find answers in the midst of a world where traditional and historical values and faith in community structure and religious guidelines are in question.

And this takes us to what I call the fourth strand of self-help literature, which is the path of some of the New Age or metaphysical self-improvement literatures (by no means all), with strong Eastern influence, and which claim that it is possible to attain “self-acceptance through a mystical oneness” (McGee, 2005:142). Often using philosophical, psychological and spiritually-oriented ‘oriental’ discourse, they also use the rhetoric of science and technology to legitimise their approach, in which happiness and success are understood as inner mastery, self-knowledge and inner peace.

#### **1.5.4. Fourth Strand: Eastern Influence in the Self-help Literature Landscape**

*Internal and external are ultimately one. When you no longer perceive the world as hostile, there is no more fear, and when there is no more fear, you think, speak and act differently. Love and compassion arise, and they affect the world*

Eckhart Tolle

If we are to understand the increasing rise of self-help literature books from a Cultural Studies perspective, it is important not to forget that from the 1950s on, but especially during the 1960s, a growing counterculture emerged to question the basic materialism of Western society (Kelsey, 1993: 38). Around that time, San Francisco had become the nation's countercultural capital, the beacon of resistance to conformity. In a way, one could say that it was a symbol for race-mixing, beatniks, hippies, free love, drugs and homosexuals. Anarcho-pacifism was the guiding idea for a rebellious generation equally suspicious of militarism, Stalinism and anti-communism (Walker, 1995: 70). Beat painters, poets, jazzmen and bohemians were the first ones who used personal expression in the arts and in their lifestyle as a social expression to shake up everyday life and morality.

Many Americans were convinced that the established social order was crumbling or already shattered. According to historian John McWilliams, "The appearance of hippies in the mid-1960s and the emergence of a counterculture reinforced the perception that the cultural revolution was more threatening to the post-World War II consensus than political unrest and violence in the streets" (2000: 65). Hippies were a direct outgrowth of the disillusioned beats in the 1950s: "The Hippies' Summer of Love grew directly out of the Beat scene, with its experiments with drugs, sexual freedom, integration, and spiritualism" (Walker, 1995: 70). Unlike their forebears, they were apolitical critics of the Eisenhower era, and heirs of a long tradition of rebellion (1995: 67). They believed society had placed too much emphasis on conformity, and had become too materialistic, competitive, and anxiety-ridden.

Shunning Christianity, private property and nationalism, hippies preached love and rejected a system they saw as irreparably flawed (McWilliams, 2000: 65). The counterculture was often scorned for its naive idealism, antiestablishment values, and sometimes frivolous behaviour; but as historian Allen J. Matusow affirmed “The hippie movement was profoundly significant, portending as it did the erosion of the liberal values that had sustained bourgeois society” (1984: 307).

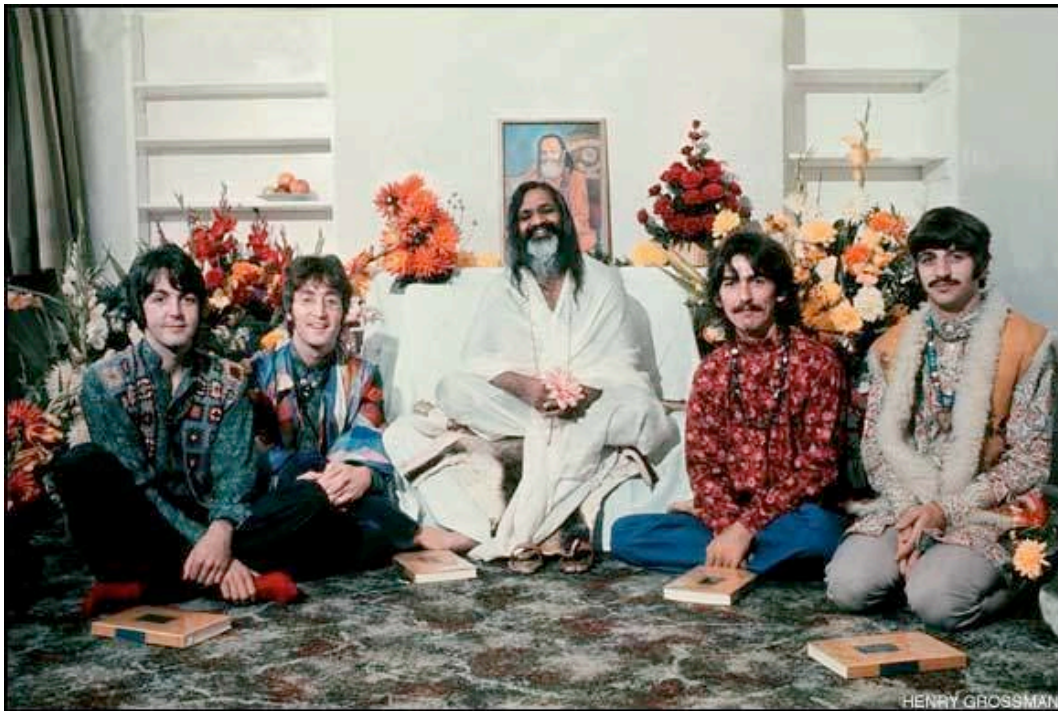
At the same time, there was a general disillusionment with the political situation, with a Cold War which continued through the 1960s and 1970s, and the Vietnam War, whose growing unpopularity fed already existing social movements, including those among women, minorities and young people (Powaski, 1998: 148). Never before had so many Americans representing different organisations publicly questioned and demonstrated against their government in time of war. Unfortunately, the strong “opposition to America’s longest war consumed a generation and left a legacy of ambivalence, bitterness, and animosity” (McWilliams, 2000: 47).

It was also around that time when increasing contacts with Eastern religions opened up different perspectives on life and some kind of hope to achieve inner peace, as well as access to a whole range of new practices and experiences other than those provided by the five senses. The changes that started to emerge coincided with different events. On the one hand, there was a rise in Eastern practices such as yoga, martial arts and meditation. In 1961 Richard Hittleman brought hatha yoga into American homes via a television program that continued for over 20 years.<sup>24</sup> Transcendental Meditation (TM) was introduced into America by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who became popular in the West through his association with the Beatles and with other celebrities such as the Beach Boys, actress Mia Farrow, singer-songwriter Donovan and directors David Lynch and Clint Eastwood, amongst others. All of them contributed to popularising

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Hittleman was an American yoga teacher and author (1927-1991) who specialised in introducing yoga in an easy-to-follow way to those who were new to the subject. He taught yoga through the first-ever yoga television series: *Yoga for Health*, between the 1960s and 1970s. His DVDs are sold on this website: <<http://www.richardhittlemanyogatv.com>> (accessed March, 2008).

Eastern philosophy and practices, learning and practicing the techniques, and often travelling to India to visit guru Maharishi Mahesh (Natarajan and Sersland, 1991: 19).



*The Beatles with guru Maharishi Mahesh in India*

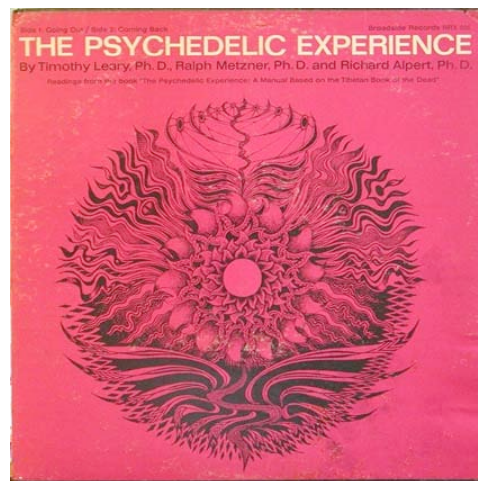
Thanks to extensive research into the benefits of meditation and yoga, TM found its way into the corporate world and the medical establishment. But, inevitably, also many ‘fast food’ and ‘watered down’ versions of the technique were created and promoted in the US by people in the mental stress management business who wanted to get on the TM band wagon. Fortunately, “the medical community investigated the effects of TM quite thoroughly and concluded that it was an excellent relaxation technique which when practiced regularly alleviated mental stress significantly” (1991: 19). Surveys show that over 10 percent of the American public have had contact with TM in their lives (Kelsey, 1993: 41).

In 1962, psychologist Timothy Leary – icon of the 1960s counterculture and advocate of psychedelic drug experimentation – started the International Foundation for

Internal Freedom (IFIF) to promote LSD research, announcing, four years later, the formation of a psychedelic religion, the League for Spiritual Discovery. He was followed by Owsley Stanley, who started an LSD factory in 1965, making large quantities of the drug available to the world for the first time (Lauer, 1976: 49). In Leary's words:

Put it into historical context. The use of sacramental vegetables has gone back, back, back in history to shamans and the Hindu religion and Buddhist religion. They were using soma. It's an ancient human ritual that has usually been practiced in the context of religion or of worship or of tribal coming together. I didn't pioneer anything. The use of psychedelics for spiritual purposes was started in the 50s by Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs.<sup>25</sup>

Here we can see the cover of *The Psychedelic Experience*, a manual based on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, by Timothy Leary, Ph.D., Ralph Metzner, Ph.D., and Richard Alpert, Ph.D. in 1964:

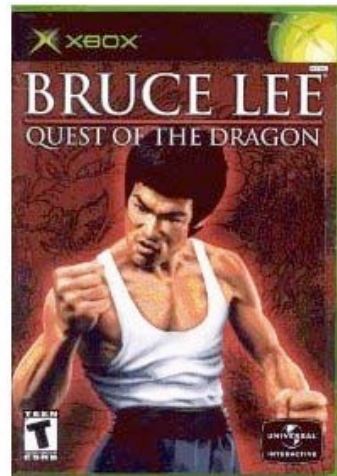
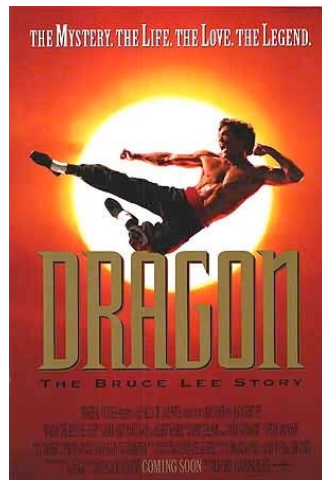


It was also during this decade when martial arts were made popular throughout the US and Europe, especially thanks to the film industry, with actor Bruce Lee (1940-1973) as the main popular culture icon of his time for a large generation of people

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<sup>25</sup> Dr. Timothy Leary (1920-1996) was an influential American psychologist and writer especially known for advocating research into psychedelic drugs. The above quotation was taken from the following website devoted to him <<http://deoxy.org/leary.htm>> (accessed May, 2008).

interested in fitness and self-mastery (Smith, 2009), (more on Bruce Lee in section 2.2.3).



*Movie and video game covers of 'Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story' (1993) and 'Bruce Lee Quest of the Dragon' (2002)*

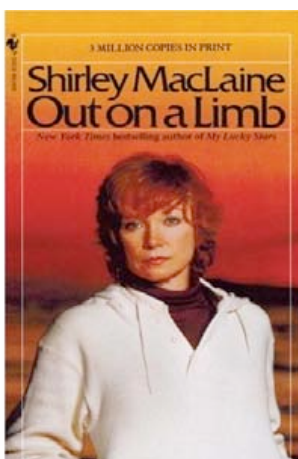
Simultaneously, many Eastern concepts and expressions started becoming familiar in everyday life. In *Oriental Enlightenment*, John J. Clarke affirms that “throughout the modern period from the time of the Renaissance onward, the East has exercised a strong fascination over Western minds, and has entered into Western cultural and intellectual life in ways which are of considerably more than passing significance within the history of Western ideas” (1997: 5 and 7). There are countless Eastern concepts and practices which have now been ‘Westernised’, appearing in such different areas as business (the need to meditate and do yoga to unwind and get rid of stress and also to be more productive); relationships (the yin and yang philosophy of the opposites); psychology and sports (the use of visualisations and introspection to create and re-create a scene, and the popularisation of martial arts); and health (acupuncture, and Chinese medicine and ayurvedic medicine).

Around this time, as a clear sign of a shift in interests that is occurring in the world on a large scale, the self-improvement discourse also takes on a greater influence from Eastern philosophies with associated applications: models of mind/body, medicine and therapies, as well as self-help techniques based upon them. At a time when almost

any disease is now potentially at risk of being made worse by stress, this explains, at least in part, why there is an increasing attention paid to new narratives of self-help literature which focus on *mind-body medicine*. These narratives claim that happiness and success can only be gained when there is physical, emotional, mental and spiritual balance inside. According to them, there are different ways to heal, to recover balance, to boost immunity, and to increase well-being. Cancer surgeon Bernie Siegel, author of the bestselling *Love, Medicine, and Miracles* expressed it this way:

I feel that all disease is ultimately related to a lack of love, or to love that is conditional, for the exhaustion and depression of the immune system thus created leads to physical vulnerability. I also feel that all healing is related to the ability to give and accept unconditional love... the truth is: love heals. (1986: 180)

Seeking the direct experience of the spiritual domain and not finding it in the traditional churches, many people are turning to New Age and Eastern religious groups for spiritual guidance. The New Age movement, diverse as it is, is largely “a reaction to the dominant, rational materialistic worldview of Western culture. Conventional Christianity that relies on authority and reason, rather than on human experience, has become unpalatable to many modern Western religious seekers” (Kelsey, 1993: 35).



Even celebrities without any academic qualifications have started second careers based on self-help, mainly offering their life experience and personal insights. In 1986, actress Shirley MacLaine, whose interest in New Age spirituality and themes such as ‘reincarnation’ and ‘karma’ is well-known, published her autobiographical book *Out on a Limb*, which later was turned into a television miniseries based upon it. In this book, which is considered a self-improvement book, she casts herself in the role of a seeker of personal and metaphysical truth, sharing her inward journey and her discovery of a new sense of purpose, joy, energy, and love in her life. It might be surprising that a former actress is now a leading figure in the self-help literature landscape, but hers is not an isolated case. In fact,

numerous writers, often with little or no academic background at all, whose books appear in the self-help section of US and European book-stores, had reached levels of fame or success well before they started writing.<sup>26</sup>

Inspired by many ancient Eastern texts from the *Vedas* to the *Tao Te Ching*, *The Art of War* (Sun Tzu 4<sup>th</sup> century BC) and the Buddha's teachings in the *Dhammapada*, an ever-growing number of self-help writers consider that success and happiness can only be attained through inner mastery, that is, 'private victory' before 'public victory' (Covey, 1989). This idea is also developed by Chopra (1994), Chin-Ning Chu (1994), Mantak Chia (1985), Tolle (2005) or Dyer (2007). These authors, among others, describe happiness as something that has to be found inside and that is not dependent upon any external circumstance. According to them, inner peace and happiness are achieved through stillness, meditation, visualisation and observation of one's thoughts, without any struggle, without any effort. In this category of self-help books, writers affirm, just as 19<sup>th</sup> century New Thought writers did, that only by changing their thoughts will people be able to change their lives, and that those thoughts which receive attention, good or bad, go into the unconscious mind to become the fuel for later events in the real world. In Rhonda Byrne's best-selling book *The Secret* (2006), which first appeared in movie format, a number of scientists and philosophers express this very idea in a simple way. Dr. John Hagelin affirms that "Quantum mechanics confirms it. Quantum cosmology confirms it. That the Universe essentially emerges from thought and all of this matter around us is just precipitated thought" (Byrne 2006: 160). Byrne herself says that "you are the most powerful magnet in the Universe! You contain a magnetic power within you that is more powerful than anything in this world and this unfathomable magnetic power is emitted through your thoughts" (Byrne 2006: 7). And Dr. Michael Bernard Beckwith insists, "You attract to you the predominant thoughts that you're holding in your awareness, whether those thoughts are conscious or unconscious" (Byrne 2006: 19).

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<sup>26</sup> Examples of writers who were famous before they wrote books which are now considered self-help books are car magnate Henry Ford (*My Life and My Work*, 1922), oil magnate John D. Rockefeller (*Random Reminiscences of Men and Events*, 1909) and steel magnate Andrew Carnegie (*Autobiography*, 1920).



At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century an ever-growing number of self-help writers offer well-researched ‘road maps’ to achieve ‘lasting happiness’, and readers of the most varied backgrounds who follow their advice report considerable improvement in their lives. We can find an example in Rick Foster and Greg Hicks’ *How We Choose to Be Happy*, in which the authors affirm that

It was inconceivable to us when this book first came out in 1999, that our happiness model of nine choices would be used all over the world by universities, corporations, hospitals, and churches. And now that same model has brought us to the halls of major research institutions, including the Mayo Clinic, NYU Hospital, and Wake Forest University Medical Centre, where it’s seen as a groundbreaking analysis of how people create happiness and a key to the mind/body connection. In non-business settings, it has been embraced as a strategy for relationships – among parents and children, teachers, social workers and therapists. And to medical people it is fast becoming accepted as a paradigm of behaviours that lead to better health and healing. (1999: 1-2)

In their book, Foster and Hicks claim that happiness is a conscious choice that comes from within (1999: 3); it does not require any effort, but rather an attitude towards life, a special awareness that depends on oneself. Aristotle, in the fourth century BC was very aware of this truth when he affirmed that “Nothing can bring you happiness but yourself” (Kenny, 1992: 16). Also in the Bible, Jesus proclaimed that “The Kingdom of Heaven is within you” (Luke 17: 21), and many others have known and applied this principle in their daily lives. It is only very recently, however, that researchers, very often inspired by Eastern practices, have turned their attention, through empirical field work, to the construction of a detailed profile of the attitudinal factors involved in happiness, using ‘scientific’ and ‘quasi-scientific’ terminology and expressions, (such as the body as a computer, brain as a broadcasting-receiving station for thought, mathematical rules, concepts of energy, universal law, etc.) to support the validity of the theories offered, and to give them special weight within an otherwise more ‘spiritual’ context. Thus, they are able to provide a road map to be used by individuals and organisations on an empirical basis which is more acceptable within the paradigms of a scientific-oriented Western society. In *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* (1998) the Dalai Lama claims that the attainment of happiness is ‘scientific’ and requires discipline of mind to control one’s consciousness, which means

that one very important way to happiness is through mental practice. Rather than focusing on the achievement of a dream in the future, these authors remind the readers of the importance of living in the present moment. In Tolle's words, "When you make the present moment, instead of past and future, the focal point of your life, your ability to enjoy what you do – and with it the quality of your life – increases dramatically. Joy is the dynamic aspect of Being" (2003: 297).

We witness a relatively new conception of happiness in America (and the Western world in general). It is neither an external God, nor a sense of achievement, nor money and possessions of any kind that will bring happiness to the Self, but rather, self-knowledge and the inner mastery of thoughts, emotions and passions as well as the opening of one's heart and the awareness of the 'preciousness' of every moment in life, which are the keys to personal success and lasting happiness. This happiness begins when we "cease to understand or see ourselves as isolated and narrow competing egos and begin to identify with other humans, from our family and friends to, eventually, our species" (Devall and Sessions 1993: 242).

Two of the most outstanding exponents of this type of discourse are Deepak Chopra, an Indian American endocrinologist, public speaker, and writer on spirituality, Ayurveda and mind-body medicine, author of thirty-six books, amongst them many bestsellers, such as *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind: The Quantum Alternative to Growing Old* (1993) or *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success: A Practical Guide to the Fulfilment of Your Dreams* (1994); and Eckhart Tolle, a German-born writer, living in Vancouver, Canada, who is a public speaker, and spiritual teacher, author of a long list of audio conferences, DVDs and five bestselling books, amongst them *The Power of Now* (1999) and *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* (2003). An article in the *New York Times* referred to him as "the most popular spiritual author in the nation" (McKinley, 2008).

It should also be mentioned nonetheless, that, whereas on the one hand we see a proliferation of these kinds of self-help books with an increasing interest in a more spiritual calling, in which meditation, visualisation and observation are key factors to

gain inner knowledge and peace, there is simultaneously a growing tendency to use Eastern ideas and practices just for utilitarian purposes. Let us mention, for example, that, yoga, a spiritual practice in its origin, started being used in the US as an exercise program to keep fit, toned and healthy, as a way to relieve stress and improve one's posture, or to learn how to breathe more fully. Likewise, meditation<sup>27</sup> and martial arts are also mainly used to fit Western needs, and it is nowadays very common to see these practices in movies, television shows, fashion pages, self-help magazines or even music videos. According to Paula Smith (2000), "Perhaps this is a critical crossroads, one in which there is the real risk of a profound spiritual practice passed down through the ages becoming watered down as an exercise program. Being the 'popular' thing to do may strip away the spiritual depth and sacred meaning". In Covey's view (1989: 26), the same is true for many self-help literature texts that would appear to deal with profound topics in a shallow way, using technical terminology that makes it sound 'scientific', but lacking in real scientific depth. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, we cannot affirm that this is a characteristic of all self-improvement literatures. Some authors use the rhetoric of science and technology to legitimise their approaches. The reason their books are written in a simple style is, no doubt, so that they can reach the mainstream, which would be an impossible task otherwise – as, for example, in *What the Bleep Do We Know?* (2005).<sup>28</sup> It is, therefore, very typical of this genre to have renowned personalities such as physicists, medical doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, quantum physicists, biochemists, business managers and business advisors backing up the different messages in the books in a 'light' fashion. That is, although privileged in knowledge and wisdom, the authors often express themselves adopting a very friendly, easy-to-understand and 'reachable' tone as if one was talking to a friend who lets you in on a secret.

Many self-help 'gurus' belonging to the third and fourth strands, such as Tony Robbins, Louise Hay, Wayne Dyer, John Gray, Chris Griscom, Zig Ziglar, Neale Donald Walsch, Robert Kiyosaki, Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle – just a short

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<sup>27</sup> Meditation is often a spiritual path even in the West, see Steele, 2000.

<sup>28</sup> The book *What the Bleep Do We Know?* appeared in 2005, one year after the movie of the same title was released, just like the book called *The Secret* (2006), first featured as a movie in 2005.

sample of a long list of authors – reach out to the public through the extensive marketing of improvement via books, CDs, DVDs, seminars, newsletters, blogs and webpages, offering their services and often acting as psychologists or counsellors (Mur, 2009: 134). One of their appeals is that they are people who claim to have achieved the goals that they mention in their books, be they inner peace (Tolle, 2004: 5), gratefulness (Demartini, 2006: 128), inner strength and prosperity (Robbins, 1991: 33), healing of an incurable disease (Hay, 1984: 13; Bays, 1999: 43) control over their lives by controlling their time (Covey and Merrill, 2003: 12; Smith, 2003: 19) or success and happiness (Chopra, 1994: 3). These authors are considered examples and teachers who share their experiences and their wisdom. Through their books they inspire people to want to know more about themselves, to be aware of how to manage change better, or to have a plan for their lives that does not depend on external factors. We could argue, nevertheless, that such inspiration might not be suitable for people in less privileged positions such as poor-non-white-immigrants. The slow rise in self-help literature written by black authors, for instance, started especially from the 1990s onwards.<sup>29</sup>

Sociologist Irene Taviss Thompson considers that self-improvement literature from the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards demonstrates that Americans have already moved away from a model of the individual in conflict with society to a newer model of a relational self that forms itself within smaller voluntary groups (2000: 133). But, as McGee reminds us, while individuals can and do constitute themselves voluntarily into small self-created communities of interest – Twelve-Step groups, reading groups, meditation groups, etc. – they continue “to have involuntary relationships with a whole group of institutions that are neither voluntary nor self-constructed” (2005: 180). Thus, for instance, one individual or group might totally oppose a war, but the taxes that support that war and wars in general are not optional,

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<sup>29</sup> Here you can see a couple websites dealing with self-help literature written by and addressed specifically at the black population. The first one is called *BlackBooksDirect* <<http://www.blackbooksdirect.com/inspiration.html>> and the second one is *Self Help Books for Black Women on Amazon.com* <<http://www.amazon.com/Self-Help-books-Black-women/lm/1ZXNOMW7OICAD>> (accessed September, 2009).

and so on. We seem to have reached “a time of polarization, with self-explorers refusing to vote and activists (...) who criticize self-realization or recovery movements without ever asking what they are offering that social justice movements are not” (Steinem, 1992: 347). It will only be when these groups and self-created communities unite that ‘becoming oneself’ or ‘being all one can be’ could potentially challenge existing power structures (McGee, 2005:180). In the meantime, in Butler-Bowdon’s view, the bottom line lies again in people’s attitudes: “Whether you want to change the world or just change yourself, you are right in suspecting that no one is going to do it for you. In the end, it is all up to you” (2003: 6).

Without pretending to have the answers to all the questions one poses in life, a self-improvement book can, in all likelihood, be good guidance in moments of despair or an inspiration to aim at higher objectives or deeper truths in one’s life, particularly in our secular world. Especially the authors of the fourth strand distinguish themselves from the ones of the third strand in that most of them mention the need to let go of the ego (Chopra, 1994; Kraft, 2003; Tolle, 2005; Dyer, 2007), the usefulness of meditation and/or contemplation (Chia, 1985; Chopra, 1994; The Dalai Lama, 1998; Tolle, 2003); and the importance of silence (Tolle, 2003; Dyer, 2007). Rather than an emphasis on the achievement of external goals their ‘inward turn’ brings them peace and a special awareness of the present moment in life where one cannot talk about self-improvement any longer. Any anxiety about the past or the future, any desire to ‘become’ or to ‘improve’ becomes meaningless.

### **1.5.5. Recapitulation: the Appeal of Self-help Literature in America**

*Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you've imagined*

Henry David Thoreau

As we have seen so far, in American late 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and even into the 20<sup>th</sup> century culture, success, hard work and discipline used to be three inseparable terms, as expressed in *Self-Help* (Smiles 1859); *Pushing to the Front, or Success under Difficulties* (Swett Marden 1894) or *Ragged Dick* (Alger 1868), and all of these had a strong puritan-religious influence, as was the norm at the time. Later on, in the America of the 1930s, affected as it was by the Depression, many people were more focused on avoiding poverty than on becoming wealthy. They had to be shown the way to believe in themselves again – and what they were looking for was mainly an easy style with practical proven rules and principles that worked. Authors like Napoleon Hill and Dale Carnegie encouraged people to believe in themselves and taught them how to use the power of their minds to achieve their goals.

The depression gave way to World War II, and while defense spending brought the nation out of the depression, eliminating unemployment, Americans were still living in an economy of scarcity during the war years. After the war, sociologists consider the 1950s consumerism “as an attempt to achieve contentment and security in a complicated world” (Jones, 2010). The puritan-religious discourse was still prevalent, but adopting more and more scientific-oriented language as a sign of what was occurring in the world on a large scale. Success was equated to prosperity, and competitiveness, aggressiveness, initiative and forcefulness were required traits if one wanted to succeed. The next phase was characterised by a desire for self-fulfilment beyond the economic goal. The origin of this trend within self-help literature lies in Abraham Maslow’s ‘self-actualization’ (Maslow, 1954: 150), but the danger of it, according to some authors, was the lack of limits in the path of self-fulfilment, which can leave people utterly exhausted and ‘belaboured’ (McGee, 2005: 12). And finally

there was the path of a more spiritually-oriented self-help literature of partly Eastern origin, which appeared at a time of many socio-political and economic challenges (1950s and 1960s) and started flourishing towards the 1990s with an ever-increasing demand for it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

What is obvious, from what we have seen so far is that the self-help genre has many supporters and many detractors. According to Butler-Bowdon, “Maybe the genre took on its lowbrow image because the books were so readily available, promised so much, and contained ideas that you were unlikely to hear from a professor or a minister. Whatever the image, people obviously had a new source of life guidance and they loved it” (2003:2). A quick glance at the numbers will help us understand that it is a genre in constant growth. According to the Gallup Survey, one-third to one-half of Americans have bought a self-help book in their lives (Wood, 1988: 33). Self-improvement books are available to cover any and all issues and age groups, with titles specialised to address every market segment (McGee, 2005: 12). The Barnes and Noble bookstore at Union Square in New York City, for example, allocated in February 1997 four hundred metres of shelf space to the various sub-categories of self-improvement literature, including the following subject categories: addiction and recovery; diets and fitness; career planning; parenting; personal motivation; self-improvement; psychology; and human sexuality and relationships (McGee, 2005: 200).

We should not overlook that this explosion of self-improvement books and the plethora of contemporary ‘bestselling’ self-help authors leaves an open question as to the factors behind their success: Is it due to successful marketing strategies; or to readership response to the discourses (whether or not the recipes of self improvement contained in them are put into practice)? The balance between those two factors will almost certainly vary from author to author and from book to book (Mur, 2009: 134-35). Robbins, for example, was one of the first self-help gurus to start using new technologies for spreading his message. As the Federal Communications Commission’s ruling deregulated television advertising in 1984 and made way for the infomercial, Robbins produced one of the most successful infomercials in the short history of the form, reportedly selling \$120 million worth of audiotapes in his first five years of

broadcasting (Stanton 1994: 106). His annual sales from seminars and tapes are reported to be close to \$50 million per year (Levine 1997: 53). Rather than relying on the sale of print media, “Robbins has built his empire on the sales of audiotapes and compact discs and the production of charismatic revival-style spectacles” (McGee, 2005: 63).

In spite of these figures and the million-dollar sales of countless authors, the appeal for this kind of literature in a context of economic crisis, fewer employment opportunities and stagnant wages is understandable for several reasons: on the one hand it offers a kind of security, if only imagined, to a public that is already open to this kind of discourse; and on the other hand, self-improvement literature is also appealing in contemporary society for its role as a possible ‘mild’ substitute for psychotherapy (Coleman and Ganong, 1987: 61-65) and for other obvious advantages, such as low cost, informal, uncomplicated language and easy accessibility.

Let us now pursue to Part Two of this dissertation, which will be devoted to a Cultural Studies analysis of the rise of Far Eastern influence<sup>30</sup> in America from different perspectives: social, historical, philosophical, psychological, economic, technological and scientific. Precisely because of the increasing demand for self-help books belonging to the fourth strand, that is, with marked Eastern references, I considered that tracing the origins of such a phenomenon would be an important academic contribution before embarking (in Part Three) on the critical analysis of five bestselling books of the third and fourth strand, all of them with various degrees of Eastern influence in their messages.

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<sup>30</sup> When referring to the Far East I am always referring to the extended definition of Far East as it appears in the *Webster's Online Dictionary*, whereby the *Far East* “is a term often used by people in the Western world to refer to the countries of East Asia” (usually including China, Mongolia, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Indochina and eastern Siberia). However, for cultural reasons, “the term is often expanded to also include Southeast Asia and South Asia”. See: <<http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definitions/far+east?cx=partner-pub-0939450753529744%3Av0qd01-tdlq&cof=FORID%3A9&ie=UTF-8&q=far+east&sa=Search#922>> (accessed January 2009).



**PART TWO**

**The Attraction of the Far East**



## **2.1 The Rise of Eastern Influence in America: A Cultural Studies Heuristic**

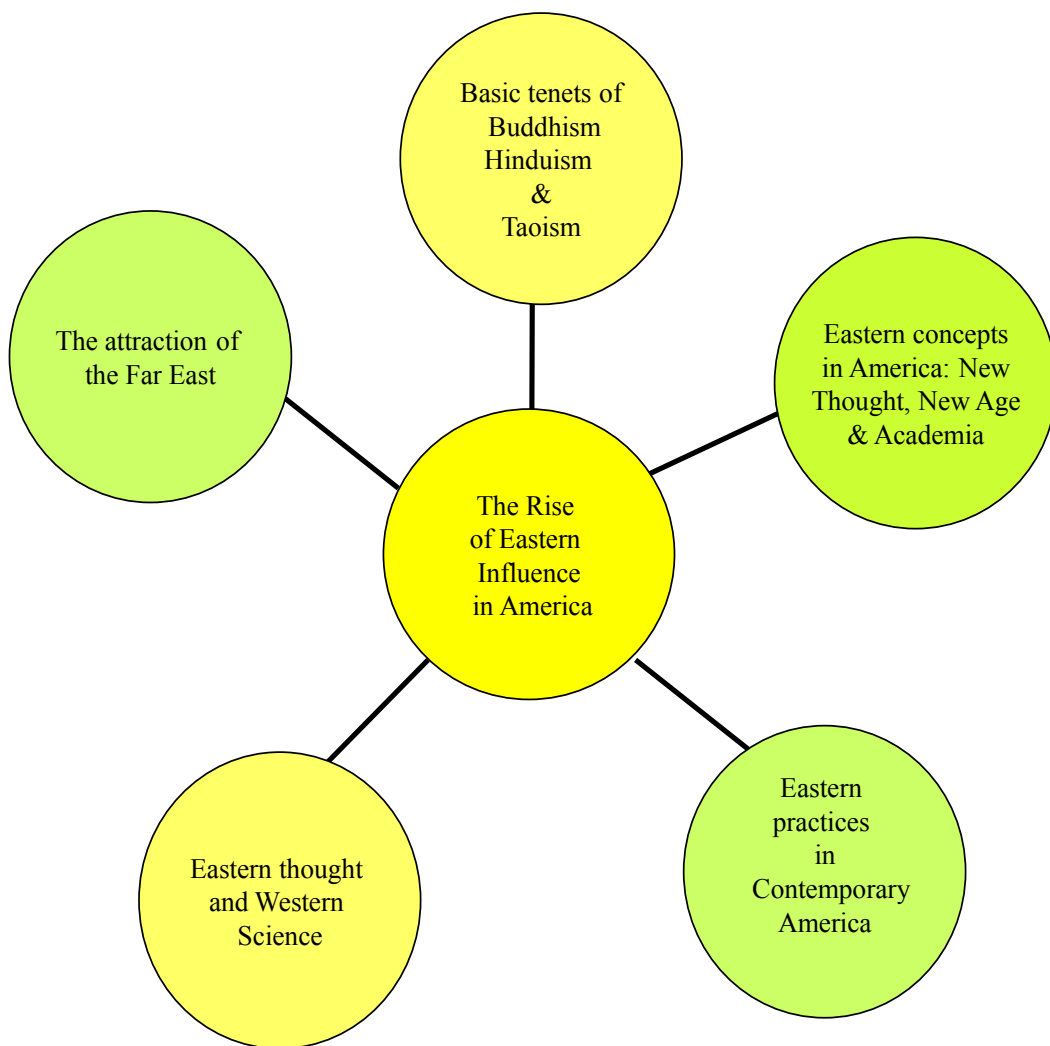


Figure 3: Exploring different contexts in order to understand the emergence of Eastern influence in America as a social phenomenon.

## **2.2 Introduction: The Rise of Eastern Influence in America**

*Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know*

Alan W. Watts

As we have seen in Part One, the ideas of happiness and success have experienced several shifts in the self-help literature landscape throughout time, and so have the religious beliefs which often affect these ideas. Each age has its faith or lack of it, and our age in the Western world is nowadays, at first sight, mainly committed to science and technology, rather than to religion or spirituality. Science and technology are omnipresent wherever we look. Children who can barely walk know how to turn on the TV set or the Play-station. Most families have gadgets such as I-pods, MP4s or mobile phones with cameras and internet incorporated to them, not to mention ‘Blackberries’ and satellite dishes which connect them to the rest of the world.

In contrast with earlier times when only a limited layer of society participated in the movement of ideas, nowadays the majority of people are being affected, even if only in a superficial way, by the dominant *zeitgeist*. The magnificent achievements of science have led many people to accept the “all sufficiency of matter and the omnipotence of the world of sense” (Radhakrishnan, 1967: 443). At the same time, some authors consider that “modern civilization with its scientific temper, humanistic spirit, and secular view of life is uprooting the world over the customs of long centuries and creating a ferment of restlessness” (Radhakrishnan, 2007: vii). Thus, the void created by abandoned superstitions and uprooted beliefs often calls for a “spiritual filling” (2007: vii).

In a short period of time of less than a lifespan, we have witnessed how Western thought has changed so rapidly that familiar concepts of space, time, and movement, of history and society, of nature and natural laws, and of human personality have drastically changed, and we find ourselves in a universe which resembles more and

more the Buddhist principle of the 'Great Void' (*Dhammapada*, 7: 3, 4). The various wisdoms of the West – scientific, philosophical and religious – anchored to firm principles and rules for psychological and spiritual security – do not offer anymore the expected guidance that they used to offer in the past.

We can affirm, as some authors do, that the Western world, with all its development and all its material wealth is feeling weary, fatigued and empty (Racionero, 2001: 13). As never before, from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we witness the opening of a new doorway to the East, favoured by economic, military and cultural changes leading to the modernisation of Japan, China and India (2001: 13). The attraction of the East, of Eastern philosophies, concepts and practices, and messages of inner peace, amongst many others, is only a sign of disillusionment and disorientation at a time when technology is supposed to make our life easier and less stressful. In fact, evidence often shows the contrary to be true:

Back then, we didn't have answering machines. We didn't have fax machines. We didn't have e-mail. We didn't have pagers and cell phones. Today because of technology there are so many ways for people to get at us.... It's like our inner operating system hasn't caught up to the outer operating system... of a new very fast-paced world. (McGee, 2000)

There is not much hope that things are going to change one day, either, since information is streaming into our lives in bulk and it is highly unlikely that it is ever going to diminish its speed, quite the opposite. Thus, we find multiple suggestions from very different sources not to succumb to the demands of this new society that we have created, which would possibly be the task of an almost Nietzschean *Übermensch*. In Gergen's *The Saturated Self* (2000) we are told that:

Because of the constant change and feeling 'off balance', it is essential for men and women to develop... coping skills. First, understand that you will never 'catch up' and be on top of things and accept this as all right.... Put a high priority on spending time relaxing and enjoying life, in spite of all that needs to be done. (2000: 74)

The impact of this new era of ‘information and technology’ is not ignored by philosophers, self-improvement writers and psychologists all over the world, who are expressing their words of warning:

If we are to be saved from mounting chaos, we must find a new human order, where we do not reduce the human individual to a mere object of scientific investigation, where we recognize him as a subject of freedom. We must make the basic concepts of our civilization illumine, guide and mould the new life. If our civilization is to function, we must cease to be blind and thoughtless. We must not allow the values of spirit to recede beyond the horizon of man. We must strive to be human in this most inhuman of all ages. (Radhakrishnan, 1967: 448)

Science and technology, however, have many positive sides to them which should not be overlooked. Who would go back to the times when there were no washing-machines, cars, phones or computers? What seems to be evident is that there needs to be a balance between the almost absolute power given to science and technology, and other aspects of life which have been obviously neglected. For some people it is sports, the engagement in a hobby, the time spent in contact with nature or the pursuit of a creative activity which help them to ‘unwind’ from their daily hectic lifestyles. For others, feeling the emptiness left by incongruent and crumbling religious beliefs of the past, it is the spiritual quest which moves them beyond the borders of their own cultures.

As we have seen in Part One, the popular appeal of Eastern ideas and practices started appearing with the countercultural movements of the beatniks and the hippies. However, the evidence of a significant engagement with Oriental ideas is not restricted to these movements, and it is certainly not new. It can be found in the works of countless Western writers including Montaigne, Montesquieu, Malebranche, Leibniz, Voltaire, Diderot, Adam Smith, Herder, Goethe, Schelling, Hegel, Schlegel, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Wagner, Nietzsche, Emerson, Thoreau, Jung, Pound, Eliot, as well as in the Theosophist movement, which appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Macfie, 2003: 3).

The Eastern discourses of Hinduism, Buddhism and even Taoism have provided hope, if only as an illusion, for numerous searchers who yearned to look at reality with

different, renewed eyes. Yet, from the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, academic opinion in the West has tended to be divided between those who take it for granted that, in the modern period, Oriental ideas have had a significant effect on Western thought, and those who for a variety of reasons doubt the relevance of Oriental influence (Macfie, 2003: 1). In the former group we can find texts like Dale Riepe's "The Indian Influence in American Philosophy: Emerson to Moore" (1967) and Rieff and Lasch's *The Philosophy of India and its Impact on American Thought* (1970); P.J. Marshall's *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (1970); and Heinrich Dumoulin's, *Buddhism in the Modern World* (1976). The latter group, on the other hand, includes the volume edited by Raghavan Iyer, *The Glass Curtain between Asia and Europe* (1965); Edward Said's, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) or J.J. Clarke's, *Oriental Enlightenment: the Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (1997).

While Western thought might or might not have had a relevant Eastern influence, what is certain is that Oriental ideas and practices – because of their appealing messages of inner peace and happiness – have played, and still do play, an important role at a 'popular level' in society from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. And self-improvement literature is only one area where this is evident, as I am going to show in this part of my dissertation.

Before proceeding to the analysis of some of the major influences and applications of these Oriental ideas and practices in the US, it is of utmost importance to have a clear notion of what we are talking about when referring to them. Therefore, I am going to devote some pages to the essential tenets of Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as brief allusions to Taoism, since these are the basic sources of influence that I am going to focus on.

## **2.2.1 Basic Tenets of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism**

*Yoga is the settling of the mind into silence. When the mind has settled, we are established in our essential nature which is unbounded Consciousness. Our essential nature is usually overshadowed by the activity of the mind*

Patanjali

It would probably be somewhat pretentious to claim to understand Eastern philosophy with its ancient origin and its myriad nuances, all belonging to a completely different culture. For this reason, without aiming at a profound unravelling of the hidden mysteries that might be contained in such philosophies/religions, I will devote this part of my dissertation to a brief introduction to Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, followed by an enumeration and description of their basic tenets. I will then use this for the development of the subsequent sections, with the purpose of finding out which of these have penetrated or have been adopted by Western thought within self-help literature books and which ones have been adapted to suit certain needs or drives within American / Western society.

Let us start by mentioning that the word 'Hinduism' is often misunderstood by Westerners, who consider it a specific religion, like Islam or Judaism. In fact, it is derived from the Hindi word for 'India'<sup>31</sup> and refers to the traditional socio-religious structure of the Indian people (Billington, 1997: 19). Unlike Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, Hinduism has no founder and is based on mythology rather than on history. There have been numerous seers (*rishis*), but no single outstanding figure around whom

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<sup>31</sup> The name *India* is derived from Indus, which is derived from the Old Persian word Hindu, from Sanskrit *Sindhu*, the historic local appellation for the Indus River according to *CYEC – The Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council* <<http://www.cyec.org.uk/young-commonwealth/about-commonwealth/profiles/india>> (accessed July, 2008).



beliefs and practices have arisen. There is no fixed code of beliefs and no equivalent to the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount (1997: 19).

Within the structure of Hinduism there are six main orthodox schools (Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa and Vedanta), all of which accept the authority of the *Vedas*, as well as numerous local cults and traditions of worship and belief. None of the schools claims to have exclusive access to the truth. They all have different emphases and some of them deal with issues that others leave out, but without any need to contend with each other (1997: 24). Because of its influence in the Western world, and because “it is the most accessible of all the Hindu systems” (1997: 26), the only one of the six schools that I am going to briefly describe for the purpose of this dissertation is the fourth one, that is, Yoga. Apart from this one, I will mainly focus on the basic ideas common to all Hindus, together with a brief introduction to the origins of Hinduism.

To begin with, we can identify four main periods of Hinduism, mainly by the writings that they produced. The first one is the Vedic period, dating from at least 1500 BC and culminating with the *Upanishads* around the sixth century BC (Radhakrishnan, 1967: 122). The word *Vedas* means ‘knowledge’ or ‘sacred teachings’ and they are written in Sanskrit, which literally means ‘perfect, complete’. The *Vedas* of this period are divided into four parts: The *Rigveda*, or *Veda* of poetry, which is the oldest and most extensive of the four, comprising 1,028 hymns; the *Samaveda*, or *Veda* of songs; the *Yajurveda*, or *Veda* of sacrificial texts; and the *Atharvaveda*, which is associated with the ancient Indian priesthood, the *Atharvan*. The *Rigveda* has been described as “one of the most important linguistic, mythological – religious, literary, and cultural documents of humanity. It has maintained its vital religious force in present day Hinduism (...) and is still held as binding by the people of India today” (Halbfass, 1989: 290).

The second period is the Epic period, from about the sixth/fifth century BC until the third or fourth centuries AD. The two great epics are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the latter containing what is generally acknowledged to be the peak of Hindu writing, the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The third one is the Classical period, dating from

around the fourth to the twelfth centuries AD. The writings of this period were the *Puranas*. This was the time when the teachings of the *Vedas* and the epic writings, which were often difficult for simple people to comprehend, were commented and presented in a more popular form (Billington, 1997: 20). The fourth period is known as the Scholastic period, and dates from the end of the Classical to the advent of the 'modern' period in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This time is known for its lack of original, creative writing and for its much learned commentary on the received texts or scriptures (1997: 20).

Let us now look at some of the basic principles of Hinduism with the purpose of setting the basis for the understanding of the process of adoption and/or adaptation of some of its tenets by Western 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture in general and US self-help literature in particular.

The central drive of Hinduism is the attainment of *moksha* in all of life's activities, decisions, relationships and commitments. *Moksha* literally means 'enlightenment', in the sense of 'seeing the light'. It is the moment when the veils of illusion, *maya*, are removed from the eyes, so that one recognises as real what had always been there to be seen, but to which one had previously been blind (Billington, 1997: 31). That is, *moksha* is the realisation that the world and all it has to offer is no more than *maya*, not in the sense that it does not really exist, but in the sense that everything is temporary and thus, unable to really satisfy human needs: "material objects will either decay or lose their appeal; relationships will either fall apart or end in death; talents and skills will decline as years go by; not even the pursuit of scholarship can last for ever" (1997: 32).

It is worth mentioning that, although Hindus also conceive other goals, such as wealth (*artha*), pleasure (*kama*) and duty (*dharma*), it is only through *moksha* that absolute liberation is achieved. None of the other three goals is viewed as reprehensible *per se*, but if they become ends in themselves, as experience shows that they tend to do, *maya* triumphs (Leaman, 1999: 32). Thus, *maya* is understood as a condition of cosmic ignorance (*avidya*), the state of one whose eyes have yet to be opened by attaining

*moksha* (1999: 33). Interestingly, the Hindu view is that all roads lead to the mountain-top where *moksha* is to be experienced (Billington, 1997: 43). *Vedanta* teaches, for example, that *moksha* can be achieved by everybody, including the outcast. Moreover, even if enlightenment is not found in this present cycle of existence, the message is that anybody, of whatever background, will eventually find it: “there is to be no final Day of Judgement, where the sheep are divided from the goats” (1997: 40). This is certainly a surprising concept in a system of castes, which divides Hindus from birth into four main fixed social groups. The highest of these is the priestly caste or Brahmins: this comprises the educated class of religious and academic leaders, priests, scholars, philosophers. The second one is the caste of warriors, comprising military people, politicians and civil authorities. Then come the merchants and farmers, those who produce the nation’s financial and economic resources, also known as the providers. And finally, the lowest caste is formed by the workers and servants. Outside the caste system are the untouchables or outcasts (pariahs) – generally left to perform the most undesirable tasks. (1997: 39) However, as mentioned before, *Vedanta*, teaches that ‘enlightenment’ (*moksha*) can be achieved by everybody, including the outcast.

The pursuit of wealth (*artha*) is viewed as natural and, if it does not involve the harm of other people in the process, it is even considered laudable. Wealth is neither good nor evil in itself: used for the benefit of others, it may be spiritually advantageous to its possessor. Only when it leads to greed, inducing its owner to lose sight of the ultimate end does it become a hindrance on the religious path, which is its propensity. Likewise, Hindus are fully aware that the pursuit of pleasure (*kama*), even more so than wealth (*artha*), can divert people from the spiritual path (Leaman, 1999: 32).

The abstract and impersonal Absolute or principle of reality in Hindu thought is called *Brahman*. In itself the Absolute is pure and unchanging, and is completely incompatible with attributes (1999: 49). *Brahman* is a sacred power which is the basis of the world, and the cycle of rebirth – *samsara* – comes about through the blending of *Brahman* with the self, *atman*:

The ultimate and essential theme of Upanishadic literature, (...) tells us that: *Brahman* is identified with *atman*. As the air inside a jar is substantially the same as that on the outside, though separated artificially by the glass, so the absolute ground of being is one with the basic self of every individual, but seemingly separated because of the blinkers brought about by *maya*. Once those blinkers have been removed through the experience of *moksha*, it becomes possible to make, with absolute assurance, the great affirmation (*mahavakya*) from the third Veda, '*Tat tvam asi*': Thou art that'. (...) *Tat tvam asi*' can be addressed to both the *Brahman* and the *atman* because, as salt dissolved in water flavours all the water, so does *atman* pervade *Brahman*. (Billington, 1997: 34)

That which is the finest essence – this whole world has that as its soul. That is reality. That is *Atman*. That art Thou. (Coward, 1988: 43)

Thus, so far we have seen how the basic aim in Hinduism is to try to achieve liberation from the cycle of birth and re-birth through turning away from ignorance and illusion. When *moksha* (enlightenment) or *samadhi* (divine consciousness) are achieved, the affirmation '*tat tvam asi*' literally means "I am God" (Billington, 1997: 33).

Another central Hindu doctrine affirms that where we are and what we are is the consequence, not of fate, but of our own freely made choices throughout aeons of existence. Thus, creation is dependent on thought. This is what is understood by *Karma*. Its basic meaning is 'deed or 'action'. In Hindu thought it refers typically to the accumulated effect of moral behaviour, and the intentions that direct it (1997: 38). Everything we do and think creates *karma*, which we bear with us as a part of an inexorable cycle of cause and effect, extending from the past through the present and into the future. Our present situation has been affected by previous deeds and decisions, as they in their turn were products of decisions before them, and so on. *Karma* spreads its tentacles over the past, present and future, working itself out according to the laws of cause and effect. These laws are illustrated by the three types of *karma* identified in the Vedas:

The first of these is the consequence of deeds that began in an earlier existence and are still affecting us in the present. As the arrow that has left the bow cannot be recalled, so, by a similar natural law, the effects of the earlier deed cannot be wiped out. Second, there is the *karma* or 'karmic deposits' that we built up in past lives and await fruition in some future life: these deposits form the subconscious memory. The third type is the *karma* arising from actions in

this present life, which will work themselves out, according to the same inexorable natural law of cause and effect, in some future existence. (Billington, 1997: 38)

This means something that is absolutely basic and philosophically of utmost importance: the fact that we can influence our future by our choice of present actions. The key is the word ‘choice’. The doctrine of *karma* is often represented as fatalistic or deterministic, and there are certainly elements of fatalism in the teaching. We are dealt a certain hand – through our parents, our genes, even our social background – and, according to Eastern thought, there is nothing we can do to change this: we often have no choice over what we inherit from parents and grandparents. But at every point where we make a decision there is, according to the teachings of *karma*, genuine choice, and the same was true in the past when we made the decisions whose consequences we are experiencing now (Leaman: 1999: 112). According to Hinduism, the karma we get is the karma we have freely chosen, and nobody but ourselves is responsible for where or what we are. The karma “we are about to accumulate will be the direct result of the choices we are about to make” (Billington, 1997: 39). But, since the thoughts and actions that produce *karma* relate to the material world, the world of *maya*, it follows that all *karma* is ultimately bad because it binds us to this world of illusion. The aim is to free the *atman* (self or soul) from the shackles of the physical body, which is attached to the material world of *karmic* forces. *Vedanta*, as we have seen, teaches that this aim is achieved through *moksha*, the realisation that the *atman* and the *Brahman* are one (1997: 48). The concept of *karma* basically refers to the re-establishment of harmony, and is also present in popular Western sayings such as ‘You reap what you sow’, or the Spanish ones: “Tal harás, tal encontrarás”, “Quien siembra vientos, recoge tempestades”, “No hay mal que por bien no venga” (Racionero, 2001: 66).

