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**THE MYSTIC FIRE OF TERESA OF AVILA:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MYSTICISM  
AND THE KUNDALINI PHENOMENON**

by

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**Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies of the University of Ottawa as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies.**

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## ABSTRACT

### **THE MYSTIC FIRE OF TERESA OF AVILA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MYSTICISM AND THE KUNDALINI PHENOMENON**

The sanskrit term Kundalini refers in traditional yogic texts to both a mechanism and a transformative energy in the human body which can be activated spontaneously, or through spiritual disciplines and practices. The awakening of Kundalini is described in the esoteric treatises of India such as the Tantras, as the activation of a spiritual or cosmic energy at the base of the spine which moves upward through the chakras to the head where the union of Siva and Sakti takes place.

The objective of this study is to find parallels to the Kundalini experience in a Christian mystical context. Unlike most Western Christian mystical traditions, the Kundalini model acknowledges the psycho-physiological phenomena associated with mystical experience. This dissertation argues that if there is a biological basis for the yogi's transformative experience, Teresa of Avila and other Christian mystics may well have undergone a similar psycho-physiological process.

Part I is a cross-cultural study of Kundalini-like phenomena, and includes personal accounts of spiritually awakening experiences. Part I also includes the findings of a questionnaire study conducted by the author in Ottawa, Canada, during 1997-98. Fifty questionnaires were distributed and 70 percent were returned. Twenty-four self-reports of mystical and Kundalini-like experiences are presented in Chapter 6 of this thesis. The findings indicate that mystical experiences are often associated with Kundalini-type experiences, and that Kundalini phenomena is relatively common among people who are engaged in spiritual

disciplines and practices. These research findings are important as an increasing number of people in Western society are experiencing Kundalini rising, and its associated phenomena.

Part II focuses on the mystical experiences of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), a Spanish mystic and saint of the Roman Catholic Church. The Kundalini model is used to analyze St. Teresa's writings to investigate whether there is evidence that the activation of a Kundalini-like mechanism may have been involved in some of her mystical experiences. Two types of experiences were selected for analysis: "the flight of the spirit," and the "rapture" experience. The primary sources for this analysis were the following four works: Life, Spiritual Relations, Way of Perfection, and the Interior Castle, all found in The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Jesus, translated by E. Allison Peers.

This comparative study of mysticism leads to a reinterpretation, according to the Kundalini yoga model, of some of the unusual phenomena experienced by St. Teresa, such as fire and heat, wounding sensations, and sensations and noises in the head, as well as physical and health problems. The Kundalini model links mystical experience with the sublimation of sexual energy, therefore, the role of sexual energy, and the relationship between sexual orgasm and mystical experience is examined.

The findings of this study confirm that Kundalini is a mechanism experienced within diverse cultures and spiritual traditions. Furthermore, there is enough textual evidence in the works of Teresa of Avila to conclude that some of her experiences were associated with the awakening of Kundalini. The conclusions of this study suggest that if the Kundalini model can be applied in analyzing this saint's experiences, then it can also be used to analyze the experiences of other Christian saints and mystics.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

All the quotations from the writings of St. Teresa are taken from The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Jesus, translated by E. Allison Peers, London: Sheed and Ward, 1978.

When referring to the works of St. Teresa, I will use the following abbreviations.

- L. Life
- SR. Spiritual Relations
- WP. Way of Perfection
- IC. Interior Castle

Reference is made according to the name of the book, followed by the chapter in Roman numerals, and the page number. The Roman numerals after *Spiritual Relations* refers to the number of the Relations. Reference to the *Interior Castle* is preceded by the number of the *Mansions* followed by the chapter number and page number.

## **INTRODUCTION: MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE AND THE KUNDALINI PHENOMENON**

According to traditional yogic views, the activation or awakening of a spiritually transformative energy referred to as “Kundalini” in ancient Eastern texts such as the Tantras and the Yoga Kundalini Upanishad is responsible for mystical experience. The objective of this study is to find parallels to the Kundalini experience in a Christian mystical context. Unlike most Western Christian mystical traditions, the Kundalini model acknowledges the psycho-physiological phenomena associated with mystical experience. This dissertation argues that if there is a biological basis for the yogi’s transformative experience, Teresa of Avila and other Christian mystics may well have undergone a similar psycho-physiological process. This thesis, therefore, considers applying what I will refer to as the “Kundalini model” to analyze and interpret the mystical experiences and associated phenomena experienced by Teresa of Avila, a Catholic saint. I will investigate whether the Kundalini phenomena is associated with the transformation and expansion of consciousness experienced by this Christian saint.

According to the Roman Catholic tradition, mysticism as exemplified by saints is still a matter for theological enquiry rather than a scientific one. Thus according to Catholic theologians, mystical experiences are not the result of processes which can be studied scientifically, or triggered by human beings themselves. Mystical experiences are perceived as a gift from



God, an act of “grace,” which is a Christian theological concept. However, the fact is, mystical experiences are not uncommon as scientific studies show. Furthermore, they are experienced within diverse cultures and spiritual traditions. Therefore, they cannot be accounted for by Roman Catholic theology alone. One of the main problems in this perspective is that the psycho-physiological aspects associated with the development of a mystical state of consciousness and recognized in the yogic tradition, are rarely taken into consideration, even less submitted to a critical analysis by Christian theologians. By ignoring or neglecting the psycho-physiological components of mystical experience, they are missing what the mystic is actually experiencing. For example, Teresa of Avila tells us that she experiences changes in breathing patterns, sensations of heat, and pains in her physical body. These are not mystical experiences, but could be part of a developmental process that the mystic is going through which affects the physical body and mind.

As far as Western psychology is concerned, it is usual for psychologists to view both the physical and psychological aspects of the mystic process, or the steps or stages to mystical union, from a pathological perspective. However, some transpersonal psychologists who have studied mystical experiences have also been influenced by Eastern concepts and proposed new models that include these aspects of mystical experience.

As Christian theological concepts and Western psychological theories are inadequate means to address the part that the body and mind play in mystical experience, new theories or models need to be developed to account for the unusual phenomena experienced by mystics. This thesis addresses the possibility of interpreting mystical experience taking place within a Christian context according to Kundalini an Eastern energy model of the transformative proc-

ess, which does address the question of psycho-physiological processes associated with the developmental process of spiritual transformation.

The concept of Kundalini depends on a number of presuppositions. According to the yogic tradition, there is a potential in human beings to activate a transformative energy linked to mystical experience such as Samadhi, and this energy can be stimulated by spiritual disciplines and practices. Kundalini has been defined as the individualized cosmic energy grounded in human beings, that is, a potential energy latent in all human beings. It has also been defined as “the energy of consciousness.”<sup>1</sup> The term “Awakening of Kundalini” as used in the tantric yogic tradition, refers to the activation or arousal of this potential energy, symbolically described as a coiled serpent resting at the base of the spine or muladhara chakra. According to yogic texts, when this energy or force is awakened, it travels upwards from the base of the spine to the head. An essential component of a full Kundalini awakening, is the activation of a normally dormant brain centre referred to as Brahmaraandhra in yogic texts, which results in expanded states of consciousness. Traditionally Kundalini has been held responsible for creativity, mystical experience, genius, psychic phenomena, and certain mental illnesses in cases of a morbid awakening as suggested by Gopi Krishna.<sup>2</sup>

Even though the Sanskrit term Kundalini comes from the yogic tradition, the Kundalini concept, or a mechanism akin to Kundalini, can be recognized in other cultural contexts and religious traditions. It is often presented as a transformative spiritual energy which is usually awakened through a variety of rituals or spiritual disciplines and practices. Typical experiences on awakening of this potential energy include rushes of energy, light, and sound. From a cross-cultural perspective the Kundalini phenomenon is described among other things as fire,

lightning, ki, interior light, and the Holy Spirit. This potential energy or force is akin to the “boiling energy” or n/um of the !Kung Bushmen of Africa,<sup>3</sup> the tumo of Tibetan Buddhism,<sup>4</sup> and the circulation of light or chi in Taoism.<sup>5</sup> References to “Circulation of Light” within the body can be found in The Secret of the Golden Flower<sup>6</sup> an ancient Chinese text, and in Taoist texts where it is sometimes referred to as fire.

One objective of this thesis is to point out the important part that the body plays in the experience of mystical-type phenomena. This thesis will take into account and analyze specific psycho-physiological mechanisms in the human body associated with mystical experience. It is my hypothesis that the Kundalini model can provide a descriptive tool for the physical and psychological phenomena experienced by Western mystics in their development of a mystical state of consciousness. This Eastern energy model is different from the Western models of mysticism in that it provides a developmental framework that allows us to describe the physiological processes experienced by a mystic in the process of spiritual development. Indeed, the Kundalini model maps out the developmental process of spiritual development and also provides for the integration of extraordinary experiences, or unusual phenomena thought to be associated with spiritually transformative processes. For example, when this latent, spiritual energy is awakened, it can create unusual physiological activity. Examples of symptoms experienced on awakening of Kundalini are documented in yogic texts such as the Mahayoga Vijnana,<sup>7</sup> a treatise by Sri Yoganandji Maharaja. There may be depending on the individual, violent shaking and uncontrollable trembling, extreme heat, perception of inner light, and experiences of energy moving up the spine. One essential sign of a classical Kundalini episode,

or the awakening of Kundalini, is the experience of sensations of heat or energy rising up the spine to the head.

Psycho-physiological phenomena akin to a Kundalini process are also documented in Western mystical literature by the mystics themselves, for example, St. Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Genoa, and St. Theresa of Lisieux, but they are usually ignored or go unrecognized by the readers. They are treated as epi-phenomena rather than an important component of the experience itself. Even though some transpersonal psychologists and anthropologists have done research on Kundalini they have not been too interested in Christian literature.

It is important to point out that the awakening of Kundalini is an experiential phenomenon in which the body plays an important part. Therefore, experiential knowledge of the Kundalini mechanism, not just discursive knowledge, is needed to analyze texts describing mystical experience in order to recognize the physiological components of the Kundalini experience. This may be why the Kundalini experience is usually not recognized by theologians and scholars in religious studies.

This thesis, then, following a descriptive study of Kundalini-like phenomena, involves a comparison of the mystical experiences of Saint Teresa of Avila, a Christian saint, and the Kundalini phenomenon. My hypothesis suggests that there is a positive correlation between mystical experiences and specific psycho-physiological processes associated with the Kundalini phenomenon. However, it is not the objective of this thesis to define what constitutes a mystical experience, which is a source of debate in the academic community. The classical definition of a mystical experience as a unitive state, was broadened for my questionnaire research project (see appendix) to include a variety of mystical-type experiences so as to take

into account the diversity and varieties of mystical experiences. I have defined mystical experience in the context of this thesis research as a direct experience of a Power or Force greater than oneself thus synthesizing the definitions proposed by a number of authors such as Otto, 1926, and Jung, CW 11:6, 1953-79.

I decided to undertake this comparative study of psycho-physiological phenomena associated with mystical experience and Kundalini-type experiences because it was apparent to me as a yoga teacher, and from my own personal experience, that there could be a connection between the developmental processes experienced by Christian mystics and the transformative developmental process experienced by people who have awakened Kundalini. For example, the experience of a force or power perceived as the Holy Spirit by Christian mystics and described in terms of “fire,” has noticeable parallels with the traditional yogic descriptions of Kundalini awakening.

In my opinion, the orthodox Western psychological paradigm is inadequate to account for the developmental aspect of a spiritually transformative process experienced by a mystic because it deals mostly with pathological states while the Western religious model is inadequate because it is bound to theological concepts. The Kundalini model that I am proposing could be applied regardless of one’s religious belief, and would therefore be better suited for cross-cultural analysis than the Christian theological model which is valid only for specific religious traditions, or the Western orthodox psychological model which presents mystical states as pathological.

If this model is indeed suitable to describe the process of spiritual development which culminates in a mystical experience, then the writings of prominent Christian and non-

**Christian mystics could be analyzed to uncover the psychological and physiological components associated to an experience of Kundalini awakening. If this psycho-physiological mechanism is a universal one as yoga philosophies suggest, we should be able to compare the experiences of Christian mystics with the processes described in Eastern texts.**

**Even though mystical experiences can be shown to have psycho-physiological correlates, I am not suggesting that they can be reduced to merely physical phenomena. Neither am I suggesting that all physical and psychological phenomena experienced by individuals involving mystical-type or Kundalini-type experiences are the result of the arousal of this mechanism.**

**This research, therefore, uses the working hypothesis that a transformative spiritual energy referred to as Kundalini in the esoteric treatises of India, is associated with the mystical experiences of mystics and saints of the past as well as the mystical experiences of contemporary individuals. This hypothesis is supported by an analysis of cross-cultural literary descriptive accounts of mystical experiences, and Kundalini-type experiences.**

**In linking mysticism and the Kundalini phenomenon in this comparative study, I will make the following assumptions:**

- (a) One can study reports of mystical experiences because they are human experiences.**
- (b) There are many different types of mystical experiences.**
- (c) There is a physiological component to mystical experiences.**
- (d) Mystical experiences are defined, explained, and induced in different ways in different cultural contexts.**

(e) Even though there are cultural differences, one can detect similar components in mystical experiences.

