

# The Way of Unfolding: A New Paradigm with Ancient Roots

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## Introduction

The very first edition of *NLP World* carried a dialogue, written by Jan Ardui and myself, entitled ‘NLP Presuppositions Revisited’. In that dialogue, we suggested that a meta-model, to be worthy of the name, needs some way of examining and revising its own presuppositions.

Of course, such an endeavour is beset with logical difficulties. How do we examine the presuppositions we use to examine the presuppositions that we used in examining the presuppositions we began with? Creating a genuine meta-model invites such endless and unmanageable regress.

What usually happens is that a new model emerges when people become aware of limitations in the presuppositions of the ‘old’ model and update them. The new model then replaces the old or exists along side it, as various forms of Protestantism did along side Roman Catholicism, stimulating a significant revision of the latter in the so-called ‘Counter-Reformation’.

When NLP appeared it offered a significant revision of existing models of psychotherapy. Furthermore, it offered the promise of enhancing our understanding of how mental models in general functioned. However, the original model of NLP, in spite of numerous extensions, is not without limitations. Questions such as those Jan and I raised in the original dialogue remain pertinent. For example, is the programming metaphor really appropriate for living systems? Can the NLP model adequately handle the complexities of systems larger than individuals and pairs? Does the original emphasis on rapid change remain appropriate?

Since that original dialogue, Jan Ardui and I have continued our discussions, culminating in a book to be published later this year, *The Way of Unfolding: Keys to the Art of Living*. Our conclusions substantially revise the original NLP paradigm, while transcending it in important ways. Although this article is not written as a dialogue, it is very much an expression and summation of some of what we have explored together.

At the outset, we set some criteria for the model we wished to serve as a foundation for our work. We wanted a model that could offer a coherent description, not only of human behaviour, but of living systems in general. We wanted a model that could coherently accommodate complex systems, such as groups, organizations, and whole cultures. We also wanted the model to embrace the subtle teleology we observed in our lives and in the lives of course participants, clients, family, and friends.

## **Pattern and Patterning**

For us the notion of pattern, so important in NLP, remains fundamental. Pattern appears at every level of creation, from the sub-atomic to the galactic, from simple cells to whole societies. Our own minds are also peculiarly organized to perceive and handle pattern. Pattern, as such, we can define as partly present in the world and partly the expression of our own ‘punctuation’, to use Bateson’s term. Our punctuation in turn is a result of our existing patterning. We are, in effect, both the creators and the creation of our patterning.

In examining both the patterning of nature and the nature of our patterning, we find that pattern has the valuable function of simplifying yet enabling complexity. Simple patterns in nature appear to underlie surface complexity. And the patterning of our minds enables us to understand and manage the complexity of our world. Ultimately, we sense that the patterning of nature and the patterning of our minds emerge from simple meta-patterns that are present in both mind and nature. For Bateson and other

perceptive thinkers, mind and nature are a ‘necessary unity’, complementary facets of ‘a pattern which connects’.

If we speculate as to the nature of such a pattern, we can concur with Wallace Stevens that ‘it must be abstract’, but capable of imbuing the range of creation through to its most concrete expressions.

Examining the pattern to simple patterns we can get some ideas as to how to think about a connecting meta-pattern. Simple patterns can be described, as the British poet G. M. Hopkins did in the last century, as a configuration of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’. But the notions of ‘stability’ and ‘change’ are probably more apposite for dynamic processes. It is possible to describe the range of processes in nature in terms of a continuing dynamic between tendencies toward differentiation or change and tendencies towards homogeneity or stability.

However, the relationship between stability and change factors alone could never account for the enormous wealth of self-evolving patterns present in nature. So much of the patterning we observe in the natural world carries the possibility of developing in surprising and creative ways that we propose a third characteristic immanent in nature’s patterning. This we call ‘self-transcendence’. The patterns of nature have the capacity to transcend themselves, either by learning or by becoming part of larger ‘holons’ (to borrow Wilber’s term) that include them but manifest another order of possibilities.

## **Generative Patterns and Generative Patterning**

Where nature’s patterning, and our own, display a tendency for new possibilities to emerge out of the tension between factors fostering stability and factors provoking change, we may talk about ‘Generative Patterns’. Generative Patterns are patterns with a capacity for self-transcendence. They can change, learn, and grow.