There are three main divinities in Hinduism: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma symbolises the principle of creation, Vishnu symbolises the sustaining force of the universe and Shiva functions as the god of destruction and dissolution (of everything, including ignorance). All three are interdependent, and all in creation experiences the process of destruction, after a period of sustained existence, which is then followed by further creation, and so on (this connects us with the Chinese philosophy of *yin* and *yang*, as we will see later on). All three gods are viewed as

manifestations of the One, with whom all Hindus expect ultimately to be united. There are, in addition, numerous *devas* or ‘minor gods’. But, again, “the Vedas themselves acknowledge all gods and all *devas* to be no more than manifestations of *Brahman*, the ground of being” (Billington, 1997: 41). It is worth mentioning, that it is typical of Indian thought, and also of Buddhism, as we will see, that, ultimately, salvation is to be found by following one’s own path, using the powers created by spiritual insight, that one builds up in oneself, rather than through any cult of the gods (Swearer, 1997: 81).

Within Hinduism, *yoga* is a means of mastering and uniting every aspect of a person. The physical body, the active will, the restless mind: all must be brought into a state of tranquillity in order to achieve spiritual harmony. Patanjali (somewhere between the fourth and the second centuries BC) outlined eight steps (known as the eight limbs) whereby this state may be achieved. These are:

*Yama* (self-control) – the laws of life: non-violence, truthfulness, not stealing, self-control, non-attachment.

*Niyama* – the rules for living: outward and inward purity; contentment, or simplicity; strict concern about personal behaviour; reading the scriptures; and submission to God.

*Asana* – the physical posture

*Pranayama* – rhythmic control of the breath

*Pratyahara* – withdrawal of the mind from sense objects

*Dharana* – concentration

*Dhyana* – meditation

*Samadhi* (also known as *turiya*) – entry into the supraconscious state

(Rambachan, 1990: 341)

Stilling the mind, emptying it of all daily cares and concerns, is achieved with *Pratyahara*; while *Dharana* is about concentration, usually on a particular object, such as the flame of a candle or a flower, to the exclusion of all other thoughts. With the mind fixed on a single goal, the way is prepared for meditation, which is when the mind

is no longer conscious of itself independently of the object of meditation but is absorbed in that object. The final state is *samadhi* or supra-consciousness, in which the world of duality, that is, the world perceived by the senses ceases to exist (Billington, 1997: 27-28).

Happiness is understood as '*sat-chit-ananda*', literally 'Being-consciousness-bliss'. It is an attempt to put into words what cannot be expressed: the bliss referred to is not that which can be enjoyed through worldly activities since, although often worthy, they are inevitably clouded by *maya*. Rather, it is the unaffected absolute bliss found only when one is free from thoughts, anxieties, hopes, fears, and suffering: in other words, as the word *samadhi* indicates, only when one has experienced divine consciousness (1997: 34).

We can sum up the Hindu doctrine as one which holds that this world is an illusion, from the trap of which one needs to be freed if permanent fulfilment is to be found; it expresses the doctrine of *samsara*, the transmigration of souls in a continuing round of incarnations; it teaches that each rebirth is the direct consequence of earlier lives and decisions then made; it holds that the overcoming of *karma* is the key to enlightenment and permanent happiness; and, finally, it offers yogic meditation as a positive way of achieving all this.

Let us pursue now with the basic tenets of Buddhism and a short history of its origins, in order to have the sufficient knowledge to embark on a comparative analysis in Part Three of this dissertation. There are many different schools of Buddhism which have often exerted great fascination on the Western world. Some of the earliest Western researchers of Buddhism, such as Alexandra David-Neel in *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (1929) and W. Y. Evans-Wentz in *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrine* (1935) described Tibetan Buddhism, for example, as exotic and esoteric. D. T. Suzuki's view of Zen Buddhism as iconoclastic and antirational held great appeal for Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac (author of *The Dharma Bums* (1958)), and other members of the Beat Generation during the 1950s (Swearer, 1997: 81). The appeal spilled over into the counterculture movement, which made books such as Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922; English translation 1951) and Alan Watt's *Way of Zen* (1957) extremely popular.

Today, Buddhism is probably personified for most people by the Dalai Lama, who is now living in exile in the northern Indian city of Dharamsala, where he fled two years after communist China occupied Tibet in 1957. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 and has gained worldwide stature, giving “lectures around the world on human rights, economic justice, and environmental protection, (...) [as he] challenges the international community to bring pressure to bear on China to end its policies of ethnic cleansing and ecological and cultural genocide in Tibet” (Swearer, 1997: 81).

If we go back in history, the man who is universally known as ‘the Buddha’ was born Siddhartha Gautama in north-eastern India around 563 BC. He was one of the many outstanding figures who lived in Asia in a century paralleled in human history only by the European Enlightenment (Racionero, 2001: 53). This was, in Asia, the century of Confucius and Lao Tzu, the Taoist, in China; of Mahavira, founder of Jainism, in India; of Zoroaster in Persia; of the Jewish prophets – Jeremiah and Ezekiel; and of many Greek philosophers and artists in the West, such as Aesop, Aeschylus, Parmenides, Pythagoras, Xenophanes, and Thespis (Billington, 1997: 52). Tradition tells that Siddhartha Gautama was born into a noble family and was raised in a princely fashion, shielded from the poverty and general hardship that was prevalent in his state. At the age of sixteen he married and had one son. At the age of 29 he encountered what is known in Buddhist lore as the ‘Four Signs’ that were to change his life forever. The four signs were encounters that Siddhartha had with four men: an old man, a terminally sick man, a corpse, and a wandering ascetic. For the first time in his life he was brought face-to-face with poverty, and the presence of pain, suffering and the inescapable fact of mortality. After this experience, he decided he could no longer continue living his privileged existence and resolved to leave his family home forever. He vowed to live the life of a wandering ascetic in quest of an eternal truth beyond the inexorable realities of aging, sickness, and death (Kirimura, 1981: 15). Over a period of six years, he learned to control the bodily appetites, gaining “an inner strength that was to add to the authority he would evince throughout his later ministry” (Billington, 1997: 53). However, he eventually realised that self-denial did not help him as a means of achieving inner harmony. So, disillusioned with all that the ascetics had told him, he went to a remote place 60 miles south of Patna in northeast India, and sat down in deep



meditation for forty-nine days under a fig tree (also known as the *bodhi-tree* or tree of awakening). And this is where Siddhartha claimed to have achieved perfect enlightenment (*nirvana*) and became a 'Buddha'.

It was also the beginning of what is known as Buddhist philosophy or religion. From then on he started preaching what Buddhists call the Middle Way: a path of moderation between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification (Kirimura, 1981: 121). He decided that rather than speculate on metaphysical matters, he preferred to spend the rest of his years showing his followers how they might come to terms with suffering, which, according to him, is the product of a world characterised by impermanence. His main concern was how to cope with this 'vale of tears', in which anything and anybody will sooner or later pass away. The basis of his teaching is contained in what is known as the Benares Sermon, where he spoke of the Four Noble Truths, along with the Noble Eightfold Path, to which they point. This is a summary of the Four Noble Truths:

The first truth is that the world is permeated with suffering, or *duhkha*, understood not just as pain and suffering, but also as dissatisfaction and unfulfilment.

The second truth tells us that the cause of *duhkha* is craving or desire: the thirst for that which cannot satisfy, not only in the direction of sensual pleasures, but also by psychological motivations, such as desire for acknowledgement, for fame, or wanting to be liked. And, ultimately, the frustration of failing to find enlightenment, and so remaining bound to *samsara* (the cycle of re-births).

The third truth says that *Duhkha* can only be ended through the total elimination of craving and desire. Once this has been achieved, it is possible to have a sense of detachment from the object of craving; and with this sense comes liberation and peace. In such a state disappointment cannot occur.

And finally, according to the fourth truth, desire can be destroyed following the Noble Eightfold Path of perfect view, perfect resolve, perfect speech, perfect conduct, perfect livelihood, perfect effort, perfect mindfulness and perfect concentration (*The Columbia Encyclopaedia*, 2009: 7586). Briefly summarised, this is what each path means:

*perfect view*: realising the impermanence of all things.

*perfect resolve*: living according to the Buddhist way: non-attachment to the world; showing sympathy and good will to one's fellows; and empathy with all beings in order to never cause them harm.

*perfect speech*: Everything one says should be true and kind, avoiding lies, gossip and slander.

*perfect conduct*: following certain moral obligations or precepts such as not killing or stealing and refraining from unjust speech.

*perfect livelihood*: one could not, for example, live in a state of perfect livelihood and be a butcher, a hunter or a soldier, or deal in arms or narcotics. For many, though not all Buddhists, this step leads to a pacifist or vegetarian life-style.

*perfect effort*: the cultivations of actions that are *karmically* beneficial, avoiding those that are unwholesome.

*perfect mindfulness*: this means the control of all the mind's activities: awareness of the body (breathing and posture, etc.); identification of one's sensations or feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, indifferent, worldly, transcendental...) realising that, like the body, they are transitory; and mindfulness of one's thoughts, it is by the controlling of these that deep meditation, facilitating the way to *nirvana*, becomes possible.

*perfect concentration*: The state of absorption is one in which all passions have died away and the practitioner is able to concentrate uninterruptedly on the object of meditation, which is the realisation of selflessness in the context of total transitoriness.

At this stage, any sense of joy or happiness is replaced by equanimity, one of the most important Buddhist virtues. It is “a state where the mind is lifted above the distinctions of joy and suffering to a condition of equilibrium, while remaining alert and aware” (Billington, 1997: 66). Finally, in *samadhi*, the goal of all Buddhist meditation, what remains is a state of wakeful equilibrium, beyond all distinctions and all ‘pairs of opposites’, such as good and evil, happiness and sorrow, etc. *Samadhi* is the gateway to *nirvana*, the state beyond desire. The teachings of the Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra* “revealed that the seeds of Buddhahood are inherent in each individual’s life” (Kirimura, 1981: 83).

It should be noted that although Siddhartha’s way was a deviation from the surrounding Hinduism, it was not an attempt to uproot it. Unlike Hinduism, he did not accept the authority of the *Vedas*, but just like in Hinduism, he stressed the impermanence of things. Events of the world are essentially fleeting and unstable. There is nothing that we can grasp, nothing that we can keep. He maintained that through meditation it is possible to detach oneself from ordinary thinking and feeling, and merge mentally with an idea that dissolves any notion of self, which, in itself is a powerful source of error and suffering. This is a particularly important consideration for Buddhists: through meditation one can not only appreciate the absence of a fixed self, but also experience what it is like to operate without such a self. In ordinary Western life, of course, we cannot operate at all without the idea of the self as something central and essential to our being.

There are now two major branches of Buddhism called Theravada or Hinayana (“The School of the Elders”) and Mahayana (“The Great Vehicle”). Theravada has a widespread following in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, whilst Mahayana is found throughout East Asia and includes the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren Buddhism, amongst others (Kirimura, 1981: 32). For all the different branches, Buddhism can be defined as a religion without God, therefore, it is often described as a philosophy rather than as a religion (Pan-Chiu, 2002: 153).

In short, the core teaching of Buddhism says that suffering and death can be overcome only when ignorance and desire have been overcome or put aside. The Four Noble Truths are: that life's pleasures and satisfactions are ultimately unsatisfactory or unfulfilling; that this sense of dissatisfaction is rooted in selfish attachment to desire and greed based on an erroneous perception of ego; that a deeper sense of purpose and meaning (*nirvana*) is achieved when the false sense of ego is transcended; and, finally, that the way to this saving knowledge is by means of the Noble Eightfold Path, which are: perfect view, perfect intention, perfect speech, perfect conduct, perfect vocation, perfect effort, perfect mindfulness, and perfect concentration.

Interestingly, Hindu and Buddhist thinkers with a singular unanimity coincide that ignorance is the source of our anguish, and wisdom, or enlightenment is our salvation. Ignorance (as opposed to true knowledge) comes from constant mental activity which produces self-consciousness and separates us from nature and innocence. Our suffering and our anxieties are bound up with our intellectuality, whose emergence at the human level causes a fissure or cleavage in our life (Radhakrishnan, 2007: 43). But it is possible to free oneself from sorrow and suffering, by becoming aware of the eternal (Radhakrishnan, 1967: 443). By facing the bitter meaning of nothingness, it is possible to attain illumination of the Being in which existence dwells (1967: 445). In other words, human beings must first experience the void, the nothingness (*Śūnyatā*), not for its own sake, but in order to transcend it, to get beyond the world of birth and re-birth (*samsara*).

Just like the Hindu state of 'enlightenment' (*moksha*), for Buddhists *nirvana* also involves the extinction of all desire, the freedom from the inescapable effects of *karma* and a state of perfect tranquillity, perfect knowledge perfect power, beyond the world of cause and effect (Billington, 1997: 46). As mentioned earlier, one major difference between both religions is that for Buddhists there is no God,<sup>32</sup> no self or permanent soul; thus *nirvana* is understood more like an annihilation of the self. In Sanskrit, the word *nirvana* literally means 'extinction': 'blowing out' as of a candle; whereas in

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<sup>32</sup> Although some forms of Buddhism, such as Tibetan Buddhism, do have gods and goddesses (see Willis, 2003).

Hinduism *samadhi*, or the ‘state of bliss’, is attained from the union of the soul (*atman*) with *Brahman*. As we have seen, according to Hinduism and Buddhism, man is a victim of ignorance, which breeds separation and selfishness. As long as we live our unconscious lives in the world of time governed by *karma* or necessity, we are at the mercy of time, and “death is the token of the power of time over us” (Radhakrishnan, 1967: 444). This creates a feeling of distress which is universal. A sense of helplessness overtakes the seeking spirit, which makes “the world a waste and life a vain show” (1967: 443).

Quite different from this view are the teachings of Taoism, which, rather than preaching that everything is an illusion, encourages its followers to enjoy nature and to get in touch with their intuition in order to feel a mystical oneness with the world around them (Billington, 2002: 80). Taoism, with its emphasis on the living and on achieving harmony with the forces of nature stands alongside Buddhism (and *Confucianism*) as one of the philosophies/religions which have most influenced Chinese thought and culture over the past two and a half millennia (Kohn, 1993: 11). Taoism centres itself on the concept of the Tao, which literally means ‘Way’. It can be described as the “all-embracing origin of all things, the first principle from which all appearances arise; it is the ground of being, the underlying reality that sustains the universe and makes possible its ongoing existence and activity” (Billington, 2002: 90). Taoism emphasises what is known as the ‘Three Jewels of Tao’, which are: compassion, moderation and humility, also translated as kindness, simplicity (or the absence of excess), and modesty (Waley, 1958: 225).

The most popular Taoist text is called the *Tao Te Ching*. According to Chinese tradition, it was written by Lao Tzu, a famous teacher and mystic who lived in the sixth century BC. Lao Tzu means ‘great master’, which is more a title than a name. It is now generally agreed by sinologists that the work is the product of many hands and that it was compiled over some centuries (Billington, 2002: 81). In the book we are taught the spiritual principles of being flexible, of being humble, of not pushing ourselves forward, of being able to adapt ourselves to whatever situation we find ourselves in - good or bad - and of not striving to control the world around us, but of ‘flowing’ with life (called *wu*

*wei* in Chinese) (Towler, 2005: 9). *Wu wei* is often translated as living a life of ‘non-action’, or even better, as not taking any *inappropriate* action (Billington, 2002: 83). It also means to practise patience and learn how to act only at the right time and with the minimum amount of effort. In fact, if we learn how to wait, we shall frequently find that no action is necessary at all. *Wu wei* means “striking only when the iron is hot” (2002: 84), that is, to act only when it is appropriate. In the *Tao Te Ching* we are asked: “Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?” (*Tao Te Ching*, 15)<sup>33</sup> When a person achieves this condition, he or she can be described as being at one with the Tao. It will not be achieved by academic research, or the study of sacred texts, or through a correct observance of rituals. Instead, it will be gained by living one’s life with simplicity and in accordance with the natural forces of the universe, expressed both in nature itself and in human nature. Thus, people are exhorted to ‘be themselves’:

When you are content to be simply yourself  
and don’t compare or compete,  
everybody will respect you.  
(*Tao Te Ching*, 8)

According to the *Tao Te Ching*, the origin of the universe is *Chi*, or primeval breath. Tao is the source of *Chi*, the origin of the origin:


The Tao engenders One,  
One engenders Two,  
Two engenders Three,  
Three engenders the ten thousand things.  
All things in the universe carry shade  
and embrace sunlight.  
Shade and sunlight, *yin* and *yang*,  
And they are held together in the *Chi*,  
Breath blending into harmony.  
(*Tao Te Ching*, 42)

The One is *Chi*, (or *Qi*) literally meaning breath, energy or spirit; it is the life-force that pervades and vitalises everything, the cosmic energy that brought the universe

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<sup>33</sup> When quoting the *Tao Te Ching* I will always be using the version with the translation of Addis, Stephen and Lombardo, Stanley.

into being and continues to sustain it (Billington, 2002: 82). The 'Two' to which the *Chi* gives birth, are the twin forces of *yin* and *yang*, the polar opposites by which the universe functions, such as negative and positive, feminine and masculine, darkness and light, cold and heat, intuition and rationality, earth and heaven. Neither of these can be nor has any meaning without the other. 'Hot' is only known in relation to its opposite 'cold', or 'dark' to 'light', 'wet' to 'dry', 'tall' to 'short', or 'life' to 'death'. These twin forces, the *yin* and the *yang*, operate throughout the world, giving us day and night, summer and winter, seedtime and harvest. But it is important to remember that no living creature is entirely one or the other: there is some feminine *yin* in every male and some masculine *yang* in every female, and each of them is continuously moving into the other. In daily life this means that one must learn, using one's intuition, to recognise when to apply *yin*, and when *yang* energies. It is important, for example, to know when to speak out and when to remain quiet; when to be gentle and when to be violent; when to be active and when to stand still. Thus, Taoism's ideal is to balance *yin* and *yang* forces. The image we receive from the heart of Taoism is of a life lived with honesty, without pretence, in tune with the natural forces of *yin* and *yang*, which are manifested in all that exists and occurs (Kohn, 1993: 33).

As the symbol of *yin* and *yang*,  the *Tai-chi-tu* (diagram of the supreme ultimate) illustrates, there is always some light (*yang*) in the dark *yin*, and there is always some dark (*yin*) in the light *yang* (Kohn, 1993: 28). Several Buddhist tenets parallel those of Taoism: sincerity and effort are required to abandon worldly desire and strive for righteousness. Both Taoism and Buddhism teach the virtues of simplicity, the enjoyment of the eternal here and now, naturalness, and the discovery of the intuitive side of one's nature. Nonetheless, there are some important points upon which both philosophies differ. For example, according to most Buddhist schools the self should be a nonentity, while Taoism preaches belief in an immortal soul with a distinct personality (Weiss, 2000: 194). Moreover, teachers of Buddhism (except for some schools, such as the *Nichiren Daishonin* school (Cowan, 1982: 8)) exhort followers of its path to turn away from the tangible world, whereas Taoism encourages its followers to discover the intuitive side of their natures by enjoying the natural world around them, so as to experience total harmony with it (Billington, 2002: 80). And it is precisely this message

which has influenced American self-help literature to a great extent, as we will see in the following chapters.

While there are parallels between Taoism and Hinduism, it is also important to recognise their differences. The Tao could be compared to *god* or the *ground of being*, but unlike the Hindu view of *Brahman*, which can be known by the *atman* (individual soul), the Tao is completely “unknowable” (2002: 85). For Taoism, it is enough to be at one with nature, which is a sign of being in harmony with the Tao. It is, then, clear that we are here “engaged on a different quest from that followed by either Buddhists or Hindus” (2002: 85). For them, although very valuable, nature is just nature, part of the illusion of our lives. The experience of *moksha*, or *nirvana* (or *satori* in *Zen Buddhism*), is ultimately independent of anything which the material world provides, and could also be gained, for example, by facing a wall. For Taoists, however, the relationship with nature is at the very heart of the mystical experience. It is as far removed as one can imagine from the dominant Western attitude to the natural world, as exemplified in the newspaper headlines after the first successful climbing of Mt Everest, which proclaimed: ‘Everest Conquered!’ Edmund Hillary from New Zealand and his Nepalese-born guide Tenzing Norgay, reached the top of Mt Everest on May 29, 1953. Later, on the descent to camp, when met by climbing colleague George Lowe, Hillary apparently reported the achievement using these words: “Well, George, we knocked the bastard off” (Gambino, 2008). A Taoist would see this attitude “as typical human conceit, preferring to describe the event along the lines of permission to visit the mountain peak for a brief period before the guests scuttled off back down to the safety of the lower levels” (Billington, 2002: 86).

In a nutshell, we could say that Taoists seek enlightenment through what heaven and earth provide, rejoicing in their glories and discovering through them the deepest mysteries of the universe. So, it is seen as unnatural to deny oneself that which is both health-giving and enjoyable. One of the sure indicators of being in harmony with the Tao is this feeling of joy that emerges when one is at ease with oneself. For Taoism, the wise person is one who accepts his or her place in the natural order by co-operating with it, gaining, thus, the fulfilment of living in harmony with the Tao.



After having explored some of the basic tenets of three of the major religions of the Far East, let us now turn our attention to the presence of Eastern influence in America (and the Western world in general) and how this presence is slowly, but steadily, increasing while, at the same time, undergoing processes of Westernisation. It appears in such different areas as cinema (the influence of Bruce Lee and martial arts films, like *The Karate Kid* (1984)), cartoons ('Manga' style, Pokemon, Hayao Miyazaki's animation films, such as *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Spirited Away* (2001)); sports (judo, karate and martial arts in general); art and decoration (ikebana, bonsai, Feng-shui: the art of placing objects in an auspicious way); medicine (acupuncture and Chinese / Ayurvedic medicine, Jin-Shin-Jytsu); anti-stress techniques (yoga, pranayama's breathing techniques); massage (Japanese shiatsu, Ayurvedic massage, Thai massage); entertainment (Sudoku); food (Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Thai, Korean, or Vietnamese); and literature: above all the classics from the three traditions and, recently, those by such major figures as the Dalai Lama, Krishnamurti, Yogananda and, very especially, its influence on self-help literature, which will be my main focus in Part Three of this dissertation.



*Symbol of Yin and Yang (Tai-chi-tu) within a Pakua octagon. In traditional Chinese culture, this symbol is used to understand the energies inherent in someone's house, apartment or office.*

### **2.2.2 Eastern Concepts in America: New Thought, New Age and Academia**

*There are no coincidences. Everything around you has spiritual meaning, and spiritual lessons to teach you. You are meant to be here, and are always exactly where you need to be to learn from what confronts you*

Deepak Chopra

In spite of the obvious geographical, linguistic, and cultural differences, there has been intercourse between East and West throughout the ages (Garratt, 1937; Burn, 1962). There is, for instance, evidence of early trade by sea between the Phoenicians of the Levant and Western India as early as 975 BC (Garratt, 1937: 1), and, as we know, with merchandise there invariably may come an exchange, not only of goods like jewellery, pottery, and woven materials, but of technology, language and ideas, as well. The powerful Persian Empire stretched from the Mediterranean to the Indus, and included both Greeks and Indians among its subjects (1937: 2); this made the conditions for the interchange of ideas between India and the West more favourable. Pythagoras, for example, born around 580 BC on the cosmopolitan island of Samos, travelled widely, studying the esoteric teaching of the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Brahmans, and was clearly influenced by India and by Egypt (1937: 5). We know now that almost all the religious, philosophical, and mathematical theories taught by the Pythagoreans, were known in India in the sixth century BC (1937: 5). There are many parallelisms between Hindu and Greek philosophies. For instance, the well-known simile of the Cave, with which the seventh book of Plato's *Republic* opens, reminds us of the Vedanta doctrine of *Maya* or Illusion, as we can see in the *Mandukya Upanishad*:

If the phenomenal universe were real, then certainly it would disappear. The universe of duality which is cognized is mere illusion (*maya*); Non-duality alone is the Supreme Reality.  
(Chapter I, 17)

Or:

If a thing is non-existent both in the beginning and in the end, it is necessarily non-existent in the present. The objects that we see are really like illusions; still they are regarded as real. (Chapter II, 6)

What is ever existent appears to pass into birth through maya, yet from the standpoint of Reality it does not do so. But he who thinks this passing into birth is real asserts, as a matter of fact, that what is born passes into birth again. (Chapter III: 27)

As mentioned earlier, from this period onwards, the evidence of a significant engagement with Oriental thought can be found in the works of numerous Western philosophers and writers, who responded to the slow penetration of Eastern ideas through the translation of texts like the *Vedas* or the *Dhammapada* at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Miller, 1994: 556). Out of all philosophers, Schopenhauer is often considered to be the first modern Western philosopher of any note to have studied oriental philosophies deeply and attempted an integration of his work with Eastern ways of thinking (Magee, 1999: 143). Influenced by Kant and Plato, Schopenhauer is renowned for his pessimism. He claimed that as individuals, “we are the unfortunate products of our own epistemological making, and that within the world of appearances that we structure, we are fated to fight with other individuals, and to want more than we can ever have” (Wicks, 2007). Our world is a world of constant struggle, where each individual thing strives against every other individual thing; the result is a permanent ‘war of all against all’, similar to what philosopher Thomas Hobbes<sup>34</sup> characterised as the state of nature. In Schopenhauer’s view, the world of daily life is essentially violent and frustrating; it is a world that will never resolve itself into a condition of greater peace and tranquillity. According to his biographer, Arthur Hübscher, Schopenhauer was deeply affected by the poverty and cruelty that he witnessed in the Europe of the 1800s, which led him to write these lines:

In my seventeenth year, without any academic schooling, I was gripped by the sorrow of life, as was Buddha in his youth when he saw illness, age, pain, and

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<sup>34</sup> English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) considered that life in its natural state is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes, 1885: 460).

death. The truth that spoke loud and clear from the world overcame the Jewish dogmas that had been inculcated into me, and the result for me was that this world could not be the work of any being that was all-good, but must be that of a devil, who had called creatures into this world to feast himself on their torment. (in Hübscher, 1967: 19)

There is a remarkable correspondence, at least in broad terms, “between some of the central Schopenhauerian doctrines and Buddhism: notably in the views that empirical existence is suffering, that suffering originates in desires, and that salvation can be attained by the extinction of desires” (Janaway, 1999: 28-29). These three Buddhist tenets are mirrored closely in the essential structure of his doctrine. However, Schopenhauer claimed that he arrived at his theories *before* he was acquainted with Eastern thought, “emphasising how gratifying it was to find his own views arrived at *independently* by the religion he had come to respect more than any other” (1999: 27). Rather than finding solace in meditation, though, Schopenhauer affirmed that only artistic contemplation is able to lift one out of the mere empirical consciousness to a clear vision of underlying realities.

In the literary scene, on the other hand, a considerable number of writers, among them “Shakespeare, Dryden, Southey, Campbell, Moore, Shelley, and Wordsworth were all attracted by the glamour of an unknown India; a land of romantic dynasties, of luxury and exotic beauty, and of mystic religions” (Garratt, 1937: 410). And, of course, as mentioned above, in the Introduction, Transcendentalist writers Emerson and Thoreau were also fascinated by Eastern philosophy, and were seminal influences in what was popularly called the New Thought movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

At this point, it would be useful to take a closer look at the eminently American movement of New Thought and also at its 20<sup>th</sup> century development, known as New Age. Their important adoption and adaptation of various Eastern ideas and practices is unquestionable and will be dealt with in this section and also in Part Three of this dissertation. As mentioned earlier, New Thought was a movement that was created during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by a number of spiritual thinkers, philosophers and individuals who shared a set of metaphysical and Eastern beliefs concerning the effects of positive thinking, healing, creative

visualisation and the power of the mind (Anker, 1999a: 147). The movement emerged in a variety of religious denominations and churches, particularly the Unity Church, Religious Science, and the Church of Divine Science (1999a: 212). Some of its principles, expressed by the *International New Thought Alliance* (2007), affirm that people are all spiritual beings, dwelling in a spiritual universe that is governed by spiritual law, and that in alignment with spiritual law, it is possible to heal, prosper, and harmonise. According to them, the highest spiritual principle is “loving one another unconditionally (...) and teaching and healing one another”. They consider it is vital to be aware of one’s thoughts, since people’s “mental states are carried forward into manifestation”<sup>35</sup> and can become experiences in daily living. In 1910 New Thought author Wallace Wattles wrote in his best-selling book *The Science of Getting Rich* about the technique for carrying into manifestation whatever one focuses on, affirming that he obtained his philosophy from the Hindu Monistic theory of the Universe ([1910] 2007: 3).

From its very beginnings, the main tenets of New Thought were that people, through the constructive use of their minds, could attain freedom, power, health, prosperity, molding their bodies and all the circumstances of their lives (Lewis, 1992: 16-18). Even today, New Thought embraces a creed by which individuals are free to relate directly to God (Anderson, 2003: 2). Some people describe it as a “do-it-yourself religion” (2003: 3) with its emphasis not on *religiosity*, but on *spirituality*. ‘Intensely practical’, it is “the application of one’s beliefs to solve the problems of daily living” (2003: 3). Originally, New Thought started dealing with problems of sickness and then it rapidly expanded to include issues such as lack of money or difficulties in relationships with other people. American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1919) referred to New Thought as the religion of ‘healthy-mindedness’, and regarded it as “the American people’s only decidedly original contribution to the systematic philosophy of life” (Anderson, 2003: 4). As we have seen in Part I, its principles underlie nearly all of the American success literature of the past century and more, as manifested in students of success from Orison Swett Marden, to Napoleon Hill

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<sup>35</sup> Website of the *International New Thought Alliance* <<http://newthoughtalliance.org/about.htm>> (accessed November, 2009).

and Stephen Covey. Although critics at the time complained that New Thought did not insist on suffering as something necessary for salvation, the religion of ‘healthy-mindedness’ has always been “an upbeat, positive, optimistic way of life” (2003: 4).

Interestingly, nowadays, the largest New Thought group in the world, called Seicho-No-Ie, is of Japanese origin. It was founded by Rev. Masaharu Taniguchi in 1930,<sup>36</sup> mixing Christian and Eastern elements, with over eighteen centres in eleven countries. Its main theme, again, is that:

...each of us can reach spiritual fulfilment when we come to realize the God consciousness within us. Our lives are meant to be harmonious, joyful, and fulfilling in all aspects. Through the power of the mind, we can greatly improve our environment and physical condition by replacing our negativism with positive thoughts and beliefs. We can become awakened to the true divinity which lies within us through a method of prayerful meditation called Shinsokan.<sup>37</sup>

Hinduism had entered the United States in at least three distinct waves. The first wave was almost purely literary: in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a group of scholar-officials working for the British East India Company translated some of the more important Hindu religious scriptures into English. The ideas contained in these texts directly influenced the Transcendentalist movement (as is evident in such compositions as Emerson’s essay “Over-Soul”), and, both directly and indirectly, influenced New Thought (Lewis, 1992: 48). The presence of Hindu scriptures translated into English was also at least partially responsible for inspiring Madame Blavatsky<sup>38</sup> and Colonel

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<sup>36</sup> For more information on the Seicho-No-Ie movement, see <<http://www.snitruth.org>> (accessed November, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Quotation taken from Seicho-No-Ie’s website <<http://www.snitruth.org/teachings.html>> (accessed November, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) was a “Russian spiritualist, author, and cofounder of the Theosophical Society to promote theosophy, a pantheistic philosophical-religious system. At the age of 17, Helena Hahn married Nikifor V. Blavatsky, a Russian military officer and provincial vice-governor, but they separated after a few months. She became interested in occultism and spiritualism and for many years traveled extensively throughout Asia, Europe, and the United States; she also claimed to have spent several years in India and Tibet” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica.com*).

Olcott's visit to India in 1878, reinforcing the existing Theosophical tendency to draw inspiration from this country (Nethercot, 1963: 15).

The second wave was set in motion by a small number of Hindu religious teachers who came into the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Especially noteworthy was Swami Vivekananda, who visited the United States in 1893 and who was the most popular speaker at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Vivekananda eventually gathered enough support to establish the Vedanta Society in New York, in 1894. This organisation has had an outstanding influence in the US, mainly because of its publishing activities (Rambachan, 1990: 331). Another important Indian religious teacher to enter the United States half a century later was Swami Paramahansa Yogananda. His extremely popular *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1947) has inspired thousands of Westerners to undertake Eastern spiritual disciplines, and the ongoing influence of his organisation, the 'Self-Realization Fellowship', is still growing very actively today.<sup>39</sup>

Thirdly, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new wave of Indian gurus found a receptive audience among young Americans seeking religious inspiration from non-traditional sources. These Indian spiritual teachers were the most numerous and the most influential ones, although the spiritual subculture of the 1960s and 1970s also drew on Buddhists, Sufis, Native Americans and other non-Hindu groups (Lewis, 1992: 49). This was the setting for the emergence of the so called New Age<sup>40</sup> movement – a large-scale, decentralised spiritual subculture that drew its principal inspiration from sources outside of the official Judeo-Christian tradition – which propelled the interest for everything Eastern as never before. While this subculture was in many respects a continuation of a pre-existing occult-metaphysical tradition, “the addition to its ranks of a sizable number of former counterculturists in the postsixties period meant that metaphysical religion was no longer a marginal phenomenon: by the eighties, it had become an integral part of a new, truly pluralistic ‘mainstream’” (1992: ix).

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<sup>39</sup> For information on the Self Realization Fellowship, by Paramahansa Yogananda see their website: <<http://www.yogananda-srf.org/>> (accessed May, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> The term New Age was already used by William Blake as early as 1809, when he described a belief in a spiritual and artistic 'New Age' in his preface to *Milton: a Poem* (1982: 95).

The New Age movement absorbed New Thought themes, drawing most of its inspiration from Theosophy, Spiritualism, and Eastern religions (1992: 18). It arose, “not so much as a new religion, but as a new revivalist religious impulse directed toward the esoteric/ metaphysical/ Eastern groups and to the mystical strain in all religions” (1992: 19). Said to be lacking a cohesive social or political agenda, the New Age movement spread mainly at a popular level of society, and has been criticised as naive on ‘evil’ and ‘injustice’, offering ‘positive thinking’ as a remedy for everything (Hull, 1993: 132). Some deem that the majority of activities with which it is identified are probably overly focused on personal growth and self-help, “without a complementary emphasis on service to others and the serious engagement of issues” (1993: 132).

Yet, for many people associated with the New Age movement, the renewed sense of engagement with the spiritual side of creation, in an almost Taoist way, and the focus on the interdependence of humanity and nature, encouraged a profound commitment to work on environmental issues. Some began to refer to the New Age as the ‘ecological age’ or as the age of the ‘Earth Community’ (Hull, 1993: 137). Moreover, several New Age communities<sup>41</sup> in America (Esalen, in California), in Europe (Findhorn Foundation, in Scotland), Australia (3HO Foundation, in New South Wales), and India (Auroville, near Ponducherry) “undertook experiments in sustainable agriculture, appropriate technology, reforestation, species protection, and pollution cleanup, and also promoted environmental issues through educational and public awareness programs” (1993: 137). Although these efforts may have remained on a relatively small scale, they do point to a significant way in which the New Age emphasis on the sacramentality of nature served as the motivation for pioneering environmental movements. It was the time (1961) of the emergence of organisations

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<sup>41</sup> This is the official website of *Esalen*, the New Age Community in America where Abraham Maslow used to teach: <<http://www.esalen.org/>> (accessed August, 2009). In Europe there is the New Age community of Findhorn, in Scotland. This is the *Findhorn Foundation* official website: <<http://www.findhorn.org/index.php?tz=-60>> (accessed August, 2009). In Australia we can find the *Mysticplanet* website featuring the Australian 3HO Foundation and other New Age communities and centres: <<http://mysticplanet.com/AUSTRALI.HTM>> (accessed August, 2009). In India the New Age community of *Auroville* also has its own website: <<http://www.auroville.org/>> (accessed August, 2009).



such as World Wildlife Fund (WWF),<sup>42</sup> created by a small but influential group of scientists, naturalists, business and political leaders; and of Greenpeace, the world famous non-governmental environmental organisation, founded in 1971.

According to Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy we are witnessing a changing definition of the self, from the notion of the separate, contained, and competitive individual which has dominated Western society to what she calls the “ecological self or the eco-self, coextensive with other beings and the life of the planet”. She regards this awakening consciousness of the self as a unique part of an interdependent world as “the most fascinating and hopeful development of our time”. In her words, “This is hardly new to our species. In the past poets and mystics have been speaking and writing about these ideas, but not people on the barricades agitating for social change” (1990: 55). Interestingly, as we will see in Part Three of this dissertation, self-help literature has exponents of this ‘awakening consciousness’ or ‘eco-self’ and also of its opposite, that is, the self-centred, ego-driven self, so typical of Western society and capitalism in general.

We can see that the concept of New Age can be interpreted in many different ways and is far from being a neutral term. It was popularised by the American mass media to describe the alternative spiritual subculture – including practices such as meditation, channelling, crystal healing, astral projection, psychic experience, holistic health, simple living, vegetarianism and environmentalism, as well as belief in reincarnation, Indigo children<sup>43</sup> and extraterrestrial beings, among many others (Pike,

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<sup>42</sup> For more information, you can take a look at the *WWF* website (accessed September, 2009): <<http://www.worldwildlife.org/who/History/index.html?linklocation=topnavdropdownmenu>>. And this is the *Greenpeace* official website: <<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/about/history>> (accessed August, 2009) As an example, let me mention the first ‘success story’ of the founders of Greenpeace: “motivated by their vision of a green and peaceful world” they resolved “to ‘bear witness’ to US underground nuclear testing at Amchitka, a tiny island off the West Coast of Alaska, which is one of the world’s most earthquake-prone regions”. Thanks to their initiative, “Nuclear testing on Amchitka ended that same year, and the island was later declared a bird sanctuary”. This was the beginning of an intense pro-environmental trajectory, still very active in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, aided by new technologies. From the *Greenpeace* website: <<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/about/history>> (accessed August, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Indigo is a label given to children who are claimed to possess special, unusual and/or supernatural traits or abilities. For more information you can refer to *The Indigo Children Website*: <[www.indigochild.com](http://www.indigochild.com)> (accessed September, 2009).

2004: 27-28, 63, 72, 149). But it seems to be very difficult to draw the line between what is and what is not New Age. According to some authors (Pike, 2004; Ferguson, 1993), several key moments helped to raise public awareness of this subculture, among them, the publication of Linda Goodman's best selling astrology books *Sun Signs* (1968) and *Love Signs* (1978); *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (1967) with the opening song "Aquarius" and its famous line "This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius"; the broadcast of Shirley MacLaine's television mini-series *Out on a Limb* (1987); and the Harmonic Convergence (1987)<sup>44</sup> organized by José Argüelles in Sedona, Arizona and in Mount Shasta, California (Pike, 2004: 170).

For many, the term New Age is a highly charged phrase that "draws shudders, denials, charges of scam, flim-flam, and quackery, not only from rationalists and materialists but also from some of those spiritual and holistic radicals who have witnessed the New Age movement's passage from 1960s counter-culture to 1990s commercialised counter-culture" (Redden, 1999). And for conservative Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, the New Age movement is often considered a 'satanic' threat, more dangerous than naive to their eyes (Pike, 2004: 160). In spite of there being a whole market of New Age products (from books, to music, art, crystals and chimes), some authors comment that there is an idealistic emphasis among New Agers on living in a simple sustainable way that attempts to reduce an individual's or society's use of the Earth's natural resources and shuns the consumer society (Satin, 1979: 199). But, what seems to be obvious is that underneath the surprising range of ideas, programs, and therapies identified as New Age, there runs a deeper transformative current marked by two important convictions: on the one hand, there is the belief that this time in history is unique, marked by a radical change in how we understand human nature and our interdependent relationship with our environment. And on the other hand, there is the notion that if there is to be a viable future at all, then our social, political, and religious institutions must reform themselves in the light of this new relationship (Hull, 1993: 123). The New Age movement, no doubt, represented (and still represents) in itself "an important response to the perceived failure of mainstream values and

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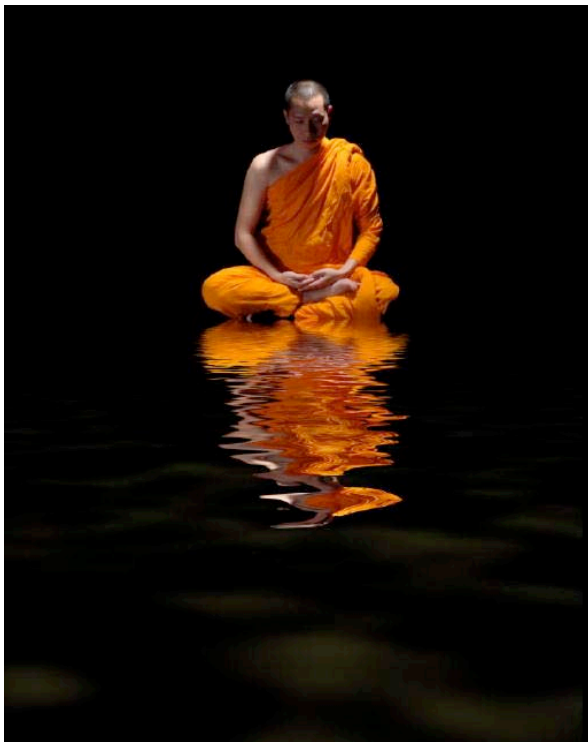
<sup>44</sup> The Harmonic Convergence is an astrological term applied to a planetary alignment which occurred on August 16 to 17 1987. There are numerous websites which give information about it, see *Harmonic Convergence*: <[http://rahelio.homestead.com/Harmonic\\_Convergence.html](http://rahelio.homestead.com/Harmonic_Convergence.html)> (accessed November, 2009).

institutions by many people who were seeking answers to the issues affecting both personal life and the fate of the planet” (1993: 128). Its main message is its hope in transformation. It is, of course, this hope of the complete transformation of society that gives the movement its name. As we will see in Part Three of this dissertation, many exponents of the New Age (among them numerous authors of a large variety of self-help books) experienced themselves a personal transformation which, they claim, changed their lives. Also, most of the various New Age activities aim at facilitating personal transformation through such diverse practices as body work, spiritual disciplines, natural diets, contact with nature and renewed human relationships.

But if personal transformation on a large scale is possible, argues the New Age, then social and cultural transformation is also possible (Lewis, 1992: 19). Probably in an overly ingenuous way, many New Agers believe that the world “can be changed from the crisis-ridden, polluted, warlike, and resource-limited world in which we live into a New Age of love, joy, peace, abundance, and harmony” (1992: 19). Various New Agers have proposed quite different mechanisms for accomplishing this worldwide transformation. Some of them, such as Ruth Montgomery (1965), look to the possibility of a world-wide catastrophe, while others see an almost magical change occurring as a critical mass of individuals accept the New Age perspective, opening up to a ‘shift in consciousness’. According to these writers, a change in consciousness is not only going to bring about self-growth, but also ensure planetary survival (Pike, 2004: 149; Sutcliffe, 1986). Yet a third group sees the New Age becoming manifest through the efforts of individuals in this generation to further New Age values in every arena of life. This latter group “has led in the alignment of New Agers with the larger environmental, peace, alternative technology, and feminist movements” (Lewis, 1992: 19). Finally, there are also some who have described the New Age as a values-based sociopolitical movement (Ferguson, 1993; McLaughlin, 1994). But, clearly, one of the characteristics of the movement is that it took the message and the fresh vitality of Eastern religions and began to articulate the vision of a transformed people and world. For Lewis, author of *Perspectives on the New Age* (1992), there was no better symbol of the movement than Richard Alpert, who had almost been destroyed by drugs in the 1960s. In a state of despair he turned to an Indian guru, Neem Karoli Baba for help, and found in him the

agent who transformed his life. Years later, he returned to the US from India “as a new person, Baba Ram Dass, a most articulate exemplar of the transformation he advocated” (1992: 20).

The beginning of the New Age period, around the 1960s, was the time when terms previously practically invisible within the Western world such as ‘guru, karma, mantra, mandala, yoga, reincarnation, chakra, nirvana, yin / yang, martial arts, tai-chi, reiki, feng-shui, qi-gong, tantra, ayurveda or acupuncture’ started becoming more and more present and more used in everyday life. Just as the Buddha did in the sixth century



BC, exponents of New Thought and later New Agers essentially affirmed that “we create our lives with our thoughts” (Anderson, 2003: 3), and with this premise, the Western movements seem to be drawing from Eastern religion, but in fact, often interpret the words differently, basically by teaching how to create the world one wants, using one’s imagination (Lewis, 1992: 18). It is important to notice this fundamental difference between the Eastern and the Western belief systems. While New Thought and New Age teachings

emphasise achieving what one wants in life by directing or aligning one’s thoughts with those things, the Buddha’s message might be summarised as the need to free oneself from identifying with one’s thoughts in order to overcome suffering; that is, it emphasises observing and analysing one’s thoughts with detachment, to free oneself from the desires and aversions that can be implicit in them, instead of using one’s thoughts to create one’s reality. While Buddhism is about superseding desire, New Thought, and also New Age teachings, seem to reinforce desires. The same can be said in terms of daily ‘practice’: New Thought and New Age teachings emphasise positive thinking, and creating our lives by using visualisation and ‘vision boards’ (Byrne, 2006:

89), or treasure maps (collage of images, pictures and affirmations of your dreams and desires) that, presumably, will help people manifest the lives they want. By contrast, Buddhist teachings emphasise mindfulness and acceptance of what *is*, instead of a constant focus on outcome, so that one can be free of suffering right now, not at some future point when one has the life one wants.

In fact, the story of the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama, shows the futility of trying to attain happiness through the fulfilment of desire. Growing up, the Buddha's every desire was fulfilled by his father, in the hopes that his spiritual nature would never awaken. But this, we are told, did not lead him to happiness. It was only when he left home, engaged in extreme renunciation, and then gave that up too that he found enlightenment and the inner peace that he was looking for (Levine, 2000: 9-12).

As we saw in section 1.5.2 of this dissertation, and as will be expanded upon in Part Three, the emphasis of New Thought and New Age on positive thinking to achieve one's goals is deeply embedded in American history and can be found in many areas, from religious sermons, where evangelical mega-churches preach the good news that you only have to want something to get it, because God wants you to 'prosper' in life (Anker, 1999a: 21; Ehrenreich, 2009: 123), to the medical profession, where positive thinking is often prescribed for its apparent health benefits (Siegel, 1986: 180).

From a Cultural Studies perspective, my main aim, as mentioned in the Introduction, is to analyse how ideas, concepts, and words get adopted and adapted, and how they eventually spread or diffuse from person to person and from culture to culture. So, let us take a look now at the academic world, which will help us understand how these ideas and concepts have penetrated and inspired some of the mainstream thought patterns of our times. At an academic level, the interest in Asian languages and the proliferation of departments on Eastern or Asian Studies started at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>45</sup> Also in the departments of Psychology, the inspiration of Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism was evident in teachers such as Abraham Maslow, founder of Humanistic

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<sup>45</sup> As an example, see *Harvard University for Eastern Studies*: <<http://harvarddealc.org/about.html>>; or the *University of Berkeley*: <<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/AsiaExhibit/harvest.html>> (accessed August, 2009).

Psychology and widely known for his conceptualisation of a “hierarchy of human needs” (Maslow, 1954), or transpersonal psychologists such as Stanislav Grof, Anthony Sutich and Ken Wilber (Hastings, 1999: 194). Western Psychology and Psychiatry had been dominated by Behaviourism and Psychoanalysis. Yet, in spite of their great contributions, by focusing on simple, measurable behaviour (Behaviourism) and on pathology (Psychoanalysis), they had “reduced or pathologized crucial dimensions of human experience such as spirituality and alternate states of consciousness to neurotic immaturities or random neuronal fireworks” (Walsh, 1994: 115), overlooking, according to Maslow, a whole section of society: that of the healthy people. Increasingly interested in psychological health as opposed to pathology, Maslow (1968) expressed in a famous statement that “to oversimplify the matter, it is as if Freud supplied to us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half” (1968: 5). Unlike Freud, Maslow wanted to know what constituted positive mental health.

Inspired by Taoism, which claims that people do not obtain personal meaning or pleasure by seeking material possessions, Maslow and other humanistic psychologists in the 1950-1960s believed that people have a strong desire to realise their full potential, to reach a level of ‘self-actualization’ (Walsh, 1994: 115). Thus, he created his now popular pyramid as a visual aid to explain his theory (see section 1.5.3). When a human being ascends the steps of the pyramid the journey goes from the two first levels which are important to the physical survival of the person (food, water and touch, followed by security and stability), to the third level of needs which is psychological in nature. Once individuals have basic nutrition, shelter and safety they attempt to accomplish more. When the physical needs are taken care of, people are ready to share themselves with others through love and belonging. The fourth level is achieved when individuals feel comfortable with what they have accomplished. This is called the esteem level, the level of success and status.