As already stated, I will focus in this thesis on the mystical experiences of Teresa of Avila, a Christian mystic and saint. The possible relationship between the arousal of the Kundalini mechanism and mystical experience in the life of Teresa of Avila has not been examined before. Thus in analyzing Teresa's mystical experiences from a Kundalini perspective, I am suggesting that there are other models than the Western religious and psychological models to explain the mystical experiences of Christian saints.

Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth-century Spanish mystic and saint of the Roman Catholic Church, was a reformer of the Carmelite Order who founded enclosed convents of Discalced or barefoot nuns. This saint, also known by her spiritual name of Teresa of Jesus, was canonized in 1622 and was declared the first woman Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1970.

Teresa wrote extensively about her mystical experiences and spiritual development. Her introspective descriptions of her experiences were written mainly for didactic purposes. Even though mystics contend that their experiences are incommunicable and difficult to describe, and in contradiction to the ineffability argument, they often do proceed to describe them when commanded by their spiritual directors to do so for the edification of others. Since Teresa was commanded by her confessor to write about her life and personal experiences, she analyzed and described her mystical experiences, including physical and psychological observations which are of great interest to us. They provide evidence of psycho-physiological mechanisms which could give answers to the age-old "mind/body" conflict. This medieval

nun did not have the equivalent of our modern knowledge of psycho-physiological processes, so she used Christian terminology as well as her own metaphors to describe and explain the range of phenomena associated with her mystical experiences.

One of the reasons why I chose Teresa of Avila for my study is because Spanish mystics as E. Allison Peers describes, “. . . are skilled practical psychologists, ‘superb directors’ of the consciences of individual souls, and well able to throw their experiences into works which appeal no less to the many than to the few.”<sup>8</sup> I also selected this saint because she seemed to be very much aware of the part the body played in her spiritual development, and her experiences of God were symbolized by “fire” analogous to the Kundalini concept. I am also interested in Teresa of Avila because some of her so-called mystical experiences are described in terms that involve a movement of energy that rises upwards analogous to descriptions of the Kundalini experience. Even though we do not know how accurate the phenomenological reportage of mystics and saints of the Christian church are, we can analyze their experiences according to the texts that we have, bearing in mind that the works of women mystics were edited by the male ecclesiastical establishment of the time who ignored the psycho-physiological mechanisms of the human body.

In order to construct a theoretical context for this thesis, I have grouped the studies and explanations of mystical experiences into three main evolving paradigms resulting in three different models. The orthodox Christian supernatural model, the orthodox Western psychological model, and the heterodox Kundalini yoga model.

The first paradigm approaches the interpretation of mystical experiences through the agency of the supernatural. Mystical experiences are human experiences that are culturally



and socially preconditioned, but according to Christian theology they cannot be induced. They are given according to the will of God. Thus according to the Christian religious model the subjective experiences of mystics can only be explained as the result of Divine intervention, and not as the result of one's own efforts as in the case of a yogi. However, Christian mystics did use a variety of manipulative techniques to induce mystical states of consciousness such as meditation and self-flagellation.

The professed contact with a supernatural power or agency called God by Christian mystics is the element that distinguishes the interpretation of mystical or religious experience from other extraordinary human experiences. This emphasis on the theological interpretation of mystical experience has its limitations as it does not acknowledge the psycho-physiological processes of mystical experience. As hagiographic texts testify, Christian mystics focused on the supernatural interpretation of mystical or religious experience, and ignored the psycho-physiological aspects of mystical experience. Lack of medical knowledge led people to believe that "unusual" experiences were the result of Divine intervention. Today, we know that many unusual or unexplicable experiences can be explained scientifically, for example, the alteration of body chemistry that results from practicing manipulative techniques.

The Christian supernatural model without analytical reasoning is no longer accepted as the only interpretation of mystical or religious experience in contemporary society (The writer of this thesis is not, however, suggesting that the orthodox scientific model should completely exclude the supernatural element in analyzing mystical or religious experience.)

The second paradigm approaches mystical experiences through interpreting them in Western psychological terms thus establishing the study of mysticism on a scientific basis. The

orthodox psychological model, however, is limited because it does not accommodate extraordinary or unusual experiences. Historically such phenomena are usually explained from a psychologically reductionistic perspective using pathological diagnostic categories. For example, the expansion of consciousness, which is a prominent characteristic of a mystic's experience, is viewed by Freud as a regressive state. Thus as mysticism results in a withdrawal from the external world of reality, he would consider it to be pathological. For Jung, the mystical experience is an archetypal experience, which suggests that it is a universal phenomenon. However, Jung views the unqualified unitive state of the mystic as pathological because he believes that to identify with God or the Self results in the replacing of the ego with the overpowering, numinous forces of the unconscious, thus resulting in psychosis.

William James (1842-1910) is well known for his classic study of religious experience entitled The Varieties of Religious Experience<sup>9</sup> which illustrates the paradoxical development of a mystical state of consciousness. Though James emphasized the positive value of mystical experience in the lives of individuals, his early study suggests that there is an overlap between mystical experience and psychotic states. The autobiographical texts of Teresa of Avila do show that the development of a mystical state of consciousness is a paradoxical one.

The interpretation of mystical experience has also been examined in the classic works of psychologist James Henry Leuba (1925),<sup>10</sup> and Friedrich Von Hugel (1908).<sup>11</sup> These early studies conclude that the psycho-physiological phenomena experienced by woman mystics such as Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Genoa should not be treated as directly spiritual or due to the supernatural. They suggest that mystical phenomena is of a sexual, or pathological nature.

The third paradigm, the Kundalini model, though grounded in an Eastern cultural context, allows for a developmental approach to spiritual development as well as a multi-religious approach. Kundalini has recently become an object of study among anthropologists and psychologists, especially those connected with transpersonal psychology. This third approach provides an alternative model that allows for a critique of the first two, is conducive to scientific experiments, and broadens our understanding of human experiences.

Among prominent names connected with contemporary scientific research of the Kundalini phenomenon are psychiatrist Lee Sannella, M.D., and biomedical inventor Itzhak Bentov author of Stalking the Wild Pendulum. Bentov's neurophysiological, or "physio-kundalini model"<sup>12</sup> has provided a context within which the medical profession and others can work. Sannella's study of Kundalini in a clinical context, suggests that what could be diagnosed as a psychotic episode may be a psycho-psychological transformation resulting from the "awakening of Kundalini." Thus the awakening of Kundalini is seen by Sannella as a reality, a concrete experience. He presents case histories and self-reports of Kundalini arousal in his book The Kundalini Experience.<sup>13</sup>

### Thesis Outline

This comparative study of mysticism and the Kundalini phenomenon begins with an exploration of the Kundalini phenomenon in various contexts, both theoretical and practical. Then, we look at the contributions of psychology to the study of mystical experience. This is followed by a comparison of the mystical texts of Teresa of Avila with the Hindu texts describing the Kundalini model.

This thesis is in two parts:

## **Part I: The Kundalini Phenomenon**

**Part I explores the Kundalini phenomenon. There is an emphasis on presenting personal accounts of mystical, Kundalini, or spiritually awakening experiences. These accounts include those from the East, the West, and other cultural contexts as well as accounts originating from my own survey in Ottawa, Canada. Part I also includes a survey of scientific research on Kundalini.**

**Chapter 1 presents the definitions and theories of Kundalini-Shakti according to the Eastern tradition and according to Western thinkers. The symbolic Tantric Kundalini-yoga model is introduced in this chapter.**

**Chapter 2 first describes the awakening process in the East. Then the activation of the Kundalini mechanism which has an effect on the nervous system and brain is described in Gopi Krishna's terms. Chapter 2 concludes by presenting eleven accounts quoted from Eastern literary sources of those who have undergone the experience.**

**Chapters 3 discusses the awakening of Kundalini in the West, and includes descriptive accounts from literary sources of spiritually awakening experiences.**

**Chapter 4 looks at Kundalini-like experiences in other religious or cultural traditions through selected literary accounts in order to show that the Kundalini mechanism can be approached from a cross-cultural perspective. In this chapter we especially compare the Hindu Tantras model of Kundalini with the Taoist and Buddhist Tantric human "energy" models.**

**Chapter 5 focuses on contemporary North-American research on Kundalini, especially the "Physio-Kundalini Syndrome," a term used by Itzhak Bentov to describe his model of the Kundalini experience.**

Chapter 6 presents the results of my Questionnaire research project on “Mysticism And Kundalini,” a survey done in Ottawa, Canada, in 1997-98. This chapter includes twenty-four self-reports from participating individuals.

### Part II: The Mysticism of Teresa of Avila and the Kundalini Phenomenon

Part II begins with an introduction to the life and writings of Teresa of Avila. This is followed by a historical survey of the psychological theories of mystical experience, and how they have been applied to Teresa. Then, we proceed to investigate whether there is evidence that the Kundalini mechanism may be associated with some of Teresa of Avila’s mystical experiences, in particular, the flight of the spirit, and the ecstasy or rapture experience. Teresa’s own self-reports of her experiences are analyzed and reinterpreted from a Kundalini perspective. This leads to a discussion of the role of the body in mystical experience especially as far as medieval women are concerned.

Chapter 7 is an introduction to the life and writings of Teresa of Avila. It presents a developmental chronology of Teresa of Avila’s spiritual life as well as a chronology of her illnesses and physical ailments.

Chapter 8 is a historical survey of psychological theories and approaches to mysticism. This chapter also includes psychological views of Teresa of Avila. The chapter concludes with a comparison of yoga psychology with Western psychotherapy.

Chapter 9 is an analysis of two of Teresa of Avila’s mystical experiences from a Kundalini perspective. It is in two parts. In the first part, we analyze the “flight of the spirit,” and compare Teresa of Avila’s metaphor of “fire” with the Kundalini phenomenon by presenting Eastern explanations of the fire phenomenon. In the second part, I map out the development

of Teresa's rapture experience. I then compare the texts of Teresa of Avila's rapture or ecstasy experience with descriptive texts of yoga samadhi.

Chapter 10 addresses several issues related to the role of the body in mystical experience as Teresa of Avila's spirituality was rooted in the physical. In this chapter we discuss the role of the reproductive system in the ecstatic experience according to Eastern texts. We also examine the relationship between mystical experience and sexual orgasm..

Chapter 11 summarizes my findings of mystical experience and the Kundalini phenomenon, and presents my conclusions concerning the part that the Kundalini mechanism played in the mystical experiences of St. Teresa of Avila.

### Method

Data was gathered from the following sources: Eastern texts, Western texts, questionnaires, personal interviews, and scientific studies of the Kundalini phenomenon. Descriptive accounts of mystical, Kundalini-like experiences, or spiritually awakening experiences were collected from literary sources from the East, the West, and other cultural contexts to show that the awakening of Kundalini is found in many societies. Self-reports were also collected through my own questionnaire research project. The accounts were analyzed to see if there were any systematic patterns in the descriptions to suggest that they are describing similar types of experiences associated with the Kundalini phenomenon. The variety of the experiences were noted and compared with the classical Kundalini yoga model.

From Teresa of Avila's writings, a corpus was selected for textual analysis from The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Jesus,<sup>14</sup> translated by E. Allison Peers. The four main texts for textual analysis were: the Life, Spiritual Relations, Way of Perfection, and the Interior

**Castle. The texts describing Teresa's experiences were analyzed for evidence of descriptive components similar to the Kundalini experience according to the Kundalini Yoga Chakras model. Mystical experiences that could be interpreted as part of, or related to Kundalini experiences were documented and compared with Eastern explanations of the fire phenomenon. The texts describing Teresa's rapture experiences were selected for particularly study because they were recorded by Teresa in great detail. The textual components of the rapture experience were compared with those of the descriptive texts of the Samadhi experience of yogis to note the similarity of the experience, and to provide evidence of the awakening of Kundalini. Eastern texts were also analyzed for theories that explained the connection between sexual energy, and mystical experiences that culminated in bliss or ecstasy.**

When analyzing the texts of Christian mystics and saints, the author of this thesis seeks to show that individuals who have no knowledge of Kundalini, could be describing the awakening of Kundalini using Christian terminology. Yet, regardless of the terminology used, in whatever religious or cultural context, the basic components of the Kundalini experience are sufficiently identifiable. If we can show that one psycho-physiological mechanism is associated with mystical experience as the Kundalini hypothesis of this thesis suggests, it will allow us to view Teresa's experiences with new awareness and understanding.

## NOTES: INTRODUCTION

1. Christopher Hills, "Is Kundalini Real,?" in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed. John White (New York: Paragon House, 1990), p.108.
2. Gopi Krishna, "The Phenomenon of Kundalini," in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed. John White, p.232.
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6. Richard Wilhelm, trans., The Secret of the Golden Flower (New York: Brace & World, 1931).
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8. E. A. Peers, Spanish Mysticism (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1924), p.41.
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12. Itzhak Bentov, Stalking the Wild Pendulum (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977).
13. Lee Sannella, The Kundalini Experience (Lower Lake, California: Integral Publishing, 1987).
14. Teresa of Jesus. The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Jesus, trans. E. A. Peers (London: Sheed and Ward, 1978).



**PART I**

**THE KUNDALINI PHENOMENON**

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **WHAT IS KUNDALINI-SHAKTI?**

In this chapter, I explore the theories of Kundalini as well as those of the chakra system, a component of the Tantric Kundalini-yoga model. The question is, what is this psycho-physiological mechanism in the human body known as Kundalini-Shakti in the Eastern spiritual traditions?

