

# Self Inquiry

Qualitative Research as  
Spiritual Practice – Spiritual  
Practice as Qualitative  
Research.

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# Introduction

Self inquiry is a subject which I am passionate about. It has interested me as a therapist, a spiritual seeker, and as a qualitative researcher for many years. My current doctoral studies draw deeply on this stream. This paper sets out some of my ideas. I have lectured the Transpersonal Research Masters students at CCPE in since 2013 on this subject and I am pleased to commend this reflexive practice to the qualitative research community.

## Preliminary thoughts

*Whoever knows himself knows his Lord.*

Ibn Arabi (Corbin 1998).

Self inquiry is essentially a sacred practice. It is as old as human consciousness. Literally, exploring and uncovering the self - going within in order to understand life, and staying within in order to expand one's understanding of the life that is found. Most if not all the world's religions have a process of self inquiry at their root. Sometimes the practitioner of the religion is encouraged to conduct their own self inquiry in order to reach God, sometimes the practitioner is guided towards the reported experience of another who undertook the self inquiry and reported the results. But self inquiry is essentially a sacred undertaking.

Although religious and spiritual practice has been the crucible for deep self inquiry through the millennia, artistic and creative practices have also drawn on the tradition of self inquiry. Psychotherapy is intimately about self inquiry. Now, a significant stream of self inquiry is developing in qualitative research practice. It is my proposition that this is the descendant of and part of the current expression of the wisdom

traditions. Accordingly we may draw upon those traditions to understand how we may best proceed in qualitative research.

When we research we are asking questions about being (ontological questions), and we are asking questions about the universe, the cosmos. Our arising curiosity and love for that cosmos is what drives our questioning – we long to know this beautiful and baffling universe more fully, as we long to know our beautiful and baffling lover more fully – we become deeply engaged, drawn in, hypnotized by the desire to know. This longing to know links the mind and the heart. This can be conceived either dualistically, as me wanting to know about ‘that’ or ‘you’ or ‘it’, or as the definition of self and consciousness widens through spiritual practice it can be a longing to know more about the cosmos from a sense of oneness.

*I was a hidden treasure and I so longed to be known that I created creation in order that I could be known.*

(Hadith of the Prophet).

I am offering you the concept of your research being sacred, because it arises from the source of longing, which is the divine longing to know itself, through itself.

Thus all inquiry can be seen as the divine being gazing at itself, with wonder, and what we are doing as researchers is serving this process.

## Part I

### Serving the Divine Self Inquiry:

- i) through spiritual practice
- ii) through psychotherapy
- iii) through qualitative research

#### i) serving through Spiritual Practice

*The Treasury of the heart is the  
library of god.*

*Ibn Arabi (The Kernel of the Kernel)*

Many forms of spiritual practice are part of this tradition in one way or another.

Ramana Maharshi is a teacher from the vedantic tradition, who encourages the question ‘who am I?’ to be posed over and over, to encourage the freeing of consciousness. The self is constant and unremitting awareness, and continued focus on the awareness itself, on the self, brings freedom. He urges disciples to ask, scrutinize and investigate their thoughts, wondering ‘to whom these thoughts occur’

*‘Whatever the means adopted you must at  
last return to the self so why not abide as the  
self here and now what is not permanent is  
not worth striving for. by whatever means  
adopted you are the Self you are already  
that’*

*Ramana Maharishi*

In contemplative practice we settle our attention under, or beyond, the ‘self’ which we think we know – in mindfulness practice we observe without identifying, in centering prayer (see eg Borgeault, 2004) and other kenotic practices we simply release the identifications and return straight to the ground of being. These practices are self inquiry.

*This moment, this love comes to rest in us,  
many beings in one being.  
In one wheat grain a thousand sheaf stacks.  
Inside the needle’s eye, a turning night of  
stars*

*Rumi  
(Trans. C.Barks)*

ii) serving through Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy can be seen as assisted self inquiry.