Living systems are Generative Patterns, as are social systems. Our own patterning becomes generative when we find

we are learning about our learning in a way that fuels further learning and growth.

We can thus think of ‘Generative Patterning’ as the exploration and description of how we manage the relationship between stability and change, sameness and difference in a way that is self-transcending for ourselves and for the self-context continuum. Generative Patterning is the process of having a self-transcending relationship with the patterns of our lives.

## **Modelling and Applied Epistemology**

To have such a relationship depends on how we interact with our models of the world. Whereas pattern occupies an intermediate zone between ‘things as they are’ and our coding of them, models are very much the products of our mind. Models arise when we attempt to understand and manage the pattern to the patterns we perceive. Compared with patterns, models are one step removed in the direction of mental constructs. Patterning is essential for modelling, and the latter is an integral part of deep learning. In deep learning, the complexity of what is not yet understood or integrated crystallizes into a coherent form that becomes part of us. This new crystallization or model enables us to us to manage the rich complexity of what we have been learning and apply it in our lives. For us, classic NLP modelling is really a specific example of these more general processes that we use to manage the complex challenges that life presents to us.

Both modelling as we understand it and NLP modelling invite us to become more conscious of our unconscious epistemology. The Way of Unfolding calls for an Applied Epistemology, of which Generative Patterning is a central plank.

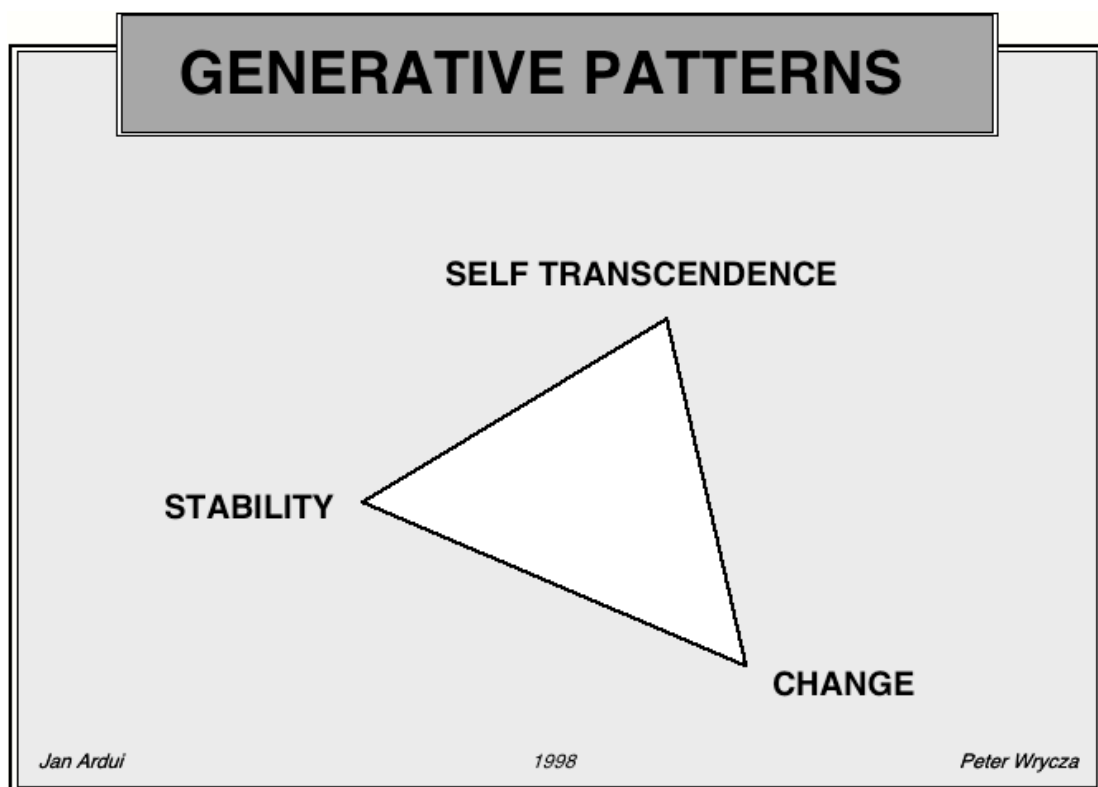
Generative Patterning means having a more conscious, fluid, flexible, and creative relationship with our own modelling process. This we feel has been the primary intention of NLP at its outset, and, if we are not mistaken, still is to purists such as