In the ancient esoteric treatises of India, Kundalini is referred to as an innate “evolutionary” mechanism in the human body. From this particular evolutionary perspective, the awakening of Kundalini is the means to the evolution of consciousness for the individual as well as for the entire human race. Swami Sivananda Radha in “Kundalini: An Overview” writes that “Kundalini yoga is a direct path of conscious cooperation with the evolutionary forces inherent in each individual, leading toward higher consciousness.”<sup>1</sup> As Swami Sivananda Radha points out, “The ancient yogis depicted the evolution of mankind, and the consciousness of the individual in particular, as a progression of seven steps. The seven centers have symbolic locations in the spinal column. These centers are referred to either as chakras or lotuses.”<sup>2</sup>

As previously mentioned, Kundalini has been defined as the individualized cosmic energy grounded in human beings, that is, a potential energy latent in all people. It is symbolized in some yogic texts as a coiled serpent at the base of the spine. Kundalini is

referred to as a Goddess in the Tantras and the Shakti Shastras, and is recognized by yogis, and Hindus as a creative power. The transforming of this potential energy into a dynamic force is called the awakening of Kundalini. According to yogic tradition, it can result in enlightenment if Kundalini reaches the top of the head. When the Kundalini mechanism is activated it generates physical, mental, and spiritual transformation as it follows its self-directing course. There is no straightforward step-by-step account giving all information concerning a Kundalini process, that is, the experiences of an individual with awakened Kundalini. Information is scattered in various works, disguised in coded symbolic language, or deliberately left out. On awakening this potential energy, one can experience rushes of energy, light, and sound phenomena.

Pandit Gopi Krishna, an Indian yogi, proposes that mystics have inherited a predisposition to the awakening of Kundalini. He presents the awakening of Kundalini; which involves the brain and reproductive organs, as an acceleration of the evolutionary process. He believes that there are five categories of individuals in whom Kundalini is congenitally active: the born mystic, the prodigies, the genius, the mediums, and the psychotics.<sup>3</sup> He mentions that even though these individuals may be born with an awakened Kundalini, and their brains are prepared to deal with a bioenergy of a higher potency, they still experience crises throughout their lives. Support for this notion is mentioned by Swami Sivananda in Kundalini Yoga, he writes, “There are some developed souls who are in a state of Samadhi naturally from their very birth. . . . They are called born Siddhas.”<sup>4</sup>

Swami Rama emphasizes that the meaning of Kundalini must be considered together with the word Shakti. He defines the term Kundalini-Shakti in following text:

To understand the meaning of this word kundalini we must consider it in its proper context along with the word *shakti*, for the term kundalini modifies and explains this term, shakti. Kundalini comes from the word *kundala*, which means coiled. The image of a serpent coiled up while resting conveys the idea of kundalini. The word shakti comes from the root *shak*, to have power or to be able. Taken together, these two Sanskrit words might be translated as the coiled-up power, or the resting potential.<sup>5</sup>

He explains what this power is and why it is resting:

According to tantra, the human being is a miniature universe. All that is found in the cosmos can be found within each individual, and the same principles that apply to the universe apply in the case of the individual being. In human beings the surplus of energy that is not being used to maintain the functioning of the organism is also symbolically described as a coiled or resting serpent. This potential energy is said to rest at the base of the spinal cord, at the muladhara (root support) chakra. This potential energy is called kundalini.<sup>6</sup>

Swami Rama also describes this potential energy from a evolutionary perspective in the following terms: “When she is aroused and moves upward, kundalini withdraws into herself the dynamic forces that maintain the body. This is the reverse of involution, of consciousness involving itself in the universe. It is a process of evolution in which the human being comes to realize his full potential.”<sup>7</sup>

In his well-known work on the subject The Serpent Power, Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon), a Western authority on the Tantras writes, “Kundalini-Sakti in individual bodies is power at rest, or the static centre round which every form of existence as moving power revolves.”<sup>8</sup> He defines it simply as “the Divine Cosmic Energy in bodies.”<sup>9</sup> This universal aspect of Kundalini is recognized cross-culturally as John White points out in his book entitled Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, he writes, “. . . Kundalini is the personal aspect of the universal life force named *prana* by the yogic tradition. This primal

cosmic energy is akin, if not identical to *ch'i* (Chinese), *ki* (Japanese), the Holy Spirit, and various other terms from cultures that identify a life force that is the source of all vital activity.<sup>10</sup>

The confusion over the concepts Kundalini and Prana alluded to in White's statement is clarified by Sri Swami Sivananda in his book Kundalini Yoga. He writes, "Energy (Shakti) polarises itself into two forms, namely, static or potential (Kundalini), and dynamic (the working forces of the body as Prana). . . . This static centre in the human body is the central Serpent Power in the Muladhara (root-support)."<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, he explains in the following terms that this power has two aspects, the individual (Kundalini) aspect, and the Cosmic aspect. Sivananda contends that union with Ultimate Reality involves both aspects. He writes: "If the Ultimate Reality is the One which exists in two aspects of quiescent enjoyment of the Self, and liberation from all form . . . that is, as pure spirit and spirit in matter, then a complete union with Reality demands such unity in both of its aspects."<sup>12</sup> In yoga terms, these two aspects, the individual and the cosmic, are present in the individual as the dormant energy at the base of the spine (Kundalini) and the cosmic aspect Shiva which resides at the crown chakra (Sahasrara). The unitive experience termed Samadhi is the result of the uniting of Kundalini with Shiva or pure consciousness, that is, the cosmic aspect.

Christopher Hills, a scientist-yogi, proposes a contemporary theory of Kundalini. He defines Kundalini in his article "Is Kundalini Real?" as "the energy of consciousness," therefore, he concludes, everyone has it.<sup>13</sup> This definition agrees with Yogi Bhajan's definition of Kundalini.<sup>14</sup> Christopher Hills believes that it is "not something special but

something superordinary,” and the only difference between a “seer” and anyone else is that it is active in one and latent in the other.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Hills proposes that Kundalini is not energy at all. According to his theory, what is conceived as energy moving up the spine, is not energy, but rather that energy is the byproduct of the process. He states that:

When it moves through the chakras, the kundalini burns like fire through the channels or nerve currents which carry it upward to the magnetic part of the mind and brain. Strictly speaking, what is burning and moving is not a chemical or an energy; but energy is the byproduct, just as light is completely unquantized until is absorbed or impinges on something resulting in the release of heat and energy as a byproduct. So is consciousness the same as unquantized light. Only when it moves through the system can it be described as kundalini because only then do we become conscious of its existence as an ambrosia which melts and burns.

To describe kundalini in chemical or energetic terms alone is to avoid the real cause and look only at the effects. . . . Kundalini is a basic component of life and it is only when it moves from one place to another that we sense it or feel it as “energy.”<sup>16</sup>

Hills contends that we make the mistake of believing that Kundalini moves through the chakras as Kundalini energy. It is, he says, “only experienced in the brain and not in the root of the spine,” but, he points out, that does not mean he is saying that nothing physical happens at the base of the spine.<sup>17</sup>

Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri in “The Psychophysiology of Kundalini” uses modern scientific terms to explain what Kundalini is. He mentions that an advanced meditator can release a dormant energy known in yoga psychology as the Kundalini. He explains that:

Tantric yogis believe that it is the nuclear energy of the human psychophysical system. It is comparable to the nuclear energy of the atom. The atomic energy is released through bombardment of the atomic nucleus with high-voltage alpha particles. Likewise, the psychonuclear energy of man is released through high pressure of the concentrated biopsychic energy mobilized by mental focusing.<sup>18</sup>

Chaudhuri explains the mechanism involved in the activation of the coiled energy:

In the course of yoga practice and concentration, the vital, instinctual, and mental energies are mobilized and marshalled inward. Under the impact of their concentrated attack, the positive nucleus of the psychophysical system (kundalini), the apparently static positive pole of the body's magnetic field, sends forth an emanation or ejection, some kind of "etheric double," . . . which shoots up like an electric current along the central canal of the spinal cord.<sup>19</sup>

The nature of this upward electric current, Chaudhuri says, can be interpreted in different ways.

### **The Tantric Kundalini-Yoga Model**

The symbolic Kundalini-Yoga model of the human energy system consists of three energy channels known as nadis. The Sushumna nadi or central channel identified with the spine, and two other channels which lie parallel to Sushumna. Ida on the left, and Pingala on the right. Ida nadi starts from the right testicle or ovary, moves up the left side of the spine, and ends at the left nostril. Pingala nadi starts from the left testicle or ovary, moves up the right side of the spine, and ends at the right nostril.<sup>20</sup> Associated with this model are the chakras or energy centres (discussed below) which lie along the spine. It is through the Sushumna nadi that Kundalini rises upward from chakra to chakra to Sahasrara, the highest chakra at the top of the head. These three channels come together in the Muladhara chakra or root chakra at the base of the spine. The Muladhara, Anahata, and Ajna chakras described below are associated with what is known as knots (granthis), which Kundalini has to break through in order to rise up the spine.<sup>21</sup> These three knots are referred to as Brahma Granthi, Vishnu Granthi, and Rudra Granthi, and mark the points at which the three channels or nadis

come together in the Muladhara (base of spine), Anahata (cardiac), and Ajna (brow) chakras, respectively. Kundalini has to first pierce Brahma Granthi at the base of the spine.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Chakras**

There are two points of view concerning the chakras, which is Sanskrit for “wheels.” Those who believe that they are symbolic, and others who claim that the chakras are physical, that is, they are identical to certain body parts. The concept of centres of consciousness or chakras is prominent in esoteric systems, for example, the Tibetans call them khor-lo. In yogic texts the term chakras refers to the centres in the subtle or astral body. The subtle body is the counterpart of the physical body which cannot be seen by the physical senses. As the chakras cannot be seen by the physical senses, they can only be known through experiential knowledge. Lilian Silburn points out that the chakras or wheels are vibratory centres known to the Saivites of Kashmir through experience.<sup>23</sup> Some contemporary theories, however, propose that the chakras do have physical correlates in the body. Even though the chakras, like the nadis, are usually not physically seen by people, there are some individuals with psychic ability who profess to be able to see these energy centres.

Chakras have also been defined as vibrating vortices of bioenergy. A contemporary individual describes experiencing such a phenomenon in these words, “I could feel vortexes of electricity around places that have been described as chakras.”<sup>24</sup> According to the Tantric tradition these vortices are seven in number, but they vary in number according to the esoteric texts consulted. It is generally accepted by people in the West that there are seven chakras, numbered from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. The chakras are symbolically



represented as lotuses with a particular number of petals in each. Connected with each one is a certain colour, number, mantra, and diety.<sup>25</sup>

There are many contradictory theories concerning the number, the psychic or physical reality of these chakras, and exactly where they are located.<sup>26</sup> Yogi Bhajan, for example, disputes their physical reality. He believes they are imaginary.<sup>27</sup> Ken Wilber, a biochemist, points out in “Are the Chakras Real?” that most of the great sages conclude that the chakras are not real, for example, Sri Ramana Maharshi. He quotes Sri Ramana Maharshi as saying that they are “merely mental pictures,” and that one should not waste time meditating on them.<sup>28</sup>

Some contemporary yogis do not consider the chakras to be imaginary. Indian scholar Indra Sinha in The Great Book of Tantra mentions the work done by Swami Satyananda Saraswati on the possible physiological connection of the chakra system. He points out that Satyananda found that the “seat of Kundalini is in the cerebral cortex.”<sup>29</sup> (This correlates with Itzhak Bentov’s research of Kundalini and the chakras discussed in Chapter 5.) Satyananda, he says, “. . . conceives of the cakras as being switching centres for neurochemical activity, each monitoring, modifying and regulating the activities of the others.”<sup>30</sup> Sinha also mentions that the Swami’s ideas have been developed by Dr. Serena Roney-Dougal in her work Where Magic and Science Meet. In this work Roney-Dougal states that she found Satyananda’s teachings link Kundalini and the chakras with “psycho-neuro-endocrinological knowledge of the West.”<sup>31</sup> She says that “I have found that Satyananda’s concept of the pineal gland as the psychic chakra and as the ‘command’ chakra has a sound neurochemical basis.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Roney-Dougal says, “. . . I find it absolutely fascinating that a spiritual system as

exact as that of Kundalini Yoga can be found to correspond so precisely with a science as complex as psycho-neuro-endocrinology.”<sup>33</sup>

According to Omar Garrison, author of Tantra: The Yoga of Sex, the chakras are part of one’s “invisible anatomy.” However, they are “correlated with the endocrine system of the gross body.”<sup>34</sup> This has led, he says, to some texts on yoga incorrectly identifying the chakras with the physical glands. He mentions that the ideas of Rammurti Mishra, M.D., a Hindu physician, are an example of this problem as he refers to the chakras as “neuro-hormonal mechanisms.”<sup>35</sup>

Gopi Krishna contends that the chakras are not just symbolic constructs. He defines them as “the nerve clusters or plexes commanding the various organs.”<sup>36</sup> He points out that what is symbolic are the lotuses which have a specific number of petals, and the gods and goddesses associated with them. According to Krishna’s point of view based on personal experience “The psychic force released on the awakening is felt distinctly moving in the nerve clusters and the motion is often circulatory. This gives the impression of a wheel or chakra.”<sup>37</sup> It is a fact that the chakras are regarded by some yogis as being identified with the plexuses or nerve centres in the human body. For example, as mentioned by Sivananda in Kundalini Yoga. Swami Rama points out that the chakras do have “physical correspondences in the various plexes of the body,” but they are not physical centres.<sup>38</sup>

The location and corresponding plexuses of the chakras as described below are according to Swami Sivananda.<sup>39</sup> He states that the chakras are in the astral body, but they “. . . have corresponding centres in the spinal cord and the nerve-plexuses in the gross body. Each Chakra has control and function over a particular centre in the gross body.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Muladhara**

The first chakra is called Muladhara or root chakra. According to Sivananda, Kundalini, is located at this chakra. This chakra, he says, “lies between the origin of the reproductive organ and the anus.”<sup>41</sup> The exact location of Kundalini differs according to the texts consulted. The first knot or granthi is in this chakra. The corresponding physical centre in the physical body is the sacrococcygeal plexus.