The element of self inquiry in psychotherapy is present almost by definition – the client comes to therapy in order to inquire in to themselves, and as therapists we put ourselves in service of that process.

Some of the ways self inquiry is present in psychotherapy are:-

- Exploration of the client's known self
- Exploration of what the client does not yet know about themselves
- Exploration of the therapist's self – countertransference and consciousness
- Exploration of the field between the therapist and client

The exploration which we undertake with our client can be characterized as being sacred in nature .

A central aspect of the CCPE model is the exploration of self (Hamilton, 2013). We ask ourselves who this person is – what is their unique treasure. We contextualize, metaphorically, the defenses they have as veils over this beautiful treasure, and we serve in helping the client to move beyond their veils and to reveal more and more clearly that which is trying to shine through.

John Rowan has attempted to divide the therapists use of self in to three levels – the instrumental, the relational and the transpersonal (Rowan, J. (2002)). This is a useful taxonomy and helps to 'tidy up' our thinking about the self in psychotherapy through the different modalities, but it is also possible to see psychotherapy as being in service to the divine self inquiry through all these Rowan levels when viewed through the lens of the CCPE model. Although a fuller exploration of this is beyond the scope of this paper, it can be seen that self inquiry can be held to be a paradigm – a lens through which the world can be viewed – rather than simply a discrete activity. This insight is directly transferable to the exploration of self inquiry in research.

### iii) serving through research

Research is disciplined inquiry in to what is so. The researcher explores the universe (the creation) and seeks to understand and explain the phenomena encountered. There is no limit to the phenomena which may be explored by the researcher, and research methods have been evolving

to meet the challenge of studying aspects of the cosmos which have traditionally been hard to know. Whether you are researching an archetype, an experience, a type of therapeutic intervention, a selection of stories about a certain circumstance – whatever you are researching, you can approach your research as a sacred endeavor, one imbued with the dignity of your spiritual attention. This will transform your research in to an offering from your heart.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) emphasize the presence and interpretive influence of the researcher

‘Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive material practices which make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world in to a series of representations including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level qualitative research evolves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’

## Part II Self Inquiry in Qualitative Research

The self may be recruited in to the research process through

1. Reflexive practice (see eg Etherington, 2004)
2. Using the self as the data source - Research methods which focus on self as object of inquiry.

All qualitative research involves reflexive practice, and certain methods (such as heuristic research, intuitive inquiry, organic research) involve reflexive practice and also use of self as object of inquiry.

### a) Reflexive practice

All qualitative work requires good use of reflexive practice. The presence and influence of the researcher is always felt and present and affects the research process and findings. Cultural, social, personal factors come in to the work. Age, gender, ability, sex, ethnicity, education, personal history - all these factors influence the lens through which the researcher perceives their work. Furthermore, we can see that there is an 'inner' lens too, of nature, personality structure, soul nature.

Reflexive practice is designed not to eliminate these factors but to notice them and to be transparent about them.

## Procedures for Reflexivity

Keep a research journal – this is an indispensable tool for a qualitative researcher. There are many ways to structure your reflexive practice (see for example Harper (2005), Etherington (2004), Marshall (2006)).

- Set aside a self inquiry time each day, preferably in the evening, and commit to it for the whole time you are doing your research. Have a notebook for recording your findings.
- Ask yourself 'what happened in my research today?'
- 'What struck me most in my research today'
- "What feels most uncomfortable or most enlivening in my research today'  
Sit with the discomfort and allow it to lead you to deeper places in yourself. See what is touched and stirred. Allow it to work on you.
- Once a week schedule a longer session and count up how often you sat with uncomfortable things in the week and how often with comfortable. Sit with the opposite. Use the expanded once weekly time to bring your body and creativity to the process. Dance, sing, paint, write.