The top of the pyramid, self-actualization, occurs when individuals reach a state of harmony and understanding. What Maslow discovered was that his exceptionally healthy subjects – ‘self-actualizers’ as he called them – tended to have peak

experiences. That is, profound, spontaneous and ecstatic moments of love, understanding, happiness, or rapture, very similar to those mystical experiences that have been widely reported across centuries and cultures (Moss, 1999: 29). Initially it was thought that these kind of peak experiences were inevitably spontaneous, brief, and virtually overwhelming. They were regarded as the high points in people's lives, and it was doubted if people could stand them for more than brief periods. Therefore, it was somewhat of a shock when the early pioneers of Humanistic Psychology "turned their attention Eastward and found that Asian psychologies, philosophies, religions and contemplative disciplines contained detailed accounts, not just of peak experiences, but of whole families of peak experiences and systematic techniques to induce and sustain them" (Walsh, 1994: 115). Here was an indication that psychological health and potential might include possibilities undreamed of by mainstream Psychology up to that point. In the past, experiences such as the ones mentioned, were generally the province of religions.

In Psychology these phenomena were treated as "exaggerated developments of normal processes, such as fantasy, or as by-products of pathological processes, such as migraine phenomena, organic brain disorders, or psychosis" (Hastings, 1999: 198). In contrast, Maslow regarded transpersonal experiences as natural and healthy, rather than pathological. Maslow's election in 1968 as president of the American Psychological Association "signalled a growing respect for this new humanistic viewpoint within the mainstream of psychology" (Moss, 1999: 32). Just as Maslow was a key figure in the establishment of Humanistic Psychology, he played a central role in the emergence of what he called the Fourth Force, Transpersonal Psychology. In his own words, he saw the dawning of a "Fourth Psychology, transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interest, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like" (Maslow, 1968: iv). As Maslow continued his research on self-actualizing persons, this led him to explore transcendent experiences and transcendent values that did not easily fit into either the Humanistic or the mainstream Psychology paradigms. His initial assumption, probably based on his training in classical Psychology, "was that peak experiences and metavalues were a part of the biologically based personality". But later, Maslow "recognized that in peak experiences

the universe was perceived in a manner reaching beyond biological needs, and individuals went beyond their personal interests to be altruistic, to engage in service to others, and to transcend the individual personality” (Hastings, 1999: 192).

This meant that “the self was not the ultimate touchstone” (1999: 192) anymore. Thus, Transpersonal Psychology arose to explore all these new possibilities. Taking its cue from Eastern philosophies, it investigated such matters as meditation, higher levels of consciousness, and even para-psychological phenomena (Walsh, 1994: 117). In 1979 the International Transpersonal Association (ITA) was established by Stanislav Grof and other professionals to further the growing international interest (Hastings, 1999: 194). It should be noted that Transpersonal Psychology is now taught at universities all over the US.<sup>46</sup> It recognises that certain experiences of mystics, meditators, and religious devotees have transpersonal qualities – that is, they bring the self into a state that transcends individual ego boundaries (1999: 198). From his research and his observations of ‘non-ordinary’ states of consciousness, occurring through therapeutic techniques and in psychedelic sessions, Grof noted “that there is a very wide range of phenomena in which the usual boundaries of the structures of ‘ordinary’ consciousness (time, space, patterns of thinking and sensory perception, sense of self, and so forth) are extended or transcended” (Rothberg, 1989: 5).

Interestingly, rather than using Eastern terminology and because of a lack of academic Western terminology for this kind of state, Dr. Grof labelled the non-ordinary states of consciousness such as meditative, mystical, or psychedelic experiences with the word *holotropic*, from the Greek ‘holos’, meaning wholeness, and ‘tropos’, which is the act of ‘trepein’, meaning ‘moving towards’. That is, ‘moving towards wholeness’<sup>47</sup>. And *hylotropic* from Greek ‘hylo’ meaning ‘wood, matter’ referring to “the normal, everyday experience of consensus reality” (Grof, 1988: 38). Grof connects the

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<sup>46</sup> See *Directory of Graduate Programs in Humanistic-Transpersonal Psychology in North America*: <[http://www.ahpweb.org/aboutahp/hum\\_edu.html](http://www.ahpweb.org/aboutahp/hum_edu.html)>; Master’s degree on Transpersonal psychology, at *Kona University*, American Pacific University (Hawaii): <<http://www.ampac.edu/>>; *San Diego University for Integrative Studies*: <<http://www.sduis.edu/>> (accessed August, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Here you can see an interview where Stanislav Grof defines the holotropic mode of consciousness: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA1hDI5IiJQ>> (accessed June, 2009).



*hylotropic* to the Hindu conception of the separate, individual, illusory self and the *holotropic* to the Hindu conception of *Atman-Brahman*, the divine, true nature of the self (1988: 38). Grof believes that the *holotropic* mode has been uniquely de-emphasised in the modern West. Similar to Hindu thought, the transpersonal paradigm holds that “we are not separate from one another nor from sources of higher love, insight, and being” (Hastings, 1999: 206). Humanistic and transpersonal psychologists focused on the study of optimal human functioning and developed theories along these lines.<sup>48</sup>

Contrary to what some people might think, as Dr. Tel Ben-Shahar of Harvard University informs us, for over one hundred years, Psychology in the United States since William James has mainly focused on the negative, rather than on the positive.<sup>49</sup> Psychologists David Myers and Ed Diener conducted a study in which they analysed articles published between 1967 and the year 1994, and which were indexed in *Psychological Abstracts*. Their aim was to determine the number of articles on different topics and they found out that the ratio between negative and positive articles written was 17/1 in favour of the negative, as shown in the following chart (Myers and Diener, 1996: 54):

Anger	5,099	Joy	405
Anxiety	36,851	Happiness	2,389
Depression	46,380	Life satisfaction	2,340

After this study, Martin Seligman and other members of the American Psychological Association decided to shift the ratio, that is, to start focusing on what works, instead of on what doesn't work, without abandoning the studies on anxiety and

<sup>48</sup> Approximately at the same time, another movement was getting underway, one inspired by some of the approaches that Maslow disliked: “computers and information processing, as well as very rationalistic theories such as Piaget’s cognitive development theory and Noam Chomsky’s linguistics” (Boeree, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Here you can see a video conference by Dr. Tel Ben-Shahar on Positive Psychology, the science of happiness, October 4, 2006: <<http://forum-network.org/lecture/positive-psychology-science-happiness>> (accessed April, 2009).

depression, but limiting its extensive research, focusing on strengths as well as on deficiencies (Seligman, 2002: 6). Martin Seligman (1991) convincingly demonstrated how ‘wrong’ thinking can greatly contribute to suffering. He described attitudes of pessimism, in which pessimists respond to setbacks by thinking in universals (‘They always criticise me’; ‘I never have any time’) or sweeping generalisations (‘I’m not good enough’; ‘Nobody can help me’). He also categorised negative thoughts into three types: *permanence* (‘I’ll never amount to anything in my life’), *pervasiveness* (‘Everything is always so difficult’), and *personal indictment* (‘I’m a terrible father’). He characterised the opposite kind of thinking as optimism (1991: 3-71). According to Positive Psychology, the optimistic thinker

focuses on the particular situation, sees it as a problem to be dealt with, and is aware of the external contributions to the event. Consider, for example, a college sophomore receiving his first failing grade on an exam. A pessimistic response is: “I just can’t do this work” (*permanent*); “I’m always doing a lousy job” (*pervasive*); “I’m not good enough for this school” (*personal indictment*). By contrast, an optimistic response is: “This is the first time I’ve failed an exam” (*limited in time*), “I’ll talk to the professor to find out what I can do to improve” (*focused, solution-oriented*); “I shouldn’t have let Bill pull me away from studying last night” (*externals considered*). (Levine, 2000: 150)

Seligman also demonstrated that pessimistic thinkers tend to be less successful in careers, are more likely to become clinically depressed, and also tend to be in poorer physical health (Seligman, 1991: 95-184). His pioneering research has led to a renewed interest in the ‘positive mental attitude’ approach, providing a scientific foundation for the study of human happiness and optimal functionality, thus adding a positive side to the predominantly negative discipline of Psychology. There are now departments of Positive Psychology in many universities in the United States<sup>50</sup> as well as studies on the ‘science of happiness’. According to some authors, positive thinking or ‘looking at the bright side of life’ has nowhere taken firmer root than within the business community, where the refusal even to consider negative outcomes – like mortgage defaults –

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<sup>50</sup> Here we can see the websites of some American universities and their extensive interest in Positive Psychology: *University of Berkeley*: <<http://extension.berkeley.edu/cat/course2140.html>> and <[http://div17pospsych.com/positive\\_psychology\\_members.htm](http://div17pospsych.com/positive_psychology_members.htm)> (accessed April, 2009); *Harvard University*: <<http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k14790>> (accessed April, 2009); *University of Pennsylvania*: <<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/>> (accessed April, 2009); *Claremont Graduate University, CA*: <<http://www.cgu.edu/positivepsych>> (accessed April, 2009).

contributed directly to the current economic crisis (Ehrenreich, 2009: 177-195; McGee, 2005: 41).

As is obvious from the previous sentence, there are also many detractors of positive thinking. In her book *How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (2009), Barbara Ehrenreich explores the insistence upon optimism as a cultural and national trait, showing how deeply positive thinking is embedded in American history and how crippling it can be as a habit of mind. She discovers its symbiotic relationship with American capitalism and how poverty, unemployment, relationship, and even obesity problems are being marketed as obstacles that can be overcome with the right (read: positive) mindset (Ehrenreich, 2009: 97-98). After having been diagnosed with breast cancer (2009: 18), the author criticises the burden that positive thinking can have on people who are not lucky enough to enjoy a relatively easy life, such as slaves, refugees, workers who have been laid off, or terminally ill people. In her opinion, if all that stands between you and the good life is a positive attitude, as Positive Psychology posits, then the only person to blame if your life isn't working is yourself (2009: 21). And this is an even greater burden to carry on top of one's misery, leading to self-blame and a morbid preoccupation with trying to stamp out negative thoughts. Ehrenreich goes on to expose the downside of America's taste for positive thinking, affirming that on a national level, it has brought an era of irrational optimism resulting in disaster (2009: 147-177).

One could certainly expand upon this point of view, supported by many other scholars (Lasch, 1979; Albanese, 1981; Lichterman, 1992; Hochschild, 1995; Hulbert, 2003; McGee, 2005; Stephen, 2005; Johnson, 2006), but my main aim here is to highlight how Eastern thought has penetrated self-help literature and influenced American culture in many different ways. As we have seen, the Buddhist search for happiness by freeing oneself from suffering through becoming the observer of one's thoughts and thereby reaching higher states of consciousness, inspired academic research in the 1960s through Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology. The word *holotropic* was coined to describe states like *samadhi*, *moksha*, *nirvana*, *satori* or the expression '*sat-chit-ananda*', a Hindu term for happiness which literally means 'Being-

consciousness-bliss'. The New Thought and New Age interpretation of the Eastern focus on mantras to achieve the desired goal (more about this in the following section) using affirmations and positive thinking is an intrinsic part of American popular culture, as we have seen in Part One of this dissertation, and is also a basic tenet of Positive Psychology. For positive psychologists, "Happiness is not the negation of unhappiness". Among its many benefits, they claim, it has been proven that a positive attitude strengthens our immune system, making us more resilient when dealing with the negative. Dr Tel Ben-Shahar of Harvard University tells us that the study of happiness offers many other advantages:

We have discovered that there are human strengths that act as buffers against mental illness: courage, future-mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, the capacity for flow and insight, to name several. We've shown that learning optimism prevents depression and anxiety in children and adults, roughly halving their incidents over the next two years. Similarly, I believe, that if we wish to prevent drug abuse in teenagers who grow up in neighborhood that puts them at risk, that the effective prevention is not remedial. Rather, it consists of identifying and amplifying the strengths that these teens already have.<sup>51</sup>

That is, he recommends focusing on what works rather than on what doesn't work as a strategy to achieve happiness. Within Positive Psychology it is commonly admitted, for example, that, what we call 'happy people', generally share certain traits. They are defined as individuals who have high self-esteem, who feel they are in reasonable control of their lives and are optimistic. Compared with the depressed, "happy people are less self-focused, less hostile and abusive, and less susceptible to disease" (Myers and Diener, 1996: 54).

Positive psychologists mainly concern themselves, on the one hand, with such positive *experiences* as happiness, zest and flow, and with more enduring psychological *traits* such as talents, interests, and strengths of character; and, on the other hand, with positive *relationships* between friends, family members, and colleagues, as well as with

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<sup>51</sup> This excerpt was taken from Dr. Tel Ben-Shahar's lecture: <<http://forum-network.org/lecture/positive-psychology-science-happiness>> (accessed April, 2009). Dr. Tel Ben-Shahar's makes it clear in his conference that "happiness is not the negation of unhappiness". Furthermore, Dr. Tel Ben-Shahar explains how happiness strengthens our immune system (accessed April, 2009).

positive *institutions* such as families, schools, and youth development programs (Earhart, 2009: 97). Interestingly, ample literature on the topic shows that people who are used to meditating are more prone to being optimistic than pessimistic (Goleman, 1976; Delmonte, 1984; Canter, 2003; Davidson et al., 2003) (for more on meditation see section 2.2.3). Positive psychologists claim that they cannot tell people what to value, but they can shed light on whatever is valued (Peterson, 2009: 4). The resulting knowledge can be used to inform people on how they might live. For instance, “research is highly consistent in showing that good relationships with other people are a much more robust determinant of life satisfaction and happiness than are material goods” (2009: 4). This information is priceless and refers us back to Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology, and eventually back to Eastern philosophies like Taoism and also to Western mysticism, (see Carmody and Carmody, 1996: 298, 312).

In order to gather information, the underlying premise of Positive Psychology is that “To understand what it means to live well, one must study people who do so” (Peterson, 2009: 3). Accordingly, positive psychologists often leave behind the experimental laboratory and embark on ‘exotic’ applied research such as the ongoing collaboration between psychologist Richard Davidson and Buddhist monks (like Matthieu Ricard) to understand the nature of compassion and its relationship to happiness, for instance (Davidson and Harrington, 2001: 3-18). Dr. Richard Davidson, director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin identified an index for the brain’s set point for moods using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and advanced Electroencephalogram (EEG) analysis. The functional MRI images reveal that when people are emotionally distressed - anxious, angry, depressed – “the most active sites in the brain are circuitry converging on the amygdala, part of the brain’s emotional centers, and the right prefrontal cortex, a brain region important for the hypervigilance typical of people under stress” (Goleman, 2003). This means that an extreme rightward tilt in activity in these prefrontal areas predicts a high likelihood of clinical depression or of an anxiety disorder in one’s life. By contrast, when people are in positive moods – upbeat, enthusiastic and energised – those sites are quiet, with more activity in the left prefrontal cortex (Meyers, 2008: 7). Dr. Davidson, thus, discovered what he believed was a fast way to index a person’s

typical mood range, by reading the baseline levels of activity in the right and left prefrontal areas of the brain. He discovered a ratio which predicts daily moods with surprising accuracy: “the more the ratio tilts to the right, the more unhappy or distressed a person tends to be, while the more activity to the left, the more happy and enthusiastic” (2008: 6). Interestingly, Dr. Davidson had the opportunity to test the left-right ratio on Matthieu Ricard, a French Buddhist monk living in Nepal, who turned out to have the most extreme value to the left measured to that point (Goleman 2003),<sup>52</sup> and was thereafter popularly called ‘the happiest man in the world’ (Chalmers, 2007).

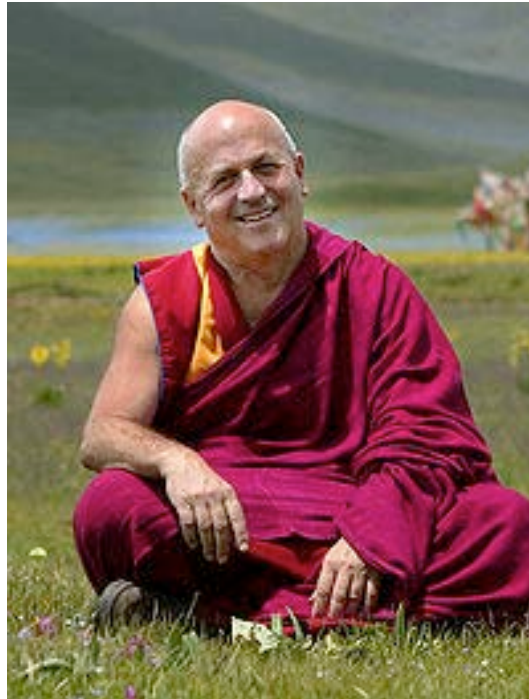
Matthieu Ricard (born 1946) was regarded as one of the most promising biologists of his generation. He completed his PhD at the Institut Pasteur under the supervision of Nobel prize-winner François Jacob, but decided to abandon his scientific career in 1972, moving to Darjeeling. There, he studied under Tibetan monk Kangyur Rinpoche. He has been a monk, and celibate, since he was 30 and still lives at the Schechen Monastery in Nepal (Ricard, 2007: 5).

In an interview for *The Independent*, journalist Robert Chalmers writes:

Matthieu Ricard, French translator and right-hand man for the Dalai Lama, has been the subject of intensive clinical tests at the University of Wisconsin, as a result of which he is frequently described as the happiest man in the world. It’s a somewhat flattering title, he says, given the tiny percentage of the global population who have had their brain patterns monitored by the same state-of-the-art technology, which involves attaching 256 sensors to the skull, and three hours’ continuous MRI scanning. The fact remains that, out of hundreds of volunteers whose scores ranged from +0.3 (what you might call the Morrissey zone) to -0.3 (beatific) the Frenchman scored -0.45. He shows me the chart of volunteers’ results, on his laptop. To find Ricard, you have to keep scrolling left, away from the main curve, until you eventually find him - a remote dot at the beginning of the x-axis. (2007)

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<sup>52</sup> This was one of the first experiments carried out by American neuroscientists with Tibetan monks to be followed by a long list of scientific tests on meditators carried out both in the US and in Dharamsala, the residence of the XIV Dalai Lama since the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959.



Waisman Brain Imaging Lab



*US neuroscientists have declared Matthieu Ricard, Buddhist monk and confidant of the Dalai Lama the 'happiest man' they have ever tested. (Chalmers, 2007)*

The study mentioned is just one of many, as will be shown in the following section of this dissertation, where certain Eastern practices which have reached the Western world, both at a popular, as well as at a scientific level, are analysed in more detail in relation to their contribution to happiness and well-being in US society. Although Matthieu Ricard is not American himself, it was a group of American neuroscientists who carried out the research and showed that happiness can be measured.

What we have seen in this section is that movements such as New Thought and the New Age have often drawn from Eastern ideas and concepts, but have been very selective as far as the adoption of these ideas is concerned, very often adapting and transforming them following the utilitarian, extremely pragmatic Western mentality, to suit their own needs. At an academic level, we have seen that, on the one hand, the interest in Eastern philosophy has inspired Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology, and on the other hand, Positive Psychology has also been attracted by Eastern practices, promoting scientific research with EEGs and MRIs on individuals with years of experience in meditation, trying, for example, to determine ‘degrees of happiness’ in relation to brain-wave activity, from a Western, scientific point of view.<sup>53</sup>

In the next section I will expand upon the development – from their origins, to their Western adoption and adaptation – of some popular Eastern techniques and practices that are currently widely used and practiced all over the United States (and many other parts of the world), contributing, thus, to a better understanding of Eastern influence on the West from a Cultural Studies perspective.

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<sup>53</sup> On the topic of happiness, let me mention a revolutionary idea which started being implemented in the small South Asian country of Bhutan in the late 1980s. In an attempt to define an indicator that measures quality of life or social progress in more psychological and holistic terms than Gross Domestic Product (GDP), this country, located at the eastern end of the Himalaya Mountains, was “the first one in the world to suggest that the beneficial development of human society only takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other”; developing, thus, the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). According to Dr. David Zurick, professor of geography at Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, Kentucky: “The premise of GNH is that development should not be limited to increased consumption and the accumulation of wealth but, rather, should seek to maximize happiness by attending to the shared needs of humanity”. Although, according to Zurick, there is evidence that shows that Bhutan itself “falls short in accomplishing its happiness goals” (2006: 657), it still may provide inspiration – as so many self-help literature books do – to other people and places in the world by way of example. For additional information check Official Bhutanese *Gross National Happiness* Website, *Centre for Bhutan Studies* <<http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/>> (accessed April, 2010).



### **2.2.3 Eastern Practices in Contemporary America**

*Health, a light body, freedom from cravings, a glowing skin, sonorous voice, fragrance of body: these signs indicate progress in the practice of meditation*

Shvetashvatara Upanishad

From the late 1960s onward there has been a visible penetration of Far Eastern influence at many levels in American society. In this section I am going to further analyse this penetration and presence in different areas of society and, subsequently, I will do the same with self-help literature, giving thorough examples to back up my conclusions.

It is important that an attempt be made at this stage to describe and interpret the political and socioeconomic aspects of Asian influence in America and their impact on everyday life. I will especially focus here on Chinese influence, precisely because of the considerable impact the Chinese have had on American society (both demographically and conceptually), and later I will move on to Hindu influence. According to the census of 1980 there were 3.5 million Asian Americans in the United States, about 1.5 percent of the total population. This was the first time in history that the Asian American population had amounted to as much as 1 percent of the total (Daniels, 1988: 3). Their presence was going to be felt more and more from then on.

We can talk about four critical periods in the history of Asian – especially Chinese – immigration in the United States. The period from 1850 to 1882 was a time of free immigration. The first significant Chinese immigration to the United States began with the California Gold Rush of 1848-1855, and continued with subsequent large projects, such as the building of the First Transcontinental Railroad. During the early stages of the gold rush, when there was plenty of surface gold, the Chinese were tolerated, and even well-received (Norton, 1924: 283-84). Nevertheless, as gold became harder to find and competition increased, hostility toward the Chinese and other

foreigners started to rise. After being forcibly driven from the mines, most Chinese settled in districts within cities, mainly San Francisco, and took up low-end wage labour such as restaurant and laundry work. Interestingly, by 1860 the Chinese were the largest immigrant group in California, providing cheap labour. They did not use any of the government infrastructure (schools, hospitals, etc.) because the Chinese migrant population was predominantly made up of healthy male adults (Kanazawa, 2005: 779-805). As time passed and more and more Chinese migrants arrived in California, violence would often break out in cities such as Los Angeles. By 1878 Congress decided to act and passed legislation excluding the Chinese. Once the *Chinese Exclusion Act* was finally passed in 1882, California went further in its discrimination against the Chinese by passing various laws that were later held to be unconstitutional (Cole, 1978: 8-31). The Chinese legal exclusion years lasted from 1882 to 1943 (Xueqin Ma, 1999: 60). After the act was passed most Chinese families were faced with a dilemma: to go back to China to reunite with their families or to stay in the United States alone (Chew and Liu, 2004: 57-78). Because of the highly imbalanced male to female ratio, and the thousands of immigrants returning back to China, the Chinese population in the US fell drastically at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chan, 1991: 94). This was followed by limited entry under a special quota system between 1943 and 1965. And finally, after the 1965 Immigration Act, large floods of immigration allowed not only families to re-unite, but also new immigrants to enter the United States from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China (Xueqin Ma, 1999: 60). Also, thousands of students entered the United States to pursue higher education.

While Chinatowns in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were composed of single, male Chinese pioneers who worked mainly in gold-mining, road construction, or small family-owned businesses, and experienced exclusion and discrimination (1999: 59), the newcomers after 1965 “were strikingly different from earlier Chinese immigrants; they were educated and skilled, and came from urban centres” (1999: 61). Also around that time (from mid- 1960s on), immigrants from Southeast Asia and other parts of the world also joined in the mass exodus, seeking new opportunities in the United States (1999: 62). The year 1965 is certainly considered a turning point for Chinese communities in the United States. As mentioned, “many families were

reunited, the labour force changed, the Chinese population increased, and the population's economies expanded from service-oriented to manufacturing and consumer services" (1999: 59).

Much of the beginning of Asian American experience is remembered as 'negative history' (Daniels, 1988; Xueqin Ma, 1999). At certain times and places in the past, Asians and their children "have been a pariah group at the very bottom of the ethnic escalator of American society, holding legal and social status even below that of oppressed American blacks; today, and for the last few decades, this is demonstrably no longer the case" (Daniels, 1988: 4). In Harding's words:

President Nixon's historic trip to China in February 1972 marked the beginning of a new era in Sino-American relations. For the first time since 1949, the two countries established high-level official contacts and transformed their relationship from confrontation to collaboration. Over the subsequent twenty years, however, U.S.-China relations have experienced repeated cycles of progress, stalemate, and crisis, with the events in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 the most recent and disruptive example. Paradoxically, although relations between the two countries are vastly more extensive today than they were twenty years ago, they remain highly fragile. (1992: i)

The historiography of American immigration has, no doubt, been dominated by the symbol of the melting pot, the notion that America, "this great new continent (...) could melt up all race-differences" (Zangwill, 1909: 179). But the persistence or, more precisely, the renaissance of ethnic consciousness, so notable in the 1960s and 1970s, has caused many scholars of immigration to question the entire concept (Daniels, 1988: 4). For some, a stew- or salad-bowl describes more accurately a "new America where ethnic identities do not melt and meld, but instead remain distinctive" (Barefoot, 2001: 85). More than focusing on the extent to which Asians feel or do not feel integrated and 'melted' within American society, my aim in this dissertation is to analyse their contribution to the United States, that is, what these people did rather than what was done to them.

Arguably, the interest in Eastern thought and religions was prompted by a clear sign of disillusionment and disorientation in relation to Western belief systems (Powaski, 1998: 148). Thanks to the massive Asian immigration in the United States during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the spread of their customs and religious

practices became clearly more and more present in American society in many different areas: from Chinese and Indian restaurants to Chinese and Ayurvedic clinics, as well as martial arts and yoga centres sprouting all over the country. The goals of inner peace and balance, as well as the achievement of mind and body mastery, of power acquired through concentration and the use of certain laws and exercises that comes with steady practice, are only some of the many promises offered to eager practitioners of the newly imported exotic techniques. One of the main points in this section is to show that the pragmatic, utilitarian American society is increasingly opening up to investing in studies and techniques that can offer practical tools which will help people to improve their lives. Although, especially at a popular level, we will also see how it is often difficult to keep true to the roots of these ancient practices, frequently scraping only its surface with a view to obtaining some practical result. As mentioned, my aim in this section is to analyse the development – from their origins to their Western adoption and adaptation – of some popular Eastern techniques and practices that are currently being widely used and practiced all over the United States; I will start with the history of martial arts.

An early legend tells that the Asian martial arts movements were introduced to monks in the Shaolin temple by a visiting monk from India named Bodhidharma<sup>54</sup> in 600 CE. The Shaolin monks are the first to be accredited with categorising martial arts moves for the sake of self-defense and physical fitness, intertwining the values of ethical conduct and self discipline with martial practice from its earliest beginnings. The story tells us that upon his visit, Bodhidharma found that the monks were very weak in their bodies, because of the time they spent in meditation. Thus, they were easy prey for thieves. This, we are told, was the reason why he introduced them to basic movements and exercises, which would help them to protect themselves from aggressive outsiders, and, at the same time, aid them to complete their journey to enlightenment of mind,

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<sup>54</sup> Bodhidharma was born into the warrior caste in India and thus certainly studied and must have been proficient in self-defense prior to becoming a Buddhist monk. He is traditionally credited as the transmitter not only of martial arts, but also of Zen to China.

body, and spirit (2000: 2). The Shaolin arts were called *chuan-fa*, which meant Chinese boxing or *kempo*, ‘fist law’, or ‘way of the fist’ (Hoh, 2002: 16). As time went on the monks became very famous for their fighting-skills and were sought out by others. Often they would leave the temple and wander, passing on to others their knowledge, spreading it into neighbouring countries (2002:16). The traditional Asian martial arts focus on allowing Chi (cosmic energy; also known as Qi, Ki or Ch’i) to flow through one’s body. This belief in Chi connects the martial arts with *tai chi chuan*, a meditation-like discipline that emphasises slow, graceful body movements. The most popular form of individual exercise in China, *tai chi* is often performed publicly in large groups. Amongst many benefits, it has been claimed to reduce stress and lower blood pressure.

As we mentioned, toward the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese immigration played an important role in the introduction of some of their ancient customs, such as the practice of martial arts and also of *tai chi* (Yan, 1995: 61, 62) into the United States. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jigoro Kano arrived in America and started teaching *judo*. He had first done a demonstration for President Grant in 1879. By the 1900’s, *judo* was introduced through political connections into universities and the Naval Academy. Eventually police departments also started to learn some of the fundamentals of *judo* and *jujitsu* for the locking and submission techniques it had to offer (Sullivan, 2000: 2). The United States began to see the introduction of many types of martial arts – most of which were coming through the islands of Hawaii – with actual schools opening around the mid 1930’s; before that, training was only done privately. In 1954 Ed Parker started teaching *kempo* at Brigham Young University. The Korean War brought the art of *tae kwon do* to America through Jhoon Rhee, who arrived in the US in 1956 (2000: 2). In spite of all the different techniques that were being introduced to America, none were seriously catching on. The real martial arts explosion did not start until the 1960’s, the two main factors for its diffusion being: first, the power of movies and TV that helped launch Bruce Lee and others who captured the imagination of an entire generation and a whole nation; and, second, the free enterprise system of the United States that allowed martial arts pioneers to market their skills and services. The Eastern presence in the US, no doubt, received a big publicity boost in the movie industry when *kung-fu* TV series and movies, with stars like David Carradine, Jet Li and Zhao Wen

Zhuo, made the Shaolin temple and martial arts famous all over the world (Hoh, 2002: 16).



Thus, the media's ability to reach such large audiences and the theory of supply and demand were soon put into effect, with *karate* schools popping up everywhere. Unfortunately, although most of them had good black belts, many of the teachers were more interested in the exhibition of violence and self-glorification than in transmitting the genuine teachings of non-violence and self-mastery (Sullivan, 2000: 2). Thus, it did not take long for *karate* to get a bad name, hurting businesses and schools that took the teachings more seriously. After a few years of this, the schools that were still standing had begun a change, which came about because many instructors realised they had left out the harmony part of 'body, mind, and spirit' that the martial arts had been based on (Yuasa, 1987: 9). Thus the 'Professional Karate School' was born, and with it the birth of the *karate* school chain. In the 1980's these school chains opened in all major American cities. It was "the largest growing business in the US. Unfortunately it also had the highest failure rate. Because of this, schools now began to realize the importance of business management. With this, *karate* takes another turn into the future and continues today" (Sullivan, 2000: 2).

On the one hand, the positive feedback of martial arts' benefits is nowadays widely accepted in America, with positive endorsements like "Martial arts have been widely recognized as a tool in enhancing academic skills" or "The increased awareness and concentration that it develops, the discipline it fosters, lead to greater understanding of academics and oneself", and even, "Success in the martial arts leads to success in life" (Harvey, 1997: 2). Paul Linden, senior *aikido* instructor, considers that martial arts taught for the purpose of personal growth by a kind and respectful teacher can offer numerous benefits. In his words, "martial arts teaches body awareness and self-control

in ways that are very different from Western sports” (Linden, 2000: 61). On the other hand, it is also a well-known fact that Bruce Lee and martial arts have greatly influenced the video game industry<sup>55</sup>, promoting scenes of violence amongst its users. David Walsh, tells us about the two different approaches to the martial arts within the US:

The first is a modern (Americanized) version of martial arts, in which only free-sparring and self-defense techniques are taught; without proper instruction, this could indeed *increase violence*. The second approach is more traditional and holistic. It entails periods of meditation that help students focus on martial-arts skills and on their aspirations in life. This is followed by calisthenics, stretching, techniques, and discussions about the true martial artist’s philosophy on life, which includes showing respect and concern for others, building confidence and self-esteem, and making contact with yourself and your fears. (2000: 12, emphasis added)

Properly taught, we are told, the martial arts techniques for maintaining calm alertness under pressure would be invaluable in today’s stressful society. The techniques for biomechanical and postural integrity could greatly help people prevent back problems and general postural problems; the techniques for maintaining a compassionate state when confronted with aggression could also contribute a great deal toward reducing violence in society (Linden, 2000: 61).

Other teachers consider that self-defense, flexibility, personal discipline, and increased self-confidence are just a few of the benefits of martial arts courses, but, encouraged by violent movies and video games and without its philosophical background “it would be very difficult to teach younger children about the importance and benefits of a martial art without them using it primarily for fighting” (Ronnenberg, 2000: 12). In recent years, the martial arts have been marketed as a self-defense technique, also for women, in a society in which fear and violence are promoted as never before, mainly thanks to the overwhelming influence of the mass media (news, television, films, games). In his article “Should Martial Arts Be Taught in Physical Education Classes?” Steven Murray affirms:

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<sup>55</sup> See the interview with Shannon Lee, Bruce Lee’s daughter, where she talks about the great influence her father had on the whole video game industry: <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0\\_FuNRitk&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0_FuNRitk&feature=related)> (accessed January, 2010).

Martial arts can improve one's capacity for self-defense. This is very important in today's society, especially for women. You can sugar-coat this issue all you like, but we live in a society that at times is brutally violent. As women enter the workforce in record numbers, they are being placed in situations where there is a marked increase in the probability of a violent attack. With this in mind, I wholeheartedly support the inclusion of martial arts into the physical education curriculum. They can help increase self-confidence and promote physical fitness, and they may even save lives. (2000: 16)

In 2002, filmmaker Michael Moore denounced America's high violent crime rate in his documentary film *Bowling for Columbine*, concluding that fear is the number one reason why America has many more deaths attributed to guns than any other nation in the world, and openly affirming that US society is based on 'fear and consumption'. With this panorama in mind, no doubt, it is easy to explain why any self-defense techniques are highly appreciated in this country. The history of martial arts in the US is only a brief sample of how an ancient practice has often been taken on and exploited for self-serving purposes, ignoring its sacred roots and marketing just the superficial personal benefits that it can provide; although it should be mentioned that there are obviously numerous serious teachers who manage to transmit their teachings as genuinely as possible, and should, therefore, not be underestimated (Linden, 2000: 61; Walsh, 2000: 1).

The same could be said in relation to *yoga*. While there are certainly a great many serious practitioners within the US, their goal is often very distant from that of Patanjali and traditional Hindu teachings. As mentioned in section 2.2.1, within Hinduism, yoga is a way of life focused on non-violence, truthfulness, self-control and non-attachment to the material plane. One is supposed to live a life as pure and as simple as possible, controlling one's physical posture, breath and mind (Rambachan, 1990: 341). That is, according to these teachings, every aspect of a person – the physical body, the active will and the restless mind – must be brought into a state of tranquillity with the use of *asanas* (postures) and other techniques to achieve spiritual harmony; its final goal being entry into supra-consciousness or *samadhi*. The achievement of this would be an example of real body-mind mastery.



For most Americans, these objectives are certainly not on their agendas. Nevertheless, in recent years, numerous researchers (Peck et al., 2005) have greatly praised the practice of yoga – without necessarily having to focus on its ultimate goal – by mainly emphasising its physical and psychological benefits. If performed properly, we are told, yoga can be extremely useful since it incorporates physical postures, breath control, mental concentration, and deep relaxation to positively affect mental states (Zipkin, 1985: 283-89). The coordination of stretching and body movements in combination with deep breathing have been shown to improve the body's overall circulation, resulting in a release of tension as well as an increase in the levels of blood and oxygen throughout the entire body, positively affecting the central and autonomic nervous systems (Brosnan, 1982; Lalvani, 1999). It produces effects similar to relaxation in that “it tends to result in feelings of calmness and it also tends to promote self-control, attention and concentration, self-efficacy, body awareness, and stress reduction” (Peck et al., 2005: 415).

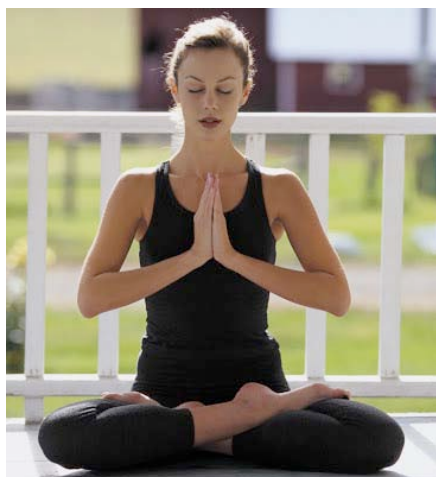
The popularity of yoga has clearly grown in recent years as its benefits have become more widely recognised. There are many different yoga schools, but the one which has spread most in the US is, no doubt, the path of *hatha yoga* (2005: 416), which involves mainly physical exercises that enhance the cardiovascular system, strengthen the muscles, improve the digestive activity, and cleanse the entire body. One of the main objectives of yoga instructors in the America is to help people see that yoga is not about big muscles or achieving one's perfect figure, but rather about focusing and concentrating oneself on the moment and letting go of competition not only with others but also with oneself (2005: 416). Some yoga students confess that the best part of a yoga class is the last bit, which is about relaxation – a much needed practice in our stressful society: “Coming at the end of the session, it ... simply requires us to lie flat on the floor as if we are dead to the world while the instructor encourages us to let go of the angst and anxieties of the day, freeing our minds for peace and harmony” (Mamminga, 2007: 1). For Westerners, it should be made clear that yoga is not like aerobics or running, as it is not a sport. Instead, it is about health and well-being and getting in touch with oneself, rather than just a physically-oriented activity. As Johnson affirms, yoga “is not about trying to fit yourself into a pair of skinny trousers but how

you feel about yourself in your trousers” (Peck et al., 2005: 2). Yet, the challenge for a society where “people constantly flit from one thing to another” is, as with anything else, to be persistent and patient with the practice, which if done properly can “really change lives” (2005: 2).

This has been shown through several research studies dealing with social, emotional, behavioural, and academic difficulties (Peck et al., 2005: 415). One of the early studies that employed yoga as a treatment for ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and oppositional behaviours was successful in reducing lack of attention and impulsive and oppositional behaviour (Redfering and Bowman, 1981: 126-27). And the list goes on, with very promising outcomes in relation to children, especially. Thus, for instance, another study analysed the positive results of the implementation of a yoga program which incorporated meditation to help children decrease hyperactivity, lack of attention, and anxiety, improving their peer relationships and sleep patterns (Harrison, Manocha, and Rubia, 2004: 479-497). Similarly, another study showed how a group of boys with ADHD decreased their hyperactivity, impulsivity, and lack of attention also after completing a yoga program (Jensen and Kenny, 2004: 205-216). Additionally, the practice of yoga has been shown to reduce middle school children’s states of anxiety, heart rate, headaches, and general tension and stress symptoms (Kalayil, 1988: 12). Moreover, the therapeutic potential of yoga has been suggested for children with psychomotor deficits (Hopkins and Hopkins, 1976: 461-465). When implemented on children, some researchers mention that a particularly attractive aspect of yoga is their reported feelings of well-being and enhanced body awareness, calmness, reduced tension, and improved concentration (Hopkins and Hopkins, 1979: 341-345). Although there is still a need for more research in this area, the findings so far have shown the clear benefits of yoga for children and for people in general. The scientific reasons for these results are obvious. The autonomic nervous system, which primarily regulates involuntary activity such as heartbeat and respiration, consists of the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems (Campbell et al., 1992: 173). These systems generally work in opposition to each other, while controlling the same muscles and glands (1992: 172). The sympathetic system utilises stored energy and prepares the body for ‘fight or flight’ by increasing heart rate and blood sugar level

(Selye, 1979: 60), whereas the parasympathetic system conserves energy and is active in relaxed situations. Activities of this division include a decrease in heart rate and activation of the digestive system (Graham, 1992: 3). In essence, the practice of yoga stimulates the parasympathetic system resulting in a sense of calm, tranquillity, emotional balance and increased concentration while at the same time deactivating the sympathetic system of the body (Dahlen, 2000: 209).

Scientific evidence of the benefits of yoga is one of the reasons why, not surprisingly, there are countless yoga centres all over the US nowadays, and why it is recommended by numerous doctors and psychologists with yoga classes even offered online and through DVDs.<sup>56</sup> We can find numerous yoga courses for fitness, beauty, relaxation, energy, balance, and even for slowing the ageing process.<sup>57</sup>



Yet, according to some authors, Americans, and Caucasians in general, have body structures that differ considerably from those of an Easterner. This is the reason why numerous yoga teachers have tried to synthesise what they learnt in the East and the West, developing a new approach to asanas (postures) that is “tailored to suit the Western body’s needs” (Johnson, 2004: 174). But, in spite of

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<sup>56</sup> Here I have selected a couple of articles about yoga from *Nature* journal of science <<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v310/n5973/pdf/310094a0.pdf>> and <<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v298/n5872/pdf/298402b0.pdf>> (accessed February, 2010); as well as a sample of online yoga courses, such as these ones: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwpJwV9DjNc>> or <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuvfHTaftLQ&feature=Playlist&p=9C3B0AE007FDECDB&playnext=1&playnext\\_from=PL&index=12](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuvfHTaftLQ&feature=Playlist&p=9C3B0AE007FDECDB&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=12)> (accessed February, 2010).

<sup>57</sup> For example, according to the philosophy of yoga, it’s the flexibility of the spine, not the number of years that determines a person’s age (Johnson, 2004: 189). Thus, the more flexible the spine, the younger the person’s biological age. For yoga philosophy, keeping young is only a by-product of the practice, not its main objective, but, it is obvious that statements – or promises – such as these ones, are particularly appealing to the materially-oriented, youth-cult culture of America. One website expresses it this way “Yoga slows down the aging process by giving elasticity to the spine, firming up the skin, removing tension from the body, strengthening the abdominal muscles, eliminating the possibility of a double chin, improving the tone of flabby arm muscles, correcting poor posture, preventing dowager’s hump and so on. Yoga lets you trade in characteristics of old age for characteristics of youth”. Excerpt from *Yoga for Life*: <<http://www.yoga-for-life.org/yogaandaging.htm>> (accessed January, 2010).

all the promises and the increase of yoga classes and books about it, for many people the word yoga is still very exotic and the practice probably too complicated and difficult. The range of Eastern practices offered, nonetheless, is vast and suitable for all sorts of different tastes and needs. Martial arts and hatha yoga are very physical in nature, although concentration and attention are basic requirements for its practice, too.

Probably less physically demanding, but also focused on attention and concentration, either on a sound ('mantra'), a body function (breathing), a body part (the heart, the tip of the tongue), or an image (a candle, a mandala, a point in the distance), meditation has also become more and more popular in the West and has recently been validated by a team of scientists thanks to the unprecedented cooperation of the Dalai Lama to carry out such research, as we shall see subsequently. Often connected with yoga, meditation is regarded as a vital route to salvation in most Eastern philosophy (Griffiths, 1986: xv). One of the premises of meditation is that unless one can control the body it is very difficult to be able to control the mind. In just the same way that there are precise ways in which the body can be controlled, so there are different stages in controlling the mind (Radhakrishna 1967: 200). Controlling the mind in Hindu terms involves fixing the mind on an object, contemplating it and then entering into a trance. There are two types of trance. The weaker kind is where the meditator is absorbed in the object of contemplation, but is still aware that it is an object of attention. The stronger kind is where the immersion is so total that it is no longer regarded as just an object of attention, but as something identical with the meditator (Radhakrishna 1967: 200). When a direct and non-conceptual insight is achieved one can consider that the meditator can appreciate that what looks like inherent existence is just an illusion. The goal, once again, is to attain enlightenment. In one version of Buddhism, what the meditator is doing is uniting with emptiness, which brings out the basic nature of emptiness as the only viable definition of reality (see section 2.2.1). But, generally considered, the main function of meditation is to bring about a calming and concentrating effect, to weaken the power of desire; while the sort of awareness produced through forms of meditation designed to produce a strong sense of one's mind (*vipassana*) can reduce both craving and ignorance (Radhakrishnan, 1967: 200-01).

There are numerous types of meditation, each one with its different nuances (Swearer, 1997: 81). Several Chinese and Japanese approaches to meditation insist on the possibility of sudden enlightenment, reinterpreting the tendency in Indian philosophy to stress a more gradual approach. This reinterpretation often took the form of understanding the notion of the diverse stages of meditation as being really states of mind that are to a degree always present. This was combined with a view of meditation that stressed the absence of attachment, allowing the mind to flow freely without being slowed down by the introduction of value judgements, judgements about whether the objects of the thoughts are true or not (Griffiths, 1986: 14-15).

The attraction for the practice of meditation in America has undoubtedly been triggered off by the extensive literature about its benefits, both in the popular as well as in the scientific media. Research evidence supports the claim that meditation provides considerable physiological and emotional benefits to those who practise it (Travis, 1979: 169-80; Delmonte, 1984: 181-200; Fontana and Slack, 2007). Over the past forty years, several hundred research studies have investigated the effects of meditation with encouraging results (e.g., Canter, 2003; Haimerl and Valentine, 2001; Thomas and Wuyek, 2007). In addition, there have been very positive outcomes in the investigation of the long term effects of meditation on cognitive performance (Cranson, et al., 1991; Travis, 1991; So and Orme-Johnson, 2001; Walton, et al., 2002). Apart from the study mentioned above (in pages 127-29), experiments with EEGs showed how alpha brain waves, usually associated with a state of relaxed alertness, increase markedly during meditation, bringing about thereby a decrease in anxiety levels (Linden, 1973: 139-43). Results such as these ones are obviously highly valued in a society where the increase in levels of stress can lead to a greater risk of heart disease and even trigger depression, anxiety, workplace injuries or suicide (Moskvitch, 2010).

As mentioned, the growing interest in meditation within modern medicine and biomedical science that has arisen over the past forty years is also greatly indebted to the efforts of Buddhist spiritual leader and Nobel Peace Laureate Tenzin Gyatso, the XIV Dalai Lama, who co-founded the Mind and Life Institute (MLI) in Boulder, Colorado, in 1987 together with neuroscientist Francisco J. Varela and entrepreneur

Adam Engle for the purpose of creating a rigorous dialogue and research collaboration between modern science and Buddhism.<sup>58</sup> The Dalai Lama proposed “that the medical and emotional benefits of meditation should be investigated in controlled laboratory experiments; and, if so established, *meditation should be divorced from its religious roots and made universally available*” (Pollard, 2004: 31, emphasis added). Thus, since 1987, a cycle of conferences have brought together psychologists, physicists, neuroscientists, Buddhist philosophers and meditation practitioners to discuss some of the cutting-edge fields in philosophy and science.<sup>59</sup> It is worth mentioning that, whereas there has been no relevant opposition to this initiative based on a science-spirituality approach in the Western world, hundreds of scientists, mainly of Chinese origin, and, obviously for political reasons, signed a petition before the start of the conferences against having the Dalai Lama speak about the neuroscience of meditation in a lecture series entitled “Dialogues between Neuroscience and Society”. On the day of the speech, though, the only visible protest came from a post-doctorate Chinese national with residence status in the US, “who quietly sat holding a scrawled statement saying that the Dalai Lama was not qualified to speak at the meeting” (Reed, 2006: 12). The several “Life and Mind Conferences” in the US and in India throughout the years have mainly sought to explore the intersection between the natural sciences and Buddhism. According to Paul Ingram, author of the article “The New Physics and Cosmology: Dialogues with the Dalai Lama”, this series of conferences “represents the most systematic effort to dialogically engage Buddhist thought and practice with the natural sciences to date” (Ingram, 2005: 180). Here is a sample of the academic involvement of Eastern and Western participants in one of these conferences. As we can see, this blend between East and West is especially noteworthy:

Along with the Dalai Lama, the major participants in this dialogue were David Ritz Finkelstein, who teaches physics at the Georgia Institute of Technology and edits the *International Journal of Theoretical Physics*; George Greenstein, Sidney Dillon Professor of Astronomy at Amherst College; Peter Hut, professor

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<sup>58</sup> These are two websites about the *Mind and Life Institute*, in Boulder, Colorado, with information of their programmes and research initiatives: <[http://www.investigatingthemind.org/about\\_sponsors.html#mindlife](http://www.investigatingthemind.org/about_sponsors.html#mindlife)> and <<http://www.mindandlife.org/>> (accessed January, 2010).

<sup>59</sup> See *The Science and Clinical Applications of Meditation* website, co hosted by the Georgetown University Medical Center and the John Hopkins University School of Medicine (2005): <<http://www.investigatingthemind.org/speakers.html>> (accessed January, 2010).

of physics and interdisciplinary studies at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University; Thupten Jinpa, who has served as the Dalai Lama's principal English translator since 1985; B. Allan Wallace, who trained for many years in Buddhist monasteries in India and Switzerland and is one of the Buddhist pioneers of the Buddhist-science dialogue; Tu Wei-Ming, who directs the Harvard-Yenching Institute and is professor of Chinese History and Philosophy at Harvard; Arthur Zajonc, professor of physics at Amherst College, whose research focuses on the experimental foundations of quantum physics and the relation between science and the humanities; and Anton Zeilinger, director of the Institute for Experimental Physics in Austria and professor of physics at the University of Innsbruck from 1990 to 1999. (2005: 180)

The interesting conclusion for America (and the Western world) is that the penetration of Eastern practices, such as meditation, is occurring with an ever-growing support of the scientific community, pragmatically interested in its usefulness. Thus, a large number of empirical studies “have shown that forms of contemplative practice, such as meditation, are effective in overcoming and treating stress-related states” (Pollard, 2004: 31) with decreases in heart rate, breathing and blood pressure, and attainment of better health, more energy, improved concentration, reduction in substance-use problems, and increased self-actualization (Haimerl and Valentine, 2001: 37-52; Canter, 2003: 1049-50). Moreover, individuals who meditate have been found to enjoy significantly increased alpha brain wave activity, a unique form of consciousness which is different from relaxation states (Dunn et al, 1999: 147-65), and increased orderliness of brain activity (Khare and Nigam, 2000: 173-78). Research has also shown that meditation has positive health effects in cancer treatment (Tacon, 2003: 64-74), with a remarkable study showing tumor cell growth rates to be significantly decreased in prostate cancer patients who practiced Zen Buddhist meditation (Yu et al., 2003: 499-507). For the American pragmatic-oriented mentality what really counts are the results. Thus, to invest in the study of the applicability of different ancient techniques to a Western context is the natural way to proceed.

Likewise, within the educational field, the conclusions regarding the benefits of meditation are unanimous in affirming, for example, that they have found improved cognitive performance in schools that include regular meditation as part of the school day, as compared to schools that do not (Warner, 2005: 47). One of the studies on the benefits of meditation and relaxation indicated that after 18 weeks of practicing meditation there were significant improvements in test anxiety (Linden, 1973: 139-43).