### **Svadhithana**

The second chakra called Svadhithana is situated at the root of the reproductive organ. It is associated with the lower abdomen, the bladder, kidneys, and genitals. The corresponding centre in the physical body is the sacral plexus.

### **Manipura**

The third chakra is Manipura and is located in the navel region. The associated organs are the stomach, liver, spleen, and small intestines. It corresponds to the solar plexus in the physical body.

### **Anahata**

The fourth chakra is called Anahata. It is commonly known as the heart centre. According to Sivananda, it corresponds in the physical body to the cardiac plexus.

### **Vishuddha**

The fifth chakra is situated at the base of the throat. It corresponds to the laryngeal plexus in the physical body.

## **Ajna**

The sixth chakra is called Ajna, or the third eye centre. This centre corresponds in the physical body to the space between the two eyebrows directly behind the root of the nose, and is associated with the pituitary gland. It corresponds in the physical body to the cavernous plexus.

## **Sahasrara**

The seventh and last chakra is called Sahasrara which means thousand. This energy centre is symbolically referred to as the lotus of the thousand petals. It is situated at the crown of the head in the cerebrum, or above the head depending on the source consulted, and is associated with the pineal gland. It is when Kundalini reaches this centre; which corresponds in the physical body to the brain, that the yogi experiences a superconscious state. It is where Divine cosmic energy in individual form unites with Universal cosmic energy.

Kundalini opens or awakens the chakras as it moves up the spine through the Sushumna nadi, until it reaches the Sahasrara chakra at the top of the head. The opening of the chakras allows the yogi to experience higher states of consciousness. He also experiences supernatural powers known as Siddhis, for example, the power to levitate, or the power to become large or small. The Siddhis may also include such phenomena as clairvoyance.<sup>42</sup> This is the Kundalini-Yoga model of the Tantric tradition which includes three energy channels or nadis known as Sushumna, Ida, and Pingala, and the chakras or energy centres of consciousness.

My research findings show that there are many contradictory statements on the subject of chakras among gurus and other so-called experts. The debate as to the reality of the chakras, their number, and location still continues. These opposing views of experiential phenomena expressed in symbolic form could be the result of individual differences as each person's experience is unique. Each individual's sense of awareness differs with regards to bodily currents of energy, also experiential knowledge would depend on what specific chakra one is concentrating on, and what one is expecting when following a particular model. What is noticed by one person can be ignored by another. This is why much more research is needed to clarify the many contradictions that we have at the present time, and to synthesize the various theories concerning the Kundalini model. The question is, can this model be applied outside of the Kundalini yoga tradition to other cultural contexts and religious traditions to better understand the psycho-physiological phenomena associated with mystical or religious experience ?

## NOTES: CHAPTER 1

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2. Radha, p.48.
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4. Swami Sivananda, Kundalini Yoga (Sivanangagar, U.P., India: The Divine Life Society, 1971), p.191.
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6. Rama, p.29.
7. Rama, p.34.
8. John Woodroffe, The Serpent Power (Madras, India: Ganesh & Co., 1989), p.36.
9. Woodroffe, p.1.
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12. Sivananda, p.xlviii-il.
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14. M. S. S. Gurucharan Singh Khalsa with Yogi Bhajan, "Exploring the Myths and Misconceptions of Kundalini," in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed John White, p.144.
15. Hills, p.110.
16. Hills, p.110.
17. Hills, p.111.

18. Haridas Chaudhuri, "The Psychophysiology of Kundalini," in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed. John White, p.61.
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29. Sinha, p.106.
30. Sinha, p.106.
31. Serena Roney-Dougal, Where Magic and Science Meet (Tisbury, England: Element Books, 1993), p.109.
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33. Roney-Dougal, p.122.
34. Garrison, p.30.
35. Garrison, p.30.
36. Krishna, "The Phenomenon of Kundalini," p.246.

37. Krishna, p.246.
38. Rama, "The Awakening of Kundalini," p.30.
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## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE AWAKENING PROCESS IN THE EAST**

The awakening of the Kundalini mechanism is a known and accepted phenomenon in the Eastern tradition, but as we will see in the following chapters, it has been, and is being experienced by individuals in the West in all walks of life as well as in many other cultural contexts. Even though every spiritual tradition has its own model of the transformative process, Eastern traditions present models that are more explicit especially concerning the objective signs, which are usually treated as epi-phenomenon by Westerners. The Tantra Yoga model of the Kundalini experience allows us to make objective comparisons of the process.

In this chapter, I present literary accounts originating from the East and considered to be representative of phenomena associated with Kundalini awakening experiences. My objective is to see if there are systematic patterns that emerge in the descriptions to suggest that the subjects are describing similar experiences. Then we are better able to construct models that can be translated in Western terms.

The activation of the Kundalini mechanism is described as the “awakening,” and the process of going through the energy centres of the body (chakras) is described as the “rising of Kundalini.” Traditionally it is said that when the Goddess Kundalini awakens she rises upwards through the spine. Many personal accounts describe awakening experiences as energy moving up from the base of the spine. Yogic texts describe a classical Kundalini

awakening as occurring from the base of the spine to the seventh chakra located at the crown of the head. This is an unusual achievement, even for a yogi. It results in an upward flow of energy that rises up from the base of the spine, surges through the chakras, and ascends to the head. It is postulated in some texts that Kundalini can be awakened in any energy centre, which may account for the variance in personal accounts because of individual differences.

Swami Vishnu Tirtha in Devatma Shakti (Kundalini) describes the rising process experienced by yogis in these words:

Yogis experience currents of prana flowing down and up the nervous system in the whole body and concentrating it near the coccyx, and also through the legs flowing up to the same point, and then the whole energy is felt gradually entering the spinal cord at that point and rising up straight to the top in cerebrum giving the yogi a beatitude of bliss not otherwise experienced.<sup>1</sup>

According to yogic texts, the awakening of Kundalini can be unexpected and sudden, gradual (step-by-step), as a result of spiritual disciplines and practices such as concentration and meditative techniques, or it may be congenitally active as in born mystics. The Kundalini mechanism can also be activated through sexual activity and childbirth. Awakening of Kundalini may occur through shatipat, that is, through transference of a guru's spiritual energy (shakti) by touch, thought, glance, or mantra. Many awakening experiences do not result in a fully risen Kundalini, and some are referred to as partial, incomplete, or abortive. Negative aspects of awakening can be described as the result of a defective ascent of Kundalini as in Gopi Krishna's case where the energy concentrated in the right channel (pingala), causing unbearable heat, instead of the central channel (sushumna).<sup>2</sup> It is recognized in the yogic tradition that a faulty awakening of Kundalini could result in destruction of matter, and in some cases insanity. All yogic scriptures have one thing in common which is to

warn disciples not to proceed without a proper guide as the increased energy could be dangerous in an unprepared individual if one does not know how to control this energy. Traditionally, Kundalini was awakened when the guru decided the time was right, and a disciple would be supervised and guided by their guru.

In the Hindu yogic tradition, a genuine Kundalini awakening is considered to be the beginning of a longitudinal transformation process effecting body, mind, and spirit. If the mechanism of Kundalini is in full operation, which is rare, its purification process results in transformation of matter and consciousness.

Within the yogic traditions, spiritually awakening experiences have been variously described as a rush of energy moving up the spine, a force that ascends up the spine like a flash of lightning, an electric current passing through one, a powerful force that surges upwards, and hot currents of energy moving up the spine. Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri in “The Psychophysiology of Kundalini” expounds three theories to interpret the mechanism involved in converting the coiled energy at the base of the spine from its static form into its dynamic form. He gives an orthodox interpretation of this “upward-ascending electric current”: “. . . at the highest point of inward concentration in the practice of kundalini yoga, the coiled energy becomes entirely dynamized, leaves its original abode at the base of the spinal cord, shoots up to the top of the cerebrum and becomes blissfully united with the boundless light of transcendental consciousness (paramshiva).”<sup>3</sup> Chaudhuri mentions that modern interpreters find this orthodox interpretation difficult to accept as the presence of the static coiled energy is essential to the functioning of the physical body.

The signs and symptoms of a classical Kundalini awakening have been described in ancient yogic texts. On awakening one can experience various bodily movements, head

sensations, and expansion of consciousness. Swami Vishnu Tirtha gives some of the characteristic symptoms associated with an awakened Kundalini in his work Devatma Shakti based on a treatise on the subject *Mahayoga Vijnana* by his guru Sri Yoganandji Maharaja. These may include: shaking, trembling, vibrations, currents of energy rising up to the head, you feel contraction of nerves, divine intoxication, blissful sensations, hearing inner sounds, and uttering unknown languages.<sup>4</sup>

From a yogic perspective, the operation of this mechanism does not signify that one leads a spiritual life as Kundalini raisers are not necessarily on a spiritual path. The energy, once raised, must be fully-controlled, and accompanied by moral development if one is to become a balanced whole being. There is a difference between a mystic who seeks God through love, and an individual who seeks to stimulate the pleasure centre of the brain.

#### **The Kundalini Mechanism: Two New Activities in the Body**

Pandit Gopi Krishna (1903-1984) was founder-director of the Central Institute for Kundalini Research in Srinagar, Kashmir, and author of many books and articles including Kundalini, The Evolutionary Energy in Man, Krishna's autobiographical account of his spontaneous Kundalini awakening. Through his writings Krishna has drawn the attention of the West to the Kundalini process as well as calling for research on Kundalini. He explains the mechanism of Kundalini in these words:

. . . the activation of the mechanism marks the start of two new and different activities in the body. [First,] the whole vast network of nerves begins to manufacture a more potent form of psychic energy (prana) and pour it into the brain through the spinal duct. The most distinguished feature of this altered form of bioenergy is that it appears as a luminous cloud in the brain. The energy in the average men and women does not have this property. For this reason the visionary experience of mystics is almost always bathed in light.

. . . This is also the reason why kundalini is always likened to sun, moon, lightning, or fire. Flashes of light or other forms of luminosity, experienced by many people during the course of meditation, and sometimes even otherwise, are often due to a sudden, brief upsurge of the higher prana into the brain.

[Second,] the other activity starts in the genital region. On the awakening, the reproductive juices in the form of radiation are sucked up in a mysterious way and poured into the spinal canal. . . This juicy stream rising through the spine represents the “nectar” or “ambrosia” repeatedly mentioned in the treatises on kundalini. . . Its entry into the spinal cord, and later on into the brain, is marked by exquisitely pleasurable sensations even exceeding orgasm. This stream of organic essence is ramified into smaller streams, during the course of its ascent into the cranium, and these slender streams irrigate the visceral organs through the nerve plexes or the chakras.

The stream can be distinctly felt moving into the various organs, stomach, liver, intestines, heart, lungs, throat, and the like. A new channel for toning up the organs to meet additional needs, resulting from an increase in the area of awareness, now comes into operation. In this way the body and the brain are prepared for a more elevated manifestation of consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

The awakening of the Kundalini mechanism can best be understood by reading the variety of descriptive accounts presented below of those who have undergone the experience.

### **Gopi Krishna**

Krishna’s awakening experience occurred one morning in 1937 (age 34) while he was sitting cross-legged meditating as was his custom for hours at a time with his attention on the crown of his head visualizing a lotus in full bloom. He describes his spontaneous awakening experience of Kundalini in such detail that I will quote him fully.

I sat steadily, unmoving and erect, my thoughts uninterruptedly centered on the shining lotus, intent on keeping my attention from wandering and bringing it back again and again whenever it moved in any other direction. The intensity of concentration interrupted my breathing; gradually it slowed down to such an extent that at times it was barely perceptible. My whole being was so engrossed in the contemplation of the lotus that for several minutes at a time I lost touch with my body and surroundings. During such intervals I

used to feel as if I were poised in mid-air, without any feeling of a body around me. The only object of which I was aware was a lotus of brilliant colour, emitting rays of light. This experience has happened to many people who practise meditation in any form regularly for a sufficient length of time, but what followed on that fateful morning in my case, changing the whole course of my life and outlook, has happened to few.