John Grinder. However, much of that purity of intention has been obscured by the proliferation of secondary models spawned by the NLP endeavour. Typically, NLP now emphasizes the ‘Applied’ part, but deep epistemology is relegated to a back seat. The Way of Unfolding invites a lot of attention to how we know what we know. This is important if we are to support our development by unravelling the sometimes confusing strands of our evolving models of the world.

Ultimately, questions about our own knowing lead us to explore and fathom the nature of the knower. Whereas classical NLP has emphasized ‘how’, the Way of Unfolding invites curiosity about the ‘who’.

Exploring our deep epistemology, brings us to an edge. What can we know of the knower? What is the structure of that which takes itself to be the knower? What is the pattern of development of the self? Is personal identity anything other than an artefact of our patterning and modelling?

What is the eventual destination of that which we take to be ‘myself’?



## **Change, Learning, and Growth**

Classic NLP has been obsessed with change. It has had little to say about growth or development. This is a pity. For change without reference to deeper learning and growth is likely to be either shallow or problematic.

Change is never without a dance with stability. Many of the so-called NLP change formats have aptly been termed ‘rituals’ by Robert Dilts in that they enact a process symbolic of change, rather than engendering change itself. Most practitioners will have experiences in which the expectation of magic and change is tempered by the realization that much of what was sought has stayed vigorously as it was. People respond to this in different ways: by pretending that the rituals have really wrought the desired changes, by declaring that the NLP model sucks, or by concealing their disappointment with secret fears that there is something wrong with themselves, when so many others have achieved the promised benefits.

We can perhaps better think of change as generally exterior to ourselves. In Dilts’ model of logical levels, change primarily occurs at the environmental or behavioural levels. The world throws the challenge of change at us, and we can also initiate behavioural and contextual changes. We can change our partners, jobs, homes, life-styles, and so on.

Contextual changes in our circumstances constrain the patterns of our lives to new configurations. The economy goes sour, our company closes down, or we fall in love, and the knock-on effects in our lives are profound. These effects we can term ‘learning’ (rather than change), when they involve the acquisition of new capabilities or the realization of important new ways of framing our experience.

Learning enables us to manage increasingly complex patterns of similarity and difference in what we perceive. With its drive for simplicity and coherence, learning helps us accommodate complexity, boosting the connections and relationships available to our minds.

Paradoxically, learning is a fundamentally conservative process. In providing us with the means to manage the pressures of change, learning has the valuable function of supporting stability in our lives. Much of our learning serves to expand our ability to cope with new developments so that our personal selves remain secure.

Eventually, of course, our learning rubs up against the limits of our self-paradigm, and we find ourselves entering a period of profound revision of our sense of who and what we are. We may emerge from such periods of personal development different than before, but it is then more accurate to speak of ‘growth’ rather than either learning or change.

Because growth involves a significant outframing of our usual frames of reference, much of it happens at an unconscious level. We cannot really renew our old selves from within the old mould. The mould itself must expand. That implies a surrendering to larger processes than those that make for our usual selves. We cannot ‘do’ growth, but we can support it.

Generally, people do not change. Rather than trying to alter ourselves or others, we might be wiser to seek small behavioural changes that will indirectly engender new levels of learning and growth. This approach was widely practised by Milton Erickson, who gave many of his clients simple behavioural tasks that would inevitably lead to developments on other levels.