A more recent pilot study found that meditation was a feasible and acceptable intervention for anxious children (Semple, Reid, and Miller, 2005: 392). And, just as with yoga, meditation was found to reduce the non-attending behaviours of behaviourally disturbed children who practiced relaxation only during a 5-day intervention (Redfering and Bowman, 1981: 126-27). Moreover, similar to the benefits of yoga in slowing the aging process, there is scientific evidence of the same being true for meditation practitioners. For instance, according to recent research, brain scans show that the white matter that envelops the neurons and helps them work more efficiently typically degenerates as people get older. Dr. Sara W. Lazar of Harvard Medical School found that meditation may help prevent the rate of cortical thinning with age. What she discovered was “that older meditators had active cortical regions that were comparable with those of younger non-meditators” (Reed, 2006: 12).

A series of studies with employees at Promega, a biotech firm in Wisconsin, showed that it is not necessary to spend years of meditation in a closed community to experience positive effects (Davidson et al, 2003: 564). Prior to the study, it was established that the workers at Promega reported feeling ‘stressed-out’ and unhappy with their jobs, exhibiting high levels of right-brain activity. After a period of eight weeks of meditation training and practice, “the activity in the left side of their brains increased significantly, and the workers reported feeling happier, with a renewed sense of enthusiasm for their life and work” (Pollard, 2004: 32), while the control group showed no change.

It is probably the speed with which one can reap positive results when devoting oneself to these practices – as we have seen from the studies analysed – which makes them particularly appealing to the hectic, results-oriented American society. Far from looking for enlightenment, the main aim in the United States (and also in other Western countries) is to use these practical tools to provide some rest to the over-strained nervous system, not with a view to changing one’s life, but with a view to providing coping strategies to continue leading the multitask-oriented lifestyle people are used to. This is, no doubt, one of the reasons why the fad for meditation and “mindfulness” (Macpherson, 2008: 24) has reached the business world, from within the companies,



and also from sports clubs and fitness centres around the country. We are told that “in the competitive fitness market, clever entrepreneurs are always looking for ways to capitalize on the latest craze. Yoga and meditation are no exception... To capitalize on all the interests, many clubs are trying to attract new audiences through yoga hybrids, including combinations of yoga and everything from Pilates and Tae Bo to disco” (Carr, 2001: 1). The aim is to find tools to increase profitability (Goldsby, Kuratko and Bishop, 2005: 78). With the assistance of meditation, coaching and “mindfulness”, entrepreneurs are achieving a more “mature leadership” (Macpherson, 2008: 24), and this is always extremely profitable for one’s business. Ceferí Soler, professor of Human Resources Management at ESADE (Barcelona), expresses it with these words: “Este liderazgo maduro se suele notar en el clima de trabajo y la motivación y eso influye en los resultados” (2008: 24). With affirmations such as these, we are witnessing the pragmatic use of Eastern techniques applied to strategic company needs, which are not only focused on profitability, but also upon the necessary sustainability of the company through its most valuable asset: human resources.<sup>60</sup> In *Stress at Work: Management and Prevention*, the author recommends a list of techniques to help cope with stress in the workplace. Amongst them he mentions: autogenic training, mindfulness meditation, yoga or walking meditation, progressive muscular relaxation, transcendental meditation and biofeedback (Stranks, 2005: 79).<sup>61</sup>

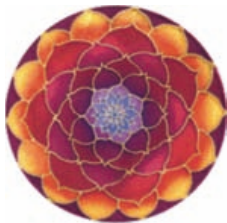
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<sup>60</sup> When a company pays money to train its staff it is supposed to be good for the people. As a work force they will be more creative, happier and healthier. As a result the company will be more viable in the long-run.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Autogenic training’ is a technique “in which a person imagines being in a peaceful place with pleasant body sensations. The person focuses on the body and tries to make parts of the body feel heavy, warm or cool. Breathing is centred and the heartbeat is regulated”. During ‘mindfulness meditation’ a person concentrates on body sensations and thoughts that occur in the moment, learning to observe sensations and thoughts without judging them. ‘Transcendental meditation’ is a practice in which a person focuses on a sound or thought, repeating a word, mantra or sound many times. ‘Biofeedback’ is a technique “in which an instrument is used to monitor certain changes in the body, such as skin temperature or brainwaves. The person uses this information to try to relax deeply”. (Stranks, 2005: 79)



As far as the specific meditation techniques are concerned, in Hinduism and Buddhism, one of the basic practices requires the use of a *mantra* or *mantram*, which is considered a sacred sound from the *Vedas* (Chatterjee, 2001: 30). The constant repetition of this sound, which can be a single syllable like OM or AUM (*Katha Upanishad*, Part I, Chapter II, 15-16), or a longer *mantram* such as the Tibetan *Om mani padme hum*, or the Buddhist *Nam yoho rengo kyo* (Nichiren Daishonin school), is supposed to help “control the natural tendency of the mind to wander” (Rao, 1989: 51). We will see in Part Three that the Western counterpart to mantras in self-help literature is commonly referred to as ‘affirmations’. That is, the repetition of a word or sentence in order to achieve a specific goal (Hay, 1984: 8). One of the most famous affirmations in self-help circles is probably the one coined by French psychologist Émil Coué, who introduced a method of psychotherapy and self-improvement based on ‘optimistic autosuggestion’ in the 1920s: “Every day in every way I am getting better and better” (Lawrence and Walther, 1990: 39).



Another widespread practice in Hinduism and Buddhism is the concentration on, and creation of *mandalas*, used to help focus the mind on perfection, beauty and harmony. *Mandala* is a Sanskrit word meaning cosmogram, or circle (Miller, 2005: 164) that has been found in cultures all over the world and throughout history (Moacanin, 2003: 71). By focusing on these images, it is believed that the meditators will speed their spiritual progress through the shifting of their own awareness into states of balance and perfection. We can now find numerous mandala books (Fincher, 1991, 2000, 2009; Mandali, 1998; Cornell, 2006; Hutchinson, 2007; Normand, 2007), as well as decorative greeting cards (Baird, 2008; Satterthwaite, 2007) and calendars (Bell and Todd, 2008; Koinuma, 2008).

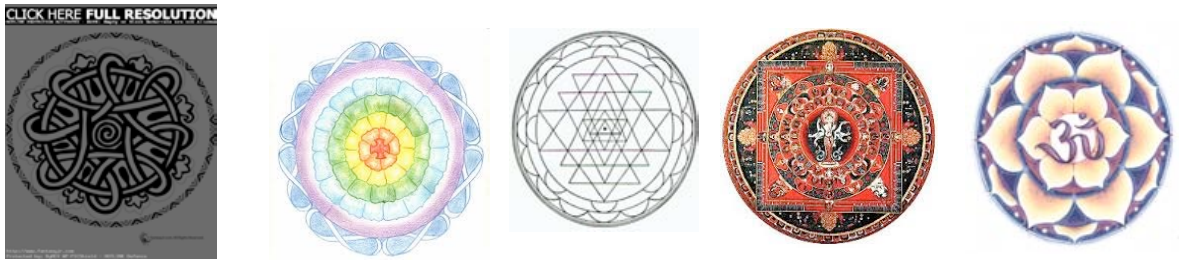
The use of mandalas has entered fields such as psychology, psychotherapy, art, education and business. According to Smoley and Kinney, in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung experienced a fascination for Eastern and occult practices (2006: 2), some of which he then used when assisting his clients in therapy (Miller, 2005: 165-66). One of the chief ‘meditative practices’ of Jungian Psychology is called ‘active imagination’. Indeed Jung “was probably thinking of this technique when he urged that Western man ‘remain true to himself and develop out of his own nature all that the East has brought forth from its inner being’” (Smoley and Kinney, 2006: 6). Jung discovered that mandala images frequently occurred in the dreams and fantasies of his clients (2006: 11-12), and found that the construction of mandalas – particularly when drawn spontaneously – may be useful in the individuation process. For Jung “mandalas often symbolize the Self, and appear symbolically to represent the striving for individuation, wholeness, and psychological integration through the reconciliation and unification of opposites” (Miller, 2005: 165). Mandalas are also often used in psychotherapy not only as a symbol of wholeness and healing, but as a tool that can be actively employed as a means toward that end (2005: 165-66). It has long been recognised within both Jungian and Transpersonal Psychology that self-expression through artistic, visual means can potentially be therapeutic (Jung, [1963] 1989: 186-97; Mellick, 2001: 6), and that an individual’s most fundamental thoughts and feelings, derived from the unconscious, reach expression in images rather than in words (Lynch and Chosa, 1996: 75).



One of the most popular Western examples are the Celtic mandalas, which are viewed as decorative designs, rather than as objects for meditation, although little is known about their original use (Hall and Puleston, 1996: 3-4). Nevertheless, the borrowing of the Sanskrit word – the fact that the different circular designs do not have a distinctive Western name, but are called *mandalas* – is an interesting adoption of Eastern terminology which can be seen in numerous books (Baird, 2008;

Paterson and Davis, 1997), journals (Delyth, 2003) and calendars (Delyth, 2009) worldwide.

*Different kinds of mandalas:*



The epitome in the use of mandalas as a kind of meditation / concentration is probably expressed during the Buddhist ceremony of the Kalachakra sand mandala, in which Buddhist monks create a multicoloured mandala made of coloured sand over a period of several weeks. At the end of the ceremony, the completed *mandala* is destroyed and the sands are used as offerings, symbolising the impermanence of all things.<sup>62</sup>



*Kalachakra Sand Mandala*

<sup>62</sup> As a sample, here we can watch this video on a Buddhist ceremony focused on the creation of a Tibetan sand mandala: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ee4A1OFrX7w>> (accessed January, 2010).

Apart from the three Eastern practices mentioned so far, there are also others such as *Tai Chi*, whereby the practitioner seeks to align his or her body, through subtle and graceful movements, with the natural, though invisible, energies of the environment (Billington, 2002: 80). The list of practices is long and includes, *Feng-shui*, *Reiki*, *Chi-Kung* (Qi-gong), *Jin-Shin-Jyutsu* or *Budokon*, to name some that are becoming more and more popular amongst Americans; but, as we will see in Part Three of this dissertation, within self-help literature it is, no doubt, especially the practice of meditation that is mostly recommended for its innumerable benefits and practicality. This is the reason why I have devoted more attention to it than to other techniques which might be as valid, if not more, than some types of meditation.



In this section we have seen some of the reasons why there is a growing attraction of Eastern practices within the US. Often, stress and movement are counterbalanced by silence and stillness; a dispersed mind is balanced up by focused recitation of mantras or concentration on mandalas, or other focal points such as a candle, one's breathing rhythm, a point in the distance, or the tip of one's tongue; built-up stress in the muscles is treated softly with breathing exercises (pranayama) and yoga postures (asanas) that manage to stretch and tone without hurting, bringing overall wellbeing to body and mind; or, alternatively, stress can be unwound through a more dynamic, but focused, activity as in martial arts. Without delving deeply into the meaning and the underlying philosophies of each of these practices, the rapidly growing research-based literature on the topic tells us that it is possible to reap great benefits, if they are practiced regularly. Thus, we have seen how the interest – even if only superficial – in ancient Eastern ideas and practices is increasing rapidly among a large portion of society. Moreover, from the 1990s on, a growing number of Western quantum physicists seem to imply that there are strong connections between their empirical science and the ancient mystical sacred texts, as we will see in the following section.

## **2.2.4 Eastern Thought and Western Science: A Possible Convergence?**

*Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe – a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble. In this way the pursuit of science leads to a religious feeling of a special sort*

Albert Einstein

From a Cultural Studies point of view it is remarkable to notice the scope and often also the depth to which the interest in Eastern philosophies and practices has encouraged research of very varied types. German philosopher Schopenhauer (1788-1860) is often considered to be the first modern Western philosopher of any note to have deeply studied oriental philosophies and attempted an integration of his work with Eastern ideas (Magee, 1999: 143). Also, American Transcendentalist writers Emerson (1803-1882) and Thoreau (1817-1862) were fascinated by Eastern philosophies. Clearly, the progressive mainstream attention to Eastern thought and practices has been growing to the extent that there has even been a claim by some scientists of an apparent approximation of paradigms of Eastern and scientific worldviews. In quantum physics, for instance, the issues debated by Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein “paved the way for a great flowering of speculation about the interconnectedness of all phenomena” (Strait, 2001: 161), suggesting an affinity with Eastern mysticism, as we will see in this section.

However, we could, no doubt, agree with the fact that Eastern discourse, rather than phenomenological, is more philosophical and poetic (based on ‘energy’ or on the theory of the ‘five elements’ (Maciocia, 1989: 2). Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, for example, is written in a seemingly illogical style, full of apparent contradictions, using an extremely poetic language that is meant to stop the reader’s mind and “throw it off its familiar track of logical reasoning” (Capra, 2000: 48). Likewise, the Chinese concepts of Qi (energy) and yin-yang differ radically from those in the West before the appearance of quantum physics, as we shall see. Yin and yang, for instance, “represent

opposite but complementary qualities. Each thing or phenomenon could be itself and its contrary. That is, yin contains the seed of yang and vice versa, so that, contrary to Aristotelian logic, *A* can also be *NON-A*” (Maciocia, 1989: 1, original emphasis). Up until recently, Western logic was based upon Aristotelian logic, whose fundamental premise is the opposition of contraries (Pohl and Muller, 2002: 80). According to this logic, contraries such as ‘the table is round’ and ‘the table is not round’ cannot both be true. This is the view that has dominated Western thought for over 2,000 years. Indeed, Western civilization is distinguished from all other civilizations by the importance placed on reason – especially from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, with French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes – and science is, no doubt, one of its unique features and its main driving force: “it affects every human activity, and the arts and even religion have changed, under its influence” (Hutten, 1962: 11). The spirit of inquiry certainly “occupies a position of dominance in our culture. Great things were expected from this approach to life when it first became a matter of common practice following the Renaissance” (Siu, 1957: vi). However, what is obvious is that science only progresses by asking questions, challenging the assumptions and the truths taken for granted at any given time in history. Clearly, our paradigm of knowledge can only evolve as older views are proved to be incomplete or incorrect.

This new spirit of rationality which the Greeks had developed had its roots in philosophy, and although science and philosophy are now separate academic disciplines, they started together and have become alienated, especially during the last hundred years (Hutten, 1962: 12). Historically speaking, Greek philosophy represents the very beginning of scientific thought, and it is, precisely, the rediscovery of Greek learning during the Renaissance that is generally recognised as the starting-point of science in the modern sense of the word. Interestingly, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century physicists were still called experimental philosophers. And philosophers like Locke, Hume, Leibniz or Kant were explicitly concerned with explaining and understanding the new physics and mathematics of Newton. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, Newton “revealed a solar system that worked like a vast machine. The machine, he said, was made of parts – some of them as small as an atom and others as huge as the sun but they all obeyed the same four laws” (Taylor, 1999: 613). Thus, according to the Newtonian

mechanistic worldview, the atom is the basic building block of the cosmos, in the physical universe, even something as big as the sun is made up of atoms. The giant cosmic machine was seen as being completely causal and determinate. In that worldview, all that happened had a definite cause which gave rise to a definite effect, and predictions could be made about the future of any part of the system with absolute certainty if its state at any given time was known in all details. The Newtonian laws were seen as the basic laws of nature and Newton's mechanics was considered to be the ultimate theory of natural phenomena. It was believed that the world could be described objectively, i.e. without ever mentioning the human observer, and such an objective description of nature became the ideal of all science (1999: 618).

Yet, less than two hundred years later, a new physical reality began to emerge which would make the limitations of the Newtonian model apparent and show that none of its characteristics had absolute validity. This realisation came slowly but steadily, and was initiated by developments that had already started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and which prepared the way for the scientific revolutions of our time. According to particle physicist Stephen Barr the changes began with a puzzle called wave-particle duality, which first appeared in the study of light (2007: 22).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, light was understood to consist of waves in the electromagnetic field that fills all of space. The idea of fields goes back to Michael Faraday and James Clerk Maxwell, who thought of magnetic and electrical forces as being caused by invisible lines of force stretching between objects, imagining space as being permeated by such force fields. In 1864, "Maxwell wrote down the complete set of equations that govern electromagnetic fields and showed that waves propagate in them, just as sound waves propagate in air" (2007: 22). Thus, Faraday saw that forces arise from fields, and Maxwell saw that fields give rise to waves. This was an extremely profound change in people's conception of physical reality. Whereas in the Newtonian view the forces were rigidly connected with the bodies they acted upon, now the force concept was replaced by the "much subtler concept of a field which had its own reality and could be studied without any reference to material bodies" (Capra, 2000: 61). In 1900, Max Planck found that a specific theoretical problem could only be resolved by



assuming that the energy in light waves comes “in discrete, indivisible chunks”, which were called “quanta” (Barr, 2007: 22). In other words, his theory was that light acts in some ways as if it is made up of little particles. Precisely, “light quanta gave quantum theory its name” (Capra, 2000: 67). Planck’s idea seemed absurd at the time, because it was until then believed that “a wave is something spread out and continuous, while a particle is something point-like and discrete” (Barr, 2007: 24). How could something be both one and the other at the same time? And yet it was Einstein, in 1905, who found that Planck’s idea was needed to explain another puzzling behaviour of light: the photoelectric effect. In 1921 Einstein won the Nobel Prize for his groundbreaking work on the photoelectric effect. In a seminal paper he explained that it was “a phenomenon in which some materials exposed to ultraviolet light eject electrons in ways unexplainable by classical physics” (Strait, 2001: 154). It took a generation of brilliant physicists such as Bohr (Denmark), Heisenberg (Germany), Schrödinger (Austria), De Broglie (France), Born (Germany), Dirac (England), and Pauli (Austria), to develop a mathematically consistent and coherent theory that described and made some sense out of wave-particle duality (Barr, 2007: 22). The quantum theory they came up with has been spectacularly successful and has been applied to a vast range of phenomena, and hundreds of thousands of its predictions about all sorts of physical systems “have been confirmed with astonishing accuracy” (2007: 22). Thus, the materialistic worldview “was being cracked open by scientists...who told the world: Probe deeply enough into matter, and it disappears and dissolves into unfathomable energy” (Arntz et al, 2005: 21).

Until then, Newton’s theories had given a unified account of celestial and terrestrial phenomena; Maxwell’s equations unified electricity, magnetism, and optics; and Einstein’s theory of relativity unified space and time (Barr, 2007: 25). In fact, the theory of relativity and the theory of atomic physics “shattered all the principal concepts of the Newtonian world view” (Capra, 2000: 61). Clearly, the discoveries of modern physics required more profound changes in concepts such as time, space, matter, object, cause and effect. Physicists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century felt as if the foundations of their worldview were being shaken by the new experience of atomic reality. For instance, when Einstein first came in contact with the new reality of atomic physics, he

wrote: “All my attempts to adapt the theoretical foundation of physics to this (new type of) knowledge failed completely. It was as if the ground had been pulled out from under one, with no firm foundation to be seen anywhere, upon which one could have built” (In Schilpp, 1949: 45).

Likewise, Nobel laureate physicist Niels Bohr expressed the depth of the radical change in the realm of physics with these words: “The great extension of our experience in recent years has brought to light the insufficiency of our simple mechanical conceptions and, as a consequence, has shaken the foundation on which the customary interpretation of observation was based” (Bohr, 1934: 2). Moreover, the verbal interpretations of all scientific models and theories used so far started to suffer from the inadequacy of language. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the study of the world of atoms forced physicists to realise that language in itself is “not only inaccurate, but totally inadequate to describe the atomic and subatomic reality” (Capra, 2000: 45). Heisenberg wrote that:

The most difficult problem... concerning the use of the language arises in quantum theory. Here we have at first no simple guide for correlating the mathematical symbols with concepts of ordinary language; and the only thing we know from the start is the fact that our common concepts cannot be applied to the structure of the atoms. (1958: 177)

With the new quantum perspective, the delicate, modern instruments of experimental physics started making the sub-microscopic world accessible to our senses by penetrating deep into realms of nature that are beyond our imagination. However, what people can now see, or hear, are never the investigated phenomena themselves but always their consequences. The atomic and subatomic world itself lies beyond our sensory perception. While in pre-quantum, classical physics, one calculated what actually happens, in quantum physics one calculates the relative probabilities of various things happening (Barr, 2007: 23). Thus, the probabilistic nature of quantum theory gives rise to many unusual conclusions. A famous example, for instance, comes from an experiment in which an opaque wall with two windows is placed between a light-collector and an initial burst of light. In such a situation, some of the light wave

will crash into the wall, and some will pass through the windows, blending together and impinging on the light-collector. If the light-collector collects a particle of light, one might imagine that the particle had to have come through either one window or the other. The rules of the quantum probability calculus, however, compel the weird conclusion that in some unimaginable way the single particle came through both windows at once. Waves, being spread out, can go through two windows at once, and so the wave-particle duality ends up implying that individual particles can also. (2007: 24)

Thus, when quantum theory showed that waves are particles (and particles waves), a deep unity of nature came into view: “The forces by which matter interacts and the particles of which it is composed are both manifestations of a single kind of thing – ‘quantum fields’” (2007: 25). In fact, the quantum issues debated by Bohr and Einstein “paved the way for a great flowering of speculation about the interconnectedness of all things” (Strait, 2001: 161). And it is precisely this “interconnectedness” of all phenomena in quantum physics which is one of the main reasons why some scientists, as well as philosophers, saw an affinity with Eastern mysticism. Eastern ‘sages’ of the past, too, speculated about the world, but rather than guided by the desire to understand external reality, they were mainly guided by religious and moral feelings (Hutten, 1962: 13). Thus, Oriental cultures never developed anything near to what we accept as science in the West, even though the Chinese provided great technological inventions such as printing, the compass, porcelain, gun powder, paper or the glass lens, before they were devised in the West (Binyon, 1936: x). Likewise the Hindus, who remained fruitful in producing art and in promoting craftsmanship, did not succeed in developing what we call science, either (Hutten, 1962: 18); although they did produce outstanding philosophers, such as Patanjali, Shankar, Aurobindo amongst many others (Radhakrishnan, and Moore, 1957; Isayeva, 1993; Heehs, 2008). Interestingly, it is in Taoism where mistrust of conventional knowledge and reasoning is stronger than in any other school of Eastern philosophy, since it is based “on the firm belief that the human intellect can never comprehend the Tao” (Capra, 2000: 113). In the words of Chuang Tzu,

The most extensive knowledge does not necessarily know it;  
reasoning will not make men wise in it.  
The sages have decided against both these methods.  
(Tzu, 1971: Ch. 22-5)

Thus, according to Taoists, logical reasoning was considered as part of the artificial world of man. They were “not interested in this world at all, but concentrated their attention fully on the observation of nature in order to discern the characteristics of the Tao” (Capra, 2000: 114). We could affirm that the attitude they developed was essentially scientific, but their deep “mistrust in the analytic method prevented them from constructing proper scientific theories” (2000: 114). In spite of this, their careful observation of nature, together with a strong mystical intuition, led them to profound insights, which are now being confirmed by modern scientific theories. Taylor tells us about a cycle of conferences given by Fred Burnham, an Episcopal priest, doctor in the history of science from John Hopkins, who is dedicated to holding *peace* talks between science and religion. In his view,

There is another way to conceive of our life..., but it requires a different worldview – not a clockwork universe in which individuals function as discrete springs and gears, but one that looks more like a luminous web, in which the whole is far more than the parts. In this universe, there is no such thing as an individual apart from his or her relationships. Every interaction – between people and people, between people and things, between things and things – changes the face of history. Life on earth cannot be reduced to four sure-fire rules. It is an ever-unfolding mystery that defies precise prediction. Meanwhile, in the universe, there is no such thing as ‘parts’. The whole is the fundamental unity of reality. (1999: 615)

If this sounds like “the language of Eastern religion”, Taylor says, “it is not. It is the language of quantum physics, which is causing a revolution in the way we see our world” (1999: 615). Likewise, according to some authors, the extended debate about the interpretation of atomic and subatomic physics was a pivotal event whose outcome has shifted the foundations of Western culture closer to Eastern and New Age religions (Strait, 2001: 154). Certainly, the translation of Eastern texts at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fired up the interest in themes like ‘energy’ and ‘the power of our thoughts’, as we saw in section 2.2.2. It should be mentioned, though, that Western interest in ‘energy’ or ‘animal magnetism’, as it was called in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by physician/hypnotist Franz Anton Mesmer, has in one way or another been present at a popular level, especially in relation to religious belief (Harrington, 2008: 22). From the ‘laying on of hands’ performed by Jesus to heal people, in the Bible (e.g. Mathew 9: 18-25; Mark 6:5; Luke 4:40; Luke 13:13), or healing at a distance (Mathew 8:8), to the

laying on of hands of priests during baptisms, blessings, and ordination of priests and ministers. And it was especially during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when science stepped in to explain, still at a very rudimentary level and followed by a cloud of criticism, what had previously been seen as of purely theological significance (Harrington, 2008: 43). Nowadays, sentences such as ‘our thoughts create our reality’ – which is the opening line of the *Dhammapada* – or ‘everything is energy’ – which can be read in the *Vedas* or the *Upanishads* (*Prasna Upanishad*, 2: 13) – are often repeated within self-help literature texts and are becoming part of everyday language for many people. Interestingly, these same affirmations are also starting to appear in a number of popular scientific books such as *Taking the Quantum Leap: The New Physics for Non-Scientists* (Wolf, 1989); *Mind into Matter: A New Alchemy of Science and Spirit* (Wolf, 2001) or *What the Bleep Do We know?* (Arntz, 2005).

Indeed, for some authors, quantum theory has “escaped” from the world of physics into the world of popular culture, where it has emerged as an important element affecting religious and philosophical discourses now circulating at the global level (Barr, 2007, 21). Especially in the 1970s, there were two books that particularly aimed to explain the basic concepts of quantum theory to the general public, highlighting some extraordinary parallelisms with Eastern thought: *The Tao of Physics* by Fritjof Capra, published in 1975, and *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics* (1979), by Gary Zukav. Thus, Capra expressed in the first chapter:

The purpose of this book is to explore this relationship between the concepts of modern physics and the basic ideas in the philosophical and religious traditions of the Far East. We shall see how the two foundations of twentieth-century physics – quantum theory and relativity theory – both force us to see the world very much in the way a Hindu, Buddhist or Taoist sees it. (2000: 18)

Capra goes on to explain that the surprising parallels between modern physics and the religious philosophies of the Far East had already been noticed by some of the great physicists of our century when they came in contact with Far Eastern culture during their lecture tours to India, China and Japan. Thus, American physicist Julius Robert Oppenheimer wrote these revealing lines in the introductory pages of his *Science and the Common Understanding*:

The general notions about human understanding (...) which are illustrated by discoveries in atomic physics are not in the nature of things wholly unfamiliar, wholly unheard of, or new. Even in our own culture they have a history, and in Buddhist and Hindu thought a more considerable and central place. What we shall find is an exemplification, an encouragement, and a refinement of old wisdom. (1954: 8-9)

Likewise, Danish physicist and Nobel laureate Niels Bohr expressed a similar belief in the first pages of his *Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge*:

For a parallel to the lesson of atomic theory [we must turn] to those kinds of epistemological problems with which already thinkers like the Buddha and Lao Tzu have been confronted, when trying to harmonize our position as spectators and actors in the great drama of existence. (Bohr, 1958: 20)

Moreover, German physicist and also Nobel laureate, Werner Heisenberg, who was assistant to Bohr in Copenhagen and is best known for conceiving the Uncertainty Principle of quantum theory, made important contributions to nuclear physics, quantum field theory and particle physics. He affirmed in 1958 that there is a clear indication “of a certain relationship between philosophical ideas in the tradition of the Far East and the philosophical substance of quantum theory” (Heisenberg, 1958: 202).

These renowned physicists, amongst many others, saw the parallels between modern physics and Eastern mysticism as most striking. For the first time in our modern world, scientists were forced by their own findings to acknowledge that “a complete understanding of reality lies beyond the capabilities of rational thought” (Strait, 2001: 160). Thus, the early separation between science and philosophy seemed to be longing for a new convergence. Zukav tells us that physics is not a sterile, boring discipline, but, rather, “a rich, profound venture which has become inseparable from philosophy” (Zukav, 2001: xxxi). Subsequently, he goes on to say that “Physics, in essence, is the simple wonder at the way things are and a divine (some call it compulsive) interest in how that is so. Mathematics is the *tool* of physics. Stripped of mathematics, physics becomes pure enchantment” (2001: 4). Similarly, for American physicist and science populariser Fred Alan Wolf, quantum physics has something “magical” about it, containing striking similarities with Buddhism (Wolf, 1989: 105; 2005: 190-1). As already mentioned, it is often almost impossible to say whether some statements have been made by physicists or by Eastern mystics.

It turns out, we are now told, that the physical universe is essentially non-physical, and seems to arise “from a field that is even more subtle than energy itself, a field that looks more like information, intelligence or consciousness than like matter” (Arntz, 2005: 21). At the atomic level, the solid material objects of classical physics seem to dissolve into patterns of probability, forcing us to see the universe as a complicated web of relations between various parts of a unified whole. An elementary particle is, in essence, a set of relationships that reach outward to other things. In Heisenberg’s words: “The world thus appears as a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole” (1958: 107). Interestingly, this is also the way in which some Eastern mystics have experienced the world, expressing their views in words which are almost identical with those used by atomic physicists, as, for example, in Aurobindo’s *The Synthesis of Yoga*, where he states that “The material object becomes... something different from what we now see, not a separate object on the background or in the environment of the rest of nature but an indivisible part and even in a subtle way an expression of the unity of all that we see” (1957: 993). Quantum physicist John Hagelin, for instance, tells us that the *Vedic* tradition is founded upon the premise of the ultimate unity of life and the capability of the human brain to directly experience that core unity and live it. According to Hagelin, if one looks at the structure of the human brain in detail, one can see that it is specifically designed and carefully engineered to experience the unified field, to experience the unity of life (1987: 29-87).

In Eastern mysticism, the human observer and his or her consciousness play a vital part in the universal web, just as they do in atomic physics. Heisenberg explained it clearly when he affirmed that “the end of the chain of processes lies always in the *consciousness of the human observer*” (Heisenberg, 1958: 107, emphasis added). Thus, one of the main features of atomic physics is that the human observer is absolutely necessary to perceive and to define the properties of an object. Almost every aspect of modern physics seems to reflect the fundamental role that observation and, ultimately, consciousness must play in understanding the basic physics of the world. This is known in quantum physics as the Copenhagen Interpretation, by which Niels Bohr and his colleagues supported the idea that the observer has an inescapable influence on any

observed physical process, that is, that we are not neutral, objective witnesses to things and events – meaning that something isn't an 'it' until it's an observed 'it'. Bohr believed that the particles themselves don't come into existence until we observe them, and that reality on a quantum level does not exist until it is observed or measured (Zukav, 2001: 40-44).

Both in Hinduism and in Buddhism, the world we perceive with our senses is no more than *maya*, or illusion (see section 2.2.1). Many spiritual texts suggest that “there is a ‘higher reality’ that is more fundamental than the material universe is, and it has something to do with consciousness” (Arntz et al, 2005: 41). As mentioned before, this is, precisely, what some scientists claim that quantum physics reveals: “at the core of the physical world there is a completely non-physical realm” that could well be called information, probability waves or just consciousness (2005: 42). Others openly admit that there is essentially nothing to matter whatsoever, that it's completely insubstantial. For them, the most solid thing you could say about all this insubstantial matter is that it's “*more like a thought*; it's like a concentrated bit of information” (Satinover, 2001, emphasis added). Also for Zukav, Eastern mystics from around the world, in their moments of enlightenment, reveal that everything – all the separate parts of the universe – are no more than manifestations of the same whole, meaning that there is only one reality, which is whole and inseparable (Zukav, 2001: 267). For numerous scientists, as we have seen, the gap between East and West seems to be closing between Eastern mysticism and quantum physics (Needham, 1991).

It should nonetheless be mentioned that, in spite of the fact that many of the founders of quantum physics expressed a great interest in Eastern thought – “Niels Bohr used the yin/yang symbol in his coat of arms; David Bohm had long discussions with the Indian sage Krishnamurti; Erwin Schrödinger gave lectures on the *Upanishads*” (Arntz, 2005: 70) – while many others openly suggest some kind of parallelism between quantum physics and spirituality, as shown at the beginning of this section, this does not necessarily imply that quantum physics proves the mystical worldview. In fact, some professional physicists take issue with what they consider popular interpretations of quantum theory, especially criticising the use and abuse of the term by New Age writers



such as Chopra and others (Barr, 2007, 21) (more on Chopra in section 3.2.3). Precisely because it gives too much importance to the mind of the human observer, there are many people who do not take the traditional interpretation of quantum theory seriously. In fact, there have been several attempts to prove its absurdity. The most famous one of these attempts is called the Schrödinger Cat Paradox, devised by Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger in 1935, which claims that the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics cannot be applied to everyday objects. His experiment presents a cat that might be alive or dead, depending on an earlier event. He suggests one should imagine a cat in a sealed box with a flask of poison and a radioactive source. If an internal Geiger counter detects radiation, the flask is shattered, releasing the poison that kills the cat. According to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, after a while, the cat is simultaneously alive and dead. Yet, when we look in the box, we see the cat *either* alive *or* dead, not both alive *and* dead:

If, as the traditional view has it, there is not a definite outcome until the human observer knows the result, then it would seem that the cat remains in some kind of limbo, not alive or dead, but 95 percent alive and 5 percent dead, until the observer opens the box and looks at the cat – which is absurd. It would mean that our minds create reality or that reality is perhaps only in our minds. Many philosophers attack the traditional interpretation of quantum theory as denying objective reality. Others attack it because they don't like the idea that minds have something special about them not describable by physics. (Barr, 2007: 27)

Einstein himself did not like the new quantum theory, because there was too much chance in it and too little design. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, Einstein and his colleagues Boris Podolsky and Nathan Rosen “tried to undermine quantum theory with something known as the EPR experiment (for Einstein, Podolsky and Rosen)” (Taylor, 1999: 616). The paper presented an experiment that followed quantum theory precisely, in which the theory predicted an outcome which made no sense: “a ‘spooky’ instant interaction between two originally linked particles even if they were widely separate” (Strait, 2001: 158). EPR argued that quantum theory must be flawed, since instant interaction would require communication at speeds faster than the speed of light, and Einstein's theory of relativity specifically rules out such possibility (2001: 159). Yet, after analysing all possible angles to the EPR paper, Niels Bohr finally certified that “both the experiment and the outcome predicted in the paper were fully consistent with quantum theory” and

that from the quantum point of view, “the two particles, once linked or entangled, can be considered part of one quantum system. Their distinction as two apparently separate particles arises only because we have elected to measure out two independent particles” (2001: 159). In 1983, a French team led by physicist Alain Aspect, finally confirmed the validity of the EPR prediction. They confirmed that in the quantum world, “particles could indeed carry on some kind of mysterious, instantaneous communication. Quantum theory was vindicated again, and the real world defended by Einstein was deviant from the experimental data” (2001: 159).

The second scientific area we will look at is that of earth sciences. From the early 1960s onward, scientists such as James Lovelock (UK), Lynn Margulis (US) and Lars Gunnar Sillen (SE) started to consider a more holistic approach to the study of physical phenomena (Lovelock, 1982: 10). At that time, James Lovelock was working for NASA in its search for life on Mars, when he developed the Gaia<sup>63</sup> Hypothesis which later developed into the Gaia Theory (1982: 10). He proposed that everything about the Earth’s environment was interrelated and, in fact, regulated by organic and inorganic factors (1982: 1-2). His hypothesis considered “that the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of manipulating the Earth’s atmosphere to suit its overall needs” and that it is “endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts” (1982: 9).

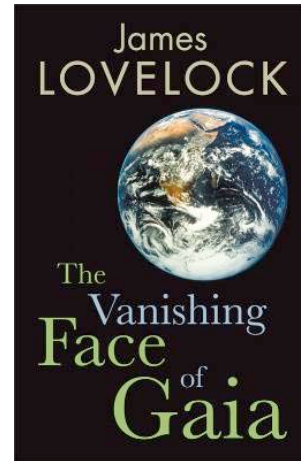
Lovelock observed that the Earth’s atmosphere was actively maintained and regulated by life on its surface, that is, by the biosphere. He had several reasons to put forward his hypothesis. For example, he noticed that:

The atmosphere is not merely a biological product, but more probably a biological construction: not living, but like a cat’s fur, a bird’s feathers, or the paper of a wasp’s nest, an extension of a living system designed to maintain a chosen environment. Thus the atmospheric concentration of gases such as oxygen and ammonia is found to be kept at an optimum value from which even small departures could have disastrous consequences for life... The climate and

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<sup>63</sup> The name Gaia – after the goddess of earth in Greek mythology – was suggested to Lovelock by his neighbour Nobel Prize for Literature laureate William Golding (Lovelock, 1982: 10).

the chemical properties of the Earth now and throughout its history seem always to have been optimal for life. (1982: 9)



*James Lovelock<sup>64</sup>, author of the Gaia Theory*

In relation to this, it is well-known that in cultures of tribal people from all around the world, from North American or Amazonian Indians to New Zealand Maoris the Earth is considered as a sacred entity in which all living beings are interconnected. To our mind comes the famous speech arguing in favor of ecological responsibility and respect of native Americans' land rights by Chief Seattle of the Dwamish Tribe in Washington in reply to a government offer by President Pierce to buy their land in 1854: "Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. Even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as the swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people, and the very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch".<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> For information on Lovelock's activities and publications see his official international website: <<http://www.ecolo.org/lovelock/>> and <<http://www.jameslovelock.org/>> (accessed January, 2008).

<sup>65</sup> For the complete speech of Chief Seattle's Treaty Oration see *The Original Smith Text* <<http://www.synaptic.bc.ca/ejournal/smith.htm>> (accessed January, 2009).

Also, the Maori stories of creation – where Papatuanuku is a loving, nursing and protective Mother Earth – tell us of a deep connection between our planet and its creatures.<sup>66</sup> Without going that far, Lovelock comments that “country people still living close to the earth often seem puzzled that anyone should need to make a formal proposition of anything as obvious as the Gaia hypothesis. For them it is true and always has been” (1982: 10). In the 1970s Lovelock and Margulis defined Gaia as:

a complex entity involving the Earth’s biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet. The maintenance of relatively constant conditions by active control may be conveniently described by the term ‘homoeostasis’. (1982: 10)

Furthermore, in Lovelock’s words, Gaia has three important characteristics that could profoundly modify our interaction with the rest of the biosphere, namely:

The most important property of Gaia is the tendency to keep constant conditions for all terrestrial life. Provided that we have not seriously interfered with her state of homoeostatis, this tendency should be as predominant now as it was before man’s arrival on the scene. Gaia has vital organs at the core, as well as expendable or redundant ones mainly on the periphery. What we do to our planet may depend greatly on where we do it. Gaian responses to changes for the worse must obey the rules of cybernetics, where the time constant and the loop gain are important factors. Thus the regulation of oxygen has a time constant measured in thousands of years. Such slow processes give the least warning of undesirable trends. By the time it is realized that all is not well and action is taken, inertial drag will bring things to a worse state before an equally slow improvement can set in. (1982: 119)

Rather than seeing nature as a primitive force to be subdued and conquered, the Gaia Hypothesis warns us that we are all connected and that whatever we do to our planet, we also do to ourselves.

Similarly, the *Tao Te Ching* tells us, just as quantum physics and the Gaia Theory seem to confirm, that everything is connected and part of a bigger whole:

Yet Heaven and Earth  
And all the spaces between

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<sup>66</sup> For Maori stories of creation and Maori related topics, see *New Zealand in History* <<http://history-nz.org/maori9.html>> (accessed January, 2009).

Are like a bellows:  
Empty but inexhaustible,  
Always producing more.  
(*Tao Te Ching*, 5)

Or:

Someone who's in touch with Tao is in touch with the earth.  
The earth is in touch with heaven.  
Heaven's in touch with Tao.  
Tao's in touch with the way things are.  
(Chapter 25)

Also:

All things originate from being.  
Being originates from non-being  
(Chapter 40)

In this section entitled “Eastern Thought and Western Science: A possible Convergence?” we have explored seeming similarities between some cutting-edge scientific theories in two major areas (physics and earth sciences) and certain Eastern beliefs, such as the ancient Eastern conviction that everything is made up of energy, that all things are interconnected in our universe and that at the core of the physical world there seems to be a completely non-physical realm called consciousness.

## **2.2.5. Recapitulation: The Appeal of the Far East in America**

*Always aim at complete harmony of thought and word and deed,  
always aim at purifying your thoughts and everything will be well*

Mahatma Gandhi

In Part Two we have analysed the attraction of the Far East in the United States. We explored emerging Eastern influences in America as a cultural phenomenon, from many different perspectives: historical, philosophical, psychological, social and scientific. I devoted the first section to a description of the essential tenets of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism in order to provide a sufficient basis for understanding the connections established in Western science with Eastern ideas and, above all, to set the necessary conceptual background for my analysis of specific self-help authors in Part Three. Following this, we explored how Eastern concepts and practices have spread in America, both at a popular, as well as at an academic level.

We saw that the adoption of Eastern ideas and practices started to spread with movements such as the New Thought movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and subsequently, the New Age movement, especially from the 1960s onwards. We also saw how Eastern immigration to the United States (which occurred in different waves) helped towards a greater presence of Eastern practices in American society. From the 1960s onwards, departments of Psychology and Psychiatry of different American universities started showing great interest in the exploration of Eastern practices, such as yoga and meditation, for the obvious benefits that these techniques offer. Furthermore, we saw that a growing number of Western physicists, specifically, quantum physicists, as well as other scientists, take the position that there are strong connections between their scientific theories and the ancient mystical sacred texts, supporting the idea of interconnectedness in our universe and the presence of a non-physical realm called consciousness.

From the data given in this part, it is evident that the channels of diffusion of ideas and practices through society are varied. Just like consumer goods are diffused through society, so are words, concepts, techniques and practices. Clearly, one of the ways diffusion may take place is via key, definable people or institutions (New Thought, the Beatles, Bruce Lee, Richard Hittleman). A second way is the diffusion through the media, giving coverage to or putting on series like *Kung Fu* or *The Karate Kid*, whereby the decisions taken by executives in the film industry or television might have a decisive impact by giving great popularity to a minority practice. Likewise, articles in magazines and newspapers dealing with themes such as ‘reincarnation’, ‘chakras’ or acupuncture play an important role in making familiar and popularising themes which were practically unheard-of at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The diverse and intertwining paths of transmission lead finally to a place where millions of people know of and even practice oriental techniques. The ‘exotic’ becomes more and more familiar: by word of mouth, by seeing advertising for activities and courses in health shops, and through specialised centres where people receive oriental massages or practice yoga, meditation, reiki and martial arts. Perceptions of supply and demand, real or anticipated, lead to the expansion of some of these practices into mainstream health and fitness centres. From there, we find institutions and companies taking initiatives to establish courses for their employees and management, especially of yoga and meditation. People get used to the new concepts and practices to the point where it is not surprising to find in bestseller lists books by authors who have incorporated some of these Eastern ideas and practices, whether more superficially or more profoundly, into their discourse, as we will see in Part Three of this dissertation.





**PART THREE**

**Analysis of Eastern Influence  
in US Self-help Literature**



### 3.1 Heuristic Diagram: Eastern Influence in Five Self-help Literature Books in the US from the 1980s to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

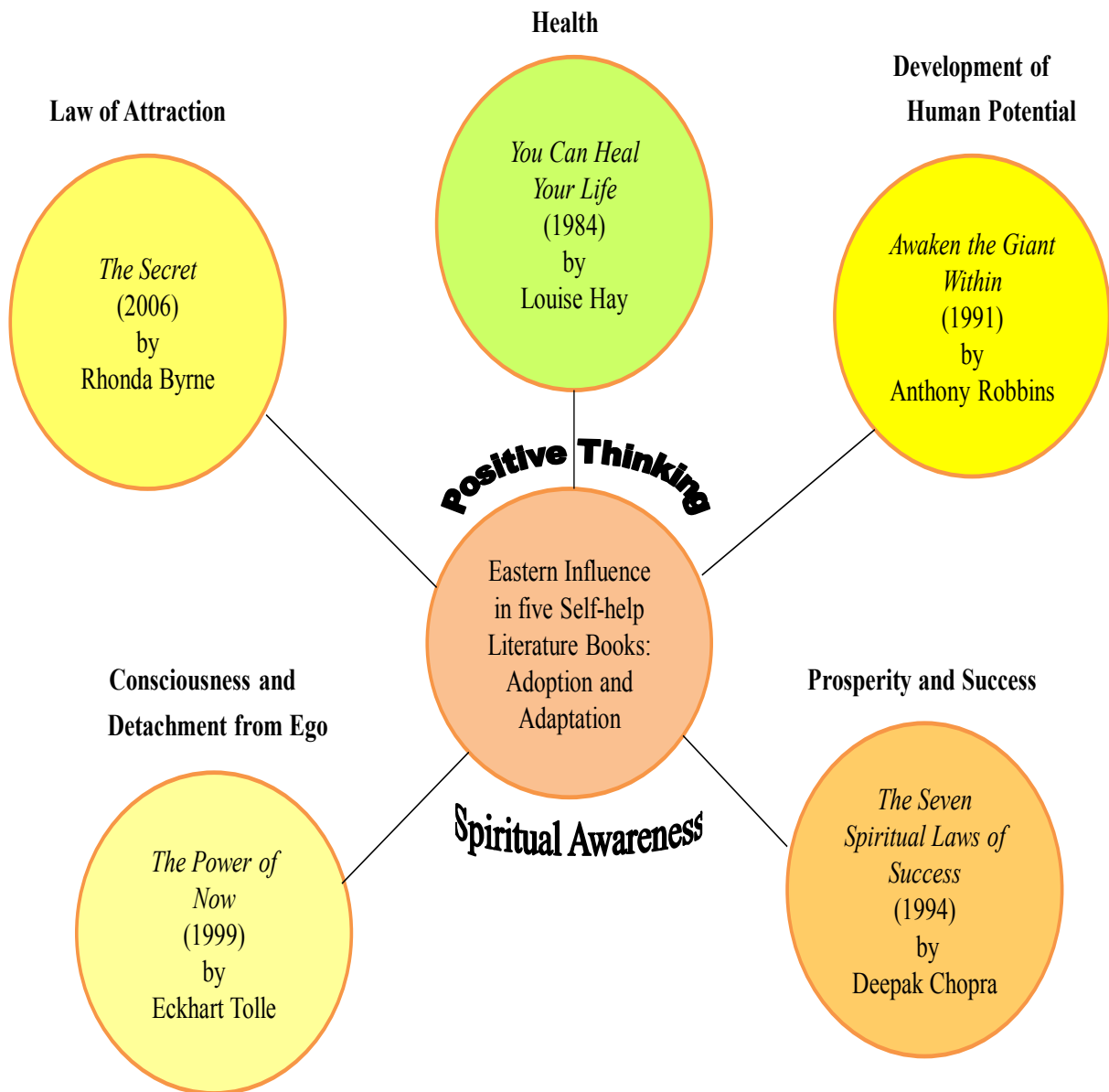


Figure 4: Here, a selected number of self-help books have been classified and grouped into different topic areas with a view to examining the representation of our target issue.

### **3.2 Eastern influence in American Self-help Literature: A Process of Adoption and Adaptation**

*Be the change you want to see in the world*

Mahatma Gandhi

Part Three of this dissertation is mainly devoted to the analysis of the articulation of Eastern ideas and practices within some of the most well-known and widely-read American books belonging to the third and fourth strands of the popular genre of self-help literature, in the light of their contributions to the achievement of happiness and inner peace, as mentioned in the Introduction. As we saw in section 1.5.4, this is the purpose of self-help literature of mostly Eastern influence that appeared at a time of important socio-political and economic challenges (1950s and 1960s), and started to flourish towards the 1990s with an ever-increasing demand for it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of the basic aims of my analysis is to contribute to an understanding of these developments in self-help literature, in order to open them to equanimous assessment, rather than accepting, condemning or ignoring them. In other words, I hope that by providing an academic analysis of how this popular genre operates, this dissertation will open up new possibilities to understanding their role, values and success in their contemporary cultural context.

The selection of books for my analysis is taken from the *New York Times* bestseller lists, since, lacking a canon, these lists are very often referred to in self-help publications and articles on self-improvement (Hazleden, 2003: 413). And even though the term ‘best-selling’ is probably somewhat ill-defined – this is obvious when contrasting the results of lists made by different agencies – I am confident that they represent a reasonably fair reflection of recent popular self-help books of the third and fourth strands (as defined in the Introduction of this dissertation). I have deliberately chosen only best-selling books, with an enormous popular impact, whose authors are

also ‘self-help gurus’ with their own websites<sup>67</sup> and with additional channels of promotion of their work, such as CDs, DVDs, seminars and regular conferences given worldwide. They are, nonetheless, not the only important exponents of the self-help genre in the US.

We will see applications in such different areas as health, business, management, popular psychology and spiritual guidance. My aim is to establish a clear distinction between books which use a typically American self-help discourse, only superficially adopting, adapting, or simply paralleling certain Eastern ideas and practices from those which are clearly more based on Eastern philosophical thought but have been adapted to an American context, thus shedding some light on the process of penetration, adaptation and diffusion of ideas and practices so valuable from a Cultural Studies perspective.