His report continues with an emphasis on the triggering of the process due to his intense concentration as the energy moves upwards from the base of the spine:

During one such spell of intense concentration I suddenly felt a strange sensation below the base of the spine, at the place touching the seat, while I sat cross-legged on a folded blanket spread on the floor. The sensation was so extraordinary and so pleasing that my attention was forcibly drawn towards it. The moment my attention was thus unexpectedly withdrawn from the point on which it was focused, the sensation ceased. Thinking it to be a trick played by my imagination to relax the tension, I dismissed the matter from my mind and brought my attention back to the point from which it had wandered. Again I fixed it on the lotus, and as the image grew clear and distinct at the top of my head, again the sensation occurred. This time I tried to maintain the fixity of my attention and succeeded for a few seconds, but the sensation extending upwards grew so intense and was so extraordinary, as compared to anything I had experienced before, that in spite of myself my mind went towards it, and at that very moment it again disappeared. I was now convinced that something unusual had happened for which my daily practice of concentration was probably responsible.

Krishna continued his intense meditation which resulted in an experience of liquid light entering his brain:

I had read glowing accounts, written by learned men, of great benefits resulting from concentration, and of the miraculous powers acquired by yogis through such exercises. My heart began to beat wildly, and I found it difficult to bring my attention to the required degree of fixity. After a while I grew composed and was soon as deep in meditation as before. When completely immersed I again experienced the sensation, but this time, instead of allowing my mind to leave the point where I had fixed it, I maintained a rigidity of attention throughout. The sensation again extended upwards, growing in intensity, and I felt myself wavering; but with

a great effort I kept my attention centered round the lotus. Suddenly, with a roar like that of a waterfall, I felt a stream of liquid light entering my brain through the spinal cord.

Krishna's experience culminated in an out-of-body experience, and an expansion of consciousness that he describes in the following words:

Entirely unprepared for such development, I was completely taken by surprise; but regaining self-control instantaneously, I remained sitting in the same posture, keeping my mind on the point of concentration. The illumination grew brighter and brighter, the roaring louder, I experienced a rocking sensation and then felt myself slipping out of my body, entirely enveloped in a halo of light. It is impossible to describe the experience accurately. I felt the point of consciousness that was myself growing wider, surrounded by waves of light. It grew wider and wider, spreading outward while the body, normally the immediate object of its perception, appeared to have receded into the distance until I became entirely unconscious of it. I was now all consciousness, without any outline, without any idea of corporeal appendage, without any feeling or sensation coming from the senses, immersed in a sea of light simultaneously conscious and aware of every point, spread out, as it were, in all directions without any barrier or material obstruction. I was no longer myself, or to be more accurate, no longer as I knew myself to be, a small point of awareness confined in a body, but instead was a vast circle of consciousness in which the body was but a point, bathed in light and in a state of exaltation and happiness impossible to describe.

After some time, the duration of which I could not judge, the circle began to narrow down; I felt myself contracting, becoming smaller and smaller, until I again became dimly conscious of the outline of my body, then more clearly; and as I slipped back to my old condition, I became suddenly aware of the noises in the street, felt my arms and legs and head, and once more became my narrow self in touch with body and surrounding.<sup>6</sup>

This individual's awakening experience resulted in an ongoing difficult transformation process which lasted for twelve years. Krishna experienced emotional, and physical and mental problems. Through his study of the oral tradition, he came to the conclusion that his problems were associated with the malfunctioning of the Kundalini mechanism. His awakening had

occurred through *pingala* on the right side of his spine instead of the central channel (sushumna) which is why he experienced unbearable heat. This was compounded by the fact that his intensive practice of meditation had prematurely activated a normally dormant brain centre, and his body was not prepared to provide the enhanced bioenergy the brain needed. His major problems were that he had no knowledgeable spiritual teacher to guide him during the Kundalini process, and he was unable to control this energy.

### **Jiddu Krishnamurti**

Krishnamurti, a philosopher and mystic, was born to Brahmin parents in Madanapalle, India on May 11, 1895. He is well known for his association with the Theosophical Society who regarded him as a world teacher. Krishnamurti experienced great physical suffering that may have been due to the awakening of Kundalini. He referred to the mental and physical phenomena happening to him as “The Process” which reached a climax in 1924 (age 29).

Krishnamurti wrote in a letter:

Whatever it is, the force or whatever one calls the bally thing, came up my spine, up to the nape of my neck, then it separated into two, one going to the right and the other to the left of my head till they met between the two eyes, just above my nose. There was a kind of flame and I saw the Lord and the Master. It was a tremendous night. Of course the whole thing was painful, in the extreme.<sup>7</sup>

This self-report is an account of a painful experience which his brother Nitya felt could be related to the opening of the “third eye.” As in Gopi Krishna’s case, Krishnamurti’s ongoing Kundalini process was a difficult and painful one. He experienced ongoing pain in his head, neck, and spine as well as digestive problems.



## **B. S. Goel**

This personal account of a spontaneous awakening experience is by an Indian male who had been practicing yoga exercises and pranayama for several years. His awakening experience happened in 1964 (age 28) while he was standing on the roof of a building with a friend discussing religion and Marxism:

. . . I found to my great astonishment that a great force rose from the base of my spine and rushed up to the crown of the head where Hindus keep a lock of hair. I noticed further that the force which went into that point also removed something from that point which looked like a cork on a bottle, and lo! I stood there a completely transformed man in a high state of ecstasy! My vision changed immediately and the total world assumed a silvery white shape.<sup>8</sup>

According to yogic texts the awakening of Kundalini situated at the base of the spine can activate, as Goel describes, a usually dormant centre of the brain called Brahma-randhra also known as Cavity Of Brahma in Hindu scriptures situated where Hindus keep a lock of hair.<sup>9</sup> Like Gopi Krishna, Goel is experientially aware of activating this normally dormant brain centre. Goel has also documented his Kundalini process in detail for the benefit of others undergoing the process. As in Krishna's and Krishnamurti's case, Goel also experienced emotional, as well as physical and mental problems.

## **Sri Ramakrishna**

Ramakrishna is a well-known mystic and saint of India who tried to describe his Kundalini experiences to his disciples. The mystic experienced the awakening of Kundalini during the period when he had been practicing the disciplines of Tantra. The following account was recorded by one of his disciples:

He actually saw the Power, at first lying asleep at the bottom of the spinal column, then waking up and ascending along the mystic Sushumna canal and through its six centres, or lotuses, to the

Sahasrara, the thousand-petalled lotus in the top of the head. He further saw that as the Kundalini went upward the different lotuses bloomed. And this phenomenon was accompanied by visions and trances.<sup>10</sup>

Ramakrishna also described to his disciples how he experienced the various movements of the spiritual current. These included: moving up the spine in a zigzag way like a snake, step-by-step, reaching Sahasrara in one jump like a monkey, or moving up the spine crawling like an ant.

### **Jagadananda Bhakti Shastri Tirtha.**

This experience occurred while Jagadananda was meditating and chanting OM:

Then I had an exciting experience! I felt as if I was no longer a man of flesh and blood but was present everywhere. This feeling started from my toes and rose to my head until I felt I had burst out of the upper part of my skull. It was as if my skull was hit by hammers. Then I lost all consciousness. I was in samadhi for three days and three nights, with no feeling of the external world. When I returned to my senses, I was uttering the sound MA, which means mother. . . . the doctor had declared me dead.<sup>11</sup>

This account varies from the classical model of Kundalini awakening and supports Lee Sannella's clinical data of a movement of energy starting from the toes and rising to the head (see Chapter 5).

### **Gopi Krishna**

This account is of Samadhi or an ecstatic unitive experience that Krishna had while meditating in 1943 (age 40). The energy moves from the toes towards the spine as in Jagadananda's Samadhi experience:

I distinctly felt an incomparably blissful sensation in all my nerves moving from the tips of fingers and toes and other parts of the trunk and limbs towards the spine, where, concentrated and intensified, it mounted upwards with a still more exquisitely pleasant feeling to pour into the upper region of the brain a

rapturous and exhilarating stream of a rare radiating nerve secretion. In the absence of a more suitable appellation, I call it nectar, a name given to it by the ancient savants. All authorities on Kundalini Yoga are agreed about the reality of the ambrosial current, which irrigates the seventh center in the brain at the moment of the union of Shakti with Shiva, . . . and it is said that the flow of the nectar into it or into one of the lower centres on spinal axis is always accompanied by a most exquisite rapture impossible to describe, exceeding many times in intensity that most pleasurable of bodily sensations, the orgasm, which marks the climax of sexual union.<sup>12</sup>

The next day after this experience, Krishna became ill. He realized that he had overdone his practice of meditation, and had dangerously strained his nervous system. His head reeled, and there was an unpleasant noise in his ears. Instead of experiencing a glow in his head, he observed a terrifying column of *fire* was mounting up shooting out tongues of flame in every direction. Krishna also suffered from insomnia, acute digestive disturbances resulting in inability to eat much, and he was slightly delirious at times.

### **Swami Muktananda**

This experience of Muktananda's occurred while he was meditating on his guru Nityananda being in his body from his toes to his head:

As I continued to meditate, my meditation became concentrated in the heart, and the *prana* became serenely steady there. I felt a stab at the *muladhara* like a bolt of divine lightning. A wave of *prana* ran throughout my body and throbbed in thousands of different nerves. I was lost in meditation.

At 3:00 I heard Nityananda Baba's voice telling me to get up. I did so; I had been immersed in ecstasy. My trance slowly disappeared.<sup>13</sup>

In this experience, Muktananda's meditation became focused on his heart, not on the base of the spine, nevertheless, he experienced a stabbing sensation at the lower centre, and he felt energy (*prana*) moving throughout his whole body.

### **Sri B. P. Dalal**

The following is an account of a spiritually awakening experience through shaktipat or the grace of the guru, given in this particular case by Swami Muktananda:

I compose myself as usual, to meditate. . . . I can hear Baba walking about in the garden, . . . suddenly he shouts loudly from nearby, 'Kalu, Kalu'. I hear him distinctly. The effect is immediate. I feel a current of power flowing from the bottom of the spine gradually up, spread into my abdomen, my chest and soon my whole body tingles with a strange force. What is happening to me? The force surges up in waves. Now I can't contain myself; my breathing is loud and forced. I am fully awake. I cannot sit still. I get up and walk about the narrow room. I feel an extraordinary strength. I stretch my arms, and flex my muscles. I have an insane impulse to break the wall down with my bare hands. I am Samson, ready to shake the pillars and bring the roof down over my enemies. I am breathing more and more heavily, as the mysterious force pours into my body. I have an insane impulse to thump my chest and shout. I resist it. But in a while, I can resist no more. I thump my chest and laugh aloud. For half an hour or more, I pace up and down the narrow room thumping my chest, and then suddenly I find myself shouting in triumph: *Sivoham! Sivoham! Sivoham!* Am I going mad? I can no longer stand it. I open the door, and slip out into the garden, and go to the far side, where is a bronze of Nataraj dancing in ecstasy. I stay there for a while, until I am calmer.<sup>14</sup>

This description emphasizes the powerful nature of a force that was aroused within Dalal by the grace of his guru. The individual in this account describes the energy current as moving up from the base of the spine in waves spreading throughout the whole of his body as in the previous account.

### **Swami Narayanananda**

Narayanananda's account is of a full rising of Kundalini to the head triggered by intense meditation in 1933.

. . . Swamija sat as usual in meditation at midnight. With the mind deeply concentrated, he felt the full rising of the Kundalini Shakti

to Sahasrara. His heart beats and breathing stopped automatically (Kevala Kumbaka). The body idea melted away and he felt the mind completely absorbed in Infinity, and the individual consciousness merged with the Ocean of Consciousness by Itself. There were no traces of mind, ego, intellect, etc. This was the ultimate experience, the Formless aspect of God or the All-pervading Consciousness.

Swamiji remained in this state of Nirvikalpa Samadhi for a long time. Then his mind, though still at a very high pitch, slowly but surely, came down to the plane of relative consciousness. But now his angle of vision had changed completely. Having attained full Illumination, there was no trace of ignorance left in his mind, and he perceived the one Atman (Self) everywhere behind all names and forms, and he actually felt the Divine unity in the universal diversity.<sup>15</sup>

The yogi's account above describes a unitive experience, that is, the uniting of the individual consciousness with cosmic consciousness on the full rising of Kundalini as defined in yogic texts.