<b>WAY OF UNFOLDING</b>		<b>DILTS' LOGICAL LEVELS</b>	<b>BATESON'S LEVELS OF LEARNING</b>
<b>GENERATIVE PATTERNS</b>	<b>UNFOLDING</b>	<b>Spiritual</b>	<b>Bateson Level 3</b>
<b>SELF TRANSCENDENCE</b>	<b>GROWTH</b>	<b>Identify</b>	<b>Bateson Level 2</b>
<b>STABILITY</b>	<b>LEARNING</b>	<b>Capabilities, Beliefs, Values</b>	<b>Bateson Level 2</b>
<b>CHANGE</b>	<b>CHANGE</b>	<b>Environment , Behaviour</b>	<b>Bateson Level 1</b>

## Unfolding

The hierarchical relationship between change, learning, and growth in our lives points to a larger pattern that only becomes apparent over time. It is as if the story of our lives gradually discloses a coherence and meaning as a whole that we recognize retrospectively. This trajectory of growth manifesting over a lifetime, we call ‘unfolding’. The notion of ‘unfolding’ implies that what we become is already in some sense implicit in what we are in the beginning, just as a tree is implicit in a seed. We cannot predict what specifically will happen in a person’s life. For the pattern of unfolding is constrained by the circumstances and events that happen around us. But when we consider our lives as a whole, we can appreciate a pattern that has been revealing itself all along. The larger pattern often clarifies some of the surprising choices that people make at particular moments in their lives.

We could say that our own personal pattern of unfolding is actually part of a larger pattern that is also unfolding. Our societies and cultures also change, learn, and grow over time. They are part of an evolutionary process that has brought our world to where it is now.

And the unfolding of life on our planet is part of a still larger process of unfolding that includes everything that occurs in the cosmos as a whole.

The ‘Way of Unfolding’ is thus a way of referring to the self-evolving processes of nature. It is also a way of referring to those same processes happening within us both as Generative Patterns in our own right, and as part of that larger pattern in nature.

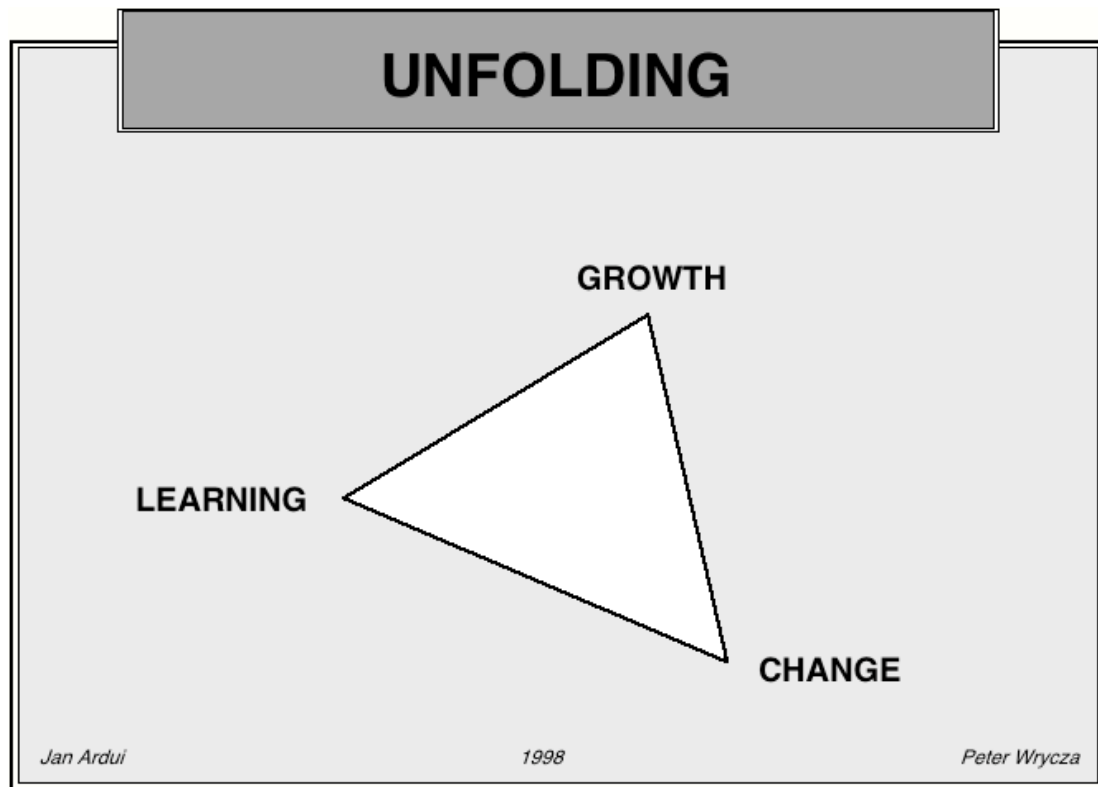
NLP with its notion that ‘every behaviour serves a positive intention’ and the methods it offers for ‘chunking up’ through our hierarchy of values to ‘core values’ points to an intrinsic directionality in our lives. Given the chance, we are as if pre-programmed to grow and evolve towards the expression of positive values in our life. Our deepest values appear to both drive and orient our unfolding.