Since this is the first study of these characteristics, I have decided to establish the following parameters for my analysis, hoping that they will be useful for further research in this area. Thus, each book in this section will be analysed as far as possible for the following aspects:

- Structure – Language – Style
- Presence or Absence of Story of Personal Transformation
- Presence or Absence of Testimonials
- Influences: Religious and Non-Religious
- Eastern Practices and Concepts
- Comparison Eastern – American Messages
- Views on Happiness and Success
- Conclusion

In other words, I will start by pointing out the typical American self-help features related to structure, language and style of each book analysed. Subsequently, I will highlight the presence or absence of a personal story of transformation as well as the Eastern background of each author (if any), and the presence or absence of

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<sup>67</sup> See all websites of the authors in the bibliography.

testimonials. As we will see, most of the authors of the books analysed are American (Chopra is American of Hindu origin), or have lived in America a great part of their adult lives. Next, I will focus on the various influences in each text (religious and non-religious), with particular emphasis on Eastern practices and concepts utilised, providing an analysis of why this is so, and offering conclusions as to what type of processes have taken place, or what stages have been reached in the diffusion of ideas. I will analyse the messages conveyed in the light of their self-help conventions, especially in relation to the meaning of success and happiness as conceived by each author. The final conclusion of this dissertation revolves around this last point and ties in with the goal orientation of self-help literature in general and the message(s) for its readership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As I already briefly mentioned in Part One, it is typical of self-help literature texts to use ‘easy-to-understand’ language, relatively simple, even naive sentences, a very friendly and direct kind of language, and a ‘reachable’ tone, as if one was talking to a friend ‘who lets you in on a secret’. Often the writers share their own stories, expressing their understanding of human miseries. Here is an example in *You Can Heal Your Life*, where the author comments on what some people share with her when they come for a private consultation. Typically patients say:

My relationships don’t work. They are smothering, absent, demanding, don’t support me, always criticizing me, unloving, never leave me alone, pick on me all the time, don’t want to be bothered with me, walk all over me, never listen to me, etc. Plus whatever else you may have created. Yes, I have heard them all... (Hay, 1984: 19)

This “Yes, I have heard them all” puts the author unequivocally in a position of ‘superiority’ in relation to the readers, or at least, in a teacher-student, psychologist-patient, counsellor-patient relationship so typical of most books of this popular genre, which could be considered “visible manifestations of the widespread influence of therapeutic discourse” (Hazleden, 2003: 413), at a time of the birth of a new epoch – that of the individualised “psychological man” (Rieff and Lasch-Quinn, 1987: 232). Lasch argues that, as never before, in recent decades there has been a retreat into

narcissism fuelled by therapy (1979: 31-32), and this is particularly obvious in the self-help literature discourse. According to Lichterman, self-help readers “read believably but loosely”, sometimes experiencing problems trying to remember particular messages, but showing a tendency to entertain psychological interpretations of personal troubles and assuming that within self-help books, “the categories and analyses themselves are legitimate” (1992: 427, 432).

I have decided to start this analysis in chronological order, beginning with the pioneering book that most openly ‘popularised’ some esoteric or New Thought aspects remarkably paralleling Eastern philosophy within self-help literature, namely, *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984) by Louise Hay. It is a self-improvement book where happiness is understood as the achievement of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health, and the creation of one’s perfect life (1984: 106-07). Spearheading the ‘New Age’<sup>68</sup> movement in the United States, *You Can Heal Your Life* is a clear example of the self-help genre with its simple, often naive style, especially directed to a feminine readership. This is followed by Anthony Robbins’ *Awaken the Giant Within* (1991), which will help us understand the Japanese philosophy of *kaizen*, also known as ‘constant improvement’ and its influence within the self-help literature discourse, with particular emphasis on business-related books, as will be shown in section 3.2.2. Here happiness is understood as maximising one’s potential. Subsequently, I analyse *The Seven Laws of Spiritual Success* (1994) by Dr. Deepak Chopra. Quite appealing to the American mind because of its scientific-sounding discourse, it is a good example of Eastern wisdom clothed in Western discourse (1994: 67). Happiness is only achieved when one is capable of flowing with life and abiding by certain cosmic laws (1994: 2). Next, I have chosen *The Power of Now* (1999), by German-born writer, settled in America, Eckhart Tolle, which could be described as a guide to help cope with the stressful conditions of Western society and to remind people to focus more on the present moment. Its discourse, as well as the practices and exercises it suggests, remind us of Zen Buddhism and the Buddhist concept of *Śūnyatā*, the Void. For Tolle, success

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<sup>68</sup> Louise Hay’s *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984) is popularly considered a New Age book as expressed, for example, in *The New York Times*: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/04/magazine/04Hay-t.html>> (accessed July, 2009).

and happiness are only achieved when one is intensely present “in the here and now” (1999: 20). And, finally, the last section will be devoted to an American blend of Eastern discourse plus other multiple discourses at the service of Western purposes, as expressed in *The Secret* (2006), by Rhonda Byrne, which appeared first in film format (2005) and was published as a book one year later. Its style is typically self-help, promoting success and happiness in such areas as prosperity, relationships, health, and career. Eastern concepts, like the power of visualisation, meditation, and energy, are taken for granted and they are included within a materially-oriented, individualistic Western message. Finally, it is noteworthy that all the books analysed have been translated into many languages and have sold millions of copies.<sup>69</sup>

Before continuing, I would like to mention that my analysis is necessarily going to take into account the powerful role of consumerism, which for many decades has been producing an important change in the American social landscape, and often “embodies what today’s society values most: the consumption of goods and services as the means for defining self-identity” (Miller, 1997: 41-42). The narcissistic changes in America are clearly a physical evidence of the decline of community values and the ascension of the megaself: “The billboards, the blight, the daily circus we call television, the frantic madness down at the local mall we call shopping – these manifestations of contemporary society all have meaning. They symbolize our collective obsession with ourselves” (1997: 156).

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<sup>69</sup> Here we can see the languages each book has been translated into, according to their websites: *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984): translated into 29 languages <<http://www.youcanhealyourlifemovie.com/about/index.php>> (accessed July, 2009); *Awaken the Giant Within* (1991): translated into 11 languages <<http://www.amazon.com/Awaken-Giant-Within-Anthony-Robbins/dp/0671750186>> (accessed Jul, 09); *The Seven Laws of Spiritual Success* (1994): into 35 languages <<http://www.answers.com/topic/deepak-chopra>> (accessed July, 2009); *The Power of Now* (1999): into 32 languages <<http://eckhartolle.com/home/books>> (accessed July, 2009); *The Secret* (2006): into 38 languages <[http://shop.theseecret.tv/Shops/Book\\_Languages.php](http://shop.theseecret.tv/Shops/Book_Languages.php)> (accessed July, 2009). Millions of copies sold of each book (as of December 2009): *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984): 35 million copies: <<http://www.louisehay.com/about/index.php>> *Unlimited power* (1986): 7 million copies: <[http://www.selfgrowth.com/experts/anthony\\_robbins.html](http://www.selfgrowth.com/experts/anthony_robbins.html)> *The Seven Laws of Spiritual Success* (1994): over 3 million copies: <<http://www.booksattransworld.co.uk/catalog/book.htm?command=Search&db=twmain.txt&eqisbndata=059304083X>> *The Power of Now* (1999): more than 2 million copies: <<http://www.listal.com/book/power-now-guide-spiritual-enlightenment-eckhart-tolle>> *The Secret* (2006): 16 million copies: *The Secret*: <<http://www.theseecret.tv/>> (accessed December, 2009).



Advertising has the capacity to accelerate the pace of consumption:

Once the obvious media – television, radio, billboards, films, magazines – are successfully and effectively utilized, and once older, dying media – such as newspapers – are strategically abandoned, new media such as the Internet are developed or appropriated to reach audiences. Using the Internet to disseminate sales information and advertising is just one example of technology spawning new advertising channels. (1997: 48)

A quick look at the revenues of some of the authors of self-help literature – who often use infomercials and modern technology to spread their messages – confirms that the fixation on the self is indeed extremely profitable (Rhodes, 1998). Thus, in the new American landscape, designed to enhance self-indulgence, “the entire society must become literally a perpetual, omnipresent, round-the-clock market”. The consuming self “must be free to pursue self-creation, self-renewal, and self-redemption through the unfettered act of spontaneous consumption” (Miller, 1997: 42). The self-help genre, without any doubt, participates in this ever-growing consumer market where many self-help gurus manage to make great fortunes and where the adoption of some Eastern concepts and practices frequently becomes a fad fuelled by our consumer society: “from Feng Shui to holistic medicine, from aromatherapy candles to yoga weekends, spirituality is big business. It promises to soothe away the angst of modern living and to offer an antidote to shallow materialism” (Carrette and King, 2004: 1). My analysis of this phenomenon will explore, amongst other things, the degree to which the reference to Eastern ideas and practices is part of a trend in present discourse, used as a more or less integral part of the overall structure, while adapting its tenets to Western needs, and/or whether the adoption of these ideas and practices includes a vision and objectives different from those currently dominant in Western society.

With this introduction, let us now look at the first book selected for my analysis, namely, Louise Hay’s *You Can Heal Your Life*, which is considered seminal in the self-help literature landscape, especially within the area of health and healing (Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 168-69).

### **3.2.1 Pioneering the Popularisation of Eastern and Esoteric Philosophy: *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984) by Louise Hay**

*The only thing we are ever dealing with is a thought, and a thought can be changed*

Louise Hay

Written in a soft, uncomplicated tone *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984) explains how our thoughts, beliefs and ideas about ourselves and about the world are often the cause of our emotional and physical problems, and how, by using certain specific tools, we can change the way we think and, thus, our entire lives for the better. Just like many non-fiction self-help books influenced by New Thought ideas, this New Age book of the second and third strand, as defined in Part One of this dissertation, (focused on mind power and on self-fulfillment) offers a program of exercises, with the promise that “if you will do the exercises progressively as they appear in the book, by the time you have finished, you will have begun to change your life” (1984: 3). It is, therefore, a typical self-help book, containing numerous traits of the genre, such as:

- a story of transformation
- an ‘expert’ (the author) giving advice based on her experience
- many ‘stories’ corroborating the author’s voice.
- easy-to-understand, positive language
- constant repetition of the same ideas from slightly different angles/perspectives
- great emphasis on health, relationships and well-being
- suggested exercises to attain the promised results
- aphoristic quotations from the author at the beginning of each chapter
- the use of Eastern and other esoteric sources to back up different discourses

The volume is divided into four parts: a first part where the author explains her philosophy of life in a simple straightforward way; a second part where she offers the clear, practical step-by-step process that she follows when giving a session to her

patients; the third part is sub-divided into six topic areas (Relationships, Work, Success, Prosperity, The Body and The List), with lots of practical suggestions for dissolving both the fears and the causes of a long list of physical and psychological illnesses (48-53); and finally, the last part is about her personal story of transformation after having been diagnosed as being terminally ill with cancer, and how she managed to cure herself without any allopathic medical help (201).

Born in Los Angeles, CA, in 1926, Louise Hay explains how she was brought up by a single mother, giving details on how tormented her upbringing was. At the age of five, for example, she was raped by a neighbour, and physically and sexually abused by her stepfather (196). At fifteen she ran away from home and from school, ending up working as a waitress and giving birth to a baby girl, whom she gave into adoption to a childless couple when she was sixteen (197). After helping her mother to get a job as a domestic in a small hotel and settling her safely into an apartment, she left for Chicago. She remembers those years in retrospect with these words: “In those early days, the violence I experienced as a child, combined with the sense of worthlessness I developed along the way, attracted men into my life who mistreated me and often beat me” (197). Some years later, she went to New York and became a high fashion model and married a prosperous English businessman, with whom she “travelled the world, met royalty and even had dinner at the White House” (198). Although it appeared that her life had turned around, the marriage ended 14 years later, when he announced his desire to marry another woman. It was at this point of total crisis in her life when she started attending meetings about metaphysics and healing at the Church of Religious Science<sup>70</sup> in New York City, where she learned about the transformative power of thought. There she studied the metaphysical works of Florence Scovel Shinn,<sup>71</sup> who claimed that positive thinking could change people’s lives and that even the body could be healed through positive thinking (198-199). After three years, she started training in the

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<sup>70</sup> Church of Religious Science is a spiritual movement based on New Thought teachings, founded by Ernest Holmes in Los Angeles, in 1927.

<sup>71</sup> Florence Scovel Shinn (1871-1940) was an American artist and book illustrator who also became a New Thought spiritual teacher and metaphysical writer, best known for her first book, *The Game of Life and how to Play it* (1925) (See: Gatlin and Edwards, 2007: 2).

ministerial program of the Church of Religious Science and became a popular speaker at the church, and a licensed counsellor. Also around that time in the 1970s she became a practitioner of Transcendental Meditation (TM) and attended the Maharishi International University (MIU) in Fairfield, Iowa. This is how she explains her time on campus: “There were none of the distractions so typical of my life in New York City. After dinner we all went to our rooms to study. I was the oldest kid on Campus and loved every moment of it. No smoking, drinking or drugs were allowed, and we meditated four times a day” (199, emphasis added).

When she left university she went back to New York becoming very active in the church and in its social activities. At that time she was inspired to put together a simple list of metaphysical causes for physical illnesses in the body, which she called *Heal Your Body* (that is included in part three of *You Can Heal Your Life*, in the chapter called *The List*). Then, one day she was diagnosed with cancer and went into total panic. In her own words:

With my background of being raped at five and having been a battered child, it was no wonder I manifested cancer in the vaginal area. Like anyone else who has just been told they have cancer, I went into total panic. Yet because of all my work with clients, I knew that mental healing worked, and here I was given a chance to prove it to myself. After all, I had written the book on mental patterns, and I knew cancer is a disease of deep resentment that has been held for a long time until it literally eats away at the body. I had been refusing to be willing to dissolve all the anger and resentment at ‘them’ over my childhood. There was no time to waste. I had a lot of work to do. (199)

She explains how she immediately “took responsibility for her own healing” (200) developing an intensive program of affirmations, visualisation, nutritional cleansing, and psychotherapy. Within six months, she was completely healed of cancer (201). She writes: “Now I knew from personal experience that disease can be healed if we are willing to change the way we think and believe and act!” (201) In 1980, Louise Hay moved back to her native Southern California, and started putting her workshop methods on paper. In 1984, her new book, *You Can Heal Your Life*, was published, reaching the *New York Times* bestseller list and remaining on it for 23 consecutive

weeks.<sup>72</sup> In 1985, she began her famous psychological support group based on love, “The Hayride”,<sup>73</sup> with six men diagnosed with AIDS. By 1988, the group had grown to a weekly gathering of 800 people and had moved to an auditorium in West Hollywood. Now she heads ‘Hay House’, her own publishing company that started as a small venture in the living room of her home and has turned into a prosperous corporation selling millions of books and tapes, CDs and DVDs worldwide.<sup>74</sup> In 2007 Louise Hay turned her bestselling book into a movie with the same name *You Can Heal Your Life*, which also has the characteristic self-improvement format, where she is the ‘expert’, sharing her experience of ridding herself of cancer, especially using affirmations (like oriental mantras), changing her mindset and transforming her whole life.



Resorting to a story of personal transformation in order to inspire or also to convince the readers of the legitimacy of their discourse, is a very typical self-help device, where the power of the assertions by ‘setting themselves as examples’ helps to create an empathy between reader and author. Authors’ testimonials are a particularly strong form of the general category of testimonials. Everybody likes to listen to personal stories, and this is probably one of the reasons why self-improvement texts are so popular among certain circles (Canfield and Hansen, 2001: xxi). Testimonials, as we know, are even often used in advertising campaigns, exploiting this human attraction for them, where we see someone using a product (e.g. soap for the laundry) and recommending it to a friend because of its miraculous results. However, in self-help literature the advice to obtain the promised

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<sup>72</sup> Here you can read how *You Can Heal Your Life*, was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 23 consecutive weeks <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A07E6DB133AF933A15757C0A96E9C8B63>> (accessed July, 2009).

<sup>73</sup> See *Louisehay.com* website for more information on Louise Hay and her charity work: <<http://www.louisehay.com/about/index.php>> (accessed August, 2009).

<sup>74</sup> *Hay House* is Louise Hay’s publishing company, and this is its website, which includes a section of books in Spanish: <<http://www.hayhouse.com/>> (accessed August, 2009).

results is not always easy to follow, and so might often leave more frustration in people than relief or help, easily leading to self-blame when cancers or any other problems do not get cured and when the suggestions do not work as expected (Adler, 2007: 1). According to Yuasa, author of *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory* (1987), the full integration of mind and body is the result of prolonged, assiduous cultivation and practice and is, unfortunately, only partial in the average human being. This implies that

there are degrees of mind-body integration attainable by each person in his or her particular context. Hence, some patients may be able to cure their ulcers with daily meditation exercises, whereas others may need drugs or an operation, for example. Healing and prognosis must be viewed within the broadest psychosomatic horizon: physicians must ask what healing processes are available to each patient in his or her own context. (1987: 9)

Moreover, while numerous practising physicians are at least aware of these psychosomatic aspects of disease and prognosis, in recent years researchers have begun to take seriously the claims of individuals who practice meditation and yoga, as we saw in section 2.2.3. The preliminary evidence “indicates these individuals can indeed consciously control physiological functions formerly thought to be strictly autonomic: pulse rate, blood pressure, and the frequency of brain waves, for example” (1987: 8). Yet, in spite of the fact that the empirical scrutiny of disciplines such as the ones mentioned has been narrowing the gap between Eastern and Western forms of healing, especially in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is still great resistance in the utilisation of alternative forms of psychosomatic healing from some sectors within the medical establishment (Kung, 2005: 118).

As I indicated in the title of this section, “Pioneering the Popularisation of Eastern Philosophy: *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984) by Louise Hay”, the author was one of the very first writers within self-help literature to openly share her own philosophy of life filled with Eastern allusions and beliefs. Whereas before the 1970s some New Thought authors such as Wallace Wattles (1910), Dale Carnegie (1936), Napoleon Hill (1937) or Norman Vincent Peale (1952) expressed the Buddhist and Hindu belief that ‘our thoughts create our reality’ (see Wattles, 2007: 3), mixed with a strong puritan influence, it was not until Louise Hay’s book appeared that Eastern

concepts like ‘reincarnation’ or ‘choosing one’s own parents’ were dealt with in a direct, matter-of-fact way.<sup>75</sup> Thus, at a time when the interest in Eastern cultures was emerging with renewed strength, Hay does not hesitate to tell her readership that she believes that:

Each one of us decides to incarnate upon this planet at particular points in time and space. We have chosen to come here to learn a particular lesson that will advance us upon our spiritual, evolutionary pathway. We choose our sex, our color, our country, and then we look around for the particular set of parents who will mirror the pattern we are bringing in to work on in this lifetime. Then, when we grow up, we usually point our fingers accusingly at our parents and whimper, “You did it to me”. But really, we chose them because they were perfect for what we wanted to work on overcoming. (1984: 10)

In Hindu philosophy, as we have seen, life is understood as an “ongoing learning process carried on through many incarnations, as the personality or soul moves from one body to another, evolving all the time” (Totton and Jacobs, 2001: 97). With Hay, this belief penetrated the self-help literature landscape at a grand level in the early 1980s, and from then on has been adopted by numerous authors (Byrne, 2006). As we explained earlier, this adoption of Eastern ideas is, clearly, a sign of the profound spiritual dissatisfaction that lies beneath American superficial consumer culture. Thus, an ever-growing public, devoid of, or detached from, the religious support systems of the past, start focusing their attention not only on Eastern philosophy, but also, as we have seen, on psychology, science and technology to find answers in the midst of a world where traditional and historical values and faith in community structure and religious guidelines are in question.

Like Wattles’ or Hill’s books, Hay’s *You Can Heal Your Life* entirely revolves around the premise that ‘our thoughts create our reality’ and, therefore, that we are totally responsible for everything that happens to us (1984: 7). Hay’s message is simple, almost naive: “Dwell on your problems and they become insurmountable; consider your possibilities and they provide hope and motivation” (Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 169). Just

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<sup>75</sup> This was two years before actress Shirley MacLaine, published her autobiographical book *Out on a Limb* (1986), also showing her interest in Eastern philosophy and New Age spirituality, talking about themes like ‘reincarnation’ and ‘karma’.

as the Buddha affirmed 2,600 years ago, Hay expresses the same idea in the opening lines of her book:

We create the situations, and then we give our power away by blaming the other person for our frustration. No person, no place, and no thing has any power over us, for 'we' are the only thinkers in our mind. We create our experiences, our reality and everyone in it. When we create peace and harmony and balance in our minds, we will find it in our lives. (7)

This 'self-centred', or subjective, worldview – even though recently supported by a growing number of quantum physicists, as we have seen in section 2.2.4 – is one of the most common characteristics of the self-help genre since its beginnings. Interestingly, at the same time it is distinguished from Eastern thought in its objectives in that Buddhism and Hinduism encourage detachment from the world rather than the desire to improve, succeed or find happiness in it. Nevertheless, with none of the common 'how to achieve success' recipes, the essence of Hay's teaching is "love of the self and evaporation of guilt, a process she believes makes us mentally free and physically healthy, as the study of psycho-immunology attests" (Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 168). In a nutshell her message is that you will only begin to change your life when you learn how to love yourself properly: "Love is always the answer to healing of any sort. And the pathway to love is forgiveness. Forgiveness dissolves resentment" (76). Self-help messages such as understanding that thoughts really do create our experiences, breaking free of limiting thoughts, replacing fear with faith and forgiveness, are the main themes of her book.

According to Hay, disease (or dis-ease) is the product of our states of mind, and one of the root causes of all illnesses is the inability to forgive (12). Healing requires us to release the thought pattern that has led us to our present condition. The physical condition we might have is seldom the bottom-line issue. Generally, the superficial things that we don't like about ourselves, and our physical ailments, hide a deeper belief that, in some way, we are 'not good enough' (e.g. *anorexia* is a sign of "denying the self, extreme fear, self-hatred and rejection" (152); *menopause problems* occur when there is "fear of no longer being wanted, fear of aging, self-rejection, fear of not being good enough" (174)). Therefore, the basis for all self-healing is the genuine (not



narcissistic) loving of the self (23). One of the first things Hay says when people come to her is “stop criticizing yourself!” (28-29) This is why some authors find Louise Hay seminal in spreading the idea of self-loving amongst millions of Americans, changing “the spiritual landscape of America and several of its Western allies” (Oppenheimer, 2008). The dividing line between self-loving, which in Hay’s words has nothing to do with “vanity or arrogance or being stuck-up, for that is not love” (23) and narcissistic love is certainly sometimes difficult to draw and easily leads to confusion. In subsequent sections we will analyse several other books of authors where this difference is not nearly as clear as with Hay, often leading to misinterpretations or to ambiguous interpretations.

As seen, we find in Hay’s book an interesting mixture of Eastern beliefs (via New Thought), such as the ones mentioned (her belief in reincarnation, in choosing one’s parents, in creating our reality with our thoughts), and also the recommendation of practices such as yoga, tai-chi and martial arts (88, 207). But, above all, she suggests that the constant practice of meditation will help the persistent practitioner find peace of mind and inner balance (88-89). From Hinduism she takes the belief in the existence of *chakras* (or energy centres): “The throat is the energy centre in the body where change takes place” (49). In ayurvedic medicine, we are told that human beings possess seven different energy centres along the spinal chord, called chakras (‘wheel’ in Sanskrit), which vibrate at a certain frequency and are related to specific endocrine glands (Totton and Jacobs, 2001: 94). According to Hindu wisdom, perfect health implies a perfect functioning of the seven chakras (2001: 95). Concepts such as these would have certainly sounded foreign and strange only half a century ago. But the fact that they are rapidly penetrating and becoming accepted, and are increasingly more common in American discourse, shows us that there has been a clear change (or addition) of a new paradigm in the US. The repetition and frequency of contact with all the different oriental techniques has reached a critical mass which has facilitated an enormous explosion of health practices based on ‘energy’ models, such as reiki, tai-chi, qi-gong or feng-shui, to name just a few.

Interestingly, Hay not only accepts the premise that our thoughts create our reality,<sup>76</sup> but also, as in Buddhism, she encourages the readers to observe their own thoughts:

Stop for a moment and catch your thought. What are you thinking right now? If it is true that your thoughts shape your life, would you want what you were just thinking right now to become true for you? If it's a thought of worry or anger or hurt or revenge or fear, how do you think this thought will come back to you? It is not always easy to catch our thoughts because they move so swiftly. However, we can begin right now to watch and listen to what we say. If you hear yourself expressing negative words of any sort, stop in midsentence. Either rephrase the sentence or just drop it. You could even say to it, "Out!" (43)

Paying attention to one's thoughts and actions is one of her vital messages: "Be conscious of your eating. It's like paying attention to our thoughts. We also can learn to pay attention to our bodies and the signals we get when we eat in different ways" (51); followed by her recommendation: "Let us stay away from thoughts that create problems and pain" (44). And just as in Buddhism, for Christianity and for most religions in the world, compassion is one of the highest qualities a human being can have (*Dhammapada* 21:11). Thus, Hay inspires her readers to start within their own families:

How much do you know about your parents' childhoods, especially before the age of ten? If it's still possible for you to find out, ask them. If you're able to find out about your parents' childhood, you will more easily understand why they did what they did. Understanding will bring you compassion. If you don't know and can't find out, try to imagine what it must have been like for them. What kind of childhood would create an adult like that? You need this knowledge for your own freedom. You can't free yourself until you free them. You can't forgive yourself until you forgive them. If you demand perfection from them, you will demand perfection from yourself, and you will be miserable all your life. (35)

Clearly, while Hay adopts concepts of Hinduism and Buddhism, her philosophy of life resembles more that of Taoism and its emphasis on enjoying life and on achieving harmony with the forces of nature. Hay reminds us to marvel at the perfection of babies (25), of flowers (31), of the miracle of nature (86); and just as Eastern

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<sup>76</sup> As we will see, this premise, that thoughts create our reality, is central to Robbins', Chopra's and Tolle's philosophy (each from their own perspective) of the relationship between the individual and his/her internal and external worlds.

philosophies do, Hay, too, invites us to live in the present: “What we often refuse to realize is that holding onto the past – no matter what it was or how awful it was, is only hurting us. ‘They’ really don’t care. Usually ‘they’ are not even aware. We are only hurting ourselves by refusing to live in this moment to the fullest” (75).

In fact, she also talks about the possible reasons for not living in the present:

When we do not flow freely with life in the present moment, it usually means we are holding on to a past moment. It can be regret, sadness, hurt, fear or guilt, blame, anger, resentment and sometimes even the desire for revenge. Each one of these states comes from a space of unforgiveness, a refusal to let go and come into the present moment. (76)

Mixed in with these messages that are compatible with Eastern philosophy, we find another typical New Age feature in her book, namely, the avoidance of the word God. In Taoism, for instance, the word Tao is used to name the nameless, “the origin of heaven and earth” (*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 1). Hay chooses expressions such as Universal Power, Cosmic Power, Infinite Intelligence, Inner Guidance instead: “The Intelligence within you is the same Intelligence that created this entire planet. Trust your Inner Guidance to reveal to you whatever it is you need to know” (70). Or “Your security is not your job, or your bank account, nor your investments, nor your spouse or parents. Your security is your ability to connect with the Cosmic Power that creates all things” (120).

It has been argued that Hay’s discourse “reflects the general ‘pick and mix’ approach that characterises New Age orientalist approaches to Asian traditions” (Carrette and King, 2004: 89). We realise that only certain aspects of ancient traditions “are translated into a modern Western context”, with the result that the wisdom of ancient civilisations becomes ‘commodified’ “in order to serve the eclectic interests of ‘spiritual consumers’ in the contemporary New Age marketplace of religions” (2004: 87). This fragmentation, it is argued, “becomes a key factor of the marketing strategy for contemporary forms of ‘spirituality’”, exploiting and re-packaging historically rich and complex traditions and selling them as the ‘real thing’ (2004: 87). According to this view, the cultural and philosophical subtleties of various beliefs and practices are often “flattened out when they are translated into Western New Age circles” (Carrette and

King, 2004: 93). But this state of affairs can certainly not be considered monolithic. While Americans have for decades felt a strong attraction for the East, as we have seen, numerous contemporary Westerners are also “suspicious of the influence of traditions and personal identities based on ancestry” (Cushman, 1995: 357). Thus, the proliferation of ‘selective’ and eclectic philosophies should not be surprising since they merely reflect a world in which people suffer from information-overload, where traditional values, faith in community structure and religious guidelines are in question (Mur, 2009: 135).

Moreover, and precisely because of this lack of spiritual and psychological support, especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, self-improvement writers seem increasingly to take on the role of the psychologist, priest or counsellor. In Miller’s words:

Once church, school, neighborhood, family, and the workplace all provided a mechanism to guide, comfort, nurture, and discipline the individual. It is in the twentieth century, blessed by psychology and psychotherapy, full production and full consumption, universal education, and mass media that the emergence of the autonomous self has come to define the American post-industrial consumer society. (1997: 32-33)

Interestingly, when Hay adopts this psychologist role, her message differs considerably from the Eastern ideas that she parallels, as she delves into what we would call ‘popular psychology’. Thus, she not only claims that our thoughts create our reality, but she explains in very didactic language that there are ‘patterns’ of thought<sup>77</sup> that we unconsciously repeat over and over again:

If you find yourself saying, ‘Everyone always does such and such to me, criticizes me, is never there for me, uses me like a doormat, abuses me’, then this is your pattern. There is some thought in you that attracts people who exhibit this behaviour. When you no longer think that way, they will go elsewhere and do that to somebody else. You will no longer attract them. (12)

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<sup>77</sup> Just as Byrne affirms in *The Secret*, when referring to the ‘law of attraction’, as we will see in section 3.2.5.

She goes on to explain that often these thought patterns come from our childhood, affirming that it is certainly not easy for the average person, without help or guidance, to know what to do, since “When we are little we learn how to feel about ourselves and about life by the reactions of the adults around us. Whatever these beliefs are, they will be recreated as experiences as we grow up” (23). In Hay’s view, most people are often not even aware of their beliefs and, therefore, would greatly benefit from somebody else’s perspective: “Until someone can show you the connection between the outer experiences and the inner thoughts, you remain a victim in life” (40). Thus, with Hay, we are also witnessing the beginning of an era where people resort to therapy as never before (Lasch, 1979: 31-32). As mentioned in section 1.4.6, the decline of traditional sources of normative behaviour offered by the church, the school, and the home have created some kind of “ethical vacuum”, and therapy has taken on the job of “redefining what we as a society mean when we talk about such fundamental social values as self-interest versus the interests of others” (Miller, 1997: 30). Some authors, indeed, consider that “psychotherapy has legitimized our society’s propensity for narcissistic self-indulgence” (1997: 31). In Miller’s words:

Given enough time, money, and expertise, therapy will have the potential to improve the social performance of an entire society of individuals. They will be encouraged and motivated by therapy to act increasingly as individuals first and as members of social communities a distant second. Therapy is the seminal mechanism for the transformation of public into private values and for the creation of the New Man. (1997: 31-32)

This is particularly obvious among authors who encourage maximising one’s potential at the expense of anything else, as we will see later on. But what is also true is that discourses such as the ones Hay offers can help readers overcome states of anxiety, fear or helplessness, as is obvious by taking a look at the numerous websites where people – almost three decades after the publication of *You Can Heal Your Life* – still share their thankfulness and enthusiasm for Hay’s book.<sup>78</sup> For instance, Hay believes – as any psychoanalyst does – that we all have a powerful subconscious mind where

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<sup>78</sup> See a couple of websites where people share their thankfulness and enthusiasm for Louise Hay’s book *You Can Heal Your Life* <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Louise-Hay-You-can-Heal-Your-Life/88550927529>> and <<http://www.powerfulintentions.org/group/louisehayyoucanhealyourlife>> (accessed August, 2009).

thoughts and old beliefs reside that might well be the origin of certain present-day-problems. Thus, we could establish the following correspondences:

<u><i>Problem</i></u>	-	<u><i>Belief</i></u>
Financial disaster	-	There is never enough for me/I am not worthy
No friends	-	Nobody loves me
Problems with work	-	I'm not good enough
Always pleasing others	-	I never get my way (40)

Hay's psychological explanations are plain, often simplistic, direct and devoid of specialised terminology, as is characteristic of the self-help genre. She tells us, for example, that "whatever the problem is, it comes from a thought pattern, and *thought patterns can be changed!*" Then, she encourages her readers to "ask yourself, 'what kinds of thoughts am I having that create this?'" (40, original emphasis). Moreover, in her philosophy, whatever we are trying to release in our lives is just a symptom, an outer effect that has nothing to do with will power or discipline. She claims that "trying to eliminate the symptom without working on dissolving the cause is useless. The moment we release our will power or discipline, the symptom crops up again" (63-64). And she goes on to share these thoughts:

How many times have we said, "I won't ever do that again!" Then, before the day is up we have the piece of cake, smoke the cigarettes, say hateful things to the ones we love, etc. Then we compound the whole problem by angrily saying to ourselves, "Oh, you have no will power, no discipline. You're just weak". This only adds to the load of guilt we already carry. (63)

Contrary to some Eastern beliefs<sup>79</sup> which focus on what is without trying to change reality, but transcending it from a point of no-action, Hay encourages her readers to be active and embrace the positive<sup>80</sup>: "Think thoughts that make you happy. Do things that make you feel good. Be with people who make you feel good. Eat things that make your body feel good. Go at a pace that makes you feel good" (85).

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<sup>79</sup>See Theravada or Hinayana Buddhism in Kirimura, 1981: 32.

<sup>80</sup> In section 3.2.2 we will see how Anthony Robbins also focuses on being active to bring about changes in one's life.

Similarly to the message expressed by the Dalai Lama in *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* (1998), where he claims that the attainment of happiness is ‘scientific’ and requires discipline of mind to control one’s consciousness (1998: 15), Hay inspires her readers to create their perfect life, achieving physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health and balance by following her guidelines for mobilising positively the power of the mind. For her, success and happiness are nothing more and nothing less than this (206). But she also warns that the change of attitude to achieve these goals might not be easy. It could actually be quite a task for some people:

Cleaning the mental house after a lifetime of indulging in negative mental thoughts is a bit like going on a good nutritional program after a lifetime of indulging in junk foods. They both can often create healing crises. As you begin to change your physical diet, the body begins to throw off the accumulation of toxic residue, and as this happens you can feel rather rotten for a day or two. So it is when you make a decision to change the mental thought patterns, your circumstances can begin to seem worse for a while (51).

Among the recommended exercises to achieve the promised goals Hay resorts to a counterpart of Eastern mantras and meditations (Anker, 1999a: 147), that is: *affirmations* and *visualisations*. In New Age terminology, affirmations are understood as the practice of positive thinking to re-program the subconscious out of its self-destructive patterns by bombarding it with bright, positive messages (Gawain, 1997: 28). The constant repetition of words or sentences inevitably reminds us of the recurrent utterance of oriental mantras, which, just like affirmations, are sounds, syllables, single words, or groups of words that are considered capable of ‘creating transformation’ (Feuerstein, 2003: 297). But, as shown in section 2.2.3, while Buddhist and Hindu mantras were originally used for spiritual purposes to help “control the natural tendency of the mind to wander” (Rao, 1989), and also to acquire awareness and mental focus in order to reach a state of enlightenment, the use of affirmations in the West is understood as the repetition of words or sentences with the purpose of reprogramming the subconscious mind in order to achieve specific goals which do not necessarily have to be spiritual in nature (Hay, 1984: 82). This is a typical example of adoption of an Eastern technique and its adaptation to suit Western needs.

Chapter Fifteen of her book is called 'The List'. It is literally a list of 38 pages where she mentions a number of diseases or symptoms (such as anaemia, earache, hepatitis, migraine headaches or rheumatism), followed by their probable causes and suggestions to change the old thought patterns that caused them. For Hay, most ailments are caused by fear, guilt, anger, resentment or lack of love, security and joy. In order to restore physical and emotional health Hay suggests using affirmations together with a change in lifestyle, to detoxify body and thoughts (201). For instance, for *anxiety*, which is caused by "not trusting the flow and the process of life" she recommends the following affirmation: "I love and approve of myself, and I trust the process of life. I am safe" (152). For *fatigue*, which is a sign of "resistance, boredom and lack of love for what one does" apart from recommending a change in lifestyle, the suggested affirmation is "I am enthusiastic about life and filled with energy and enthusiasm" (164). For *rheumatism*, which, in Hay's view, means "Feeling victimized. Lack of love. Chronic bitterness. Resentment", she tells the readers who suffer from such a condition to mentally repeat: "I create my own experiences. As I love and approve of myself and others, my experiences get better and better" (181).

As mentioned, whereas in Hinduism and Buddhism mantras are used to focus the mind in order to empty it of desires and thought, in America and many Western countries affirmations are used to empower any given thought, in order to attract a desired result. Apart from affirmations, visualisations (commonly used in meditation exercises) are also often utilised in Psychology, Sports Psychology and self-improvement books and seminars to create a desired outcome in one's mind prior to action. Sports Psychology, for instance, often has 'imagery' or 'visualisation' incorporated into its university syllabus,<sup>81</sup> not only to help reduce the impact of stress and anxiety on performance, but also to optimise performance and 'create the desired results' in any sports' event. According to the *Association for Applied Sport Psychology* in Madison (Wisconsin), some of the most common psychological skills in Applied

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<sup>81</sup> Here we have some examples of university syllabuses where imagery is used to help student achieve their goals: *California State University Dominguez Hills* <<http://www.csudh.edu/sportpsychology/courses.html>> Especially: *Psy 481 Applied Sport and Fitness Psychology, Course Syllabus* <<http://www.csudh.edu/sportpsychology/psy481syllabus2008.doc>> (accessed January, 2009).



Sport and Exercise Psychology are anxiety or energy management. And general topics include: breathing exercises (e.g., diaphragmatic breathing, rhythmic breathing), progressive relaxation, meditation, imagery or visualisation, and cognitive techniques (e.g., thought stopping and cognitive restructuring). Visualisation is understood as a “skill using all of the mind’s senses (e.g., sight, sound, taste, touch, hearing, kinesthetic/muscular feel) to re-create or create an experience in the mind”.<sup>82</sup>

Practices such as these are also very common in self-help literature. Thus, Hay suggests doing the following exercise whereby her readers are told to record a given text and to listen to it while imagining an emotional scene where “our wounded inner child is healed” (79):

Begin to visualize yourself as a little child of five or six. Look deeply into this little child’s eyes. See the longing that is there and realize that there is only one thing this little child wants from you, and that is love. So reach out your arms and embrace this child. Hold it with love and tenderness. Tell it how much you love it, how much you care. Admire everything about this child and say that it’s okay to make mistakes while learning. Promise that you will always be there no matter what. Now let this little child get very small, until it is just the size to fit into your heart. Put it there so whenever you look down, you can see this little face looking up at you, and you can give it lots of love. (78)

Conscious that it is not always easy to change, Hay hopes that following her guidelines will help people to begin to modify the way they think and talk about themselves (79). She also affirms that “We all want our problem to be over with, but we don’t want to do the small things that will add up to the solution” (56). Certainly, Hay offers inspiration and hope: “Each moment is a new beginning, and this moment is a new beginning for you right here and right now! Isn’t that great to know! This moment is the *Point of Power!* This moment is where the change begins!” (43, original emphasis).

She provides practical tools to start the journey of change without claiming that she possesses the answers for everyone: “Working with my ideas is not the only way to

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<sup>82</sup>This is the website of *AASP, the Association for Applied Sport Psychology* <<http://appliedsportpsych.org/about/about-applied-sport-psych>> (accessed January, 2009).

change. There are many other methods that work quite well. In the back of the book, I have included a list of many of the ways you could approach your own growth process” (50). Or also:

I want you to know that there are many avenues you can explore. If one way doesn't work for you, try another. All these suggestions have proved to be beneficial. I cannot say which one is right for you. That is something you will have to discover for yourself. No one method or one person or one group has all the answers for everyone. I don't have all the answers for everyone. I am just one more stepping stone on the pathway to holistic health. (89)

Not looking for acknowledgement or claiming to have found all the answers, in Butler-Bowdon's words, “the book has the calmness of a person who has gone through the worst and survived. The title only really makes sense when we read the final chapter, a plain-speaking record of Hay's personal history” (2003: 167). When interviewed by Tavis Smiley on his TV show, Smiley mentioned the fact that her book “resonates with a lot of people” and that this could be a good indicator of “the pain that so many people are enduring privately” (Smiley, 2008). Again this is a good example of a self-help book that addresses a need by using an eclectic, spiritual, emotionally-charged discourse very appealing to a wide readership.

Having analysed Hay's *You Can Heal Your Life* in the light of its Eastern and other influences and of its traits within the self-help genre, I can conclude that it is not only the presence of conventions – such as organisation, style and use of specific themes and concepts (cosmic power, chakras), as well as numerous practical suggestions (use of affirmations and visualisations) – but also their articulation and combination within the self-help discourse that is remarkable. Eastern and Western ideas and practices are often intertwined (recommending both meditation (209) or acupuncture and reiki side by side with prayer, walking, swimming or dancing (207)); and on other occasions Eastern practices are adopted and further adapted to American needs, as is the case with the use of affirmations (82) and visualisations (78). With Hay, we can affirm that the cultural penetration of these Eastern ideas and practices is still at a point of emergence, considering that, from the 1980s onward, its diffusion acquires a much more prominent role in self-help literature, as we will see presently. Again, we can clearly state that we are witnessing a change of paradigm in the US, where the

repetition and frequency of contact with all the different oriental philosophies and techniques (and those of other cultures), as well as the existence of a growing market of consumers open to ‘popular psychology’, and a somewhat ‘more easily assimilatable’ version of Eastern input, is facilitating not only the acceptance of concepts which have not been scientifically validated yet (such as the existence of acupuncture meridians,<sup>83</sup> for example), but also the enormous explosion of practices such as the ones mentioned in this section and in section 2.2.3.

While we could say that Hay’s personal philosophy has only been affected in part by Eastern thought, or even in part parallels it rather than emulating it (since much of her direct influence is via New Thought and the Church of Religious Sciences), there are numerous other self-improvement writers who do not hesitate to admit openly that their personal belief systems have been shaped by oriental paradigms. Such is the case of American ‘peak performance coach’ Anthony Robbins (1991: 96), whose relevance in the self-help literature scene is paramount, and whose Eastern influence differs somewhat from any other examples included in this dissertation and is, therefore, particularly worth studying as a cultural phenomenon.

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<sup>83</sup> As seen in section 2.2.2, an essential aspect of Traditional Chinese Medicine is “an understanding of the body’s qi (life force, or energy), which flows through invisible meridians (channels) of the body. This energy network connects organs, tissues, veins, nerves, cells, atoms, and consciousness itself. Generally speaking, there are 12 major meridians, each of which connects to one of the 12 major organs in TCM theory. Meridians are also related to a variety of phenomena, including circadian rhythms, seasons, and planetary movements, to create additional invisible networks” ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)).

### **3.2.2 Japanese *Kaizen* in American Discourse: *Awaken the Giant Within* (1991) by Anthony Robbins**

*It's not the events of our lives that shape us,  
but our beliefs as to what those events mean*

Anthony Robbins

Without any doubt, the self-help guru who has managed to build the greatest self-improvement empire – mainly thanks to the use of new technologies – is Anthony Robbins. Rather than relying on the sale of print media to spread his message, he made his fortune “on the sales of audiotapes and compact discs and the production of charismatic revival-style spectacles” (McGee, 2005: 63). His annual sales from seminars and tapes are reported to be close to \$50 million per year (Levine 1997: 53). As we mentioned in section 1.5.5, in the year 1984 Robbins produced one of the most successful infomercials in the short history of the form, reportedly selling \$120 million worth of audiotapes in his first five years of broadcasting (Stanton 1994: 106). At present, he owns nine separate companies. His corporate empire includes

a management company for physicians, a luxurious resort in Fiji, a television production company, a nutritional products firm, a corporate consulting and private coaching business, and a seminar business that offers, on the low end, a ‘Competitive Edge’ seminar (for a mere \$199), and, on the high end, a nine-day intensive ‘Life Mastery’ program (for a whopping \$5,495). One summer alone, this Life Mastery seminar grossed \$3.5 million. (1994: 100)

In fact, Robbins – born in North Hollywood, CA, in 1960 – is such a phenomenon in the world of self-improvement, that his inclusion in this doctoral dissertation is an obligation and would ideally deserve more than just one section. Eastern influence in Robbins greatly differs from any other examples included here, as we shall see below.

Let us now analyse his bestselling *Awaken the Giant Within* (1991), where we find, amongst other significant quotes, the following praise of Robbins from Stephen Covey, one of the most respected self-help authors of the third strand:

Tony Robbins is one of the great influencers of this generation. *Awaken the Giant Within* is a fascinating, intriguing presentation of cutting-edge findings and insights across a broad spectrum of issues, including the growing consciousness that true success is first anchored to true values and service to others. (1991: 4)

First we will look at his book from the point of view of its structural elements. Following a typical self-help style, each one of the twenty-six chapters and sub-sections are introduced with a title in the form of an aphorism, sometimes followed by a quotation from a famous figure. For example: Chapter 1: Dreams of Destiny “A consistent man believes in destiny, a capricious man in chance” Benjamin Disraeli (19). Further highlighted quotations to illustrate his discussion of topics may be given in the course of each chapter, e.g: “I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavour” Henry David Thoreau (41). Or: “A man who suffers before it is necessary, suffers more than is necessary” Seneca (53).

Part One (Chapters One to Thirteen) revolves around the psychological theories behind one’s personal belief systems (especially the relationship between pain and pleasure, a mechanism of emotional calculus which underpins many of our short and longterm decisions, our actions or lack of action); the science of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and Neuro-Associative Conditioning (NAC);<sup>84</sup> and what he calls Transformative Vocabulary. In Chapter Three, for instance, Robbins reflects upon the concept of *procrastination*, which he defines as follows:

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<sup>84</sup> Co-founded by John Grinder and Richard Bandler, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is “a system of alternative therapy intended to educate people in self-awareness and effective communication, and to model and change their patterns of mental and emotional behaviour” (*Shorter Oxford Dictionary* Vol. II p. 1911). Robbins studied Neuro-Linguistic Programming with John Grinder, in the 1980s and later developed and taught a technique based on some aspects of NLP, which he called Neuro-Associative Conditioning (NAC).

It's when you know you *should* do something, but you still don't *do* it. Why not? The answer is simple: at some level you believe that taking action in this moment would be more painful than just putting it off. Yet, have you ever had the experience of putting something off for so long that suddenly you felt pressure to just *do* it, to get it *done*? What happened? You changed what you linked pain and pleasure to. Suddenly, not taking action became more painful than [not] putting it off. (53, original emphasis)

He offers an interesting view on the relationship between pain and pleasure, trying to make people aware of their unconscious mental patterns. Sometimes, the only way for someone to change is by reaching an 'emotional threshold' which acts as trigger to take action. Thus, he asks:

Why is it that people can experience pain yet fail to change? They haven't experienced enough pain yet; they haven't hit what I call *emotional threshold*. If you've ever been in a destructive relationship and finally made the decision to use your personal power, take action and change your life, it was probably because you *hit a level of pain you weren't willing to settle for anymore*. We've all experienced those times in our lives when we've said, "I've had it – never again – this must change now". This is the magical moment when *pain becomes our friend*. It drives us to take new action and produce new results. We become even more powerfully compelled to act if, in that same moment, we begin to anticipate how changing will create a great deal of pleasure for our lives as well. (54, original emphasis)

Robbins' discourse helps people to look at their problems from different angles, always trying to see the lessons behind them, encouraging readers to *de-dramatise* and *take action*.

Part Two (Chapters Fourteen to Eighteen) delves more deeply into the 'why' behind a person's behaviour, helping readers to realise that everyone has a personal philosophy that can empower or, on the contrary, harm and even destroy them. In Robbins' words, "understanding transforms people". (335) That is, he shows how people often boycott themselves by saying something but thinking the opposite, or not really believing what they say. Consciously aligning thoughts, words and actions becomes a key element to a happier, healthier life.

Part Three (Chapters Nineteen to Twenty-five) is a practical seven-day step-by-step guideline to condition one's nervous system in order to produce behaviours that will give desired results, enhancing the quality of one's personal relationships. It also

gives information on how to take control of one's financial future by devising "a way to consistently add real value to people's lives". For Robbins "the key to wealth is to be more valuable". (460)<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, he gives information on how to use time to one's advantage by taking as a model people who have already succeeded in any given area.

In Part Four (Chapter Twenty-six) the author reflects upon the importance of small decisions, since these are the ones "that create our destinies". He warns that "By trying to avoid pain in the short term, we often end up making decisions that create pain in the long term". (487) He talks about different challenges the world is going through (from environmental to political, to educational), offering possible small scale solutions, which, if implemented worldwide, could make a considerable difference.

Robbins' development of the topics and subtopics is elaborated in great detail with a frequent recourse to personal experiences or testimonial stories of others. He uses easy-to-understand, positive language, often repeating the same ideas from slightly different angles, using a certain number of Eastern concepts and practices, as well as placing great emphasis on psychological techniques and on the power of the mind to change one's personal situation, just as Hay does in *You Can Heal Your Life*.



Moreover, like many other self-help writers, he shares part of his personal story of transformation (a typical 'rags to riches' story, so common in the American tradition), spread out in fragments over the book, rather than in a special section, and used pedagogically to illustrate topics. For instance, after the first paragraph of Chapter 1, which refers to the dreams we have (or had some time in our life) to

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<sup>85</sup> This repeats a basic idea present in two of the most historically important American self-help literature books: Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), that true success comes through serving others to solve their problems.

make a difference in the world, he tells the story where he is on his way by private jet helicopter to speak in front of a crowd in Orange County, California. He looks down at the streets and at the bumper-to-bumper traffic, hoping that whatever is happening doesn't delay people arriving at his seminar. Then he suddenly realises that the crowds are queuing to see him. As he swoops over the city of Glendale (CA), Robbins looks down from his jet helicopter and vaguely recognises a building which used to be the office where, only twelve years before, he worked as a janitor, broke, lonely and overweight: "I've come to believe that all my past failure and frustration were actually laying the foundation for the understandings that have created the new level of living I now enjoy" (19). Later on in the book he shares that:

When I was eleven years old, my family did not have enough money one year to afford a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, and a charitable organization delivered food to our door. Since then, helping the hungry and homeless has become one of the missions to which I've dedicated my life, and, every Thanksgiving since I was eighteen, I've made and delivered food baskets to needy families. (507)<sup>86</sup>

These kind of personal anecdotes make *Awaken The Giant Within* part-memoir, part philosophy and part training manual (Rhodes, 1998). The book is full of thought-provoking ideas, creating a powerful effect of tempo and energy, throughout most of the more than 500 pages. Like a martial arts master, Robbins talks to his readers about the importance of focused concentration, since "Most people have no idea of the giant capacity we can immediately command when we focus all of our resources on mastering a single area of our lives" (21). Indeed, the power of focus resembles "a laser beam that can cut through anything that seems to be stopping you" (21). When reading Robbins, we cannot help but imagine *karate* or *tae-kwon-do* masters capable of breaking piles of bricks with one single blow; feats that are only possible when there is total and absolute concentration and focus. In fact, Robbins himself learned how to break bricks and wood blocks using karate-style exercises and teaches how to do so during some of his seminars (171-72). Echoing the quantum theory, which states that reality is created by subjective focus, Robbins affirms that by focusing consistently on

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<sup>86</sup> The *Anthony Robbins Foundation* website contains the Thanksgiving food basket brigade story by Anthony Robbins: <<http://www.anthonyrobbinsfoundation.org/founder/oneman.php>> (accessed April, 2010).



something, “whatever we focus on becomes our idea of reality” (160). Thus, there is no room for dithering. When fear and doubt creep in, Robbins suggests changing one’s limiting beliefs and one’s strategies (25), reminding us – through the use of techniques from Neuro-Linguistic Programming and Neuro-Associative Conditioning – that “Our brains can’t really distinguish between imagined and actual events” (80, 137).