### **Sufi Spiritual Awakening Irina Tweedie**

Irina Tweedie is a European woman born in Russia who knew little about yogic practices when she went to India at the age of fifty-two. In Chasm of Fire, Tweedie's spiritual autobiography, is an account in diary form of her experiences after shaktipat initiation or Kundalini awakening by her Indian Sufi master, Bhai Sahib. She describes the initiation as like receiving an electric shock as he looked at her - a Sufi yogic master awakens Kundalini at the heart chakra. Tweedie was the first Western woman to receive the Sufi training according to the ancient tradition. She reports being unprepared for the transformation process that occurred on the arousal of Kundalini which was subject to no effort being made on her part except that she totally surrender to her guru. In the texts below taken from her spiritual

autobiography she describes frightening sensations of psychosomatic heat on awakening

**Kundalini:**

**Burning currents of fire inside; cold shivers running outside, along the spine, wave after wave, over legs, arms, abdomen, making all the hair rise. It is as if the whole frame were full of electricity.<sup>16</sup>**

**A fire was burning inside my bowels and the sensation of heat increased and decreased in waves. I could do nothing. I was in complete psychological turmoil.<sup>17</sup>**

**Irina's terrifying experience is expressed in another recorded entry:**

**The power inside my body did not abate all night and I could not sleep. I noticed something completely new. My blood was getting luminous and I saw its circulation throughout the body. I soon then became aware that it was not the blood; a light, a bluish-white light was running along another system . . . The light came out of the body and re-entered it again at different points. Observing closely I could see that there were countless points of light like a luminous web encircling the body inside and out. It was very beautiful. No bones existed; the body was built on the web of light.**

**Soon however I became aware that the body seemed to be on fire. This liquid light was cold but it was burning me, as if currents of hot lava were flowing through every nerve and every fibre, more and more unbearable and luminous, faster and faster. Shimmering, fluctuating, expanding and contracting, I could do nothing but lie there watching helplessly as the suffering and intense heat increased with every second . . . Burned alive.<sup>18</sup>**

**Intense heat experienced on Kundalini arousal may also be accompanied by overwhelming sexual desire as Irina Tweedie records in her diary. Siddha Master Swami Muktananda also reports in his spiritual autobiography that he experienced overwhelming sexual desire. Eastern esoteric traditions recognize that there is a connection between the arousal of the life-force and sexual energy. (I discuss sublimation of sexual energy in Chapter 10.)**

## **Yogi Amrit Desai**

**Yogi Desai's awakening experience in 1970 was triggered while he was performing yoga postures and listening to yogic chanting by his guru Swami Shri Kripalvanandji. At that point in time, Desai was living in America having spent over twenty years learning and teaching traditional Ashtanga yoga. The following personal account is of an ecstatic expanded state of consciousness in which the Yogi's body began to perform spontaneous and automatic yoga postures. He calls this transforming spiritual experience "Meditation-in-Motion."**

**Suddenly, like an unexpected spring downpour, bliss flooded throughout my entire being, and I felt myself being irresistibly drawn to another level of consciousness. As my mind was drawn more and more inward, and the external surroundings dissolved far into the background, I began to feel that I was no longer the performer of the exercises; they were being performed through me.**

**A new flow of energy coursed throughout my system, and with no conscious effort on my part, my body spontaneously began to twist and turn on its own, flowing smoothly from one posture to the next. The movements were effortless and free, a command and a gift from a newly opened, higher dimension of my inner being. My body became extraordinarily elastic and stretched smoothly and easily beyond its previous limits. I was moving in perfect rhythm with the whole universe. I was not aware of giving any direction to the movements.**

**Thoughts continued to come, but now they passed through my mind in slow motion, seemingly disconnected from my body's activity. I realized that if I wished, I could stop this experience, and yet I had no desire to do so. . . .**

**One after another the postures flowed. Some of them were traditional yoga exercises; others were movements which I had never seen before. Gradually, I became more and more absorbed in my experience. At the end of this flow of postures, my body naturally entered the lotus position, and a deep stillness, so deep that it penetrated every level of my being. Then a second explosion of ecstasy spread through me, and I became engulfed, overwhelmed, by a state of complete inner bliss.**

**My consciousness slowly began to return to normal.<sup>19</sup>**

Experiencing spontaneous body movements is not unusual on awakening of the life-force. Swami Muktananda, and Western individuals have also reported experiencing this phenomenon. Amrit Desai's experience; which lasted for about thirty minutes, was observed by others who reported that they saw a brilliant light surrounding Desai. The Yogi writes that he experienced a heightened sense of perception on returning to normal consciousness.

### **Summary**

The accounts of Eastern experiences in this chapter show us the dramatic impact both physically and mentally of what is described as the awakening of an energy or force can have on an unprepared individual especially in the purification process expressed as psychosomatic heat.

These descriptive accounts also show us the variety of ways in which the sensation of energy generated by Kundalini arousal through the practice of various disciplines and practices can be experienced. A few accounts point out that some yogis are aware of sensations moving from the feet up to the spine, and then entering the head in contrast to the classical Kundalini model where it moves up from the base of the spine to the head.

Besides describing these experiences in terms involving the notion of energy, the accounts of the phenomena experienced by people at Kundalini awakening emphasize elements such as light, visions, unitive states as well as ecstatic and trance-like states. All of these we will find also accompany mystical experiences in both Eastern and Western traditions.

These accounts provide a framework in which others can understand and place their own personal experiences. In the next chapter, we will look at Kundalini-like experiences in the West.



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### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **THE AWAKENING OF KUNDALINI IN THE WEST**

The raising of Kundalini is usually thought of by Westerners as an Eastern concept which can only be experienced by yogis after a long and arduous preparation. The concept that the raising of Kundalini can only be achieved by yogis after intensive preparation is no longer considered true. It is increasingly being recognized by the Western scientific community and ordinary individuals that the phenomena associated with Kundalini rising are occurring in the West. This may be the result of the adoption of Eastern practices which have become popular since the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, the raising of Kundalini can occur spontaneously in a variety of circumstances in those who have no knowledge of Kundalini. Kundalini can be released spontaneously in unprepared Westerners. In Kundalini and the Chakras, a Christian who has experienced the awakening of Kundalini and counsels others on the Kundalini process explains: "Involuntary ways in which Kundalini may be released include drug use, overwork, a severe blow or injury to the tailbone area, grief, trauma, or excessive fear; excesses in meditation, growth practices, or sex. Excessive sexual foreplay without orgasm may also cause spontaneous Kundalini release."<sup>1</sup> Individuals who have a history of long-term meditation practice usually have no idea that intense meditation could result in Kundalini arousal and unusual physiological activity.

In The Stormy Search for the Self by Psychiatrist Stanislav Grof, former Chief of Psychiatric Research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, and his wife Christina, the

authors mention that thousands of Westerners have been observed to have exhibited signs of Kundalini awakening, a form of spiritual emergence. The authors state that “This process, although regarded by the Yogis as highly desirable and beneficial is not without dangers.”<sup>2</sup> The Grofs also point out that “. . . the activation of Kundalini is not a phenomenon limited to non-Western cultures. In the Christian tradition, manifestations resembling Kundalini have been described during the practice of the so-called Jesus prayer or hesychasm.”<sup>3</sup>

I have researched the Kundalini phenomenon for a number of years, and have observed phenomena associated with Kundalini in a variety of individuals including Christian individuals in a religious context. The signs and symptoms of Kundalini awakening are unrecognized, and not understood by clergy who in certain cases unknowingly may have themselves triggered the Kundalini process in individuals by the laying on of hands analogous to a shaktipat experience.

According to my research, the raising of Kundalini can be a pleasant transformative experience. It can also completely disrupt an individual’s life if they are unable to handle a dramatic increase of energy rushing through the body. Sometimes people can become completely out of control and unable to function as they normally do. It has sometimes resulted in a serious undiagnosed illness. This sudden increase of energy places a strain on the nervous system and the need for the human organism to adjust to this increased energy. Lack of understanding by the medical profession, may result in phenomena associated with Kundalini arousal such as shaking and muscular contractions, being diagnosed in the West as a neurological disorder. It is because the symptoms of Kundalini arousal are similar to other disorders that they are difficult to diagnose.

There is no Western model or framework in which to understand the concept of Kundalini. The awakening of Kundalini in the West can be approached by looking at literary

accounts of ordinary Western individuals' personal experiences within the context of Kundalini. One can see from the descriptive accounts below that some experiences are similar to those experienced by yogis thus verifying the cross-cultural similarity of these experiences. Some experiences are described according to the classical Kundalini yoga model, and others show the variety of individual experiences. Spiritually awakening experiences involve movement of energy which can be triggered and experienced in a variety of ways. The noted "fire" experience of mystics and saints is also experienced by secular individuals described in some accounts as intense heat rising up the spine, and throughout the whole body.

### **Mineda McCleave: Christian Experience**

This account by Mineda McCleave in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment is of an awakened Kundalini but not fully risen. She describes how a current of energy entered her left foot and moved up the left leg to her lower back triggered by intense prayer:

On April 6, 1976, I was very deep in prayer, expressing a strong need for God's intervention in the affairs of my life. Unexpectedly, I was jarred out of my prayer by what felt like a current of energy that seemed to enter my body through my left foot. Subjectively, it seemed like an electrical charge of nervous energy, moving with extreme rapidity up the inside of my left leg, passing through my genitals, and then dispersing in my upper back. This current was constant for four days and nights. With it there was an increased feeling of great body heat. I felt as though I were burning up from the inside out. Relatives could feel heat emanating from the front and back of my head while their hands were an inch away from me. It was a frightening experience, I knew, intuitively, that I had somehow triggered this current through intense prayer, but I had no knowledge of how to stop it.<sup>4</sup>

This experience led the individual to seek guidance in the Bible, and she found comfort in rereading the psalms. The after effects of this person's experience resulted in schizophrenic-like behavior, and a hyperactive mind. Physical symptoms included anorexia, nausea,

headaches, trembling, fever, and mood swings. On reading Gopi Krishna's autobiography she could see a parallel between his experiences and her own such as increased genital activity. McCleave concluded that she had experienced a Kundalini awakening, but the energy had only partly risen. Indeed, in spite of the psychopathology mentioned here one can also recognize elements of Kundalini experience.

### **Philip St. Romain: Kundalini in the Context of Christian Contemplative Prayer**

In Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality, Philip St. Romain, a Catholic lay minister, describes the psychological and physiological phenomena that he has experienced since 1986 associated with the Kundalini process. St. Romain's spiritual autobiography is of particular interest to us because his experiences occurred in the context of Christian contemplative prayer. He mentions that before the spring of 1988 he had no knowledge of Kundalini. St. Romain describes his experiences in the following text:

During the fall of 1987, at about the time the asanas were diminishing in intensity, I began to experience in prayer a prickly sensation on the top of my head. It felt like a mild electrical shock - not pleasant, but not painful either. This prickly pain seemed to clear my head of all pain and preoccupation, leaving me in a state of clarity and restfulness. . . .

But what was this prickly pain? Once again, I searched the Christian contemplative literature, and found nothing. . . . Beginning in January 1988, the prickly pain seemed to begin communing in some strange way with my abdomen, and I knew I was out of the Christian contemplative framework, for sure.

The crown-abdomen communication went on for months, increasing in intensity toward the summer of 1988. During prayer, my stomach would tighten, my breathing would all but cease, and a center on top of my head, from which the prickly pain emanated, seemed to be sinking roots to relieve the abdominal area of its stresses. . . . Then something would give way in the abdomen, the crown would fizzle with energy, and a delicious sigh would issue from the abdomen. . . .

Between December 1987 through May 1988, I was awakened almost every night to take time for prayer. Sometimes I knelt for one or two hours, with abdomen and crown communing, feeling peaceful enough, but not understanding a thing about it.<sup>5</sup>

Sensations at the top of the head were frequently reported during my interviews of subjects for my research project (see accounts Chapter 6). My literary research shows that Krishnamurti also experienced a similar crown sensation to St. Romain.<sup>6</sup> In an effort to understand his experiences, St. Romain described his experiences to his friends who were priests and nuns, but they could not help him. During one phase of his development, he began to do bodily movements that he later realized were yogic postures, as well as a variety of facial movements. St. Romain also experienced seeing “shimmering gold lights” with his eyes closed, and felt that he was bathed in light from head to toe.

#### **Presbyterian Female**

This account by a 39 year old woman in Religion and Society in Tension describes a sensation that started at the crown of her head and moved down:

“ . . . I felt as if a wave started at my crown and continued down through my body, out through my feet. I truly felt as if God had passed his hand over me. I felt as if I had been reborn. It was a miracle! I went back to sleep without a care or concern in the World.”<sup>7</sup>

In the context of evangelical meetings, I have observed that the kind of sensations experienced by this woman are usually interpreted as the coming of the Holy Spirit.

#### **Brian Van der Horst: A Classical Kundalini Experience While Practicing a Lesson from “A Course In Miracles”**

This account in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment describes in orgasmic terms what occurred while the individual was practicing a lesson from “A Course In Miracles.”

I suddenly felt some activity at the base of my spine. Previously I had ignored such sensations. I had it figured out that meditation should be something quiet. This time I said, what the hell, I'll just go with the flow. A feeling like shuddering, surging energy began traveling up my back. I felt as if every nerve trunk on my spine had begun firing. Each burst was as good as any orgasm I'd ever had. It kept climbing. I could feel vortexes of electricity around places that have been described as chakras. "Well," I thought, "So this is kundalini."

Then I began breathing quickly, spontaneously. First I was smiling, then grinning, then swept over with joy, ecstasy, rocking and quaking, my whole body aquiver. The fire climbed, and then shot out of the top of my head. "This makes celibacy look pretty good," I observed.<sup>8</sup>

This "fire" that climbed up the individual's spine and out of his head, left him feeling "indescribable joy" that lasted for days.

#### **Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke (1837-1902)**

This next account is from Dr. Bucke's classic work Cosmic Consciousness. Dr. Bucke, a Canadian psychiatrist, describes in the third person an experience he had at age 36. This experience occurred after he had been reading works by well-known authors:

He was in a state of quiet, almost passive enjoyment. All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-coloured cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city, the next moment he knew that the light was within himself. Directly afterwards there came upon him a sense of exaltation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendor which has ever since lightened his life; upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an after-taste of heaven.<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Bucke describes his spiritually awakening experience using the images of light and fire like many other individuals. It is interesting to note that he describes his brain experience in similar terms to Gopi Krishna.