The Way of Unfolding invites us to become as sensitive as possible to the pattern unfolding in our lives. When we are able to align ourselves with this unfolding we find we are in harmony with ourselves. Of course, we may need to learn how to undo some of the particular conditioning that sets, say, head at loggerhead with hearts. That may also be part of our unfolding.

As we come into alignment with the pattern unfolding within us, we also come into harmony with the larger pattern of which we are part. We flow naturally with the current of life itself. There is no dissonance between own evolution and that of the world around us. Such alignment is a long way from simple outcome specification. It has to do with a profound readjustment to our usual sense of self.

The call of growth, and the larger unfolding that drives it, require a way of working that differs from classic NLP. A linear model of ‘present state’, plus ‘resources’, leading to ‘desired state’ is appropriate for behavioural changes or for specifying learning outcomes. It is an inadequate frame for supporting the mysterious subterranean processes of growth. For that, more circular and systemic models are appropriate. In our work with individuals and groups, we find we are often accompanying a process that is unfolding in its own way, without any clear ‘goal’, except the knowledge that we will recognize what we have been approaching, when it emerges. Such exploration of deep patterns of belief and behaviour we call Re•Patterning. Re•Patterning invites a collaborative process in which large measures of ‘not knowing’ allow us to spiral closer and closer to the heart of the mystery that we are. Such work is better represented by radiant rather than linear models. The rose or lotus has been a universal symbol for unfolding in the major spiritual and cultural traditions of the world and it is important to us, too.



## Unfolding in Action

In Bali, a sense of the deep unity of the pattern of unfolding running through different levels of creation pervades the culture. The Balinese invest a lot of time and energy in activities intended to harmonize the ‘buana alit’ (the small world of our personal selves) with the ‘buana agung’ (the big world of our social and natural environments).<sup>1</sup>

Ceremonies (*yadnya*) are widely used to promote such balance, both at the individual and collective levels. Ceremonies do not of themselves prevent the kind of ecological challenges to the environment that inevitably accompany modern technology. However, they do help preserve a fabric of unity and balance in Balinese society in spite of enormous pressures for change from international tourism, migration to an already crowded island, and the general push towards globalization.

At a time of national instability, Bali has remained relatively calm. When members of the dominant Islamic religion have suggested that a Hindu president would not be

acceptable, in spite of the supposed equality of religions nationally, the Balinese have preferred to respond with a special *yadnya*.

When traditional values are appropriately invoked in Bali, they lead to rapid shifts in how people act. For example, when the government wanted to promote family planning with its 'two children, enough' campaign, compliance was fairly swift, in spite of a strong tradition of large families.