It should be mentioned that one of the practices that made Anthony Robbins really famous is the fact that some of his seminars typically end with attendees walking barefoot across a 12-foot-long bed of hot coals. Like some Hindu and Buddhist religious leaders in Sri Lanka (Bastin, 2002: 186), he encourages his audience of over 10,000 people to do the firewalk,<sup>87</sup> since, “If you can walk over coals (the reasoning goes), you can do anything you want with your life” (Gold, 2004: 48). Thus, the goal of this practice is to help people realise that if they really want to, they *can* indeed take action and do anything they set their mind to in life. In Robbins’s words:

The firewalk is an experience in personal power and a metaphor for possibilities, an opportunity for people to produce results they previously had thought impossible. (...) People have been doing some version of firewalking for thousands of years. In some parts of the world, it’s a religious test of faith. When I conduct a firewalk, it’s not part of any religious experience in the conventional sense. But it is an experience in belief. It teaches people in the most visceral sense that they can change, they can grow, they can stretch themselves, they can do things they never thought possible, that their greatest fears and limitations are self-imposed. (1997: 15)



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<sup>87</sup>According to an article in *Discovery Health*, there is a scientific explanation for firewalking, it “depends on a combination of poor conduction, insulation and a short time span”. <<http://health.howstuffworks.com/human-body/bodily-feats/firewalking1.htm>> (accessed September, 2010).

According to Ron Rhodes in an article on Anthony Robbins:

The firewalk helps people form a new internal representation of possibility. If this thing that had seemed so impossible was only a limitation in their mind, then what other “impossibilities” are really very possible as well? It’s one thing to talk about the power of state. It’s another to experience it. That’s what the firewalk does. It provides a new model for belief and for possibility, and it creates a new internal feeling or state association for people, one that makes their lives work better and enables them to do more than they ever thought “possible” before. (Rhodes, 1998)

Whatever view one might take about his seminars, the book develops the different strands of his philosophy in a very pragmatic and goal-oriented way. What is, nonetheless, the major difference between Robbins’ message and any other one analysed in this dissertation? Clearly, the main distinction lies in his absolute commitment to the Japanese philosophy of *kaizen*, which he adopts, and then adapts to a wider range of social fields. Because of its influence on business-related activities and also on a large number of widely-read self-help literature books,<sup>88</sup> I cannot overlook this phenomenon, which is particularly valuable from a Cultural Studies perspective, as we will see presently. The Japanese word, *kaizen*, which comes from KAI (change) and ZEN (better), can be translated as ‘constant change for the better’ or ‘continuous improvement’. It was made famous by the enormously successful ‘Toyota Production System’, thanks to a business development system brought to Japan by an American statistician and quality control expert, W. Edwards Deming, after the Second World War (Robbins, 1991: 96). Basically, Deming’s message to Japan’s chief executives was that improving quality would reduce expenses while increasing productivity and market share (Gitlow, 1994: 197).

That his message was eagerly accepted and successfully applied can be attributed to a propitious cultural context, as we will discuss below. *Kaizen* refers to a philosophy of continuous improvement in business activities, manufacturing activities, and even life in general. When it is used in the business sense and applied to the

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<sup>88</sup> Other self-help books on *kaizen* are, for example, Robert Maurer’s *One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way* (2004), Don Tapping’s *The Lean Pocket Handbook for Kaizen Events – Any Industry – Any Time* (2007), or Norman and Tozawa’s *How to Do Kaizen: A New Path to Innovation – Empowering Everyone to Be a Problem Solver* (2010).

workplace it typically refers to activities that go from manufacturing to management, and from the CEO to the assembly line workers (Imai, 1997: 2). The term was first coined by Taiichi Ohno, a high-ranking manager at Toyota. Ohno's principles influenced areas outside of manufacturing, and have been extended into other fields, such as the service arena. For example, the field of *sales process engineering* has shown how the concept of 'Just In Time' (JIT) can improve sales, marketing, and customer service processes (Selden, 1997: 113-120). In order to raise productivity, Ohno resolved to involve the entire company structure more actively by encouraging them to come up with continual small-scale improvements towards achieving shared goals on a grand scale. The result was that Toyota was one of the few companies that managed to survive the 1973 oil crisis with its high productivity intact, focusing first and foremost on 'customer satisfaction' (Liker, 2004: 15-27). Since 1986, when the book *Kaizen: The Key to Japan's Competitive Success* was published, the term *kaizen* has come to be accepted as one of the key concepts of management (Imai, 1997: 1). The 1993 edition of the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* contained the word *kaizen* defining it as "continuous improvement of working practices" (vol. 1 pp. 1477). Generally reduced to its role in the workplace, another dictionary defines it as "a philosophy of continuous improvement of working practices that underlies total quality management and just-in-time business techniques".<sup>89</sup>

Deming's teachings were widely applied by Japanese manufacturers – while they were developing their own schools of thought on quality, at the same time – with extraordinary and unheard-of results as far as levels of quality and productivity were concerned. Thus, the improved quality combined with the lowered cost created new international demand for Japanese products.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> See definition of *kaizen* on *The Free Dictionary* <<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/kaizen>> (accessed September 2009)

<sup>90</sup> In 1960, the Prime Minister of Japan (Nobusuke Kishi), acting on behalf of Emperor Hirohito, awarded Dr. Deming Japan's Order of the Sacred Treasures. The citation on the medal recognizes Deming's contributions to Japan's industrial rebirth and its worldwide success. For over half a century now, the Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers (JUSE) awards the prestigious Deming Prizes each year to reward Japanese companies for major advances in quality improvement (Gitlow, 1994). From 2010 on it is also available to non-Japanese companies usually operating in Japan, and to individuals recognized as

Apart from the impact of *kaizen* for achieving success and increasing profitability, especially in the business world, it has been suggested by some authors that the Japanese striving for perfection has its origin in their religious background (Lebra, 1976; Satoshin et al. 2003). Until the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “when Japan was opened to the West after several hundred years of self-imposed isolation, Japanese thinking had been fed by the three streams of Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism” (Parkes, 1995: 83). Prior to the influx of any influence from outside, Shinto was the indigenous religion of Japan and it still influences many aspects of life in Japan today. It literally means “way of the divine spirits”, and is an animistic religion, according to which the entire cosmos is animated by spirits (1995: 83). Its two major components are “a *cult of nature*, in which the sun, mountains, trees, waterfalls, rocks, and certain kinds of animals are worshipped as divine, and an *ancestor cult* in which reverence is paid to the spirits of the ancestors – again often as divinities” (1995: 83, original emphasis).

As we saw in section 2.2.1, Buddhism, which arose in India in the sixth century BC, was transmitted in the first century AD to China, where its development was influenced by the indigenous philosophy of Taoism during the five hundred years before it spread to Japan (1995: 84). It was especially Zen Buddhism that had a greater impact on Japan – with its active meditation and its attention to mundane daily matters of one’s life, rather than on preoccupying oneself with things that have happened or might happen (Twemlow, 2001: 1). Perhaps of the three, Confucianism or the influence of Confucian thought on Japanese thinking – with the great importance given to ritual and its concern with ethical teachings of ‘virtues’ such as sincerity, humaneness, and filial piety – was pivotal in the shaping of the nation’s striving for perfection (Parkes, 1995: 84). For a ceremony to be genuine in the Confucian sense, “not only must the technique be faultless and effortless, but the performer must perform the actions with ‘heart and soul’” thereby creating beauty and perfection (1995: 93). And indeed, it would probably be very difficult to discuss any aspect of Japanese culture without alluding to the Japanese sense of perfection and beauty, which can perhaps be considered the central element of Japanese culture (Keene, 1995: 27). To our mind

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having made major contributions to the advancement of quality. See the Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers, *JUSE* website: <<http://www.juse.or.jp/e/deming/>> (accessed January, 2010).

come images of Japanese gardens, ikebana flower arrangements, or displays of culinary art, “which appeals more to the eye than to the gustatory sensibility”, and is known for “its visual effect, derived from the harmony of colors or the beauty of the serving plates and bowls”, creating a proper setting for an occasion (Lebra, 1976: 20). We can likewise refer to the traditional tea ceremony, which is “one of the most quintessential expressions of Japanese culture” (Keene, 1995: 90). We are told that the tearoom “was an oasis in the dreary waste of existence where weary travellers could meet to drink from the common spring of art appreciation” (Okakura 1923: 43). All features “of the room, of the ornaments, and the utensils for brewing and serving the tea are precisely specified as to their optimal size, shape, color, and so on” (Keene, 1995: 92).

The Japanese, thus, tend to lavish their sensibility on small details, seeking small-scale perfection, considering nothing finished or complete until perfect. This concept is “so natural and obvious to many Japanese that they don’t even realize they possess it!” (Imai, 1997: 3) But it is, of course, nearly impossible for the average mortal to achieve perfection, hence the Japanese expression *Kiga Susumanai*, which roughly means ‘my spirit is not satisfied’, that shows a deeply felt discomfort at their inability to be perfect in everything they do (Kaynak and Herbig, 1997: 274). The Japanese are said to suffer from a chronic spiritual dissatisfaction which constantly spurs them on to do more and do it better. It should be mentioned, nonetheless, that after World War II Japan has integrated a great deal of US culture, with a tendency to ‘look outside’ to find new references.

Nowadays the spirit of constant, never-ending improvement, embodied in the word *kaizen*, has crossed the borders, and can also be found in America where top manufacturers implement *kaizen* successfully in their businesses (Laraia et al, 1999: 6). And, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, the self-help industry has also benefitted from the idea, especially thanks to Robbins, who re-coined the word and now talks about ‘constant and never-ending improvement (CANI – pronounced Kuhn-EYE)’:

The more I began to see the impact of *kaizen* in the Japanese business culture, [the more] I realized that it was an organizing principle that made a tremendous impact in my own life. My own commitment to constantly improve, to

constantly raise my own standards for a quality life is what's kept me both happy and successful.... I believe that the level of success we experience in life is in direct proportion to the level of our commitment to CANI!, to constant and never-ending improvement. (Robbins, 1991: 96)

What is more, Robbins tells us that CANI is not a principle related only to business, but to every aspect of our lives. And he goes on to explain that: "In Japan, they often talk of company-wide quality control. I believe we have to focus on CANI! in our business, CANI! In our personal relationships, CANI! in our spiritual connection, CANI! in our health, and CANI! in our finances. How can we make constant and never-ending improvement in each of these areas? This makes life an incredible adventure in which we're always looking forward to the next level" (1991: 97). The philosophy of *kaizen* is present as an underlying message in every page of Robbins' book. Nevertheless, one could argue, that although Robbins explicitly affirms that CANI is derived from *kaizen*, this does not mean necessarily that he is adopting a new Eastern self-improvement philosophy, but that the idea of incremental self-improvement through planned daily action, as we have seen, is also an American tradition epitomized by Benjamin Franklin. For this reason, of the contemporary authors analysed, Robbins is the one I found most similar to Franklin in his attention to detail, self-observation, control of language, and overall step-by-step improvement.

In spite of Robbins' use and recommendation of certain Eastern practices, especially karate and firewalking, his worldview differs in fundamental ways from traditional Eastern ones. There is a classic Buddhist story that tells us that when the Buddha was alive, he recommended his followers to go and spend their time at the cremation grounds in order to get in touch with death and the transient nature of things (*Dhammapada*, 4:3; 11:3; 13:4). Similarly, but for somewhat different reasons, Anthony Robbins tells us in *Awaken The Giant Within* that he decided to visit the Bellevue morgue in New York, "convinced that in order to understand life, you've got to understand death" (431). A friend of his who was the Chief Psychologist of Bellevue Hospital at the time led Anthony and his wife "to the section for unclaimed bodies, where most of the remains were from the indigent street population" (431). He pursues giving details:

As he pulled out the first metal drawer and unzipped the body bag, I felt a shudder ripple through my body. Here was this ‘person’ there with me, yet I was instantly struck by the feeling of emptiness... As he opened each successive drawer, the emotion hit me again and again: there’s no one here. The body is here, but there is no *person*... (431)

Robbins concludes: “We are not our bodies. When we pass on, there’s no question that what’s missing is the intangible, weightless identity, that essence of life some call spirit. I believe that it’s equally important for us to remember that while we’re alive, we’re not our bodies” (431). One of the major differences between Buddhist thought and Robbins’ philosophy of life is that while both recommend a close contact with death, the Buddha does so in order to gain awareness of the illusory nature of life (*maya*): “Look upon the world as a bubble, look upon it as a mirage” (*Dhammapada*, 13: 4). Robbins, on the other hand, tells his readers that his experience at the morgue gave him “an incredible sense of gratitude for the blessed gift of life... There’s nothing like a little contrast to remind us how fortunate we all are!” (431). He advises us to “*Live life fully while you’re here*” (511, original emphasis) and, also, to “live every day as if it were one of the most important days of your life” (511). Thus, his *carpe diem* philosophy has little in common with the Buddhist ‘detachment-from-the-world’ approach.

Robbins tells us that “everything you and I do we do either out of our need to avoid *pain* or our desire to gain *pleasure*” (53, original emphasis). Moreover, from a psychological viewpoint he adds that “it’s not actual pain that drives us, but our fear that something will *lead to pain*. And it’s not *actual* pleasure that drives us, but our belief – *our sense of certainty* – that somehow taking a certain action will lead to pleasure” He affirms that “We’re not driven by the reality, but by our *perception* of reality” (66, original emphasis).

The Buddha’s fierce self-discipline to control the wandering mind finds echo in Robbins’ words, where he reminds his readers “to realize that you’ve got to discipline your mind. A mind out of control will play tricks on you. Directed, it’s your greatest friend” (162). But, again, rather than encouraging his followers to look inward and

detach themselves from phenomenological reality (*Dhammapada*, 25:3), while recommending that we discipline and control the mind Robbins suggests at the same time that one should “develop a plan for pleasure for each and every day”. He warns: “Don’t just randomly hope that pleasure will somehow show up; set yourself up for ecstasy – *Make room for it!*” (176, original emphasis) In fact, for him, happiness and success are only present when one lives one’s life “in a way that causes you to feel tons of pleasure and very little pain – and because of your lifestyle, have the people around you feel a lot more pleasure than they do pain” (173).

Robbins devotes a whole chapter of his book to the power of words to “shape our beliefs and impact our actions” (209). Quoting Confucius “Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men” (209), Robbins advocates for the use of ‘Transformational Vocabulary’, since, “the words that we attach to our experience *become* our experience” (205, original emphasis). Thus, a situation can be experienced differently depending on the label we put on it, regardless of whether it accurately reflects the actual experience. A situation that might be ‘a bit challenging’ can become ‘devastating’ for someone else, depending on the words they use to describe it: from ‘annoyed’, to ‘upset’, ‘angry’, ‘furious’, ‘livid’ or ‘enraged’. Robbins affirms: ‘If we want to change our lives and shape our destiny, we need to consciously *select* the words we’re going to use, and we need to constantly strive to expand our level of choice” (207, original emphasis). Moreover, as an expert in Neuro-Linguistic Programming, and a great advocate of energising emotions such as passion, love, excitement, fascination and ecstasy, (220-22) he informs us that “people with an impoverished vocabulary live an impoverished life; people with rich vocabularies have a multi-hued palette of colors with which to paint their experiences, not only for others, but for themselves as well” (201). Rather than looking at emotions as an obstacle to gain happiness (*Dhammapada*, 7:10), Robbins encourages us to

Realize that the emotions you are feeling *at this very moment* are a gift, a guideline, a support system, *a call to action*. If you suppress your emotions and try to drive them out of your life, or if you magnify them and allow them to take over everything, then you’re squandering one of life’s most precious resources. (249, original emphasis)



Likewise, he recommends one should never ‘make an emotion wrong’, since: “Making an emotion ‘wrong’ will rarely cause it to become less intense. Whatever you resist tends to persist. *Cultivate the feeling of appreciation for all emotions*, and like a child that needs attention, you’ll find your emotions ‘calming down’ almost immediately” (252, original emphasis). At the same time, he encourages his readers to always look for balance in their lives:

Make balance your watchword. Strive for balance rather than perfection. Most people live in a black-and-white world where they think that they’re either a volunteer with no life of their own, or just a materialistic, achievement-oriented person who doesn’t care to make a difference. Don’t fall into this trap. Life is a balance between giving and receiving, between taking care of yourself and taking care of others. (509)

While many of the objectives that he addresses are typical ones within self-help literature, such as human relationships and worldly success, there is also the idea – which could be related to Eastern philosophy – that we are all interconnected. Robbins does not seem to go any deeper into the topic, though. He is very much focused on human experience *in this world* to realise our *full potential as individuals*, which is, undoubtedly, a very American message. The author is not saying ‘transcend your ego’, but ‘expand it’ and do not allow your potential as an individual to be limited by your belief system and your language.

According to Butler-Bowdon, there are numerous authors who warn against any philosophy where the person could easily “end up as a mere reflection of the capitalist economy, pursuing self-improvement only to the extent that it may bring higher status” (2003: 256). In fact, just as we commented on in the previous section, there are, no doubt, “contemporary prosperity-oriented spiritualities in the West, comfortable to claim the authority of ancient Asian wisdom, while promoting a philosophy of individual self-expression and social conformism” (Carrette and King, 2004: 89). Nevertheless, Butler-Bowdon admits that “it is true that some people may use Robbins’ mental technology to achieve banal materialistic ends”, but what Robbins actually says “challenges the very hold of materialism in our lives” (2003: 256), and he goes on to affirm that the core of Robbins’ philosophy is defying the culture that surrounds us “by

refusing to be just another mole, burrowing away at our job so that we can keep in step". He clarifies that "What Robbins does is get people to 'step over the edge', to change their beliefs about themselves, identify their core values, move on from jobs or relationships that do nothing for them, and reveal that their limitations are largely illusory" (2003: 256). This is probably one of the reasons why Robbins' message has mass appeal, "because we all believe there is a lot more to us than others recognize. The world is fond of putting our ideas in the 'unreasonable, unrealistic' category. We are taught that we can't do what our heart desires, and after a while accept it as fact" (2003: 256). For Robbins, the truly successful person is whoever "refuses to be reasonable" (2003: 256).

Certainly, the calibre of people and range of professions Robbins has influenced is telling. Apart from working as a 'peak performance consultant' for IBM, AT&T, American Express and the US Army; he has been a private coach to Bill and Hillary Clinton and has also "counselled such public figures as the late Princess Diana, former Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev, tennis star Andre Agassi, U.S. Open winner Lee Janzen, *Sleepless in Seattle* screenwriter Jeff Arch, and many others, not to mention the countless people in 43 nations who have attended his seminars" (Rhodes, 1998; Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 257). As Pat Riley, elected 'Coach of the Decade' in the NBA, says: "Anthony Robbins is the 'ultimate coach' for that special breed of men and women who will never settle for less than they can be". (Robbins, 1991: 2)<sup>91</sup>

Just as we saw in Part Two where Buddhists and a growing number of quantum physicists support the existence of a subject-centred worldview, Robbins expresses it similarly when affirming that "It's not the events that shape my life that determine how I feel and act, but, rather, it's the way I *interpret* and *evaluate* my life experiences" (179, original emphasis). Or: "The one thing we have absolute control over is our internal world – we decide what things mean and what to do about them – and as a result of our decisions, we take actions that impact our emotional environment" (489).

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<sup>91</sup> Riley is one of the many figures quoted by the publishers of *Awaken the Giant Within* at the beginning of the book.

In fact, rather than a more mystic Eastern approach based on non-action which stresses inner peace, calmness, and faith in an abundant cosmos, *action* is Robbins' driving force. In Butler-Bowdon's view, *Awaken the Giant Within* represents the epitome of self-help books marked by the belief that massive action can create personal change (2003: 253-54). And it is precisely the Japanese philosophy of *kaizen* – which permeates every page of the book – where we can see Robbins' belief in practical action driven by his pursuit of excellence (Robbins, 1991: 92), as well as a deeply-rooted belief in the fact that 'change can happen in an instant', which is a concept that comes from NLP (Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 254).

His message is not only addressed to a 'chosen few', but to anyone willing to do whatever it takes to change one's focus or state. Thus, he tells us "If you want to perform better on your job, realize that intelligence is often a factor of *state*" (171, emphasis added). People who supposedly have limited capability will find an improvement in their talents if they get into a new state. We are told, for instance, that while dyslexia can be a function of one's visual faculties, it also depends on one's mental and emotional states. This is one of the reasons why people who are dyslexic do not reverse letters or words every time they read something. The difference between the moments they are able to read clearly and the moments they reverse letters all comes down to their inner state. Robbins offers numerous strategies – from breathing exercises, to physiological postures, key words, physical exercises and psychological guidelines – to help change one's state in order to immediately improve one's performance, always insisting that:

You've got to realize that you must take conscious control of running your own mind. You've got to do it deliberately; otherwise, you're going to be at the mercy of whatever happens around you. The first skill you must master is to be able to change your state instantly no matter what the environment, no matter how scared or frustrated you are (172)

Just as we have seen that the power of concentration is a basic building block of Robbins' philosophy, so is also the power of decision: "I *made a decision* in that moment, which was to alter my life forever. I decided to change virtually every aspect of my life. *I decided I would never again settle for less than I could be*" (21, original

emphasis). Following the guidelines of *kaizen*, Robbins' formula for success depends on raising one's standards, changing one's limiting beliefs and changing one's strategies (25). In fact, he considers that the importance of standards is crucial, since, if one does not set a baseline standard for what one will accept in one's life, it is easy to slip into behaviours and attitudes or a quality of life that is far below what one deserves (24). He tells his readers never to underestimate the power of belief, since beliefs have the power to create and the power to destroy (75). One of his most appreciated tools is, no doubt, the Socratic method of questioning: the power of questions. For Robbins, if you throw enough questions at a problem, you will get a solution. "Questions are the answer", he tells us (177). And he does so with his characteristic unyielding optimism which, no doubt, makes Tony Robbins an emblematic American thinker in the self-help tradition of Benjamin Franklin. Just like Franklin, who contrived a method in which he set up his own chart of virtues, and methodically tried to acquire them one after another until they became a habit, while at the same time admitting that such self-scrutiny was not an easy task (Franklin, 1986: 90-91), likewise, Robbins offers numerous exercises to his avid readers (Robbins, 1991: 175, 213, 276-80, 312-14), challenging them to take action if what they really want is change in their lives: "I've written this book to challenge you to awaken the giant power of decision and to claim the birthright of unlimited power, radiant vitality, and joyous passion that is yours!" (36)

In order to achieve any goal, though, he advises that deciding to commit oneself to long-term results rather than to short-term fixes is of utmost importance (47). In his words, "all goal setting must be immediately followed by both the development of a plan, and massive and constant action toward its fulfilment" (275). And he informs: "*You see, in life, lots of people know what to do, but few people actually do what they know. Knowing is not enough! You must take action*" (25, original emphasis). From a Cultural Studies point of view it is also worth taking into account popular culture reviews such as those we find in websites where readers are freely invited to give their opinion on the books they have read. For example, in the Amazon website for one of Robbins' books we read that it "WILL NOT magically make you successful. It requires YOU to work with the material, develop strategies, and most importantly - take

action”.<sup>92</sup> (original emphasis) Interestingly, for some Robbins’ world “may seem too black and white. It shows you how to get out of any sort of negative state, hygienically removing the bad mood, depression etc. Other self-help writers like Thomas Moore and Robert Bly see great value in depression and even grief. It teaches us about ourselves, they say, and is part of a soulful existence” (Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 255).

In the same way that the Japanese learned from Edwards Deming after the Second World War, Robbins suggests to his readers to consistently look for ‘models’ around them, that is, for people that can teach them, in order to be inspired by their achievements and by their actions (92). He admits that “The most powerful way I’ve learned to compress time is to learn through other people’s experience... Modeling those who’ve already succeeded can save you years of pain” (479). He often refers to spiritual leaders and teachers such as Confucius, Lao-Tzu, Buddha, Gandhi, and also Jesus, or examples from the West such as Mother Theresa, Leonardo da Vinci, Abraham Lincoln and Albert Einstein.

From a Cultural Studies perspective, we can affirm that, so far, we have seen two rather different ways of dealing with Eastern philosophy in the context of American self-help literature. On the one hand, Louise Hay presents a mixture of mild popular psychology notions intertwining concepts adopted from Hinduism and Buddhism – or at least coinciding remarkably with their world-views – with Western ideas and practices mainly related to the area of health, as seen in section 3.2.1. On the other hand, Anthony Robbins is more focused in his outlook. While often using or alluding to Eastern practices such as karate, firewalking, or referring to, and quoting from, figures like Buddha, Confucius, Lao-Tzu, and the more recent Gandhi, or Soichiro Honda (44-45), he mainly draws his inspiration from Japanese *kaizen*, utilising a passionate motivational discourse while resorting to Eastern examples (their language,<sup>93</sup> their focus

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<sup>92</sup> Since this is a Cultural Study, it is worth talking a look at a very popular tool such as the *Amazon* website and its reviews on Robbins: <[http://www.amazon.com/Unlimited-Power-Science-Personal-Achievement/dp/0684845776/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1270391404&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Unlimited-Power-Science-Personal-Achievement/dp/0684845776/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1270391404&sr=1-1)> (accessed January, 2009).

<sup>93</sup> At one point, Robbins talks about the Chinese word for ‘crisis’ which is composed of two characters – one representing *danger*, and the other one representing *opportunity* (421). He says that, precisely because of this double meaning of the word, the Chinese are not immediately defeatist when confronted

on concentration, their attention to detail). He tries to apply his version of *kaizen* (CANI ‘constant and never-ending improvement’) to all areas of life, from business to personal relationships, health or finances (97-97), as we mentioned at the beginning of this section. This involves, however, detailed attention to emotional reprogramming (using Western techniques, such as Neuro-Linguistic Programming), which is fundamental to succeed in modifying one’s internal states positively in order to achieve a better life in this world.

On the other hand, it is obvious that Robbins shares very little with Buddhist, Hindu or Taoist philosophies, but by ‘sprinkling’ the book with anecdotes and Eastern insights he, no doubt, manages to reach a wider public which is very open to this kind of eclectic/exotic discourse, while his own philosophy of life emphasises a completely opposite idea such as the Re-invention of the self, meaning ‘if you’re not happy with your identity, change it!’ This is one of the reasons why the book has been called “plastic surgery for the mind” (Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 256). In fact, the whole concept of ‘Re-invention’ is a basis of American culture, as I explained in section 1.5.3 (see footnote 22), and, therefore, *Awaken the Giant Within* “could not have surfaced in any other place. This is the Statue of Liberty in words” (2003: 257).



*Kaizen*

Let us now move on to another author who tries to establish a bridge between East and West by drawing upon ancient Hindu lore, creating an idiosyncratic blend of Eastern messages, scientific discourse, and prosperity-oriented ideas. He is an American endocrinologist, public speaker and writer of Hindu origin. His name: Deepak Chopra.

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with a crisis, but often rather hopeful, since the very word signifies that *there is the possibility of a new chance ahead*.

### **3.2.3. Hindu Philosophy in American Discourse: *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (1994) by Deepak Chopra**

*Everyone has a purpose in life... a unique gift or special talent to give to others. And when we blend this unique talent with service to others, we experience the ecstasy and exultation of our own spirit, which is the ultimate goal of all goals*

Deepak Chopra

With Dr. Deepak Chopra we are going to delve into ancient Hindu Scriptures (particularly the *Upanishads*) to see to what an extent his philosophy of life reflects Hindu thought, has been Americanised for practical purposes or, rather, tries to establish a symbolic bridge between East and West, as he expresses on one of his websites, where Chopra sees his mission as “bridging the technological miracles of the West with the wisdom of the East”.<sup>94</sup> The idea of bridging East and West is by no means new. If we go back in time to the first Parliament of World Religions which took place in Chicago in 1893, Hindu swami Vivekananda already expressed his desire to unite Eastern and Western spirituality (Witham, 1997; Houghton, 1893: 444); similarly, in the mid-1940s, yogi Paramahansa Yogananda expressed the need for a “harmonious exchange between East and West” (Yogananda, [1946] 2007: 326). These are only two among numerous authors who, in one way or another, have tried to synthesise “East and West, spirituality and science, reason and intuition” (Bhaskar, 2000: 147). Chopra has, undoubtedly, contributed in his own way to closing the gap between cultures, as will be shown in this section.

*The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (1994) is one of Chopra’s most popular bestsellers. It is divided into seven chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. Each chapter starts with a quotation, either from the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, from Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Lao Tzu or Kahlil Gibran. Chopra guides his readers through seven different laws that will, presumably, help them attain success

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<sup>94</sup> Chopra’s mission is expressed in *Biography Online*: <[http://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/deepak\\_chopra.html](http://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/deepak_chopra.html)> (accessed January, 2010).

in their lives, offering tools to break away from fear-based thinking.<sup>95</sup> Starting with the detailed explanation of each law, the chapters are followed by practical exercises and suggestions on how to apply the fundamental, natural principles dealt with in each one of them. Unlike many other self-help books, in *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* Chopra does not resort to stories of any kind, neither a story of personal transformation, nor testimonials from others to support his views. While using clear straightforward language, the book resembles more a philosophical treatise than a self-help book. Its author reflects on the effect of silence and meditation in our lives, on the act of giving, the practising of acceptance, and the importance of being aware of choices. He writes of how our thoughts and behaviour are always in anticipation of a response and how this often causes people to live life in fear. He talks of how practising non-judgement can be beneficial in our lives and frequently explains his points vividly through use of *simile* and *metaphor*.<sup>96</sup> Although I will expand upon three of the seven laws, I am briefly going to summarise them all in order to get a wider perspective of the work.

The first one is what Chopra calls *The Law of Pure Potentiality*, according to which the source of all creation is pure consciousness, pure potentiality seeking expression from the un-manifest to the manifest. When we realise, through *meditation*, *silence* and *non-judgement*, that our true self is one of pure potentiality, we align with the power that manifests everything in the universe. One of the ways to achieve this is when communing with nature. The second law is *The Law of Giving*, which says that the universe operates through dynamic exchange. Giving and receiving are different aspects of the flow of energy in the universe. In our willingness to give that which we seek, we keep the abundance of the universe circulating in our lives: “if you want joy, give joy to others; if you want love, learn to give love; if you want attention and appreciation, learn to give attention and appreciation; if you want material affluence,

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<sup>95</sup> Seeking approval of our actions, needing to control, and a need for power are all fear-based methods of thinking.

<sup>96</sup> Examples of metaphores and similes in the book: ‘Like a river, money must keep flowing, otherwise it begins to stagnate...’ (29), ‘Nature is a symphony’ (71), ‘Every problem is the seed of an opportunity’ (89).



help others to become materially affluent” (30-31). The third law, *The Law of 'Karma' or Cause and Effect* relates to the concept that every action generates a force of energy that returns to us in like kind. In other words, what we sow is what we reap. This law says that no debt in the universe ever goes unpaid. There is “a perfect accounting system in this universe, and everything is a constant ‘to and fro’ exchange of energy” (45). Thus, Chopra advises us, when we make a choice – any choice at all – to ask ourselves two things: first of all, “What are the consequences of this choice that I’m making?”; and secondly, “will this choice that I’m making now bring happiness to me and to those around me?” If the answer is yes, then we are told to go ahead with that choice. If the answer is no, if that choice “brings distress either to you or to those around you, then don’t make that choice” (42). When we choose actions that bring happiness and success to others, the fruit of our action is happiness and success.

The fourth law is *The Law of Least Effort*, known as the principle of economy of effort in Vedic Science (54). It says that nature’s intelligence functions with effortless ease, harmony, and love: “If you observe nature at work, you will see that least effort is expended. Grass doesn’t try to grow, it just grows. Fish don’t try to swim, they just swim. Flowers don’t try to bloom, they bloom. Birds don’t try to fly, they fly” (53-54). According to this law, when one remains open to all points of view – not rigidly attached to only one – it is possible to release one’s intentions, without attachment, and wait for the appropriate season for the desires “to blossom into reality” (62). This is only possible through an attitude of acceptance, responsibility and defenselessness. The fifth law is *The Law of Intention and Desire*, which says that “Inherent in every intention and desire is the mechanics for its fulfillment” (65). According to Chopra, there are two qualities inherent in consciousness, attention and intention: “Whatever you put attention on will grow stronger in your life. Whatever you take your attention away from will wither, disintegrate, and disappear”. (70) Chopra advises that the only caution is “that you use your intention for the benefit of mankind” and that “This happens spontaneously when you are in alignment with The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success” (72). The sixth law is called *The Law of Detachment*, which says that “in order to acquire anything in the physical universe, you have to relinquish your attachment to it” (83) Chopra tells us that the search for security and certainty is an illusion, since it is

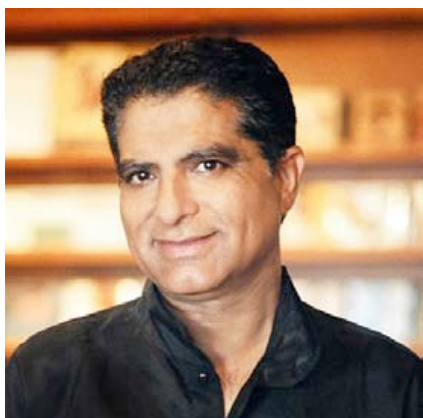
an attachment to the known, and what is known is our past. The known is “nothing other than the prison of past conditioning” whereas the unknown is “the field of all possibilities” (86):

In detachment lies the wisdom of uncertainty... in the wisdom of uncertainty lies the freedom from our past, from the known, which is the prison of past conditioning. In our willingness to step into the unknown, the field of all possibilities, we surrender ourselves to the creative mind that orchestrates the dance of the universe. (81)

Finally, the seventh law is *The Law of 'Dharma' or Purpose in Life*, which says that everyone has a purpose, a unique gift or special talent to give to others. (98). When “we blend this unique talent with service to others, we experience the ecstasy and exultation of our own spirit, which is the ultimate goal of all goals” (92). Chopra affirms that each one must find out that inside us there is “a god or goddess in embryo that wants to be born so that we can express our divinity”. In each of the seven spiritual laws, Chopra presents a way for people to align their lives with achieving success. In the conclusion, the author affirms that the seven spiritual laws are “powerful principles that will enable you to attain self-mastery”, and adds that when one puts attention on these laws, and practices the steps outlined in the book, “you will see that your life becomes more joyful and abundant in every way, for these laws are also the spiritual laws of life that make living worthwhile”. (109) Because of their relevance to understanding the prosperity-oriented messages, not only from an American, but also from an Eastern perspective, I have decided to particularly analyse later in this section the first, second and sixth laws: *pure potentiality*, *giving* and *detachment*. Thus, I offer numerous examples of Hindu scriptures and compare them to Chopra’s words and to American self-help literature and belief systems in general.

As mentioned earlier, unlike Louise Hay or Anthony Robbins, Deepak Chopra does not resort to any story of transformation in *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, although at the end of the book there are a few lines of his biography. Chopra is Indian American born in New Delhi, India in 1947. He studied Western medicine at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi, specialising in endocrinology. In 1968 he migrated to the US and began his clinical internship and residency training at Muhlenberg Hospital in New Jersey. He earned his license to practice medicine in the

state of Massachusetts in 1973. This led to a successful career in medicine, in which he became chief of staff at the New England Memorial Hospital in Stoneham, Massachusetts. Chopra is board-certified in internal medicine and specialised in endocrinology.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, he started teaching at Tufts University and Boston University School of Medicine and is still an instructor “at such exalted institutions as the University of California School of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Centre” (Gamel, 2008: 135). Dr. Chopra is also a “fellow of the American College of Physicians, a member of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, an adjunct professor at Kellogg School of Management, and a senior scientist with the Gallup Organization”.<sup>98</sup>



He eventually established a growing private medical practise and realised that allopathic medicine, while extremely advanced in some areas, offered a very fragmented view of human nature. Chopra, thus, “became aware of the limitations of Western medicine. He felt there was something missing in his approach to medical care. Therefore he increasingly became interested in Ayurvedic medicine, which stresses a more holistic approach to medical care”.<sup>99</sup> This is the reason why he studied the ancient Indian system of Ayurveda and yoga, founding, in 1996, The Chopra Center for Well Being in La Jolla, California, and other Ayurvedic Centres in Lancaster and Massachusetts, which served him as a vehicle for spreading his message of alternative medicine and holistic well-being (McGee, 2005: 71).

Chopra is author of fifty-five books – which have been translated into eighty-five languages – including fourteen bestsellers on mind-body health, peace, quantum

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<sup>97</sup> This is the *Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine Physician Profile* website containing information on Dr. Chopra’s credentials <<http://profiles.massmedboard.org/MA-Physician-Profile-View-Doctor.asp?ID=6568>> (accessed. Jan 2010).

<sup>98</sup> Information on *Deepak Chopra*: <<http://www.chopra.com/aboutdeepak>> (accessed January, 2010).

<sup>99</sup> *Deepak Chopra biography*: <[http://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/deepak\\_chopra.html](http://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/deepak_chopra.html)> (accessed January, 2010).

mechanics and spirituality.<sup>100</sup> A controversial character, he has often been criticised by the medical establishment for his open “support of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)” (Gamel, 2008: 135), and by numerous authors for his seemingly materialistic-oriented discourse (Chen, 2003: 29) and for his use of what they describe as ‘pseudo/quasi-scientific’ language (Burkeman, 2009). For instance, in *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* Chopra affirms in a very matter-of-fact way that: “The universe is nothing other than the Self curving back within Itself to experience Itself as spirit, mind, and physical matter” (4). Another example of a sentence that would certainly not be considered ‘scientific’ is Chopra’s definition of the concept of ‘law’, which he describes as:

the process by which the unmanifest becomes manifest; it’s the process by which the observer becomes the observed; it’s the process by which the seer becomes the scenery; it’s the process through which the dreamer manifests the dream. (3-4)

Obviously all the entries for ‘law’ in any dictionary<sup>101</sup> differ considerably from Chopra’s definition. Indeed, it is interesting to notice how, especially considering his medical background, one would, therefore, expect a more scientific discourse, yet sentences like the ones we have just seen, and others we are going to analyse in this section, might be thought-provoking and even inspiring, but, as mentioned, like most other self-help literature texts, would, no doubt, be relegated to the category of pseudo/quasi-science by numerous mainstream scientists (Greenberg and Lambdin, 2007: 457). On the other hand, it should also be mentioned that Chopra is seen by some as one of the leading spokespersons for an ever-growing movement of scientists and physicians who are committed to combining modern Western medicine with ancient Eastern healing methods (Ponomareff and Bryson, 2006: 48). In my dissertation Chopra is certainly a key figure, clearly embodying the growing presence of Eastern thought in American self-help literature.

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<sup>100</sup> According to the *Deepak Chopra* website, Chopra is author of fifty-five books, see: <<http://www.chopra.com/aboutdeepak>> (accessed January, 2010).

<sup>101</sup> See, for instance, entries for ‘law’ in the *Webster’s Online Dictionary* <<http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/law>> (accessed September, 2009).

At the beginning of this section, I mentioned that *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* is a short but insightful book that explains how simple actions can make a big difference. However, some parts of it may appear abstract to those who have not experienced Eastern philosophy. As mentioned, I am, therefore, going to analyse three of Chopra's laws (of *pure potentiality*, of *giving* and of *detachment*) in the light of his Hindu background, taking into account the possible interpretation of his messages by his American readership. Subsequently, I will continue comparing the concepts of happiness and success in Vedic terms, the importance of the heart, of the 'present moment' and of human beings conceived as 'individual cells'. The whole book talks about success, but soon we realise, that success, as understood by Chopra and by Hindu lore, has to do with following nature's laws and with incorporating these laws into one's consciousness:

We are, in our essential state, pure consciousness. Pure consciousness is pure potentiality; it is the field of all possibilities and infinite creativity. Pure consciousness is our essence... Our essential nature is one of pure potentiality.  
(9)

In the *Upanishads* we realise that the acknowledgement of the human soul (*Atman*) and its connection to Consciousness (*Brahman*) is the most important task for a human being: that is, to become aware of our source through meditation in order to achieve liberation. Thus, for example, we can read:

It is Consciousness, Vijnana, alone that appears to be born or to move or to take the form of matter. But this Consciousness is really ever unborn, immovable and free from the traits of materiality; it is all peace and non—dual.  
(*Mandukya Upanishad* Chapter IV: 45 Alatasanti Prakarana)<sup>102</sup>

Also:

If a man is able to realise Brahman here, before the falling asunder of his body, then he is liberated; if not, he is embodied again in the created worlds.  
(*Katha Upanishad*, Part II, Chapter III: 4)

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<sup>102</sup> Whenever I quote the *Upanishads* I will always be referring to the translation by Swami Nikhilananda, see References.

Chopra tells us that the practice of silence can be one of the keys to withdraw from the pressures of the world, in order to *prepare the ground* for true success, which can never be achieved through stress and frantic mental activity:

Practicing silence means making a commitment to take a certain amount of time to simply *Be*. Experiencing silence means periodically withdrawing from the activity of speech. It also means periodically withdrawing from such activities as watching television, listening to the radio, or reading a book. If you never give yourself the opportunity to experience silence, this creates turbulence in your internal dialogue. (14, original emphasis)

When silencing one's mind, one can: "Slip into the gap. This means to center yourself in that silent space between thoughts, to go into the silence – that level of Being which is your essential state" (76). Constant mental chatter and, above all, judgment:

is the constant evaluation of things as right or wrong, good or bad. When you are constantly evaluating, classifying, labeling, analyzing, you create a lot of turbulence in your internal dialogue. This turbulence constricts the flow of energy between you and the field of pure potentiality. (17)

To read such affirmations in the first chapter of a book on success addressed to an American readership is certainly thought-provoking, to say the least. In his philosophical tone Chopra insists on the fact that connecting to the field of pure potentiality "through the daily practice of silence, meditation, and non-judgment" (13), *is the very first requirement for the manifestation of one's desires* (16, emphasis added). Rather than encouraging his readers to improve external skills (speaking or writing abilities, organisation), the author speaks about abstract concepts (pure potentiality) and the material manifestations of people's desires, as only possible if there is a connection between the two. Far from feeding ego-driven wishes, Chopra makes a clear difference in the first chapter between one's True Self and one's ego. Thus: "The ego ... is not who you really are. The ego is your self-image: it is your social mask; it is the role you are playing. Your social mask thrives on approval. It wants to control, and it is sustained by power, because it lives in fear" (11).

On the other hand:

Your true Self, which is your spirit, your soul, is ... immune to criticism, it is unafraid of any challenge, and it feels beneath no one. And yet, it is humble and feels superior to no one, because it recognizes that everyone else is the same Self, the same spirit in different disguises. (11-12)

In fact, it is only through this true Self that there is any hope for real success in life:

The source of wealth, of abundance, or of anything in the physical world is the Self; it is the consciousness that knows how to fulfill every need. Everything else is a symbol: cars, houses, bank notes, clothes, airplanes. Symbols are transitory; they come and go. Chasing symbols is like settling for the map instead of the territory. It creates anxiety; it ends up making you feel hollow and empty inside, because you exchange your Self for the *symbols* of your Self. (84, original emphasis)

Moreover, Chopra stresses that:

The need for approval, the need to control things, and the need for external power are needs that are based on fear. This kind of power is not the power of pure potentiality, or the power of the Self, or *real* power. When we experience the power of the Self, there is an absence of fear, there is no compulsion to control, and no struggle for approval or external power. (11)

It is obvious that Chopra borrows his ideas from Hinduism, as we can see when reading the *Upanishads*, and tries to adapt the language to make it more understandable to his American readership. In the first chapter of the *Mundaka Upanishad*, for instance, we read:

Like two golden birds perched on the selfsame tree, intimate friends, the ego and the Self dwell in the same body. The former eats the sweet and sour fruits of the tree of life, while the latter looks on in detachment. (*Mundaka Upanishad*, Third Mundaka Chapter 1:1)

Often the ancient scriptures appear too cryptic to the untrained reader. Simple ideas such as the fact that there is no other way of knowing the Self than through the attainment of a pure heart are expressed in the *Upanishads* with these words:

He who attains purity of heart by performing actions as an offering to the Lord and merges prakriti<sup>103</sup> and all its effects in Brahman, realises his true Self and thereby transcends

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<sup>103</sup> Prakriti means 'nature', see *Hinduwebsite* <<http://www.hinduwebsite.com/prakriti.asp>> (accessed May, 2010).

phenomena. In the absence of maya, both collective and individual, all his past actions are destroyed. After the destruction of the past karmas he attains final Liberation. (*Svetasvatara Upanishad* Chapter VI: 4)

In the Hindu scriptures it is possible to ‘know the Self’ only when transcending the material world and ‘connecting’ with one’s divine nature. As seen, one of the aims of Chopra is to inform his readers about *other ways* of achieving success that differ immensely from competitiveness and forcefulness. In fact, he teaches the opposite. When talking about ego-based power he says:

It lasts only as long as the object of reference is there. If you have a certain title – you’re the president of the country or the chairman of a corporation – or if you have a lot of money, the power you enjoy goes with the title, with the job, with the money. Ego-based power will only last as long as those things last. As soon as the title, the job, the money go away, so does the power. (12)

And he clarifies that:

When you seek power and control over other people, you waste energy. When you seek money or power for the sake of the ego, you spend energy chasing the illusion of happiness instead of enjoying happiness in the moment. When you seek money for personal gain only, you cut off the flow of energy to yourself, and interfere with the expression of nature’s intelligence. But when your actions are motivated by love, there is no waste of energy. (55)<sup>104</sup>

Moreover, he says that all seven laws are interrelated. Thus, after suggesting one should practice meditation, silence and non-judgment following some of his guidelines,<sup>105</sup> he introduces us to the second law, which – considering this is a book on success – is also extremely surprising from the perspective of a Westerner.

The second spiritual law to attain success, according to Chopra, is the *law of giving*. In the author’s words: “The universe operates through dynamic exchange... giving and receiving are different aspects of the flow of energy in the universe. And in our willingness to give that which we seek, we keep the abundance of the universe

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<sup>104</sup> For love and compassion see *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* Part V, Chapter II: 3.

<sup>105</sup> One of Chopra’s recommendations is to commune with nature every day in silence: watching a sunset, listening to the sound of the ocean or a stream, or smelling the scent of a flower; opening up to what he calls ‘the field of pure potentiality’.



circulating in our lives” (25). The philanthropic tradition in America probably shows a subconscious awareness of this law, whereby it is not unusual to hear of millionaires such as John D. Rockefeller or Andrew Carnegie donating a significant amount of their wealth to foundations, for good purposes. This tradition is still very present in America nowadays – with examples like Bill and Melinda Gates, Oprah Winfrey or Ted Turner<sup>106</sup> – and, obviously, from a religious (Christian) viewpoint, *giving* (mainly in terms of alms) is also highly recommended. Nonetheless, based on Hindu lore, Chopra tells us that only through giving can one find wealth in all its forms, not just in terms of money: “If you want joy, give joy to others; if you want love, learn to give love; if you want attention and appreciation, learn to give attention and appreciation; if you want material affluence, help others to become materially affluent” (31).

Let us see what the *Upanishads* have to say about affluence or prosperity. Having learned that desires and material possessions are no more than *maya* (illusion) – in Hinduism, Buddhism and even Taoism – and are the basic causes for *samsara* (cycle of re-births): is prosperity in itself seen as something reprehensible? Traditional Buddhism (except for some schools, such as the *Nichiren Daishonin* school (Cowan, 1982: 8) certainly exhorts its followers to turn away from the tangible world (*Dhammapada*, Chapter 7: 8). In Taoism, as we saw in section 2.2.1, one is encouraged to enjoy life and material things, provided one is not deceived by illusion. It would be acceptable to enjoy wealth as long as one was completely detached from it.<sup>107</sup> In the *Mundaka Upanishad* we can read that prior to any acquisition of prosperity a ‘pure understanding’ is required. And, above all, one’s major task should revolve around the knowing of the Self. Once this is achieved, there is no danger of being dragged down to earthly existence again by any wishes. What is more, once the Self (meaning the connection *Atman/Brahman*) is known, all desires are granted:

Whatever world a man of pure understanding envisages in his mind and whatever desires he cherishes, that world he conquers and those desires he obtains. Therefore let everyone who wants

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<sup>106</sup> See the list of America’s 50 most generous philanthropists on Business Week: <[http://www.businessweek.com/pdfs/2004/0448\\_philan.pdf](http://www.businessweek.com/pdfs/2004/0448_philan.pdf)> (accessed December, 2010).