### **D. R. Butler: Shaktipat Initiation in the West**

D. R. Butler describes a classical Kundalini awakening experience as the result of a shaktipat initiation given by Yogi Amrit Desai in 1973 at a Yoga Convocation in New York. The individual was involved in a group meditation followed by chanting. He describes his experience as follows:

The first thing I noticed was a wave of euphoria softly permeating my being. I felt intensely happy. I didn't know the reason for the wonderful feeling but I determined to relax and enjoy it.

Suddenly surges of energy - like electrical changes - streaked up my spine. These gradually evolved into a steady current of hot energy flowing from the tip of my spine to the top of my head . . . .

Brilliant colors swirled inside my head; I thought I would burst with happiness. Nothing ever had felt so good! Suddenly a scream burst from someone in the back of the room, then another. In a few moments the place was a madhouse. People were crying hysterically, laughing uncontrollably, gasping for breath, even rolling on the floor. Apparently everyone was experiencing some manifestation of the same energy I was feeling. . . .

Suddenly the whole thing stopped as abruptly as it had begun. The energy inside me subsided and the room quieted, Amrit began to explain what had happened.<sup>10</sup>

After this awakening experience, Butler describes how his body filled with a "brilliant white light" while he was still in the presence of the guru. At this time, he regarded his experience as a transforming one in that he felt his life as he had known it had come to an end.

### **Elaine Lehman: Spontaneous Experience**

Elaine Lehman has also experienced the Kundalini process for many years, and describes her experiences in her autobiography The Big K: The Kundalini Story. She also found some understanding of her experiences in reading Gopi Krishna's autobiography. Lehman has experienced many years of physical suffering as well as spiritual breakthroughs.

The following account is of a spontaneous awakening experience which occurred while she was standing on a cruise ship waiting for it to dock.

I suddenly felt a completely strange, utterly remarkable sensation. A warm wave of energy surged gently up through my entire body. It felt like melted butter might feel, only better. It soothed every part of me, every nerve and muscle and filled me with utterable bliss.<sup>11</sup>

Lehman has also experienced intense heat that she describes as “liquid fire” or a “burning flame.” In the following text she describes a kind of purification process in terms borrowed from the Eastern model of Kundalini:

The burning flame explored every part of my body over and over again. As the vital force penetrated each chakra, that part of the body resisted.

The body has natural blocks in a variety of places. The Kundalini works away at those blocks and the person suffers discomfort, pain and even diagnosable illnesses.<sup>12</sup>

Lehman reports experiencing a healing crisis for over twenty years. As in Lehman’s case, unexplained pains and illnesses are often reported by people undergoing the Kundalini process, for example, Krishnamurti experienced an undiagnosed illness which was likened to that of a “malarial patient.”<sup>13</sup>

As well as experiencing intense heat, Elaine Lehman has also experienced light which is a common characteristic of a classical Kundalini episode. She describes her experience of photism or light in the following account:

Each time I looked within, it was stronger. I could see a golden light that filled my entire body and arms and legs. It seemed to fade just inches beyond my skin. Three days ago when the Kundalini started, there was only the light. Now, besides the light, there were deeper gold tendrils that stroked my organs, muscles and skin. The tendrils were thicker, and almost appeared to have a liquid texture.<sup>14</sup>

The experience of light, which is regarded as a sine qua non of mystical experience, is also experienced by Vanora Goodhart. The account of her light experience is described in different terms, and is quoted later in this chapter.

### **Christina Grof: Kundalini Awakening and Childbirth**

Christina Grof in The Stormy Search for the Self describes an experience analogous to a Kundalini experience she had while giving birth in 1968. She explains that before the birth she had combined Hatha yoga postures with Lamaze childbirth breathing techniques. Breathing techniques or pranayama are used by yogis to awaken Kundalini, and this may have contributed to Grof's experience. However, in Kundalini and the Chakras, Paulson mentions that extra Kundalini release may occur in pregnant women because of the pressure of the fetus on the area between the anus and the genitals associated with Kundalini.<sup>15</sup> Grof writes that as her son was making his way into the world:

I felt an abrupt snap somewhere inside of me as powerful and unfamiliar energies were released unexpectedly and began streaming through my body. I started to shake uncontrollably. Enormous electrical tremors coursed from my toes up my legs and spine to the top of my head. Brilliant mosaics of white light exploded in my head, and instead of continuing the Lamaze panting, I felt strange, involuntary breathing rhythms taking over.

It was as though I had just been hit by some miraculous but frightening force, and I was both excited and terrified; the shaking, the visions, and the spontaneous breathing were certainly not what I had expected from all of my months of preparation. As soon as my son was delivered, I was given two shots of morphine, which stopped the whole process.<sup>16</sup>

Grof also had a similar experience during the final stages of her daughter's birth two years after the birth of her son. This time she was given a large injection of tranquilizers instead of morphine which again stopped the experience, and this led her to believe that what she had experienced was a sign of illness. Later, she interpreted it as a Kundalini awakening. Several

years later Grof's life was dramatically effected by the Kundalini process as the result of a powerful shaktipat experience given by Swami Muktananda in which he slapped her several times on the forehead. This event changed her whole life as she became preoccupied with spiritual pursuits. Paradoxically, she experienced ecstatic episodes but also suffered from tremors, anxiety attacks, mood swings, depression, and gastrointestinal problems. Grof became an alcoholic and felt that she was no longer in control of her life. Later she married Dr. Stanislav Grof who helped her to realize that her experiences were part of a transformation process.

### **Male: Evangelical Experience of the Holy Spirit**

This experience took place at a revival meeting. The energy that took possession of this 45 year old man's body is explained as due to the Holy Spirit. What is interesting about this experience is that it can be compared with Christina Grof's shaktipat experience as he was also touched on the forehead. The account below is from Religion and Society in Tension:

. . . A month later at a mass meeting (evangelical and a healing campaign) I went forward and as I approached the platform the Power of God entered my body with tremendous feeling as electricity. I stood still just waiting. One of the evangelist helpers said you better go forward the evangelist is waiting to pray for you. As I walked forward the Holy Spirit released His Power. But after the evangelist anointed and said, "In Jesus name it is done" and he released his hand from contact on my forehead the Power of God, He, The Holy Spirit, came back into my body and with great power and took possession. I laid down easily on the floor and within seconds I was stiff and couldn't move. The Holy Spirit had *complete control* over my body and I was on my back for 5½ hours before I was again able of my own strength and will to get up. All morning and next day I felt the power vitalizing me with great energy. When it wore off I was left weak in my own natural body. I was weak in the natural because this was the third day of fasting.<sup>17</sup>

In this description, we again see the term electricity used to describe the experience of being possessed by a power or force entering the physical body as in a Kundalini experience.

### **Peter Russell: An Ecstatic Experience After Meditation**

The account of this experience is in The Relevance of Bliss by Nona Coxhead. It is interesting because the focus is on the chest area, and occurred after meditation:

. . . there was nothing extraordinary about the meditation, except perhaps it was very still and more peaceful than usual. Afterwards I laid down on the floor for a few minutes, as is my normal practice. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, waves of bliss and happiness started moving through my body. It was very much a physical sensation which seemed to come somewhere in the centre of the chest.

As they spread through my body I felt ridiculously happy, so much so that my inner smiles broke out into spontaneous laughter. I lay there laughing and laughing until suddenly the problem I had been immersed in flitted through my mind. It now seemed silly and insignificant; . . . The fact that I could have become so immersed in it just made me laugh more and more.

Then my body started a dancing movement, if you can call it that. Lying on the floor the whole body began a series of movements rather reminiscent of Indian dancing. Arms, legs, hands, body, neck all flowing, waving and rippling completely spontaneously. This lasted for about ten minutes, gradually subsiding and leaving me in a state of incredible peace and well-being.<sup>18</sup>

The happiness that the individual felt as the physical sensations moved through his body releasing him from his problem is expressed in this positive account. This letting go is expressed in bodily movements similar to those described by others on experiencing an awakening of the life force within, for example, Yogi Amrit Desai.

### **Vanora Goodhart: Kundalini Experience and Zen Meditation**

This account in The Relevance of Bliss triggered by the practice of Zen Buddhist meditative techniques, is analogous to a Kundalini awakening experience. The experience

lasted for twenty minutes, and the person describes head sensations similar to those experienced by St. Romain as well as seeing light.

. . . I felt a stirring at the base of my spine, and a slight pressure that rose up my back, at the same time a light began seeping through my closed eyelids, bright and gentle at first, but growing more and more intense. . . . Momentarily, I opened my eyes to make sure this Light was not coming from anywhere in the room - it was most certainly not.

**'A great rush of power'**

I closed my eyes again. The intensity grew and grew. If my eyes had been open I should have felt it was blinding. Moreover, there was a great power and strength in this Light, that was by now burning wonderfully deep into my emotions. The bliss was so totally overwhelming, . . . was I dying, was I leaving my body? The pins and needles that started in my head were now spreading down through my body, at the same time I felt I was being drawn upwards and in a great and wonderful rush of power that rose eventually to a crescendo and bathed me through and through with glorious burning, embracing Light. Then slowly, gently, I came back, again there was the powerful feeling of being drawn, this time back down into my body. During this time I had at one point flung my arms open as if I wanted to open my heart physically to the Light.

Now I felt I was back, the Light was still glowing gently, but I knew I should open my eyes. I realized I was literally drenched in perspiration and my heart was beating hard.<sup>19</sup>

This experience changed the individual's life for the better. Accounts such as the one above are often not recognized as being associated with the awakening of Kundalini by those who have not had the experience. It is by recognizing the characteristics associated with Kundalini rising that one can better understand one's spiritual awakening experience.

### **Summary**

Spiritually transformative experiences do occur both in Eastern and Western contexts. According to the Grofs, awakening of Kundalini in the West is a form of spiritual emergence. Spiritual emergencies are defined in Christina and Stanislav Grof's work The Stormy Search

**for the Self as “. . . critical and experientially difficult stages of a profound psychological transformation that involves one’s entire being.”<sup>20</sup>**

**A literary analysis shows that Christians such as St. Romain and McCleave do experience Kundalini-like phenomena as the result of intense prayer and meditation, but they have no model with which to understand their experiences. These Christians, like some other Western individuals, recognized their experiences either in Eastern texts, in the Bible, or in the lives of Christian saints and mystics. This suggests that some religious Christians may have indeed experienced an awakening of Kundalini.**

**The Western accounts in this chapter show that spiritually awakening experiences or spiritually transformative experiences expressed in terms of light or fire can spontaneously occur in a variety of circumstances. They also show that contemporary Western people do experience a variety of energy-type experiences as well as mystical elements such as light and visions.**

**NOTES: CHAPTER 3**

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3. Grof and Grof, p.80.
4. Mineda J. McCleave, "Christian Mysticism and Kundalini," in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed. John White (New York: Paragon House, 1990), p.408.
5. Philip St. Romain, Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp.28-29.
6. Mary Lutyens, Krishnamurti: The Years of Awakening (New York: Avon Books, 1975), p. 171.
7. Charles Y. Glock, and Rodney Stark, Religion and Society in Tension (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), p.53.
8. Brian Van der Horst, "So This Is Kundalini," in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed. John White, p.155.
9. Richard M. Bucke, Cosmic Consciousness (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1973), pp.7-8.
10. D. R. Butler, "Instant Cosmic Consciousness?" in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed John White, pp.185-186.
11. Bob Lehman, and Elaine Lehman. The Big K: The Kundalini Story (Seattle, Washington: Hara Publishing, 1996), p.5.
12. Lehman, and Lehman, p.151.
13. Lutyens, pp.163-164.
14. Lehman, and Lehman, p.77.
15. Paulson, p.11.
16. Grof, and Grof, p.10.
17. Glock, and Stark, p.53.



18. Nona Coxhead, The Relevance of Bliss (London: Wildwood House, 1985), p.71.

19. Coxhead, pp.63-64.

20 Grof, and Grof, The Stormy Search, p.31.

## CHAPTER 4

### KUNDALINI-LIKE EXPERIENCES IN OTHER TRADITIONS

In this chapter I discuss cross-cultural knowledge of the Kundalini mechanism, and present selected descriptive accounts of the phenomenon. An analysis of historical and anthropological data shows that concepts suggestive of the Kundalini model exist in North American Indian tribes, Tibetan Buddhism, Taoist Yoga, Sufism, and Christian mysticism. Cross-culturally energy akin to Kundalini has been awakened through rituals, and a variety of spiritual disciplines and practices including trance states in parts of Africa. From a cross-cultural perspective, the mystical traditions from various cultures describe the awakening of Kundalini as the arousal of an energy or force that rises upwards symbolized by light or fire.