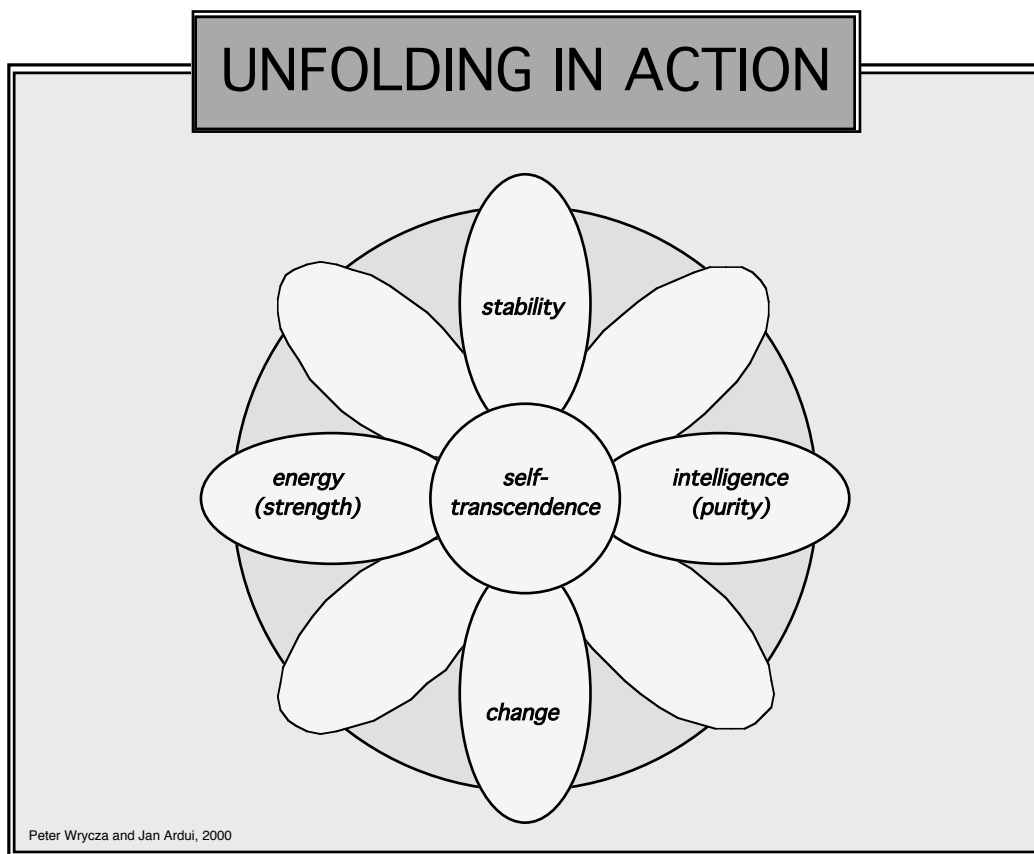
In Bali, the importance of the alignment of the personal and social/natural worlds is reflected in the ubiquitous symbol of the eight-petalled lotus. The latter provides a compact model of both the small and large worlds and the processes of transformation animating them both. Geographical orientation in space, the macrocosm, is reflected in the microcosm of the human body mind. The eight main directions of the compass originating from a central point suggest complementary energies, driving the processes of change both in nature and in our lives. These are reflected in the organization of our bodies, in the layout of homes, temples, and villages.

During our research into the Way of Unfolding, Jan Ardui and I found that the Balinese eight-petalled lotus conceals a simple coding that is highly valuable for understanding and supporting the process of unfolding in our lives. We have tried to translate this ancient coding into modern language accessible to Westerners, under the rubric 'Unfolding in Action'. This model inspires a series of personal development seminars, which we will be offering at Nirarta this summer.

The north-south axis of the lotus represents the deep structure of Generative Patterns. The north symbolizes the quality of stability, and the south, change. The centre represents the quality of 'self-transcendence', connecting the polarities and allowing higher levels of organization to emerge. In Bali, the centre is sometimes treated as the unifying source of diversity, and sometimes as the union of opposites, male and female, sky and earth, positive and negative, and so on. The centre is thus

the source and expression of complementary qualities, which we may term ‘energy’ and ‘intelligence’, or, more poetically, ‘strength’ and ‘purity’. These are traditionally represented in the west and east of the lotus respectively.

The cardinal directions represent the deep structure of the dynamics of transformation both in our lives and in nature. The dance between the opposites of stability and change has direction, meaning, and power because of its intrinsic energy and intelligence. We are able to change, learn, and grow, because the forces of change and the forces of stability exist in a state of creative tension that invites the new without overwhelming it. Order and chaos coexist, allowing the precious and precarious miracle of life to emerge and evolve.