<sup>107</sup> See *Tao Te Ching* chapter 10 for ‘detachment’.

prosperity worship the man who knows the Self.  
(*Mundaka Upanishad*, Third Mundaka, Chapter I: 10)

Also:

Having taught the Vedas, the teacher thus instructs the pupil:  
Speak the truth. Practise dharma. Do not neglect the study of  
the Vedas. Having brought to the teacher the gift desired by  
him, enter the householder's life and see that the line of  
progeny is not cut off. Do not swerve from the truth. Do not  
swerve from dharma. Do not neglect personal welfare. *Do not  
neglect prosperity*. Do not neglect the study and teaching of the Vedas.  
(*Taittiriya Upanishad*, Chapter XI: 1, emphasis added)

Or:

The Brahman which has been thus described is the same as the  
physical akasa<sup>108</sup> outside a person. The akasa which is outside a  
person is the same as that which is inside a person. The akasa  
which is inside a person is the akasa within the heart. The akasa  
which is within the heart is omnipresent and unchanging. He  
who knows this obtains full and *unchanging prosperity*.  
(*Chhandogya Upanishad*, Part three, Chapter XII: 7-9, emphasis added)

Again, according to ancient Hindu scriptures, once the soul, which resides in the  
heart, realises its divine nature, there is no danger of falling into the traps of material  
abundance, yet, curiously enough, as we have seen in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, “He  
who knows this obtains full and *unchanging prosperity*” (Part Three, Chapter XII: 7-9,  
emphasis added) precisely because this person is no longer controlled by desires:

Atman, smaller than the small, greater than the great, is hidden  
in the hearts of all living creatures. A man who is free from  
desires beholds the majesty of the Self through tranquillity of  
the senses and the mind and becomes free from grief.  
(*Katha Upanishad*, Chapter II: 20)

Clearly, the key to prosperity and the ‘granting of all one’s wishes’ in the  
*Upanishads* comes with the knowing of the Self and the feeling of total detachment  
from the outcome. That is, prosperity is or can be no more than a by-product, since the  
main goal is ‘total detachment’: “Having detached the Self from the sense-organs and  
renounced the world, the wise attain Immortality” (*Kena Upanishad*, Chapter I: 2) The  
reward is not supposed to be only for the ‘chosen few’, but for whoever has the

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<sup>108</sup> Akasa is a Hindu term for ‘space’, see *Hinduwebsite*: <<http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/concepts/akasa.asp>> (accessed May, 2010).

willpower to take time to be in silence, to meditate and to be in touch with nature. Nevertheless, it is only a reduced number of people who are willing to take this challenging path. Moreover, we can also read in one of the *Upanishads* that the energy of the universe and all the elements “support this body and uphold it” (*Prasna Upanishad*, Question II: 2). This is probably what Chopra means when he says: “Our true nature is one of affluence and abundance; we are naturally affluent because nature supports every need and desire” (33-34). The term ‘affluence’ is, of course, ambiguous, its first interpretation in an English dictionary generally being that of ‘abundant wealth’. And wealth is mainly understood in terms of actual money or material goods in the Western world. Thus, and since he is mainly addressing an American readership, Chopra does refer to money, but gives it a Hindu (mystical?) interpretation affirming that it is some kind of ‘living energy’: “*Money is really a symbol of the life energy we exchange and the life energy we use as a result of the service we provide to the universe*” (28, emphasis added). Or: “Like a river, money must keep flowing, otherwise it begins to stagnate, to clog, to suffocate and strangle its very own life force. Circulation keeps it alive and vital. (29) In fact, his medical background is evident when he asserts that:

Because your body and your mind and the universe are in constant and dynamic exchange, stopping the circulation of energy is like stopping the flow of blood. *Whenever blood stops flowing, it begins to clot, to coagulate, to stagnate.* That is why you must give and receive in order to keep wealth and affluence – or anything you want in life – circulating in your life. (28, emphasis added)

He tells his readers that the *law of detachment* (the sixth spiritual law of success) has to be mathematically applied if one wants to access the source of abundance: “The *Law of Detachment* says that in order to acquire anything in the physical universe, you have to relinquish your attachment to it. (...) You give up your attachment to the result” (83). This Hindu concept clearly differs from American (Western) results-oriented mentality. In fact, most self-help literature books, and, specifically three of the five analysed in this dissertation, totally ignore this basic Hindu law, while adopting fragments of its philosophy.

It is certainly thought-provoking that the entire *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* revolves around material success or prosperity and how to attain it, creating

“unlimited wealth with effortless ease” (2) while, at the same time stressing that it is only possible to do so when completely aligned with the universe. Chopra tells us that, according to *The Hymn of Creation* of the *Rig Veda*: “In the beginning there was desire, which was the first seed of mind; sages, having meditated in their hearts, have discovered by their wisdom the connection of the existent with the non-existent” (67). He tells his readers that there is nothing wrong with desire and wanting as long as one is very aware of its traps and consciously applies the law of detachment. The author goes on to share that for many people “Success, including the creation of wealth, has always been considered to be a process that requires hard work, and it is often considered to be at the expense of others” (2); but he prefers to look at it differently: “Success is the ability to fulfil your desires with effortless ease (...) Success in life could be defined as the continued expansion of happiness and the progressive realization of worthy goals” (2). Furthermore: “True success is (...) the unfolding of the divinity within us. It is the perception of divinity wherever we go, in whatever we perceive – in the eyes of a child, in the beauty of a flower, in the flight of a bird” (3).

Whereas the Webster dictionary<sup>109</sup> has over thirty entries for success – the most ‘common’ ones being: a level of social status, the achievement of an objective/goal, the opposite of failure – none of them resemble even closely the definition of success in terms of the expansion of happiness that Chopra mentions. Likewise, in the *Upanishads* we read:

There is one Supreme Ruler, the inmost Self of all beings, who makes His one form manifold. *Eternal happiness* belongs to the wise, who perceive Him within themselves—not to others.  
(*Katha Upanishad*, Part II, Chapter II: 12, emphasis added)

Clearly Chopra, in an attempt to wed Eastern and Western worldviews, does not hesitate to express himself in a Western style, drawing on scientific discourse and exemplification. Of course, the fact that he is a millionaire and that his writing is so prosperity-oriented makes him an obvious target for criticism (Kaminer, 2000: 6).

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<sup>109</sup> *Webster's Online Dictionary* entry for ‘success’: <<http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definitions/success?cx=partner-pub-0939450753529744%3Av0qd01-tdlq&cof=FORID%3A9&ie=UTF-8&q=success&sa=Search#906>> (accessed May, 2010).

Celebrities such as Demi Moore, Oprah Winfrey and the late Michael Jackson and Liz Taylor “have all praised the teachings which have helped the 50-year-old [now 64] from New Delhi make millions from book sales and advice sessions” (Hall, 1996: 16). We are told by one author that movie star Demi Moore has Deepak Chopra’s book *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* on her bedside table, affirming that “‘It is my bible’, says Demi. ‘It is a practical guide to the fulfilment of your dreams. I live by it’” (1996: 16); and the author of the article quickly goes on to explain the possible reasons for such a sales phenomenon:

It’s simplistic to say New Age wisdom is chic, but what lies behind its appeal appears to be a renewed hunger for some kind of spirituality. People are seeking the solace or refuge from ageing, death or misery that used to be supplied by mainstream religion. (1996: 16)

Chopra has also been criticised by different Christian groups such as The Christian Research Institute for “bringing in Hinduism through the back door”.<sup>110</sup> As mentioned earlier, further criticism comes from the fact that he often uses a scientific mode of expression in apparently un-scientific contexts, including, notably, the use of the term ‘quantum’. However, as we saw in section 2.2.4, while some authors openly despise such attempts,<sup>111</sup> there is a growing number of quantum physicists who would not necessarily disagree with Chopra and other Hindu or Buddhist sages. To illustrate my point, let us take a look at the following excerpt:

Your body is not separate from the body of the universe, because at quantum mechanical levels there are no well-defined edges. You are like a wiggle, a wave, a fluctuation, a convolution, a whirlpool, a localized disturbance in the larger quantum field. The larger quantum field – the universe – is your extended body. (69)

Or:

Energy and information exist everywhere in nature. In fact, at the level of the quantum field, there is nothing other than energy and information. The quantum

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<sup>110</sup> According to the Christian Research Institute Chopra brings in Hinduism “through the back door”, as we can read in *Biography Online*: <[http://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/deepak\\_chopra.html](http://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/deepak_chopra.html)> (accessed September, 2009).

<sup>111</sup> “Quantum strangeness, as it is sometimes called, has been a boon to New Age quackery” (Barr, 2007: 21).

field is just another label for the field of pure consciousness or pure potentiality. And this quantum field is influenced by intention and desire. (67)

It seems that affirmations such as the ones mentioned, are extremely appealing to a large American readership immersed in a world surrounded by science and information technology. As we have seen, while the possession of scientific knowledge is highly praised in our society, there is, at the same time, a growing interest in exotic philosophies and techniques. Still, some writers affirm that it is just a case of “pop spirituality experts [who] often seek academic or intellectual credibility” (Kaminer, 2000: 6). For others, “the alienation of ideas from their original cultural conditions of production is a necessity of New Age commodification of spirituality” (Redden, 1999: 101). Others still, ignoring the consumerist aspect – or looking beyond it – claim that in essence, science and spirituality, “though differing in their approaches, share the same end, which is the betterment of humanity” (Sorkhabi, 2006: 1). What is beyond any doubt is that Chopra’s Eastern-Western blend proves highly acceptable (and profitable) with a message that advocates a “more spiritual approach to success and affluence”:

We need a more spiritual approach to success and affluence, which is the abundant flow of all good things to you. With the knowledge and practice of spiritual law, we put ourselves in harmony with nature and create with carefreeness, joy, and love. (2)

Let us go back to Chopra’s main teachings and beliefs, which, no doubt, provide ample inspiration to millions of readers in our hectic Western world. As we have seen, he claims that to attain happiness we need to consider several things, such as finding time for meditation and silencing the mind, which will help us to avoid negative thoughts and emotions (14). He teaches that we should try to listen to the signals of our body and develop our intuition (43). Just as so many self-help authors over the years have expressed, Chopra also stresses that there is a close connection between our state of mind and our physical health (75). As seen in section 2.2.3, it is not surprising to find affirmations such as these nowadays, especially since several studies have found that the regular practice of relaxation and meditation, for instance, significantly reduces self-rated perceptions of anxiety and stress, which are often the major causes behind numerous diseases (Delmonte, 1984: 581-82; Gelderloos, 1990; Eliot, 2006).

Like many other self-help literature books (Gawain, 1986; Brennan, 1988; Bays, 1999), *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, while giving an impression of highly ordered thought, places the highest value on one's 'heart': "Only the heart knows the correct answer. Most people think the heart is mushy and sentimental. But it's not. The heart is intuitive; it's holistic, it's contextual, it's relational" (43-44).

Moreover, rather than using a sentimental tone, Chopra's way of dealing with the topic is quite technical. He is the self-help 'expert' informing his readers about a mechanism they might not have noticed before: "There is an interesting mechanism that the universe has to help you make spontaneously correct choices. The mechanism has to do with sensations in your body. Your body experiences two kinds of sensations: one is a sensation of comfort, the other is a sensation of discomfort" (43).

And, as we shall see in *The Secret* (2006) in section 3.2.5, when in trouble or in doubt, Chopra encourages his readers to: "Consciously put your attention in the heart and ask your heart what to do. Then wait for a response – a physical response in the form of a sensation. It may be the *faintest* level of feeling – but it's there, in your body" (43, original emphasis). As we have seen, even though the heart is at the core of most self-help philosophy, some authors exploit the sentimental aspect of it, while others, like Chopra or Tolle, talk about it in a much more rational way.

A further recurrent topic in self-help literature is the role of thought and its relation to the concept of time: "time is the movement of thought. Both past and future are born in the imagination; *only the present*, which is awareness, is real and eternal" (74, emphasis added). Here we reach a basic oft-repeated topic, dealt with in different ways in self-help literature. Whereas Hay in *You Can Heal Your Life* briefly mentions the importance of living in the present (75), she recommends exercises, such as the use of affirmations and visualisations, to imagine possible future outcomes (healing of a disease, achievement of inner peace, etc), thereby making it very difficult to really 'live in the present'. Likewise, Robbins in *Awaken the Giant Within* also mentions that it is of utmost importance to live in the present (173), but, as we have seen, his whole

philosophy revolves more around changing the present if one is not happy with it (one's life and oneself), than actually living in the present (Butler-Bowdon, 2003: 257).

Let us take a closer look at what Chopra tells us about the present in his book. He starts with a simple introduction: "The past is history, the future is a mystery, and this moment is a gift. That is why this moment is called 'the present'" (61), and goes on to clarify the often misleading interpretation of living in the present with these words: "Your *intent* is for the future, but your *attention* is in the present... the future is created in the present" (73, original emphasis). In fact, as we saw in section 2.2.1, this is a basic Hindu and Buddhist premise, whereby we can influence our future by our choice of present actions, creating good or bad karma (Billington, 1997: 38). Certainly, Chopra's promise for living in the present is extremely tempting:

If you embrace the present and become one with it, and merge with it, you will experience a fire, a glow, a sparkle of ecstasy throbbing in every living sentient being. As you begin to experience this exultation of spirit in everything that is alive, as you become intimate with it, joy will be born within you, and you will drop the terrible burdens and encumbrances of defensiveness, resentment, and hurtfulness. Only then will you become lighthearted, carefree, joyous, and free. (61)

But one can ask: What if the "present moment" turns out to be "unacceptable, unpleasant, or awful?" (Tolle, 1999: 35) Chopra does not consider this possibility and it is Eckhart Tolle who elaborates upon this idea in *The Power of Now*, which I am going to analyse in section 3.2.4, also in the light of its Eastern-related discourse. For Chopra, living in the present and feeling inner joy or happiness can be achieved by connecting with nature (53-54). Living the present intensely, instead of living a life filled with fear is one of the basic inspirational messages Chopra has for his readers. And the utter enjoyment of life with a sense of detachment is an idea he illustrates from Taoism. In fact, Chopra not only quotes Lao-Tzu (53) but would probably also agree with Bruce Lee, who, referring to the Taoist principle of *wu-wei*,<sup>112</sup> encourages his audience to

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<sup>112</sup> The Taoist principle of *wu wei* has many meanings, among them is the meaning of 'flowing' with life (Towler, 2005: 9).



‘flow’ with life.<sup>113</sup> When driven by selfish reasons, Chopra tells us that “you cut off the flow of energy to yourself, and interfere with the expression of nature’s intelligence”, but when “your actions are motivated by love, there is no waste of energy” (55). Likewise, Taoist philosophy proposes that the universe “works harmoniously according to its own ways. When someone exerts his will against the world, he disrupts that harmony. Taoism does not identify man’s will as the root problem. Rather, it asserts that man must place his will in harmony with the natural universe” (Fasching and de Chant, 2001: 35).

To conclude this section we can affirm that the author seems to be ‘teaching’ his readers about the way things work at a ‘cosmic’ universal level, drawing from several sources like the *Vedas*, and the *Tao Te Ching*. Chopra’s idea of bringing together East and West is certainly an appealing message to a world in dire need for value-based guidelines such as non-judgement, detachment, silencing the mind and developing intuition, while intensely living in the present. The author is aware that Eastern practices are being used worldwide for different purposes, but he repeatedly reminds his readers not to lose sight of the deep meaning which underlie concepts and practices, such as the practice of meditation, which “has only one reason: to get in touch with your soul, and then go beyond that and get in touch with the consciousness that your soul is a ripple of. It might be a good stress management technique, but *there is only one real purpose, which is the means to enlightenment*” (Hughes, 2004, emphasis added).

Moreover, he reminds his readers that true happiness and true success are “the perception of divinity wherever we go, in whatever we perceive” (3). He clarifies that success, rather than a destination, should be considered a journey, adding that “material abundance, in all its expressions, happens to be one of those things that makes the

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<sup>113</sup> In an excerpt of Bruce Lee’s ‘Lost Interview’ – which, incidentally, was taken to advertise a new version of a high powered car, the BMW X3 – Bruce says: “Empty your mind. Be formless, shapeless... like water. You put water into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can flow, or it can crash. Be water my friend!” Lee’s words probably reflect one of the most graphic images to illustrate the ideal oneness with nature and the total immersion in the present. We can find the excerpt of Bruce Lee’s ‘Lost Interview’, *Be Water* on: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OW-cnizLDEE>> (accessed August, 2009).

journey more enjoyable” (2). He inspires his readers to adopt a more spiritual attitude towards prosperity and success, but at the same time he *seems* to be completely oblivious to the ‘reality’ of millions of starving people in the world, and to the fact that huge fortunes are gained using trickery and fraud, rather than through self knowledge; which, evidently, is also happening worldwide on planet Earth. Chopra apparently has nothing to say about our world’s current state of affairs at a global level and seems only to be interested in the individual’s personal journey of alignment with his/her divine Self. At least, this is the first impression, but if we analyse the book further, it transpires that, in spite of its individualistic tone, *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* clearly compares the individual to a cell which is part of a larger whole; a cell that cannot harm another cell without harming itself. Thus, in order to improve life on this planet, it is, he argues, of utmost importance to start improving one’s own life (27). Moreover, in Chapter Seven, Chopra talks about the importance of service to make a difference in the world, suggesting that just by “shifting your internal dialogue from ‘What’s in it for me?’ to ‘How can I help?’ you automatically go beyond the ego into the domain of your spirit” (99). As we have seen, Chopra draws upon Hindu lore, to express to Americans that the only way to transform the world is through self-transformation. This might sound individualistic, but is much more challenging than it would seem at first sight. In the words of Hindu philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti:

In order to transform the world about us, with its misery, wars, unemployment, starvation, class divisions and utter confusion there must be a transformation in ourselves. The revolution must begin within oneself – but not according to any belief or ideology, because revolution based on an idea, or in conformity to a particular pattern, is obviously no revolution at all. To bring about a fundamental revolution in oneself one must understand the whole process of one’s thought and feeling in relationship. That is the only solution to all our problems – not to have more disciplines, more beliefs, more ideologies and more teachers. (1975: 49)

A text such as this one – as well as so many self-help books that echo the same idea – is extremely inspiring for many people and should certainly not be despised; at the same time we cannot overlook the effort of thousands of people who, rather than waiting for ‘individual transformation’ have managed to change the world thanks to their ideals, their determination and their actions. People like Abraham Lincoln,

Mohandas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela or the British and American Suffragettes have probably done more for human awakening, inspiring movements for civil rights and freedom across the world, than so many preachers of the 'individual revolution'. However, I may add, both attitudes (the individual and the social one) are not necessarily contradictory.

We could argue that the concept and focus on individual transformation feeds on three sources at this point: the Eastern concentration on the individual, which is based on the belief in reincarnation, whereby each soul evolves across lifetimes at different speeds. This necessarily leads to a philosophy of evolution of the individual, rather than of the group. Secondly, this ties in at a socio-cultural level, rather than at a religious-philosophical level, with American society, traditionally based upon the individual as a central element (due to its diversity of origins and patterns of settlement). This does not deny another tradition of community involvement on the part of individuals in American society (involvement with the church, with charity organisations, etc.). Thirdly, however, urbanisation and the exacerbated consumer society lead to further fragmentation of community bonds with an increased focus on the self as the centre of the world.

We have so far seen three very different self-help literature books that use Eastern messages in their discourses. Chopra's book *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* is, no doubt, an interesting compilation of ideas drawn from Eastern Scriptures, emphasising prosperity and success while at the same time revealing what true prosperity and true success really mean in *Vedic* terms. Very different from Robbins' and Hay's use of Eastern concepts, Chopra selects and focuses on some Eastern messages, re-packaging them in order to make them understandable to Western readers, with a view to inspiring and teaching them by using an authoritative tone, also characteristic of so many other self-help books.

In the fourth book, Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* (1999), which I will analyse in the next section, we will see certain similarities with Chopra, but with a different general outlook and view on life.

### **3.2.4 Buddhist Philosophy and its Parallels in American Discourse: *The Power of Now* (1999) by Eckhart Tolle**

*You are here to enable the divine purpose of the universe to unfold. That is how important you are!*

Eckhart Tolle

In recent years, numerous East-meeting-West self-help literature texts have somewhat changed their discourses, adopting what we could call a more markedly ‘Buddhist worldview’. This is obvious by observing the great importance placed on concepts such as the *Void* (Bays, 2003: 180) and *Transcendence*. While I will analyse the meaning of the former later on and in greater depth, the latter, suffice it to say, is often interpreted as going beyond limits of material existence, or rising above them (Schwartz, 1996: 15). We are told in the *Dhammapada* that the Buddha is an example of someone who clearly “transcended” this world through his awakening, meaning that he freed himself from all bondage and attachment associated with desire and fear.<sup>114</sup> What is obvious from reading a certain type of self-help literature (especially belonging to the fourth strand) is that in these times there is an increasing freedom from what many feel is the unnecessary burden of traditional patriarchal religion. Numerous spiritual seekers are attracted to the undogmatic goal of transcendence of the world, where any emphasis on *form* or *structure* as a support system to pursue freedom is generally seen to be an expression of the ego; and this, in the end, has nothing to do with true freedom (1996: 309-11). Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that the notion of transcendence, by no means appeals to all spiritual seekers in America, as we have seen with Chopra, Robbins and Hay. In fact, for many the concept of transcendence inherently denies the reality of our existence and of our relationship to the earth, to our bodies, and our emotions (Daniels, 2001: 3-11).

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<sup>114</sup> See *Dhammapada*, chapter 14 on the Buddha (the Awakened).



For Eckhart Tolle, author of the spiritual bestseller *The Power of Now*, the enlightenment paradigm to “transcend the world” is paramount, and it has captured the attention of thousands, if not millions, of people all over the world.<sup>115</sup> The conceptual level of the book differs considerably from the previous ones analysed so far (perhaps Chopra would be the closest in philosophical tone): it is not a typical ‘easy-to-read’ self-help book, but, on the contrary, it is quite dense, full of profound psychological insights that cannot easily be absorbed in one reading. As a structural device, the author adds markers that symbolise ‘break time’ to tell the readers when they are advised to close the book and meditate on what they have just read. As a result, *The Power of Now* reads like a spiritual guidebook that has the potential to inspire people and even ‘change many lives for the better’, if the guidelines given are followed.<sup>116</sup> Its 229 pages, divided into ten chapters, are written in ‘question and answer’ format.

Just like many other self-help authors (Hay, 1984; Robbins, 1991; Bays, 1999; Demartini, 2002), Eckhart Tolle<sup>117</sup> a German-born, Vancouver-residing 62-year-old ‘spiritual teacher’ and author, also shares his personal story of transformation in his book. He seems to have had an unhappy childhood in Germany and Spain, and when he was 19, he went to England and worked in a language school in London as a language

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<sup>115</sup> See footnote 69 for millions of copies sold.

<sup>116</sup> One of the *Amazon* book reviews for *The Power of Now* tells us that: “After reading happiness books like *Finding Happiness in a Frustrating World*, I felt like I had a good handle on what science had uncovered about how to live a happy life and have to say that I am MUCH happier for having read them. But, while the field of Positive Psychology has made some great contributions to my happiness levels, it’s books like *The Power of Now* that come along and let you know there’s STILL more you can learn”. See *Amazon Book Reviews*: <<http://www.amazon.com/Power-Now-Guide-Spiritual-Enlightenment/product-reviews/1577314808>> (accessed January, 2010).

<sup>117</sup> Born Ulrich Tolle, he changed his name from Ulrich to Eckhart, reportedly after the German philosopher and mystic Meister Eckhart (Walker, 2008).

teacher for three years. Interested in literature, philosophy and psychology, he enrolled in the University of London at age 22. After graduating with the highest marks in his class, he was offered a scholarship to do research at Cambridge University as a postgraduate student, and he matriculated in 1977 (Walker, 2008). In this year, at the age of 29, after having suffered from long periods of severe depression, Tolle says he experienced an ‘inner transformation’. Already in the first chapter of his book he introduces his readers to a particularly difficult moment in his life:

Until my thirtieth year, I lived in a state of almost continuous anxiety, interspersed with periods of suicidal depression... One night, not long after my twenty-ninth birthday, I woke up in the early hours with a feeling of absolute dread. I had woken up with such a feeling many times before, but this time it was more intense than it had ever been before. The silence of the night, the vague outlines of furniture in the dark room, the distant noise of a passing train – everything felt so alien, so hostile, and so utterly meaningless, that it created a deep loathing in me: a deep loathing of the world. (3)

And then he goes on to explain:

The most loathsome thing of all, however, was my own existence. What was the point in continuing to live with this burden of misery? Why carry on with this continuous struggle? I could feel that a deep longing for annihilation, for nonexistence, was now becoming much stronger than the instinctive desire to continue to live. “I cannot live with myself any longer”. This was the thought that kept repeating itself in my mind. Then suddenly I became aware of what a peculiar thought it was. “Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me: the ‘I’ and the ‘self’ that ‘I’ cannot live with”. “Maybe”, I thought, “only one of them is real”. (3-4)

He continues sharing with his readers that he was so stunned by this strange realisation that his mind stopped: “I was fully conscious, but there were no more thoughts” (4). And this was followed by a spontaneous experience of awakening or enlightenment, very similar to the ones that can be found in Eastern spiritual texts when referring to experiences of the void (Jacobson, 1983: 156)<sup>118</sup>:

Then I felt drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy. It was a slow movement at first and then accelerated. I was gripped by an intense fear, and my

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<sup>118</sup> Also see the *Mandukya Upanishad*, Chapter II: 23, for allusions to the ‘void’: “The knowers of the subtle call It the subtle and the knowers of the gross, the gross. Those that are familiar with the Personal Deity call It the Personal Deity and those that are familiar with the void, the void”.

body started to shake. I heard the words “resist nothing”, as if spoken inside my chest. I could feel myself being *sucked into a void*. It felt as if the void was inside myself rather than outside. Suddenly there was no more fear, and I let myself fall into that void. I have no recollection of what happened after that. (1999: 4, emphasis added)

In Buddhism, insight into the emptiness of phenomena (also called *Śūnyatā*) is an important aspect of the Buddha’s spiritual teaching. Capra tells us, for example, that:

In the Eastern view, the reality underlying all phenomena is beyond all forms and is therefore often said to be formless, empty or void. But this emptiness is not to be taken as mere nothingness. It is, on the contrary, the essence of all forms and the source of all life. Buddhists express the same idea when they call the ultimate reality *Śūnyatā* and affirm that it is a *living Void which gives birth to all forms in the phenomenal world*. Like the quantum field, it gives birth to an infinite variety of forms which it sustains and, eventually, reabsorbs. (2000: 25, emphasis added)

After his experience, Tolle goes on to describe in great detail the profound transformation that he felt, sharing that he lived in a “*state of uninterrupted deep peace and bliss*” (1999: 5, emphasis added) for about five months. Interestingly, he had no knowledge of Eastern religions before, and it was only several years later – when he started reading spiritual texts and spending time with spiritual teachers – that he understood what had happened to him (5).

In fact, in his book he occasionally quotes the words of the Buddha, of Jesus, or of other teachings and affirms that he does so

not in order to compare, but to draw your attention to the fact that in essence there is and always has been only one spiritual teaching, although it comes in many forms. Some of these forms, such as the ancient religions, have become so overlaid with extraneous matter that their spiritual essence has become almost completely obscured by it. To a large extent, therefore, their deeper meaning is no longer recognized and their transformative power lost. (9-10)

For this reason he may seem quite eclectic in his references and, as in many so called New Age self-help literature books, he also expresses caution over the use of the word God in *The Power of Now*:

The word *God* has become empty of meaning through thousands of years of misuse. I use it sometimes, but I do so sparingly. By misuse, I mean that people who have never even glimpsed the realm of the sacred, the infinite vastness behind that word, use it with great conviction, as if they knew what they are talking about. Or they argue against it, as if they knew what it is that they are denying. This misuse gives rise to absurd beliefs, assertions, and egoic delusions, such as “My or our God is the only true God, and your God is false”, or Nietzsche’s famous statement “God is dead”. (13)

While, as we have seen, most self-help books place great importance on the power of the mind to achieve any desired goal (such as happiness or success), with Tolle the mind, wrongly used, is precisely seen as an obstacle to reach a state of enlightenment or permanent happiness:

The mind is a superb instrument if used rightly. Used wrongly, however, it becomes very destructive. To put it more accurately, it is not so much that you use your mind wrongly – you usually don’t use it at all. It uses *you*. This is the disease. You believe that you *are* your mind. This is the delusion. The instrument has taken you over. (16)

For Tolle the beginning of freedom is the realisation “that you are not the thinker” (17). In fact, he encourages his readers to “start watching the thinker” in themselves in order to activate “a higher level of consciousness” (17). In his words:

You then begin to realize that there is a vast realm of intelligence beyond thought, that thought is only a tiny aspect of that intelligence. You also realize that all the things that truly matter – beauty, love, creativity, joy, inner peace – *arise from beyond the mind*. You begin to awaken. (17, emphasis added)

Moreover, according to him: “The compulsive thinker, which means almost everyone, lives in a state of separateness in an insanely complex world of continuous problems and conflict, a world that reflects the ever-increasing fragmentation of the mind” (15). Rather than just a theoretical treatise, Tolle’s *The Power of Now* is full of practical advice on how to become more present in one’s life. The author, for example, tells his readers that when they learn to listen, they become ‘witnesses’ of their thoughts:



As you listen to the thought, you feel a conscious presence – your deeper self – behind or underneath the thought, as it were. The thought then loses its power over you and quickly subsides, because you are no longer energizing the mind through identification with it. This is the beginning of the end of involuntary and compulsive thinking. (19)

As we have seen, Chopra tells us of the importance of silence and of “slipping into the gap between thoughts” (Chopra, 1994: 76). Likewise, Tolle talks about ‘the gap’ in these terms:

When a thought subsides, you experience a discontinuity in the mental stream – a gap of ‘no-mind’. At first, the gaps will be short, a few seconds perhaps, but gradually they will become longer. When these gaps occur, you feel a certain stillness and peace inside you. This is the beginning of your natural state of felt oneness with Being, which is usually obscured by the mind. With practice, the sense of stillness and peace will deepen. In fact, there is no end to its depth. (19)

He explains that it is also possible to create a gap in the mind stream simply by directing the focus of one’s attention into the Now, by becoming intensely conscious of the present moment. In fact, by doing so, “you draw consciousness away from mind activity and create *a gap of no-mind* in which you are highly alert and aware but not thinking. This is the essence of meditation” (20, emphasis added). Tolle tells us that it is in this state that “You will also feel a subtle emanation of joy arising from deep within: the joy of Being” (19). Thus, once again, we find that the message is clear as to the source of happiness:

Those who have not found their true wealth, which is the radiant joy of Being and the deep, unshakable peace that comes with it, are beggars, even if they have great material wealth. They are looking outside for scraps of pleasure or fulfillment, for validation, security, or love, while they have a treasure within that not only includes all those things but is infinitely greater than anything the world can offer. (12)

Moreover:

As you go more deeply into this *realm of no-mind*, as it is sometimes called in the East, you realize the state of pure consciousness. In that state, you feel your own presence with such intensity and such joy that all thinking, all emotions, your physical body, as well as the whole external world become relatively insignificant in comparison to it. And yet this is not a selfish but a selfless state. It takes you beyond what you previously thought of as ‘your self’. (20, emphasis added)

Undoubtedly, Tolle's discourse is very Eastern, and the practices and exercises suggested remind us of Buddhism in general and, often, of Zen Buddhism, in particular: "The whole essence of Zen consists on walking along the razor's edge of Now – to be so utterly, so completely *present* that no problem, no suffering, nothing that is not *who you are* in your essence, can survive in you" (52). It also concurs with the teachings of Hinduism's *Advaita Vedanta* with its emphasis on the now. Without any doubt, Tolle makes us aware that "the present moment is all that you ever have" (34), pointing out that there is nothing which ever happened in the past; it happened in the Now. Likewise, nothing will ever happen in the future, it will happen in the Now (34).

Clearly, one of Tolle's objectives is to awaken his readers to their role as creators of pain in their lives, showing them how to have a pain-free identity by living fully in the present. Chopra already took this approach in 1994, but, as we have seen, he failed to ask pungent questions such as: What if the present moment is unacceptable, unpleasant, or awful? While Chopra would seem to have ignored this issue, Hay (1984) and Robbins (1991) encouraged their readers to create a new reality if they were not happy with the one they had, by using their willpower and the power of their minds. But it is Tolle, who, contrary to what most other self-help authors suggest, explains in a matter-of-fact-way that even if we think the present moment is unacceptable, "It is as it is" (35). This might seem like a passive attitude, but according to the author, it is not, since there can be no change in our lives if there is no acceptance first. Thus, talking about the present moment the author tells us to:

Observe how the mind labels it and how this labeling process, this continuous sitting in judgment, creates pain and unhappiness. By watching the mechanics of the mind, you step out of its resistance patterns, and you can then *allow the present moment to be*. This will give you a taste of the state of inner freedom from external conditions, the state of true inner peace. Then see what happens and take action if necessary or possible. (35, original emphasis)

This inner freedom Tolle talks about reminds us of Austrian holocaust survivor and psychologist Viktor Frankl's dramatic experience, and his conclusion that even in the most terrible situations people still have the freedom to choose how they see their circumstances and create meaning out of them ([1959] 2006: 16). So, Tolle suggests: "Accept – then act. Whatever the present moment contains, accept it as if you had

chosen it. Always work with it, not against it” (35-36). ‘Accept – then act’: the second part of the sentence certainly differs enormously from what some branches of Hinduism believe in, placing great importance on *karma* and on the fact that things cannot be changed; they are as they are, and one is supposed to endure pain and suffering with bold resignation. This is not what Tolle is teaching. He considers it of utmost importance to accept *what is* before acting, but, certainly acting follows, if at all possible:

Focus attention on the feeling inside you. Know that it is the pain-body. Accept that it is there. Don’t *think* about it - don’t let the feeling turn into thinking. Don’t judge or analyze. Don’t make an identity for yourself out of it. Stay present, and continue to be the observer of what is happening inside you. Become aware not only of the emotional pain but of ‘the one who observes’, the silent watcher. This is the power of Now, the power of your own conscious presence. (40-41, original emphasis)

Interestingly, Tolle tells his readers that human beings feel great resistance to letting go of pain. In fact, he encourages everybody to “Observe the attachment to your pain. Be very alert. Observe the peculiar pleasure you derive from being unhappy. Observe the compulsion to talk or think about it. The resistance will cease if you make it conscious” (42).

Tolle introduces his readers to the concept of *pain-body* and how the source of pain is almost always the human mind. Therefore, he gives guidelines and strategies to dis-identify from one’s mind warning that: “if you have lived closely identified with your emotional pain-body for most of your life and the whole or a large part of your sense of self is invested in it... you have made an unhappy self out of your own pain-body and believe that this mind-made fiction is who you are” (42). He goes on to tell us how different one’s reactions are if dis-identified from the ego:

Whether you are right or wrong makes no difference to your sense of self at all, so the forcefully compulsive and deeply unconscious need to be right, which is a form of violence, will no longer be there. You can state clearly and firmly how you feel or what you think, but there will be no aggressiveness or defensiveness about it. Your sense of self is then derived from a deeper and truer place within yourself, not from the mind. Watch out for any kind of defensiveness within yourself. (44)

Tolle often talks about the ego, but, as seen previously, the term *ego* means different things to different people. When he uses it in his book though, it means “a false self, created by unconscious identification with the mind” (22). The author affirms that to the ego the present moment hardly exists, and that – for it – only past and future are considered important. Thus, the mind, used by the ego, is always concerned with keeping the past alive, and constantly projects itself into the future “to ensure its continued survival and to seek some kind of release or fulfillment there”. According to Tolle, the ego says:

‘One day when this, that, or the other happens, I am going to be ok, happy, at peace’. Even when the ego seems concerned with the present, it is not the present it sees: It misperceives the present completely because it looks at it through the eyes of the past. Or it reduces the present to a means to an end, an end that always lies in the mind-projected future. (22)

In the *Tao Te Ching*, for instance, we are told to “Master the existing present” in order to “Understand the source of all things” (Chapter 14). Not being rooted in the present is, in Tolle’s view, one of the reasons why many people live in constant fear: fear of failure, fear of loss, fear of not having enough time or money, of not being loved, of not being acknowledged, of never finding happiness, of annihilation and death. Interestingly, Tolle tells us that the fear of death, for instance, comes in many disguises and should be dealt with just as the Buddha did 2,600 years ago:

One of the most powerful spiritual practices is to meditate deeply on the mortality of physical forms, including your own. This is called: Die before you die. Go into it deeply. Your physical form is dissolving, is no more. Then a moment comes when all mind-forms or thoughts also die. Yet *you* are still there – the divine presence that you are. Radiant, fully awake. Nothing that was real died, only names, forms, and illusions. (196-97, original emphasis)

In fact, the consciousness of death is very present throughout Tolle’s discourse, especially when referring to the illusory nature of the human ego. In his words:

To the ego death is always just around the corner. In this mind-identified state, fear of death affects every aspect of your life. For example, even such a

seemingly trivial and “normal” thing as the compulsive need to be right in an argument and make the other person wrong – defending the mental position with which you have identified – is due to the fear of death. If you identify with a mental position, then if you are wrong, your mind-based sense of self is seriously threatened with annihilation. So you as the ego cannot afford to be wrong. To be wrong is to die. Wars have been fought over this, and countless relationships have broken down. (44)

Such categorical affirmations might sound exaggerated to the rational Western mind, but are certainly not so in Buddhist and even Taoist terms (*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 7). Interestingly, Tolle informs us that, while on the one hand most people are afraid of dying, others seem to be attracted to death, or at least to ‘living dangerously’. The reason why so many people are drawn to extreme sports (action and adventure sports), for instance, or why they experience a change in consciousness when faced with life-threatening situations is easy to understand in the light of his philosophy:

In life-threatening situations, the shift in consciousness from time to presence sometimes happens naturally... The reason why some people love to engage in dangerous activities such as mountain climbing, car racing, and so on, although they may not be aware of it, is that it forces them into the Now – that intensely alive state that is free of time, free of problems, free of thinking, free of the burden of the personality. Slipping away from the present moment even for a second may mean death. Unfortunately, they come to depend on a particular activity to be in that state. But you don’t need to climb the north face of the Eiger. You can enter that state now. (51)

According to Barry Glassner, author of *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (1999), the psychological condition of fear is divorced from any concrete or real, immediate danger (1999: 3). It comes in many forms: unease, worry, anxiety, nervousness, tension, dread, phobia and so on. This kind of psychological fear is always of something that might happen, not of something that is happening now. While one is in the here and now, one’s mind is in the future. And this is how anxiety is created. Therefore, Tolle reminds us: “You can always cope with the present moment, but you cannot cope with something that is only a mind projection – you cannot cope with the future” (43).

So far, all authors analysed agree, even if only conceptually, with the notion of ‘living in the present’ (Hay, 1984: 43; Robbins, 1991: 249; Chopra, 1994: 74), but it is

Tolle who really offers practical advice on how to achieve this goal: observing the thinking mind, feeling one's own presence beyond the 'thinker', acknowledging the illusion of the ego, directing the focus of our attention into the Now. All these are paralleled in Eastern (Buddhist) practice. Moreover, he clarifies that there is a great difference between what he calls 'clock time' and 'psychological time':

Clock time is not just making an appointment or planning a trip. It includes learning from the past so that we don't repeat the same mistakes over and over. Setting goals and working towards them. Predicting the future by means of patterns and laws, physical, mathematical and so on, learning from the past and taking appropriate action on the basis of our predictions. (57)

This, he says, is very different from 'psychological time':

Learn to use time in the practical aspects of your life – we may call this 'clock time' – But immediately return to present-moment awareness when those practical matters have been dealt with. In this way, there will be no buildup of 'psychological time', which is identification with the past and continuous compulsive projection into the future. (56)

Furthermore, conscious of the fact that it is not easy to 'walk your talk', Tolle encourages his readers not to yearn for happiness, seeking to become free of desire or achieving enlightenment, but to become present: "Become present. Be there as the observer of the mind. Instead of quoting the Buddha, *be* the Buddha, *be* the 'awakened one', which is what the word *buddha* means" (31, original emphasis). That is, no visualisations and no mental projections whatsoever. Although his instructions seem simple, they are most certainly not easy to follow:

Make it a habit to ask yourself: What's going on inside me at this moment? That question will point you in the right direction. But don't analyze, just watch. Focus your attention within. Feel the energy of the emotion. If there is no emotion present, take your attention more deeply into the inner energy field of your body. It is the doorway into Being (27).

Thus, Tolle, probably more than most self-help writers before him, manages to transmit in an extremely articulate way the teachings put forward by the Buddha concerning 'real happiness' beyond the limitations of our dualistic world, and beyond the fluctuations of one's emotions:

Love, joy and peace are deep states of Being, or rather three aspects of the state of inner connectedness with Being. As such, they have no opposite. This is because they arise from beyond the mind. Emotions, on the other hand, being part of the dualistic mind, are subject to the law of opposites. This simply means that you cannot have good without bad. So in the unenlightened, mind-identified condition, what is sometimes wrongly called joy is the usually short-lived pleasure side of the continuously alternating pain/pleasure cycle. Pleasure is always derived from something outside you, whereas joy arises from within. (29)

As we have seen, for people who are not used to Eastern practices such as meditation or yoga, he recommends them to just stop the mind's chatter and 'listen to the gap between thoughts': "Glimpses of love and joy or brief moments of deep peace are possible whenever a gap occurs in the stream of thought" (29). Within the self-help books of the fourth strand, the need to access these gaps and find stillness is generally emphasised as an obvious remedy for the stress and information overload of our society, which are only two of the reasons for the increase in anxiety and depression amongst more and more Americans. Tolle tells us that, unfortunately, for most people, "such gaps happen rarely and only accidentally", particularly in moments "when the mind is rendered 'speechless', sometimes triggered by great beauty, extreme physical exertion, or even great danger" (29). It is then when they find sudden inner stillness. And within that stillness "there is a subtle but intense joy, there is love, there is peace" (29).

Just like Louise Hay in *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984: 49), Tolle too speaks about the human subtle energy field (112), called the human *aura* in Hindu tradition (Totton and Jacobs, 2001: 94), and expresses his belief in reincarnation (143). And similar to Robbins' philosophy borrowed from Japanese *kaizen*, where the smallest things in life are turned into art, Tolle also speaks to us about: "The *art* of inner-body awareness [which] will develop into a completely new way of living, a state of permanent connectedness with Being, and will add a depth to your life that you have never known before" (118, emphasis added).

One of the reasons Tolle's discourse is so appealing to many Americans is, almost certainly, because of the 'Jiminy cricket'<sup>119</sup> quality it has. Devoid of advice on how to 'create' one's perfect life and achieve happiness – so typical of numerous self-help books in general – its message revolves around the opposite: that is, the importance of stopping and listening. Rather than searching for happiness outside, he clearly explains how and where to find it inside. His message sounds simple: don't be deceived by your mind and by your ego, but 'go inside' and listen to the 'gap between your thoughts' where you will find peace and joy, because it is there you will connect with your true self, a non-ego-driven consciousness. This is anything but simple to put into practice, requiring constant awareness in a state of meditation, which, for Tolle, is the ultimate happiness.

Likewise, this idea is present in the *Dhammapada*: "Let the wise man guard his thoughts, for they are difficult to perceive, very artful, and they rush wherever they list: thoughts well guarded bring happiness" (3: 4).

Even though Tolle tells us that his enlightenment experience was genuine and crucial to his spiritual development, the author explains that he did study the ancient spiritual texts years after this happened (5). Undoubtedly, this contact with the ancient teachings subsequently shaped part of his discourse. Here we can observe a clear convergence on Eastern, especially Buddhist – and to a lesser extent Hindu – discourse, while at the same time freely drawing on a wider variety of illustrative sources, finding confirmation in Jesus (9-10, 101, 105, 133), Rumi (53), Lao-Tzu (140), or excerpts from the *Bhagavad Gita* (68), the *Bible* (99, 105), the *Heart Sutra* (137), the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (142), or the *Tao Te Ching* (164).

In fact, someone suggested that *The Power of Now* should have been called: "Buddha, Vedic Scripture, Sufism, and Jesus: a Compilation".<sup>120</sup> By weaving together

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<sup>119</sup> Who does not remember Walt Disney's animation of Jiminy cricket, who, appointed by the Blue Fairy served as the official conscience for Pinocchio.

<sup>120</sup> Amazon book review of *The Power of Now*: <[http://www.amazon.com/Power-Now-Guide-Spiritual-Enlightenment/product-reviews/1577314808/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_synop?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&](http://www.amazon.com/Power-Now-Guide-Spiritual-Enlightenment/product-reviews/1577314808/ref=cm_cr_dp_synop?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&)



universal truths which find echo in ancient spiritual traditions, the author delivers his message to a readership which is very open to this kind of discourse, no doubt, thanks in part to the wide diffusion of Eastern (and other esoteric) thought in the late-20<sup>th</sup> century self-help literature landscape.

Tolle informs us that:

Your mind is an instrument, a tool. It is there to be used for a specific task, and when the task is completed, you lay it down. As it is, I would say about 80% to 90% of most people's thinking is not only repetitive and useless, but because of its dysfunctional and often negative nature, much of it is also harmful. Observe your mind and you will find this to be true. It causes a serious leakage of vital energy. (22-23)

Moreover, he claims that in our Western mind-dominated culture:

most modern art, architecture, music, and literature are devoid of beauty, of inner essence, with very few exceptions. The reason is that the people who create those things cannot – even for a moment – free themselves from their mind. So they are never in touch with that place within where true creativity and beauty arise. (98)

And, in an attempt to bring consciousness to his readers, he concludes that: “The mind left to itself creates monstrosities, and not only in art galleries. Look at our urban landscapes and industrial wastelands. No civilization has ever produced as much ugliness” (98).

Thus, he insists, one should observe and look deeply into the human condition: “Open your eyes and see the fear, the despair, the greed, and the violence that are all-pervasive. See the heinous cruelty and suffering on an unimaginable scale that humans have inflicted and continue to inflict on each other as well as on other life forms on the planet” (110).

He affirms that “That is insanity. That is unconsciousness”, and exhorts his readers not to forget to observe their minds: “Seek out the root of the insanity there”

(110) Rather than merely judging the ugliness and the pollution, he suggests one has to become aware of it first, and then act accordingly if there are any changes to be implemented. *The Power of Now*, like other self-help literature books, especially of the third and fourth strand, is expected by its author to play some kind of catalysing role in encouraging socio-political changes by enabling us to see more clearly what is wrong with the status quo and to act accordingly.

Of course, one could be tempted to argue that Tolle's book takes a self-centred, individualistic approach, since he constantly focuses on the personal, rather than on the social, political or economical levels. Nonetheless, we should take into account that, just like Chopra in *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* where the author clearly compares the individual to a cell which is part of a larger whole and which cannot harm another cell without harming itself (1994: 27), Tolle also insists that we are not alone in the world. In fact, he claims that our thoughts and our attitude in life constantly affect our surroundings and can be extremely polluting to our environment: "Your unhappiness is polluting not only your own inner being and those around you but also the collective human psyche of which you are an inseparable part" (78).

In an excerpt which resembles more Hindu than Buddhist thought, Tolle's words seem to echo Lovelock's Gaia Theory:

Everything that exists has Being, has God-essence, has some degree of consciousness. Even a stone has rudimentary consciousness; otherwise, it would not be, and its atoms and molecules would disperse. *Everything is alive*. The sun, the earth, plants, animals, humans – all are expressions of consciousness in varying degrees, consciousness manifesting as form. (99, emphasis added)<sup>121</sup>

And, just like Chopra, for whom in order to improve life on this planet, it is of utmost importance to start improving one's own life (27), Tolle observes that: "The pollution of the planet is only an outward reflection of an inner psychic pollution:

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<sup>121</sup> Numerous verses of the *Upanishads* talk about the divine nature of all things. See, for example the following excerpt from the *Katha Upanishad* (Part Two, Chapter I: 14): "As rainwater falling on a mountain peak runs down the rocks in all directions, even so he who sees the attributes as different from Brahman verily runs after them in all directions".

millions of unconscious individuals not taking responsibility of their inner space” (78). He then urges people to either stop doing what they are doing or to take action if possible: “Either stop doing what you are doing, speak to the person concerned and express fully what you feel, or drop the negativity that your mind has created around the situation and that serves no purpose whatsoever except to strengthen a false sense of self” (78).

In fact, he suggests one should be aware of one’s attitude in all areas of life, including one’s relationships, where the application of the typically Buddhist philosophy of non-judgement is particularly of vital importance. He insists that:

First you stop judging yourself; then you stop judging your partner. The greatest catalyst for change in a relationship is complete acceptance of your partner as he or she is, without needing to judge or change them in any way. That immediately takes you beyond ego. All mind games and all addictive clinging are then over. (154)

Tolle, for instance, insists: “Please, don’t just accept or reject what I am saying. Put it to the test” (124). By bringing consciousness to their readers and by denouncing the status quo, Tolle, Chopra, Robbins (each from his own perspective), and other self-help writers of the third and fourth strand, try to encourage personal change which, they hope, will then be a catalyst for change at a grander level in society, as mentioned earlier.

Possibly too difficult for most, far from the quick-fix discourse so present in our consumer society, Tolle reminds us – as most ancient spiritual traditions do – that happiness has to be found within, by connecting with our true source of Being. There, too, is love for and unity with all creation:

Love is a state of Being. Your love is not outside; it is deep within you. You can never lose it, and it cannot leave you. It is not dependent on some other body, some external form. In the stillness of your presence, you can feel your own formless and timeless reality as the unmanifested life that animates your physical form. You can then feel the same life deep within every other human and every other creature. You look beyond the veil of form and separation. This is the realization of oneness. This is love. (154-55)

In the *Isa Upanishad* we read the following lines:

The wise man beholds all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings; for that reason he does not hate anyone. To the seer, all things have verily become the Self: what delusion, what sorrow, can there be for him who beholds that oneness? (6-7)

With these lines I move on now to the last of the self-help books selected for this dissertation. It is perhaps the most specifically goal-oriented of the five books analysed here. It mainly revolves around what the mind can do in order to achieve whatever it dreams of. Because it is extremely eclectic, with numerous Eastern references, we could consider it a blend of second, third and even, to a lesser extent, fourth strand self-help characteristics; however, it probably belongs predominantly to the third strand, as we will see subsequently.

### 3.2.5 Eastern Discourse at the Service of Western Goals: *The Secret* (2006) by Rhonda Byrne

*We are in the midst of a glorious era. As we let go of limiting thoughts, we will experience humanity's true magnificence, in every area of creation*

Rhonda Byrne

Compared to the other self-help literature books analysed, *The Secret* is, no doubt, the one which has had the best marketing, which has sold most copies,<sup>122</sup> has been translated into most languages (38 in total),<sup>123</sup> and which has also been the most fiercely criticised of all the books dealt with in this dissertation.<sup>124</sup> For a self-help literature book its mainstream impact is phenomenal, with numerous sequels and imitations.<sup>125</sup>

*The Secret* (2005) appeared first in film format, and due to its spectacular success, it was decided to launch it in book format one year later. While nobody would hesitate to include *The Secret* in the self-help section of bookstores, it is not uncommon to find it upfront on book-shop shelves of the most varied types: from department stores to airports, petrol stations, and even small-town stationery shops.<sup>126</sup> As mentioned, it is mainly a self-help book of the third strand (focused on self-fulfillment) with all the typical traits of the genre taken to its maximum expression. For instance, it contains:

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<sup>122</sup> Except for Louise Hays' *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984), which has had more time to reach the figure of 35 million copies sold (see <<http://www.louisehay.com/about-louise/>> (accessed January 2009)).