## b) Self as data-source for inquiry

The research methods which specifically use the self as the object of the

inquiry, the data source, have been covered in other lectures in this series. When using these research methods you will need to apply their particular procedures, as well as having a sound reflexive practice in your work. When adopting a self inquiry method research that method and explore and follow the procedures set out for that method. Document and record your process every step of the way. When mining the self for data for a disciplined inquiry you are opening yourself up, willingly, to scrutiny not just by yourself, but by the community of researchers. Keep a notebook.

- heuristic (Moustakas, 1990)
- cooperative (Heron, 2003)
- organic (Clements, Ettlign, Jennett and Shields, (1998), Braud, (2004), Clements (2011))
- intuitive (Anderson, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2011)
- autoethnographic
- integral (Braud, 1998, 2011).

In self inquiry the requirement to be rigorous can be understood in terms of William James' (1912) definition of 'radical empiricism' in which he says

*“To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit in to its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced”  
(page 22)*

## Alchemical Inquiry as Self Inquiry



Do not ignore the tools set out over millennia for engaging in proper, rigorous, productive and effective self inquiry. By alerting you in this paper to the context within which self inquiry is to be understood – as a sacred process with an ancient and noble history – I am inviting you to mine the wisdom traditions for instructions on how to proceed. For example, the alchemists have set out clear instructions about how to approach the work:

*"O all ye seekers after this Art, ye can reach  
no useful result without a patient, laborious  
and solicitous soul, preserving courage and  
continuous regimen"*

*Waite trans. Turba philosophorum  
pg 127 quoted in Edinger (1985)*

The alchemical tradition is a rich symbolic journey through the self, using the metaphor of inquiry, the laboratory. The developing research approach of Alchemical Hermeneutics takes this exploration further into the field of disciplined inquiry (Romanyshyn, 2013). This is covered further in the lecture on Organic Inquiry (Baldock, 2015).

Also see Appendix 1 to these lecture notes, where the Judeo-Christian scriptures have been drawn on for guidance on how to work in the spirit of sacredness with disciplined inquiry. By opening yourself to the sources which are available particularly in the wisdom traditions, you will find a well trodden creative path to guide you in self inquiry practice.

For a more contemporary academic exploration of procedures for self inquiry practice, Rosemarie Anderson and William Braud have developed a strong practice of researcher involvement in their work at Sofia University. Anderson summarizes their practices (Anderson 2011):-

- **working with intention** (awareness and deliberate framing of your intentions)
- **quieting and slowing** (reducing distractions, drawing the attention within, allow fuller observation)
- **working with attention** (altering the focal depth, developing witnessing consciousness eg Byron Katie, be willing to see different channels of data and information coming to you)
- **auditory skills** (inner and outer sound)
- **visual skills, imagery, creative imagination** (seeking imagery and symbolism in the inner and outer world, being able to work with all imagery as it arises, allowing oneself to be carried back to source by the image )
- **kinesthetic skills** (practicing knowing, remembering and expressing what is known through movement, gross and subtle including dance, walking)
- **proprioceptive skills** (practice in identifying and attending to subtle visceral and muscular sensations, felt senses, feelings, knowing through the body)
- **direct knowing intuition, empathic identification** (knowing through presence, empathy, sympathy, compassion, love, participation, sympathetic resonance, empathic identification parapsychological process. Countertransference)
- **accessing unconscious processes and materials** (reducing egoic control, tacit knowing, attention to vehicles that carry previously unconscious information, identifying unconscious tendencies)
- **play and creative arts** (fostering beginners mind, excitement, novelty, new combinations, play, joy, enthusiasm and exploration).

And to this list I would add....

- **Stalk auspicious bewilderment** Rosemarie Anderson (2011) uses the phrase ‘auspicious bewilderment’ to indicate a state she encounters prior to new illumination coming through to her. I recommend that you use this as a watchword. To get to the point of not knowing is the harbinger of knowing on the path of self inquiry (as it is in psychotherapy). Until you get to that point you remain with what is known and no addition to knowledge is possible.