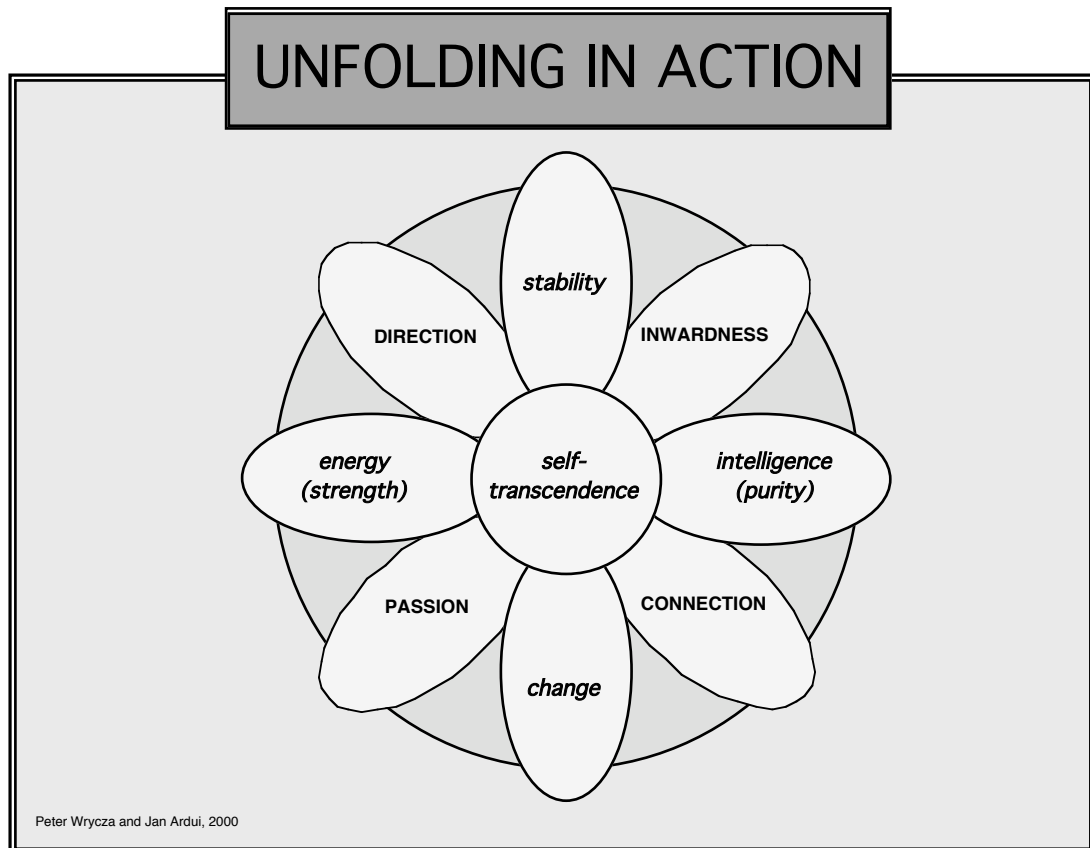


Out of the self-interacting dynamics of this simple set of relations, we find a more manifest layer of patterning emerging. The interaction of the four cardinal directions suggest four important patterns, which are mapped symbolically in the north-west, north-east, south-east, and south-west. For example, the relationship between ‘energy’ and ‘stability’ in the north-west points to a purposefulness that we call ‘direction’. Without some kind of direction, nothing much happens either in nature or in our lives. But direction is blind if it ignores the wider context. So, opposite ‘direction’, in the south-east, between intelligence and change, we situate ‘connection’, for change and intelligence together presuppose profound attention to ‘when’ and ‘where’, and the ecology of action.

Recognizing and contextualizing direction, are of course only possible when we draw on sources of inspiration within. Following the Balinese model, between ‘stability’ and ‘intelligence’, we locate ‘inwardness’ or ‘inspiration’.

For transformation, such inwardness needs a counterbalancing expressiveness, which we find between ‘energy’ and ‘change’, in the south-west. Passionate expression makes for dynamic action in the world, but action is blind, without a counterbalancing inwardness, supporting ecology and wisdom in the choice of direction.