<sup>123</sup> See *The Secret* official website: <<http://www.theseecret.tv/>> (accessed May, 2009).

<sup>124</sup> Although the Average Customer Review is between 5 and 4 stars, the negative criticism is particularly highlighted. See *Amazon.com* <[http://www.amazon.com/Secret-Rhonda-Byrne/dp/1582701709/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1280495526&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Secret-Rhonda-Byrne/dp/1582701709/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1280495526&sr=1-1)> (accessed May, 2009).

<sup>125</sup> For example, see a list of books on the now popular 'law of attraction' on: *Amazon.com* <[http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb\\_sb\\_noss?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=the+law+of+attraction&ih=21\\_0\\_0\\_0\\_0\\_0\\_0\\_0\\_0\\_1.94\\_1615&fsc=-1](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=the+law+of+attraction&ih=21_0_0_0_0_0_0_0_0_1.94_1615&fsc=-1)> (accessed June, 2010).

<sup>126</sup> I discovered a copy of *The Secret* in the stationary shop of Casteljaloux, a small French town of about 5,000 inhabitants in July 2010.

- a story of transformation
- twenty-four ‘experts’ giving support to often seemingly incredible affirmations
- numerous ‘stories’ (some of them are of the ‘experts’ themselves) corroborating the authoritative voices.
- easy-to-understand, positive language
- constant repetition of the same ideas from slightly different angles/perspectives
- an overwhelming emphasis on success, on prosperity and on achieving material goals
- similar emphasis on relationships, health and well-being
- suggested exercises to attain the promised results
- aphoristic quotations from well-known historical figures (the Buddha, Plato, Newton, Victor Hugo, Emerson, Jung, Churchill, Einstein, etc.) used to validate and summarise the self-help discourse
- a mixture of scientific and arguably quasi/pseudo-scientific concepts and discourse
- the use of Eastern and other esoteric sources to back up different discourses

The structure and the format of *The Secret* adhere to these self-help conventions, with an expert – in this case, twenty-four ‘experts’ – talking about different topics, followed by a series of personal stories supporting the authoritative discourses (e.g. 17, 53, 88 or 95). The twenty-four experts featured in the book, range from quantum physicists, to medical doctors, psychologists, CEOs, teachers, business advisors, personal coaches, metaphysicians, writers and lecturers.<sup>127</sup> Thus, it is not surprising to find numerous ‘scientific sounding’ claims side by side with what we would call ‘quasi-scientific’ (or even ‘pseudo-scientific’; see Radford, 2009) affirmations. Let us, for instance, take a look at endorsements such as these ones: “Quantum physics really begins to point to this discovery. It says that you can’t have a Universe without mind entering into it, and that the mind is actually shaping the very thing that is being perceived” (21), by quantum physicist Dr. Fred Alan Wolf. Or: “Our body is really the product of our thoughts. We’re beginning to understand in medical science the degree to

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<sup>127</sup> Pages 185-198 of *The Secret* show the credentials of all the experts appearing in the book.

which the nature of thoughts and emotions actually determines the physical substance and structure and function of our bodies” (125), and: “Happier thoughts lead to essentially a happier biochemistry; a happier, healthier body. Negative thoughts and stress have been shown to seriously degrade the body and the functioning of the brain, because it’s our thoughts and emotions that are continuously reassembling, reorganizing, re-creating our body” (133), by quantum physicist and public policy expert Dr. John Hagelin. Moreover, there are claims that, true as they may be, have obviously not yet been scientifically proven, such as these ones: “Thoughts are magnetic, and thoughts have a frequency. As you think thoughts, they are sent into the Universe, and they magnetically attract all like things that are on the same frequency. Everything sent out returns to the source – you” (25). This claim is the most frequently repeated, in different forms, and the most fundamental idea in the book. Also: “The Universe likes speed. Don’t delay. Don’t second guess. Don’t doubt. When the opportunity is there, when the impulse is there, when the intuitive nudge from within is there, act” (55-56). Or: “Our physiology creates disease to give us feedback, to let us know we have an imbalanced perspective, or we’re not being loving and grateful. So the body’s signs and symptoms are not something terrible” (127), by health consultant Dr. Demartini.

A careful reader needs to be aware of the myriad of not-scientifically-proven claims taken for granted and mixed in side by side with scientifically accepted ones. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, to resort to these kinds of scientific/technical-sounding sentences (which are sometimes obviously not derived from conventional science) is a widely-used resource to help to legitimise the discourse as much as possible. This is, understandably, a source of frequent criticism (Radford, 2009).

Let us now take a look at the structure of the book and its layout. *The Secret* is divided into ten chapters. The first four are basically practical and revolve around the nature of the so-called ‘secret’ and how to use it. The six remaining chapters deal with such basic every-day themes as money, relationships and health, followed by three more philosophical ones, namely: the world, oneself and life in general. Like the other self-help texts analysed, *The Secret* also offers a story of transformation on the part of the

author – Australian<sup>128</sup> television writer and producer Rhonda Byrne – who shares these words in the first lines of the book:

A year ago, my life had collapsed around me. I'd worked myself into exhaustion, my father died suddenly, and my relationships with my work colleagues and loved ones were in turmoil. Little did I know at the time, out of my greatest despair was to come the greatest gift. (ix)



Byrne tells her readers that thanks to a book<sup>129</sup> given to her by her daughter Hayley at that crucial moment of crisis in her life, she was struck by the profound message contained in it. Byrne decided to call this message the *Secret*, admitting that it is anything but new. And, according to Jerry Adler from *Newsweek*, “it was that stroke of marketing genius that turned what might have been a blip on *The Times*’s ‘Advice, How-To, Miscellaneous’ best-seller list into a publishing phenomenon” (Adler, 2007: 1). Appealing to most people’s sense of curiosity *The Secret* and its first chapter: *The Secret Revealed*, certainly manages to attract the attention of many. The author claims to have studied the lives of “the greatest people in history: Plato, Shakespeare, Newton, Hugo, Beethoven, Lincoln, Emerson, Edison, Einstein” (ix) finding out that they all had knowledge of this Secret. She also makes the claim that: “Religions, such as Hinduism, Hermetic traditions, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and civilizations, such as the ancient Babylonians and Egyptians, delivered it through their writings and stories” (4).

For twelve pages, from the Foreword, to page four, readers are kept in suspense about the nature of this Secret, when, finally, Bob Proctor, a well-known self-help writer and one of the teachers featured in the book, unveils it with these words:

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<sup>128</sup> Although the author is not of American origin, most of the ‘experts’ or ‘gurus of transformational thinking’ that appear in the book (and DVD) are, in fact, American, living in California (Wheatley, 2007).

<sup>129</sup> The book given to Rhonda Byrne by her daughter was a bestseller by Wallace Wattles called *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910).



The Secret is the Law of Attraction! Everything that's coming into your life you are attracting into your life. And it's attracted to you by virtue of the images you're holding in your mind. *It's what you are thinking*. Whatever is going on in your mind you are attracting to you. (4, original emphasis)

As with all the other books analysed here, the teachings in *The Secret*, as we have seen throughout this dissertation stand in a long tradition of American religious history since the mid- to late 19th century, and can be compared to the New Thought movements and to Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*. All share the idea that, in some sense, people create their own realities by their thoughts (Lemann, 1994: 83). Moreover, according to one critic, "If it all seems a bit familiar, that is because it is. It is just old-fashioned Eastern thought, repackaged and resold to a gullible new generation... It is just more New Age thought in drag. It is simply positive thinking in a new dress" (Muehlenberg, 2007). In fact, the belief in the power of positive thinking has a lengthy American tradition to it and only gets reinforced later by the Eastern belief that thoughts create our reality.

As mentioned, the first four chapters of the book are basically practical, revolving around the nature of the 'secret' and how to use it. In a typical American Dream-style discourse, *The Secret* is presented "as the key to unlimited happiness, health, money, relationships – whatever you most want" (Lampman, 2007), which makes the discourse seem materialistically driven at times, although eventually it touches on spiritual or religious themes, such as love as the greatest power in the universe and the importance of gratitude (Chapter 4). The six remaining chapters deal with everyday topics: money<sup>130</sup> is the first one selected, followed by relationships, health, the world, oneself and life in general.

The famous sentence by the Buddha (563 - 483 BC): "All that we are is the result of what we have thought"<sup>131</sup> (73) is the main message around which most other

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<sup>130</sup> For example, Jack Canfield, initial author and now CEO of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* enterprises, and one of the 'experts' in this chapter, explains how, when he had only a small income, he visualised a \$100,000-a-year lifestyle, and how it came about thanks to using the advice mentioned in *The Secret*.

<sup>131</sup> The first section in chapter 1 of the *Dhammapada* states: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil

messages revolve. While – as a fairly typical trait of the genre – *The Secret* is quite eclectic in the sources it uses to confirm its message, using quotations from the Buddha, Jesus, Lao-Tzu and others, the book overtly advocates for meditation, for quieting the mind, and for mastering one’s thoughts: “One way to master your mind is to learn to quiet your mind. Without exception, *every teacher in this book uses meditation as a daily practice.* (...) Meditation quiets your mind, helps you control your thoughts, and revitalizes your body” (23, emphasis added). Here, the practical benefits of meditation, rather than the philosophical, are emphasised.

Fundamental, too, is the absolute centrality given to the human subject, even in the process of acknowledging a ‘Universal Mind’:

Some of the greatest teachers and avatars described the Universe... saying that all that exists is the One Universal Mind, and there is nowhere that the One Mind is not. It exists in everything. The One Mind is all intelligence, all wisdom, and all perfection, and it is everything and everywhere at the same time. If everything is the One Universal Mind, and the whole of it exists everywhere, then it is all in You! (160 –161)

As seen, this concept is characteristic of Hinduism, where we can read in the *Upanishads*, that the abstract and impersonal Absolute or principle of reality is called *Brahman* which is understood as Cosmic Mind:

The wise man should merge his speech in his mind and his mind in his intellect. He should merge his intellect in the Cosmic Mind and the Cosmic Mind in the Tranquil Self.  
(*Katha Upanishad*, Chapter III: 13)

And also:

The mind freed from attachment to all external objects and undistracted by fresh objects attains the state of immutability. The wise realize *such a mind to be Brahman*; It is undifferentiated, birthless and non—dual.  
(*Mandukya Upanishad*, Chapter IV: 80, emphasis added)

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thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage” (*Dhammapada*, chapter 1: 1).

In Hinduism the process of realisation that the individual self (*atman*) is part of God or this Cosmic Mind (*Brahman*) generally comes about through meditation and the experience of enlightenment. That is, when *moksha* (enlightenment) or *samadhi* (divine consciousness) are achieved, the affirmation '*tat tvam asi*' literally means "I am God" (Billington, 1997: 33). In the *Upanishads* we read:

Om is the bow; the atman is the arrow; Brahman is said to be the mark. It is to be struck by an undistracted mind. Then the atman becomes one with Brahman, as the arrow with the target. (*Mundaka Upanishad*, Second Mundaka, Chapter II: 4)

In spite of the fact that *The Secret* claims to work for anyone regardless of their religious beliefs or practices (4), its worldview is, according to Passantino and others (see Radford, 2009 and Muehlenberg, 2007), contradictory to the Christian world view: "The most important error of *The Secret* is that it promotes a self-centered faith rather than a God-centered faith. The Secret is all about how to achieve your own goals; how to increase your own wealth; how to attract all good things to yourself" (Passantino, 2007). Indeed most American self-help revolves around the same ideas. Moreover, "it also assumes many other beliefs contrary to Christianity, including pantheism, the impersonal nature of God, and that the self is in some way divine" (Passantino, 2007). We see clearly that, in third and fourth strand self-help literature, often reflecting New Age discourses,<sup>132</sup> the individual identification with God is widely accepted as a truism. And in *The Secret*, unlike in many other New Age books, the word God<sup>133</sup> is frequently used:

*You are God* in a physical body. You are Spirit in the flesh. You are Eternal Life expressing itself as You. You are a cosmic being. You are all power. You are all wisdom. You are all intelligence. You are perfection. You are magnificence. You are the creator, and you are creating the creation of You on this planet. (164, emphasis added)

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<sup>132</sup> As seen in section 2.2.2, New Age ideas appeared initially in 19<sup>th</sup> century metaphysical movements, like New Thought, Transcendentalism, Mesmerism and Theosophy. But it is especially from the 1960s onward when we talk about a New Age movement, which draws inspiration from major world religions: Buddhism, Chinese folk religion, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism (Lewis, 1992: 15-18). And this, in turn, affects self-help literature, especially of the third and fourth strands.

<sup>133</sup> As well as other ones such as e.g. 'Universe' or 'stream of goodness' in chapter 7.

Already in 1986, Shirley MacLaine had expressed this ‘Hindu’ belief in her book *Out on a Limb* (which later appeared in film format),<sup>134</sup> and received considerable criticism, especially from the Christian community (see Pritchard, 2000). In the movie we can see Shirley lifting both arms to the sky, shouting ‘I am God! I am God!’, as the waves of the Pacific ocean lap at her feet. Certainly, in a society where the megaself acquires divine dimensions, such an affirmation – regardless of the truth or lack of it – could easily be misused if taken out of its spiritual context. While in Hinduism one is encouraged to pursue an ascetic, highly challenging personal journey of discovery of one’s divine nature through the practice of meditation, in numerous American self-help books the presupposition of one’s divinity is taken for granted and often – although not always – used (or misused) to tell the readers that, since they are God, they can have all their wishes granted, if only they train their minds well enough to focus on their desired goals. Byrne makes numerous statements – amongst them a quotation attributed to Winston Churchill where he affirmed that “You create your own universe as you go along” (36) – to support the idea that we as individuals are creators of our own reality.

Likewise, in section 2.2.4, I talked about the growing interest in bridging Eastern philosophy and Western science. This is also obvious in *The Secret*: “One of the most exciting things about living in this time is that the discoveries of quantum physics and new science are in total harmony with the teachings of the Secret, and with what all the great teachers have known throughout history” (156). In an attempt to wed science and spirituality, one of the ‘experts’ featured in *The Secret*, compares the discourse of a quantum physicist to that of a theologian, only to conclude that, essentially they are the same:

Most people define themselves by this finite body, but you’re not a finite body. Even under a microscope you’re an energy field. What we know about energy is this: You go to a quantum physicist and you say, “What creates the world?” And he or she will say, “Energy”. “Well, describe energy”. “Okay, it can never be created or destroyed, it always was, always has been, everything that ever existed always exists, it’s moving into form, through form and out of form”.

You go to a theologian and you ask the question, “What created the Universe?” And he or she will say, “God” “OK, describe God”. “Always was and always

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<sup>134</sup> The movie based on Shirley MacLaine’s book *Out on a Limb*, was directed by Robert Butler, in 1992.

has been, never can be created or destroyed, all that ever was, always will be, always moving into form, through form and out of form". You see, it's the same description, just different terminology. (158)

Self-help literature authors often have the tendency to make categorical statements about certain subjects in a seemingly laid-back way. This is especially evident in *The Secret*. Here, another of *The Secret*'s experts states: "Scripturally we could say that we are the image and the likeness of God. We could say we are another way that the Universe is becoming conscious of itself. We could say that we are the infinite field of unfolding possibility. All of that would be true" (164).

Similarly, the Hindu concept of *karma* – meaning 'deed' or 'action' – which typically refers to the accumulated effect of moral behaviour, and the intentions that direct it (Billington, 1997: 38), is explained in a very colloquial way in *The Secret* by self-help guru Joe Vitale with these words:

Everything that surrounds you right now in your life, including the things you're complaining about, you've attracted. Now I know at first blush that's going to be something that you hate to hear. You're going to immediately say, 'I didn't attract the car accident. I didn't attract this particular client who gives me a hard time. I didn't particularly attract the debt'. And I'm here to be a little bit in your face and to say, yes you did attract it. This is one of the hardest concepts to get, but once you've accepted it, it's life transforming. (27)

Of course, statements such as these arouse fierce criticism, because they imply that the starving people of the world or children born into war zones 'attracted' these situations. According to *The Secret*, there is no such thing as good and evil, right and wrong. As Chopra affirmed in *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (1994), there are inexorable laws of the universe working themselves out in people who create their own reality through their own thoughts and acts. Thus, one critic does not hesitate to declare:

It is no surprise... that *The Secret*'s inexorable, impersonal, self-centered focus is remarkably like the ancient Eastern law of karma, that the wheel of debt and credit turns eternally as souls progress cyclically through punishment and reward. Just like the law of gravity, the law of attraction never slips up... there are no exclusions to the law of attraction. (Passantino, 2007)

Byrne claims that the law of attraction “is a law of nature. It is impersonal and it does not see good things or bad things. It is receiving your thoughts and reflecting back to you those thoughts as your life experience. The law of attraction simply gives you whatever it is you are thinking about” (13). Clearly, in our Western society, a philosophy such as this could easily be used to promote selfish and even compassionless attitudes, implying that people who are victimised (be it through wars, starvation, rape or injustice of any kind) ‘must have wanted to be victims’. Byrne explains:

Often, when people first hear this part of the Secret they recall events in history where masses of lives were lost, and they find it incomprehensible that so many people could have attracted themselves to the event. By the law of attraction, they had to be on the same frequency as the event (...) those thoughts of fear, separation, and powerlessness, if persistent, can attract them to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. There is no other explanation for evil and human suffering to *The Secret*. Nothing can come into your existence unless you summon it through persistent thoughts. (28)

Of course, the question goes: ‘What about children who are born into unacceptable situations? Have they also attracted these into their lives?’ *The Secret* does not delve into such philosophical details, although Eastern religions, as mentioned in section 2.2.1, consider that our present situation has been affected by deeds and decisions in previous lifetimes, which could also be products of deeds and decisions from even earlier lives. Thus, everything we do and think creates *karma*, from one lifetime to the next, as a part of the cycle of cause and effect, extending from the past through the present and into the future. Here we can clearly see that the promoters of *The Secret* adopt some fundamental Eastern ideas, but without entering deeply into them in a dialectical way. The intricate philosophical reasonings behind different things and situations do not seem to bother most self-help authors. Thus, Bob Proctor, one of the ‘experts’ in *The Secret* expresses it this way: “Now if you don’t understand the law that doesn’t mean that you should reject it. You may not understand electricity and yet you enjoy the benefits of it” (21). Nevertheless, for many avid self-help literature readers, *The Secret*, doubtless, does inspire people to get away from the victim role and start creating their new lives regardless of the situation they find themselves in:

A lot of people feel like they're victims in life, and they'll often point to past events, perhaps growing up with an abusive parent or in a dysfunctional family. Most psychologists believe that about 85 percent of families are dysfunctional, so, all of a sudden you're not so unique. (165)

In Chapter 9, for instance, several of the 'experts' featured in the book and also in the movie (who are presumably 'successful' and 'happy' now) share dramatic episodes of their lives: "My parents were alcoholics. My dad abused me. My mother divorced him when I was six" (Jack Canfield). "From the age of 13 to 18 I was involved in street gangs" (John Assaraf). "I had a severe motorcycle accident" (James Arthur Ray). "I was homeless at one point in Dallas. I lived in poverty for 15 years in Houston" (Dr. Joe Vitale). "When I was a child, I had learning difficulties, and I was considered learning disabled, and I was told I would never read, write or communicate, never amount to anything, not go very far in life" (Dr. John Demartini). The conclusion being that:

That's almost everybody's story in some form or another. *So, that's just called 'so what'*. The real question is what are you going to do now? What do you choose now? Because you can either keep focusing on that, or you can focus on what you want. And when people start focusing on what they want, what they don't want falls away. (165-66, original emphasis)

Moreover, as we have seen with New Age self-help literature books, *The Secret* also focuses on the power of visualisation, making readers aware of the fact that the process of visualisation has been successfully used in sports, business, and alternative medicine to the extent of being responsible for diseased cells becoming healthy again (Chapter 7), or for athletes winning at the Olympic Games. In Chapter 4, Dr. Denis Waitley explains how he took the visualisation process from the Apollo program to institute it during the 1980's and 90's into the Olympic program, calling it 'visual motor rehearsal'. In his words:

...we took Olympic athletes and then hooked them up to sophisticated bio-feedback equipment, and had them run their event only in their mind. Incredibly, the same muscles fired in the same sequence when they were running the race in their mind, as when they were running it on the track. How could this be? Because *the mind can't distinguish* whether you're really doing it

or whether it's just a practice. I think if you've been there in the mind, you'll go there in the body. (81-2, emphasis added)

The idea that the mind cannot distinguish whether something is 'real' or 'imagined' undoubtedly echoes the Eastern concept of *maya*, or illusion (see section 2.2.1). But, again, rather than promoting detachment from this illusory reality, *The Secret* gives advice on how to create a perfect life in this world without questioning its reality. In order to do so, and always in simple, easy-to-understand language, the author encourages her readers to follow her example by acquiring new habits that will support them in making a change in their lives:

When I discovered the Secret I made a decision that I would not watch the news or read the newspapers anymore, because it did not make me feel good. The news services and the newspapers are not in any way to blame for broadcasting bad news. As a global community, we are responsible for it. We buy more newspapers when a huge drama is the headline. The news channels' ratings skyrocket when there is a national or international disaster. So the newspapers and news services give us more bad news because, as a society, that's what we are saying we want. (145)

And, as one of the 'experts' says: "So many times people say to me 'Well James, I have to be informed' Maybe you have to be informed, *but you don't have to be inundated*" (145, emphasis added).

The reasoning goes – as we have seen with previous self-help books – that it is not possible to help the world, or oneself, by focusing on the negative: "As you focus on the world's negative events, you not only add to them, but you also bring more negative things into your own life" (153). Interestingly, we are told in *The Secret* that, for instance, Mother Theresa refused to attend anti-war rallies (demonstrations) and only accepted to go to *peace* rallies (143). In this line, it is recommended to change one's attitude about worldly events:

So if you're anti-war, be pro-peace instead. If you're anti-hunger, be pro-people having more than enough to eat. If you are anti-a-particular politician, be pro-his opponent. Often elections are tipped in favour of the person that the people are really against, because he's getting all the energy and all the focus. (143)



Clearly, conventional wisdom would laugh at such a recommendation, and in fact it does. One critic expresses it with these ironic words:

It is not just my own dreams that can come true. The big issues of life are also a piece of cake. Want to end global hunger? Easy. Just think happy food thoughts. Want to end all war? Couldn't be simpler. Just feel and think peaceful thoughts. (Muehlenberg, 2007)

As glibly convincing as this comment may be, it could also be argued that numerous self-help writers emphasise the need to see the wider picture by stressing that our human potential is often underestimated in its capacity to bring about positive changes in our lives. Thus, for example, amongst a number of reliable studies on the effects of meditation there is a widely publicised study called “Effects of Group Practice of the Transcendental Meditation Program on Preventing Violent Crime in Washington, DC: Results of the National Demonstration Project, June-July 1993” (Hagelin et al., 1999: 153-201) which presents the final results of a two-month experiment in summer 1993, to reduce violent crime in Washington DC. On the basis of previous research it was hypothesized that the level of violent crime in the District of Columbia would drop significantly with the creation of a large group of people who would collectively meditate for long periods of time throughout the day (4,000 volunteers from 100 countries participated in this program). Apparently, it was predicted in advance on the basis of 48 previous studies that had already been done on a smaller scale that with such a large group there would be a 25% drop in violent crime as defined by the FBI. By the end, even the police department became a collaborator, since the results in fact showed a 25% drop in violent crime in Washington DC, as predicted.<sup>135</sup>

Thus, *The Secret* – as well as numerous other self-help literature books – informs its readers that they should not underestimate our human potential to change

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<sup>135</sup> For more information on the Meditation experiment in Washington DC see the following website: *Institute of Science Technology and Public Policy* <[http://istpp.org/crime\\_prevention/](http://istpp.org/crime_prevention/)> (accessed May, 2009).

any given situation in life. Apart from its obvious Eastern and esoteric influences, *The Secret* also utilizes popular explanations from Positive Psychology when referring to the negative impact of *fear* in our lives. Numerous self-help authors, like Hay, 1984; Dyer, 1976; Robbins, 1986 and Walsch, 1996 would agree with the following affirmations: “Think about every negative emotion there is and you will discover that every one of them is based in fear. They come from thoughts of separation and from seeing yourself as separate from another” (162). Or:

Competition is an example of separation. First, when you have thoughts of competition, it is coming from a lack mentality, as you are saying there is a limited supply. You are saying there is not enough for everybody, so we have to compete and fight to get things. When you compete you can never win, even if you think you won. (162-163)

Once more, while numerous ideas totally compatible with Eastern philosophies are used, the bottom-line in *The Secret* is that the messages are very American, especially when referring to the achievement of happiness and success; that is, it promotes: wealth, health, perfect relationships, creativity, career success and joy. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that in different parts of the book it is also made clear that happiness comes from within:

Many people in Western culture are striving for success. They want the great home, they want their businesses to work, they want all these outer things. But what we found in our research is that having these outer things does not necessarily guarantee what we really want, which is happiness. So we go for these outer things thinking they’re going to bring us happiness, but it’s backward. You need to go for the inner joy, the inner peace, the inner vision first, and then all of the outer things appear. (109-110)

Also love and gratitude are considered the basic building-blocks for a happier life: “Love everything you can. Love everyone you can. Focus only on things you love, feel love, and you will experience that love and joy coming back to you – multiplied!” (122) Or:

Start making a list of things to be grateful for. Start with that, because this shifts your energy. It starts to shift your thinking. Where before this exercise you might be focusing on what you don’t have, and you might be focusing on your complaints, and you might be focusing on whatever the problems are, when you do this exercise you start to go in a different direction. You start to be grateful

for all the things that you feel good about. Gratitude is absolutely the way to bring more into your life. (Chapter 4 of *The Secret* movie)

Certainly, people who are dealing with their everyday dramas (illness, loss of job and/or loved ones, etc.) might find solace in reading this kind of advice, if only to help them shift their attention away from the negative into a more positive and hopeful state. Yet, probably for a great many others, the type of messages promoted might be totally unacceptable from the point of view of their faith, on the one hand, or from sheer disbelief and/or difficulty of truly following the advice with persistence, on the other hand. When immersed in problems that involve a big emotional charge, it is, no doubt, extremely difficult to follow advice such as this: “Learn to become still, and to take *your attention away from what you don’t want, and all the emotional charge around it*, and place the attention on what you wish to experience (...). Energy flows where attention goes” (145, emphasis added).

As we have seen, the benefits of stillness and meditation have been widely acknowledged (see section 2.2.3), and the practice of visualisation is now even taught at university level, for practical purposes.<sup>136</sup> It is, clearly, still a minority of people who have incorporated these techniques into their daily practice in the West. As seen, if children were taught to concentrate on developing their personal gifts and qualities to improve themselves and the world, we would probably then witness a profound, positive transformation in our society. Unfortunately, for most people it requires much more than just having positive thoughts to implement real qualitative changes in their lives. In spite of the fact that Positive Psychology, as seen in section 2.2.2 – very far from any New Age popular connection (Myers and Diener, 1996: 54) – convincingly demonstrated how ‘wrong’ thinking can greatly contribute to suffering (Seligman, 1991: 3-71), it is not easy (even with professional help) to stay positive when the outside circumstances are rough and when one has no training in meditative practices. Thus, remaining just at a superficial level of ‘make-believe’, imagining oneself as a millionaire, could, obviously, lead people into delusion and frustration, if their wishes are not achieved. According to Nicholas Lemann: “For the half of the country that goes

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<sup>136</sup> See footnote 81.

to college, the higher-education system provides all those rogue American ambitions with a channel. It's for people who are able to do very well in school between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five that the United States is most truly a land of opportunity" (1994: 82). Unfortunately, not everybody has access to higher education, thus,

a small subgroup of the rest are able to play out their ambitions successfully in the more chaotic atmosphere of the marketplace – as entrepreneurs, entertainers, and, yes, salesmen. These people are on a second success ladder based on money. As a result, they don't present a pretty picture: by most people's standards they're greedy. But they have made the American idea work for them. (Lemann, 1994: 94)

As we have seen, some critics insist on the fact that *The Secret*, just as we saw with other self-help literature books reflects the general "*pick and mix approach*" that characterises New Age approaches to Asian traditions (Carrette and King, 2004: 89, emphasis added), translating only certain aspects of ancient traditions into a modern American cultural context. To the extent that this is true, it is a clear case where the adaptation of Eastern spiritual ideas and principles to suit Western needs is more than evident. Filled with positive and inspiring affirmations and exercises, it makes claims and establishes directions, certainly more aimed at fulfilling Western, than at achieving Eastern ideals (see Chapters 5 and 7). Thus, *The Secret* is yet another example of how self-help literature has appropriated numerous ideas, putting them together following the self-help conventions; that is: easy language, repetition of simple concepts, the use of stories, apparently easy-to-follow exercises, use of emotional/ sentimental language, use of scientific and pseudo/quasi scientific affirmations by different 'experts', and the use of Eastern and other esoteric sources to structure and support their different claims and overall discourse.

**CONCLUSION AND FURTHER  
RESEARCH**



Throughout this doctoral dissertation, we have seen complex dynamic discourses in which there are different degrees and kinds of convergence between Eastern spiritual heritages on the one hand, and scientific (and quasi/pseudo-scientific) discourse, on the other hand, with consumer-society materialism within a context of uncertainty and a frequent loss of 'higher' values and (or) aspirations. In more recent self-help literature these are

configured in a conventionalized narrative with formulaic aspects that demonstrate the *specific* nature of America's engagement with 'Eastern', non-Christian traditions (...) as a means to symbolically express, manage, and work through its troubled spiritual sense of self. (Iwamura, 1999: 27)

Hence, numerous self-help authors, psychologists and counsellors are key figures that represent the religious ethos of 20<sup>th</sup> century America, detailing the fears, hopes, and desires of a society in spiritual turmoil (1999: 27). They can be seen as 'priests'/'shamans', exemplars, or facilitators of a better life, replacing in some cases the evangelical preachers (who continue to flourish, too) for large numbers of Americans today.

As we have seen, Part One of this dissertation was mainly focused on defining the popular genre of self-help literature, attempting a categorisation of it into four possible strands. We saw that in 19<sup>th</sup> century American culture, under a strong puritan-religious influence, three inseparable terms were success, hard work and discipline, as expressed in *Self-Help* (Smiles, 1859); *Pushing to the Front, or Success under Difficulties* (Swett Marden 1894) or *Ragged Dick* (Alger 1868). Then, in the America of the 1930s, affected as it was by the Depression, people were more focused on avoiding poverty than on becoming wealthy. Authors like Napoleon Hill and Dale Carnegie encouraged their readers to believe in themselves again and taught them how to use the power of their minds to achieve their goals, drawing upon the ideas of New Thought, and, in the case of Hill, upon his own empirical study of five hundred highly successful people from all social origins. Around the 1950s, the puritan-religious discourse was

still prevalent, but adopting more and more scientifically oriented language. Success was still equated to material prosperity, often reached through competitiveness, aggressiveness, initiative and forcefulness. The third phase was characterised by a desire for self-fulfilment beyond the economic goal. We saw that this trend within self-help literature started with Abraham Maslow's 'self-actualization' (Maslow, 1954: 150), and I mentioned that the possible danger of it, according to some authors, was the lack of limits in the path of self-fulfilment, which could easily leave people exhausted and 'belaboured' (McGee, 2005: 12). And finally there was the path of a more spiritually-oriented self-help literature of mostly Eastern influence, which appeared at a time of many socio-political and cultural changes (1950s-1960s) and began to really flourish towards the 1990s with an ever-increasing demand for it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Part Two was devoted to the analysis of the attraction of the Far East, exploring the emergence of Eastern and other non-mainstream influences in America as a social phenomenon, from many different perspectives: social, economic, academic, philosophical, psychological and scientific. It dealt with the ever-increasing influence of such messages within the US (and the Western world in general). Here I examined the historical development and complex workings of the Far Eastern presence in a variety of American popular cultural representations. As seen, the changes of attitude towards non-Christian religions at a general level started for the most part in the 1960s, due to events which, on the one hand, embodied a clear challenge to the American Christian establishment (expressed in 'alternative' lifestyles and different kinds of spiritual experimentation), and which witnessed, on the other hand, the emergence of a new racial tolerance, thanks, in part, to the Civil Rights Movement and the 1965 Immigration Act. Clearly, the two World Wars and the Vietnam War, together with the growing impact of global capitalism and information technology were also responsible for the deep sense of loss and growing disillusionment with traditional forms of religious faith and worship. These alternative spiritualities symbolised



a new hope in the midst of a panorama of capitalist greed and spiritless technology.

In this context, we find the emergence of the “archetype of the American religious subject as a spiritual seeker who journeys in search of new religious ground for reconciliation and healing” (Iwamura, 1999: 31). At an academic level, we saw that the interest in Eastern philosophy inspired Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology, while on the other hand, Positive Psychology – also attracted by Eastern practices – started promoting scientific research with Electroencephalograms (EEGs) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRIs) on individuals with years of experience in meditation, trying, for example, to determine ‘degrees of happiness’ in relation to brain-wave activity. Furthermore, in the section entitled “Eastern Thought and Western Science: A possible Convergence?” I explored perceived similarities between some cutting-edge scientific theories and certain Eastern beliefs. I concluded this section affirming that Asian ideas and practices are, interestingly, no longer portrayed as incompatible with the West, but rather as transformative and life-enhancing influences. Thus, we witness how they increasingly enter the popular culture mainstream, where they find a growing market from minority to mass consumption. In a clear acculturation process, practices such as yoga, meditation, or tai-chi are often used for stress-management, health enhancement, or to improve concentration, rather than for their spiritual goals. The modification in people’s attitude through the achievement of inner balance, thanks to these techniques, is, no doubt, a coveted objective in our Western society.

Part Three was devoted to the analysis of the articulation of Eastern ideas and practices within some of the most well-known and widely read self-help books from the 1980s onward, in the light of their contributions to the achievement of happiness and

inner peace. Clearly, within self-help literature, it is among the third and fourth strands where the unparalleled promise of life-transformation finds hope in the 'new' ideas from the Far East and other sources. But, as seen, the self-improvement world is by no means monolithic:

For some, the highest aspiration is self-improvement, for others it is self-discovery, and for others it is self-transcendence and selfless service. By one view, the goal is to achieve our potential through conscious, disciplined action. By another, it is simply to know ourselves better, to be more conscious and more aware, less defensive and automatic in our behaviours. By yet another view, wisdom is derived from moving beyond rational intention and surrendering to an intuitive knowing that arises from within, when the mind and body quiet down. (Schwartz, 1996: 15)

We saw that while not all authors are genuinely interested in Eastern thought, it is clearly 'fashionable' to add eclectic discourses, adopting ideas, adapting, changing and transforming them to sustain different pragmatic (and not so pragmatic) needs of American individuals in contemporary society. In the case of Robbins his overall philosophy is 'maximising human potential', refusing to be trapped by social conditioning or stereotypes. As well as the use of Japanese *kaizen* as the main support of his approach, we have argued that the attention to detail in step-by-step self-improvement connects him to the tradition of Benjamin Franklin and, in contemporary times, to Maslow's philosophy of self-actualization. The main differences between Robbins' use of *kaizen* and its application in Japan derive from their cultural contexts and social constraints. For Robbins, the individual and his/her potential is the centre of focus, reflecting a fundamental tradition of American society and values, whether in the pursuit of personal goals or of those involving others: it is the individual who fuels transformation. The drive for perfection in Japanese society can be seen as more constrained, more socially motivated by a need for acceptance and recognition within a

social structure of hierarchical relationships still reflecting to some extent the underlying Confucian tradition.

In the case of Byrne, the philosophy of *The Secret* can be seen as partly Eastern, when referring to the law of attraction and the fact that thoughts create our reality, or to the idea that human beings are a manifestation of God (*Atman-Brahman*), but they all form part of a discourse that is totally harnessed to Western interests (health, wealth, relationships, career), which is fundamentally different from the application of the same ideas in Hinduism and in Buddhism. Clearly, the representations that have increasingly entered American popular cultural consciousness make it often very difficult for the average non-expert reader to question the authoritative discourses when presented in cleverly repackaged ways.<sup>137</sup> The basic message in *The Secret* seems to be that if you are able to manifest anything you want through the power of your thoughts and the law of attraction, you should do so. Here we have the individual at play in the material world. The author gives great importance to the power of the mind as a precious tool to achieve whatever goals one is after: “There isn’t a single thing that you cannot do with this knowledge. It doesn’t matter who you are or where you are, the Secret can give you whatever you want” (Byrne, 2006: xi). Byrne takes the first affirmation of the *Dhammapada*, “All that we are is the result of what we have thought” and does with it what the Buddha would clearly not have wanted. That is, to take the idea in order to fuel the American Dream philosophy. As we have seen, the importance of the power of the mind to achieve any desired goal is ever-present, not only in American self-help literature, but, also as a national ethos of the United States: “In America nothing is more appealing than the idea (which sounds like a joke to most people from other

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<sup>137</sup> This is, in fact, no different from our uncritical acceptance of ‘representations’ from any Western ‘authority’, be it scientist, doctor, academic, or other ‘expert’.

countries) that anyone, at any point in life, can reinvent himself psychologically and socio-economically, simply by exercising mind-power” (Lemann, 1994: 82-83). Nevertheless, counterbalancing the external goals, *The Secret*, and all the ‘experts’ in it, agree with the fact that real happiness is found within.

In the case of Hay, her adaptation of Eastern influence (mainly via New Thought, the Church of Religious Science, and the practice of Transcendental Meditation) is much more subtle. In her book she encourages her readers to observe their thoughts, not so much in order to detach themselves from the ego, but in order to observe repeated patterns of negative thought so as to correct them, with the aim of creating happiness and psychological and physical well-being in one’s life. In alignment with this, she recommends the practice of meditation (as well as yoga, tai-chi or martial arts) in order to find peace of mind and inner balance. Moreover, mixed in with occasional references to her beliefs (in reincarnation, in choosing one’s parents, in creating our reality with our thoughts), beliefs which she would have encountered directly in the Church of Religious Science, her constant message of love and compassion (and her use of affirmations built upon them) can also be seen as profoundly Christian.

Chopra’s *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* and Tolle’s *The Power of Now* are clearly more based on Eastern philosophical thought (or, in the case of Tolle, totally and absolutely parallel to it), and, therefore, their messages are somehow more ‘true to the source’ – Hinduism for Chopra and Buddhism for Tolle. We have seen how, by the choice of the word ‘success’ in Chopra’s title, and also by the extremely prosperity-oriented message throughout the book, the author purposefully adapted the Hindu messages to an American context, undoubtedly in need of a more “spiritual approach to success and affluence” (1994: 2), while at the same time developing the very concept of success as something far deeper than the material, and unrelated to the ego, in line with his Hindu ethos. In this sense we can say that, in this book, he achieves his purpose of approximating Eastern and Western cultures.

On the other hand, Tolle, who claims to have gone through an experience of enlightenment prior to even knowing what this meant, and also before having read the ancient Eastern texts, seems simply to inform his readers about the importance of living in the present, of observing one's mind and one's reactions, in order to distinguish the ego from the true Self. He uses a clearly New Age self-help style, where the eclectic utilisation of various authoritative sources (*Bible, Bhagavad Gita, Tao Te Ching, Heart Sutra*) is employed not only to validate his own discourse, but also to affirm that in his view all spiritual belief systems are essentially the same. Moreover, Tolle is not only aware of the Buddhist parallels to his affirmation that our thoughts create our reality, but also in line with Buddhism and Hinduism he sees the ego-based mind as a great 'trickster' to be careful of, and concentrates his efforts on raising our awareness as to the dangers of feeling identified with one's mind.

Of the five writers under analysis here, only Chopra and Tolle talk about one of the most important Buddhist and Hindu tenets, namely, detachment from the illusory world.<sup>138</sup> For this reason, and for their genuine promotion of Eastern ideas and practices, both authors could well be considered what Iwamura calls 'Oriental Monk icons'. In her words:

The Oriental Monk has enjoyed a long and prominent sojourn in the realm of American popular culture. We have encountered him under different names and guises: as Mahatma Gandhi and as D. T. Suzuki; as the Vietnamese Buddhist monk consumed in flames; as the Beatles' guru, the Maharishi Mahesh; as *Kung Fu's* Kwai Chang Caine and as Mr. Miyagi in the *Karate Kid*; as Deepak Chopra and, as well, as the Dalai Lama. Although the Oriental Monk appears in these various forms throughout American pop culture, we are always able to recognize him as the representative of an alternative spirituality that draws from the ancient wellsprings of "Eastern" civilization and culture. (Iwamura, 1999: 26)

In this dissertation I have followed the process of diffusion of Eastern beliefs and practices, showing that it is occurring not only in self-help literature, but also in

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<sup>138</sup> Detachment as expressed in the *Dhammapada*: "Him I call indeed a Brahmana (a venerable, seeker of truth) who fosters no desires for this world or for the next, has no inclinations, and is unshackled" (*Dhammapada*, chapter 26: 28).

very many different areas of American life, with a growing support of segments of the scientific community, pragmatically interested in the possible benefits offered (Eliot, 2006: 8; Gelderloos et al., 1990: 177). After a careful research of the Eastern origin of some of the principal ideas within the self-help literature books analysed, the thesis I have argued is that, *wherever there has been a penetration of Eastern ideas and practices, there have always been different degrees of adaptation to mainstream Western needs*. As seen, all the books have drawn on, or at least paralleled, important aspects of Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism, emphasising different aspects of these perennial philosophies in order to develop their own discourses. Generally, each writer chooses to emphasise the parts taken from Eastern discourses in different ways. In spite of the seeming materialistically oriented messages of some of the books analysed, the bottom line of each of them is that real happiness can only be found within. All of the books recommend some form of meditation, and in most of them the authors claim to be meditators themselves. Besides the overwhelming emphasis on the power of the mind, all writers believe in the ancient Eastern conviction that everything is made up of ‘energy’, that all things are interconnected in our universe, and that behind the physical world there seems to be a completely non-physical realm called consciousness (Arntz, 2005: 42). Just as Lovelock does in his Gaia Theory, self-help literature authors such as Chopra, Tolle and Robbins also warn us that, since we are all connected, whatever we do to others or to our planet, we also do to ourselves. For this reason, I mentioned that numerous self-help books, especially of the third and fourth strand, are seen by their authors as able to play a catalysing role in encouraging socio-political changes, by enabling us to see more clearly what is wrong with the status quo and act accordingly.

As a researcher who has read hundreds of self-help books over a period of about twenty-five years, I have found that many of them can often be thought-provoking and highly inspirational, as I hope to have shown throughout these pages. While traditionally American, one significant trend of this popular genre is its expansion

overseas, to Europe, South America, Canada, and other areas of the globe.<sup>139</sup> The ever-increasing production of non-US self-help literature shows that this genre has been widely exported, and with it so have its US American cultural codes of positive thinking and self-fulfillment through a striving for success and happiness based upon a process of self-improvement. The extent to which these American codes are taken on board with an American cultural ethos and goals, or whether they go through a process of acculturation in different parts of the world is an interesting open question, deserving further research within a paradigm of Cultural Studies dealing with the cross-cultural transmission of ideas, values and practices.

What new directions, if any, is self-help literature taking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? First of all, there is an ever-increasing representation of social minorities among its authors: women, racial and homosexual minorities and old people. Secondly, there is a growing tendency to convert self-help books into movie format<sup>140</sup> following a general trend that favours cinematic means in our audiovisual culture, catering, thus, for a wider target audience. Nevertheless, all in all, the outlook of the self-help genre points to a continuation of those trends from the 90s and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century examined in this dissertation.

What is also obvious, from what we have seen in this doctoral dissertation, is that the self-help genre has many supporters and many detractors. While criticised and looked down upon by a sector of the critics as “psycho-babble” only fit for “simple-minded or deluded” (Wheatley, 2007), self-help books differ immensely from one to another, and should, therefore, not be all (pre-)judged in the same way. I have provided

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<sup>139</sup> There are now self-help books in India, Russia and Japan. See the following websites: *Hinduwebsite* <<http://www.hinduwebsite.com/books/index.asp>> or *The Hindu* <<http://www.hindu.com/2010/12/23/stories/2010122362520800.htm>>; *The Independent* <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/murakami-obama-and-self-help-top-japan-bestselling-books-list-1854852.html>>, *Amazon.co.uk*, *Russian Self-help* <[http://www.amazon.co.uk/self-help-Russian-Books/s?ie=UTF8&keywords=Self-Help&rh=n%3A266239%2Ck%3ASelf-Help%2Cp\\_n\\_feature\\_browse-bin%3A40\\_0536011&page=1](http://www.amazon.co.uk/self-help-Russian-Books/s?ie=UTF8&keywords=Self-Help&rh=n%3A266239%2Ck%3ASelf-Help%2Cp_n_feature_browse-bin%3A40_0536011&page=1)> (accessed December, 2010).

<sup>140</sup> *The Secret* (2006) and *What the Bleep Do We Know* (2004) are exceptions since they started as movies and were turned into books subsequently. Nonetheless, examples of self-help books that have been turned into movies are: *You Can Heal Your Life* (2007) and *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (2007).

evidence that the appeal for this kind of literature in a context of economic crisis, fewer employment opportunities and stagnant wages is clearly understandable for several reasons: it offers some kind of spiritual security to a public that is already open to this kind of discourse, and who would probably not fully understand the ancient Hindu and Buddhist texts often referred to in the books; it also offers other obvious advantages, such as its low cost, informal, uncomplicated language and easy accessibility; as well as its role, accepted more and more amongst certain professional circles, as a possible ‘mild’ substitute for psychotherapy (Coleman and Ganong, 1987: 61-65). Yet, as I tried to highlight, it requires much more than just having positive thoughts to implement real qualitative changes in people’s lives. The advice – often taken from ancient (not always necessarily Eastern) sources – about the benefits of stillness and meditation, about focusing on the positive rather than on the negative, about learning to observe one’s thoughts and reactions, about not judging or condemning, about being respectful to life, and more connected to nature, can certainly be extremely inspiring and helpful. Echoing the Hindu *Upanishads* where mind, body and spirit are tightly interconnected,<sup>141</sup> the self-help books analysed use what they call a “holistic approach” when dealing with an issue: “The holistic philosophy is to nurture and nourish the entire being – the Body, the Mind, and the Spirit. If we ignore one of these areas, we are incomplete; we lack wholeness” (Hay, 1984: 88). It is, therefore, also a personal choice to focus on the inspiring nature of the messages of these books or just on the seemingly ego-centred, worldly objectives.

I agree with the self-help authors (Hay, 1984; Tolle, 1999) who do not hesitate to inform their readers that it would be extremely beneficial to implement some of the suggested practices in schools: to promote personal awareness, concentration, and personal development, based on awakening children’s inherent qualities, and developing their love and respect for themselves and for the world around them. We would probably witness a very different scene in the educational system. There would, no doubt, be more hope and satisfaction, not only from the children’s point of view, but

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<sup>141</sup> See, for instance, this revealing excerpt of the *Katha Upanishad*: “Know the atman to be the master of the chariot; the body, the chariot; the intellect, the charioteer; and the mind, the reins. (*Katha Upanishad*, Part One, Chapter III: 3).



also from the point of view of the teachers, often victims of a competitive, results-oriented, stressful system, which, more often than not, produces deplorable outcomes. To my mind come the lines of Eckhart Tolle, who with these simple words expresses the benefits of meditation or of 'being present' as one of the most powerful transformational tools we could offer our children:

The process that I have just described is profoundly powerful yet simple. It could be taught to a child, and hopefully one day it will be one of the first things children learn in school. Once you have understood the basic principle of being present as the watcher of what happens inside you – and you 'understand' it by experiencing it – you have at your disposal the most potent transformational tool. (1999: 41)

Finally, this thesis opens up new areas for further analysis. I admit that it has been an extremely ambitious project, which could easily have filled an encyclopaedia of several volumes. My intention, as stated in the Introduction, has mainly been to set the foundations for, and to inspire, future research on the topic of self-help, since this is a growing world-wide phenomenon, by no means confined to the US. Hopefully, the present dissertation on American self-help literature and its Eastern and other influences, will also shed some light on the process of penetration, adaptation and diffusion of ideas and practices across cultures, serving as a valuable Cultural Studies document on a topic which is, so far, still marginal and almost totally unexplored in academia. It has, I think, been a perfect 'excuse' for opening up numerous gaps and silences, since the value of a Cultural Studies approach "is not so much in the contribution it makes to the interpretation of the text itself but in how it encourages questions about the social, political, economic and cultural world in which the text is produced" (Walton 2008: 218).

There are many possible future projects within the area of self-help literature, which could shed more light on this popular genre from an academic perspective. One of them would be the compilation of a list of self-help books organised by topic areas, that would, undoubtedly, be an invaluable aid, not only for a better understanding of the scope and depth of America's self-help ethos but also as a useful 'readers' guide' to this kind of popular genre. Another project which I consider also deserves serious research

is the interesting history of the role of women within the first strand of self-help literature, and the myth of the self-made man. Here we would discover that this myth heavily relied “on the suppression of women’s ambitions for the sake of those of their husbands and children” (McGee, 2005: 37). To put this in context, according to historian Mary P. Ryan, the actual labour and material sacrifices of numerous mothers and sisters supported their sons and brothers in their aspirations of upward mobility. She tells us that it was not uncommon, for instance, for 19<sup>th</sup> century women to pool their resources in order to support the businesses and/or educational efforts of sons, brothers, and sometimes husbands (1981: 166, 168). To look more deeply into the personal stories of different, so-called self-made men and their families, would, undoubtedly, also be a very valuable research from a Cultural Studies perspective. Other projects could delve further and deeper, from different cultural perspectives, into the works (both non-fiction and fiction) of some of the authors analysed, as well as into the publications of many others that have not been included in this dissertation. This prospect opens a mine of research possibilities. From an ethical/psychological perspective the study of different self-help books in their cultural context would also shed more light on understanding humanity’s inherent search for happiness, and the different forms that are ‘empowered’ for that purpose in different cultures and at different times.

Finally, taking into account that, “the reason for analyzing popular culture is not to assess its value but, in a more anthropological sense, its *significance*”. (Lewis, 2001: 320), I hope to have contributed academically towards setting a solid base for possible future research in self-help literature within the area of Cultural Studies, through my analysis of the complexity and breadth of the self-help literature genre, as well as its importance and significance within American culture.



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