*‘weeks even months of feeling bewildered*

*are not unusual for the intuitive inquirer. While bewildered keep records, stay with the process as it is. If it gets to be too much rest, sleep, take a break, or gently put the project on the back burner for a while. Return to the project again when feeling refreshed’.*

*Anderson (2011)*

## Part III

# Humility, Validity and Rigor.

How can the researcher, the therapist and the spiritual practitioner guard against narcissism, solipsism and delusion in self inquiry? This is equally important as all aspects of self inquiry set out above are considered (spiritual practice, psychotherapy, and qualitative research).

- In spiritual practice the injunction to keep going and not identify with what you have found in your self is a primary tool in this endeavor.
- In psychotherapy the practice of relationship comes to the forefront of the work, so that the heart is engaged. As therapists we open ourselves to what arises. We have set up strong ethical injunctions to keep our work adequately supervised and overseen.
- In disciplined inquiry we guard against narcissism by adopting rigorous procedures, and clear and conscious criteria for assessing the validity of our work.

### i) Triangulation

Some ideas for triangulating self inquiry are using alchemical emblem sets to compare with your imagery, referring to myth and scripture for descriptions of self transformation process, obtaining data from other researchers, comparing your findings to other scholarly works, using psychotherapy and supervision (supervision is a vital tool for rigor in therapeutic work) and tutorial sessions. Have humility and you will find ways to bring your self inquiry out in to relationship with others.

## ii) Persistence

In self inquiry it is important to be consistent, persistent and not to curtail your engagement prematurely. As in spiritual practice we return to our practice once or twice a day whether we feel like it or not, and in psychotherapy we encourage our client to attend every week, or twice a week at set times, and to come even when they don't feel like it, in research based on self inquiry you need to engage with it regularly, often, and whether you want to or not. This brings validity to the work – it allows you to begin to track states, emotions and experiences which might deepen and challenge your initial observations. It allows you to undertake a procedure that might be called (elsewhere in the disciplined inquiry universe) the analysis of outliers – what is this bit of data which does not seem to fit? What might it mean?

## iii) Record keeping

Much good self inquiry is blighted with incomplete record keeping. This is a laborious and meticulous process, but it is essential in order to turn your experience in to research which you can present in an academic forum. Keep a research journal, make voice recordings, draw, make collages, record how you experience dancing, moving, embodiment. If embodied experience forms a significant part of your research find ways to make recordings of this experience such as embodied writing)

## iv) Bookend your work

There will come a point in your research when you have finished gathering your data (although the reflexive procedures will continue). This might (it probably will) seem disappointing and artificial, but it will come. Stop at this point. Rigor in research means concluding the experiment. Be aware when you start of when you will stop – this will announce to your consciousness how long it has got to do the work and will help the work shape itself. Make sure you stop long enough in advance of your dissertation deadline to incubate your data and write your work up.

## v) Adopting Appropriate Validity Criteria

How can you and your readers assess the validity of your self inquiry? In qualitative research it is the responsibility of the researcher to define and meet validity criteria for the research, such as credibility, transferability, dependability and credibility (see Guba & Lincoln, 2005). William Braud has explored issues of validity extensively, (see for example Braud 1998, 2011). He suggests adding validity criteria based on the transformative effect of the research on the participants, the reader, and the researcher.

# Conclusion

Self inquiry is rooted in the wisdom traditions and is a sacred practice. It needs to be approached with an attitude of humility and devotion. Adopting such a position to your self inquiry will release it in to the realm of spiritual inquiry and free your research to be undertaken in a spirit of sacrifice, love, and wonder. It is not the 'easy' option, but offers the potential for the deepest transformative effect on you the researcher, your co researchers and on those who encounter your work. Self inquiry is not just a bundle of research methods which focus on mining data from the self, but it is a practice for qualitative researchers which deepens a reflexive approach to research and enhances - arguably even defines - the transpersonal paradigm in disciplined inquiry.