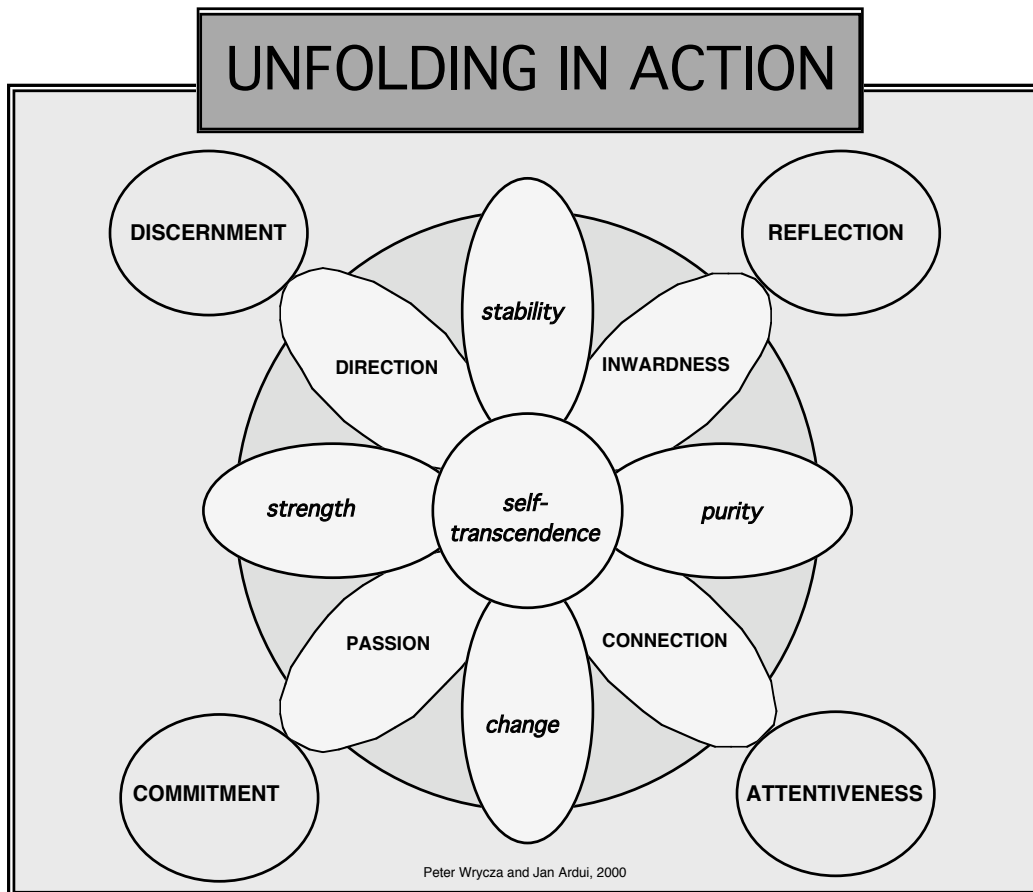
So together, direction, inwardness, connection, and expression, or passion, point to a dynamics of transformation that is very close to simple NLP outcome frames, except, here they are represented in a systemic relation with each other.



## Transcontextual Skills

At a further level of specificity, these basic qualities point to four important ‘Transcontextual Skills’ needed for our ability to function well in any context. Transcontextual Skills help us manage the processes of change, learning, and growth in our own lives, and in our areas of responsibility as leaders, managers, coaches, or citizens. To read the runes of time, at any moment in the unfolding pattern requires the ability to *reflect* deeply, allowing life’s enigmas to yield new knowing from deep unknowing. It requires a profound *attentiveness* to the patterns present in and around us, a *discerning* willingness to cut through the crap to the core issues. And lastly it needs the ability to *commit* wholeheartedly to action.

The four Transcontextual Skills of Discernment, Reflection, Attentiveness, and Commitment, together with patterning and modelling, provide the basic tools for an Applied Epistemology in daily life. When they are applied to the knower, they facilitate



a process of self-discovery that leads to the heart of the mystery that we are, to the freedom beyond our self-definitions, in the simplicity of being that we call ‘Living Awareness’.

Such self-knowledge, such knowing in unknowing, turns out to be both the destination and the way of our unfolding. Of course, all this is only a model, a mental map, an adjunct to things as they are. It points to *a* Way of Unfolding without being the Way of Unfolding itself. That is always happening by itself, in its own way, here and now. We can allude to it, try to talk about it, but it will always elude our names, definitions, and programmes to capture it. The dream is to live it. That is really what is unfolding anyway. Whether we like it or not.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, while such alignment is much sought after, it is not always fully understood intellectually, nor inevitably attained.