*'when it is over I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world in to  
my arms.'*

*From 'When Death Comes' by Mary Oliver.*

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## Appendix 1

# The Ten Commandments as pointers to the inner attitude needed for self inquiry

Another great source of guidance for inner work and Self Inquiry which stands concealed in plain light is the Ten Commandments as set out in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. The canonical church teachings often offer these as rules for accessing and pleasing an outer, dualistic God, but a closer reading reveals their applicability to Self Inquiry, the ground rules for successful completion of the opus. (See for example Edinger 1986)

*1. You shall have no other gods except me.* At a psychological level this can be thought to refer to the Self, the fundamental feature of which is that it is integrated, and whole. It is the All. In research using Self Inquiry we can understand this as an injunction to obey that which arises from the centre, to be rigorous in our integrity and authenticity in approaching our research.

*2. You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them.* Psychologically this can refer to the tendency to separate and worship one part of the psyche at the expense of the whole (Edinger, 1986). Spiritually perhaps it refers to a tendency to want to split the divine in to something we can manage or understand. In research this refers to the need to question and move on from any proposition set out, questioning and challenging as we go.

*3. You shall not utter the name of Yahweh your God to misuse it, for Yahweh will not leave unpunished the man who utters his name to misuse it.* Psychologically

this can refer to the false claim that one is whole or in some way 'enlightened', as Edinger (1986) says 'the presumptuous assumption that one is operating out of wholeness'. In Self Inquiry as a research method

this could be understood to be a warning against assuming a piece of content is arising from your Self, when in fact it is unverified by inner process and may in fact be tinged with shadow, with egoic material.

4. *Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy as Yahweh your God has commanded you For six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath for Yahweh your God...For in six days yahweh made the heavens and the earth and the sea and al that these hold, but on the seventh day he rested; that is why Yahweh has blessed the sabbath day and made it sacred.* The advice for Self Inquirers here is clear - take time away from your labours. The importance of incubation is stressed by many writers on the research methods which most use Self Inquiry (Moustakas (1990), Anderson eg 1998, 2011)). At the level of inner work, there are cycles of action and rest.

5. *Honour your father and mother, as Yahweh your God has commanded you, so that you may have long life and may prosper in the land that Yahweh your God gives to you.* Respect your sources. That which sources you and resources you. Take care of your body, your environment, and the shoulders of the giants on which you are standing. And do so with an attitude of humility.

6. *You shall not kill.* Psychologically this injunction requires us to allow unconscious contents to emerge and not be repressed. In research it refers to the same situation - allow what is difficult, consider your outliers [quote].

7. *You shall not commit adultery.* This means to ensure that what emerges is not adulterated, but psychologically this relates to material which proceeds from the conjunctio, that which follows union or marriage at an inner level. Edinger says 'psychological adultery is a violation of ones highest perceived value, a regressive back-sliding'. In Self Inquiry as a research tool this refers to the process of discernment in your research, the ability to know when to bring in other material, and when not to.

8. *You shall not steal.* At a psychological level this refers to the necessity to know what is yours and what is not, or not yet, yours. It might also refer to the necessity for sacrifice and exchange on the inner path. In research we know about the importance of not plagiarizing the work of others. How does this relate to Self Inquiry? how might the Self be stolen from by the ego?

9. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.* In psychological inner work this commandment can be understood as relating to the shadow, and to the process of projection. We are required to be honest about the parts of ourselves with which we are less comfortable, and to own them as our own and not to project them out on to our neighbour. In research using Self Inquiry this teaches us the discipline of drawing each insight back in to the self and testing it against one's inner compass, finding the inner resonance.

10. *You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, you shall not set your heart on his house, his field, his servant - man or woman - his ox, his donkey or*

*anything that is his.* Not only must we not steal what is not ours we must not want it either. We must not even want what is not ours. Do not compare yourself to others, but be willing to find your own path. In Self Inquiry we follow our own path, wanting that which is ours, uniquely, our own subjectivity.