Cross-cultural parallels of the Kundalini model are discussed by John Woodroffe in The Serpent Power. He writes:

So some of the Sufi fraternities (as the Naqshbandi) are said to have devised, or rather borrowed, from the Indian Yogis the Kundalini method as a means to realization. I am told that correspondences are discoverable between the Indian (Asiatic) Sastra and the American-Indian Maya Scripture of the Zunis called the Popul Vuh. My informant tells me that their "air-tube" is the Susumna; their "twofold air-tube" the Nadis Ida and Pingala. "Hurakan," or lightning, is Kundalini, and the centres are depicted by animal glyphs.<sup>1</sup>

Frank Waters also suggests in the Book of the Hopi that the Hopi Indians of North American have also known about Kundalini, and the invisible energy centres that correlate

with the Hindu chakras though they differ in number. He describes what the Hopis taught in the following text:

The living body of man and the living body of the earth were constructed in the same way. Through each ran an axis. Man's axis being the backbone, the vertebral column, which controlled the equilibrium of his movements and his functions. Along this axis were several vibratory centers which echoed the primordial sound of life throughout the universe or sounded a warning if anything went wrong.<sup>2</sup>

Even though there is cross-cultural knowledge of the Kundalini model, the human energy models of the esoteric traditions differ in each culture. Empirical research shows that these contradictions may be the result of individual differences, inadequate self-observation due to lack of awareness, being programmed to experience within a particular model, and inability to describe personal experiences without cultural or religious bias.

### **Taoist Model**

One example of the different approaches between esoteric traditions is found in comparing Hindu texts with Taoist texts. As Taoist master Mantak Chia points out, Hindu yogis emphasize the vertical rising of energy whereas Taoist masters emphasize its grounding and circulation as denoted by their symbols. While the traditional Hindu model of Kundalini is symbolized by a serpent spiralling vertically, the Yin and Yang energies of the Taoist energy system are shown symbolically as spiralling into each other within a circle. Chia explains the difference between the Indian and Taoist energy systems in these words, "The Tao system differs from the Indian in that a return route is provided for: from the palate to the tongue to the throat, to the navel and back to the coccyx to begin a new circuit. In this way power is evenly distributed throughout the seven glands."<sup>3</sup> Two main energy channels comprise this circuit known as the "Microcosmic Orbit." The first channel named the Governor Channel or

Tu Mai is yang (masculine), hot in nature like fire, and corresponds to the classical Hindu model of the route the awakened Kundalini takes as it ascends to the crown of the head. The second channel known as Jen Mai or Functional Channel is yin (feminine), cold in nature like water, and descends down the front of the body to complete the circuit. Taoist masters contend that the union of these two energy channels results in primordial energy circulating in the Microcosmic Orbit; the sexual current from the ovaries in women and testes in men being carried and distributed to other parts of the body. The circulation of this energy current through the Microcosmic Orbit is referred to as the “circulation of light or fire” in Taoist texts. The Taoist’s energy model is comprised of these two main Chi channels and eight other meridians. The meridians of the Taoist energy system are of interest here because of the questions raised by Western scientific research of the mechanism of the Kundalini (see Bentov’s research Chapter 5), and the contradictions presented by the classical Hindu Kundalini yoga model of movement of energy when this mechanism is triggered.

In Awaken Healing Energy through the Tao, Mantak Chia clearly states from the Taoist perspective that energy can start to move from different parts of the body including the toes. This agrees with the findings of contemporary research, thus contradicting the classical yoga model:

When the Ching-Chi sperm energy first awakens, you may have difficulty telling whether it is real or imagined. But soon you will be absolutely convinced of the indisputable reality of the energy flow. It will start in the abdomen or the hands or legs or the big toes.<sup>4</sup>

I discuss the findings of Itzhak Bentov’s research in Chapter 5 of this thesis. His research suggests a neurophysiological model to account for bodily sensations that start at the toes or feet and move upward.

### **Buddhist Tantric Model**

The physical system of Buddhist Tantrism resembles the Hindu Tantras model, but differs in its approach and methods. The difference in approach is shown by the fact that Tantric Buddhism does not focus on the raising of Kundalini at the base of the spine to Sahasrara as the concept of Sakti does not play a role in Buddhism. Instead there is a focus on the naval chakra associated with psychic heat, and the raising of the Bodhicitta which when produced in the navel awakens the “goddess Candali” lying sleeping in that area.<sup>5</sup> This awakening can be experienced as intense heat. Tantric Buddhism, however, does emphasize the same three nerves as the Hindu Tantras. The three channels of Tantric Buddhism, Avadhuti, Lalana, and Rasana correspond to the Sushumna of Hindu Tantras; the central channel associated with the spine, Ida to the left of the spine, and Pingala to the right of the spine respectively.<sup>6</sup> These esoteric systems also emphasize the chakras of which there are four in Tantric Buddhism<sup>7</sup> and seven in the Hindu system. The number and location as well as descriptions of chakras differ in different texts. The four chakras of the Tantric Buddhist model are situated at the crown, neck, heart, and navel. The Buddhist Tantras differ in their approach to the chakras in that they are concerned with the dynamic functions of the chakras, and do not emphasize their static nature as in the Hindu Tantras.

In the descriptions below, we look at the concept of activation of a potential energy from below that rises upwards.

### **Healing Dance of the !Kung Bushmen**

Certain societies perform rituals that suggest awareness of the Kundalini mechanism. An example of this awareness is provided by the !Kung Bushmen of Africa. Their rituals

include a healing dance. In an article entitled “The Painful Ecstasy of Healing,” Richard Katz, an American anthropologist, summarizes the main aspects of this ritual as follows:

In the healing dance of the !Kung everyone shares in a spiritual power called “n/um.” Some translate n/um as “medicine,” but it is more than just medicine. N/um is energy. The !Kung say it is found in the fire, in the healing songs, and most of all in the healers, in whom it concentrates in the pit of their stomachs and the base of their spines. The dance activates the n/um in the healers; their singing and their dance movements, they say “heat up” the n/um. When n/um reaches boiling, it vaporizes and rises up the spine. Tsau, one of the stronger healers, describes the feeling of n/um as a tingling in the base of his spine that works its way up his backbone, until it “makes your thoughts nothing in your head.”

As n/um reaches the base of a healer’s skull, he enters a state of transcendence called “!kia.” Once in this state, the dancer can heal. !Kia, usually translated as “trance,” is actually a state of enhanced awareness, in which the healer claims, among other things, to see over great distances, inside other people’s bodies, and to be able to contact the gods. Tsau speaks of how boiling n/um produces !kia: “N/um lifts you up in your belly and lifts you in your back, and then you start to shiver. N/um makes you tremble; it’s hot. Your eyes are open but you don’t look around; you hold your eyes still and look straight ahead. But when you get into !kia, you’re looking around because you see everything, because you see what is troubling everybody.”<sup>8</sup>

The ritual dancing of the !Kung is the trigger which activates this spiritual energy called “n/um.” This energy concentrates in two energy centres, the base of the spine, and the pit of the stomach. As in a classical Kundalini experience, the dancers experience a sensation at the base of their spines, and heat rising up the spine to the head resulting in a trance state called “!kia.”

### **Bali Temple Dancer**

In Trance in Bali, Jane Belo records a Bali temple dancer’s explanation of her trance experience as being entered by a god. When this god entered the dancer, it took possession of

her, enabling her to dance spontaneous bodily movements. This is reminiscent of what is experienced by some individuals who have awakened Kundalini. This is a description of an individual being entered by a god: "First my head suddenly got heavy, and my feet burned." Then, "My body suddenly was burning, from the earth straight up to the sky - that's how it felt."<sup>9</sup> This description suggests that the dancer experiences heat moving up her body to her head upon entering a trance state.

### **The Vailala Madness**

An interesting account of a collective phenomenon, or mass psychosis, experienced by individuals in the Papuan Gulf New Guinea in 1919, is recorded by anthropologist Francis Edgar William in 'The Vailala Madness' and other Essays. The individuals of this region experienced nervous and physical symptoms which started with strange sensations experienced in the belly:

The common native name for the condition, *Iki haveve*, which means literally "Belly don't know," would appear to arise from the facts (1) that the seat of the strange sensations is commonly felt to be in the belly; and (2) that the subject, when overcome by them, does not know what he is about.

The stomach is certainly regarded as the source of inspiration by those especially gifted Automaniacs who can divine; and one of them has defined to me two distinct stages of the seizure: first, *iki haveve*, when he is simply dizzy or ecstatic; second, *iki pekakire* - "Belly he think," when the inspiration rises. *Pekakire* means literally, "to climb." As for the alternative name *haro heraripe*, *haro* means head, and the word *heraripe* appears to indicate a whirling motion.<sup>10</sup>

This account of the unexplained "Vailala Madness" interpreted as a nervous disorder, describes an experience in which sensations started in the stomach and climbed up to the head. As a result of this "Madness" which spread like an epidemic, people could experience uncontrollable somatic movements such as trembling.

Phenomena experienced on the awakening of a spiritual energy in a non-Christian context has also been reported as occurring in Christian religious movements such as the Pentecostal Church, and the charismatic movements of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. A Christian biblical reference to Kundalini is made by Yogi Amrit Desai in his article entitled “Kundalini Yoga Through Shaktipat.” He suggests that:

The physical manifestations which occur with the movement of shakti correspond exactly to the biblical description of the day of Pentecost: “and suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire and it sat on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:2-4).<sup>11</sup>

Desai does not limit his comparison to the Pentecost event, and suggests that:

Whenever the right conditions are provided, experiences somewhat similar to shaktipat can be observed, as in the Pentecostal Church. Others who experience slight variations of this awakening are those who practice Subud, Quakers (who were originally called that because they quaked), and Holy Rollers. It may also manifest itself on the psychiatrist’s couch and in group therapy sessions, or during drug experiences.<sup>12</sup>

Desai’s text above expounds even further the universal aspect of awakening of Kundalini by a variety of triggers, and the physical manifestations associated with it. (I mentioned in Chapter 2 the different triggers of Kundalini.)

### **Summary**

There have been many documented accounts from differing mystical traditions of descriptions of people being possessed by an energy or power described in some cases as a *god*. In this chapter, a cross-cultural comparison of esoteric human energy models suggests



that many societies are aware of the Kundalini phenomenon even though their energy models and terminology may differ, for example, the Hindu Tantras and Taoist models.

One could assume that the activation of this potential energy is the result of one common factor which must be in part physiological. This would account for the similarities of the phenomena experienced whether called possession by the Holy Spirit or N/um. When an individual has awakened Kundalini, various phenomena can be observed: one can heal as in the case of the !Kung, experience spontaneous bodily movement, enter into trance-like states, or in certain cases, become out-of-control. Powerful rushes of energy experienced by those who have awakened Kundalini may result in people finding it difficult to control their behavior. They may perform yogic-like postures, laugh uncontrollably, speak in tongues, and utter animal sounds. However, it is important not to ignore the hyperstimulation of the nervous system which may have contributed to the occurrence of these experiences.

In chapters two, three, and four, I have attempted to show the similarity of human experiences across a variety of cultures and religions. If these Kundalini-like experiences could be synthesized according to Eastern concepts, this synthesis could provide a new developmental model for spiritually awakening experiences occurring in a Western context, experiences for which we have no adequate paradigm at the present time. The Eastern perspective provides concepts allowing for practitioners and researchers alike to bring diverse aspects of Kundalini-like experiences into one model. Contemporary North-American scientific research on the Kundalini phenomenon discussed next may provide additional tools to understand spiritually transformative processes.

**NOTES: CHAPTER 4**

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2. Frank Waters, Book of the Hopi (Middlesex, England: Penquin, 1963), p.9.
3. Mantak Chia, Awaken Healing Energy through the Tao (New York: Aurora Press, 1983), p.81.
4. Chia, p.38.
5. Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta, Tantric Buddhism (Berkeley, Calif.: Shambhala, 1974), p.173.
6. Dasgupta, p.154.
7. Dasgupta, pp.48 &148.
8. Richard Katz, "The Painful Ecstasy of Healing," in Consciousness: Brain, States of Awareness, and Mysticism, by Daniel Goleman, and Richard J. Davidson, (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp.166-167.
9. Jane Belo, Trance in Bali (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p.25.
10. Francis E. Williams, 'The Vailala Madness' and other Essays (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1977), p.336.
11. Yogi Amrit Desai, "Kundalini Yoga Through Shaktipat," in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed John White (New York: Paragon House, 1990), p.74.
12. Desai, p.74.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONTEMPORARY NORTH-AMERICAN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH ON THE “PHYSIO-KUNDALINI SYNDROME”**

In this chapter, we look at contemporary scientific research on the Kundalini phenomenon that may provide some new understanding of significant aspects of the Kundalini mechanism and its effect on the brain and nervous system. Very little has been done, but what has been accomplished so far provides confirmation that the Kundalini mechanism is amenable to scientific research.

Research on yoga was first carried out by self-observation or self-experimentation by yogis. They developed a detailed map of the transformation process through using themselves as subject and observing their disciples. The first laboratory to conduct medical research on yoga was Kaivalyadhama, at Lonavala, South India, established in the 1920s by Swami Kuvalayananda.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1930s, research was carried out at the Santa Cruz Yoga Institute founded by Shri Yogendra. These two organizations still exist and still conduct research even though the founding Swamis are now dead.

It was in the 1930s that a more objective experimental approach was called for to assess the effects of yoga. In 1935, laboratory studies were conducted on yogis by Therese Brosse, a French cardiologist. She measured their control over regulating their heart through voluntary control of autonomic functions.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1950s, studies on yoga and meditation have been conducted by universities and research laboratories worldwide including the

Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas, and the All-India Institute of Medical Science in New Delhi. The Indian government has also been involved in yoga research programmes. Swami Rama, a yogi willing to personally subject himself to laboratory research, participated in a series of experiments at the Menninger Foundation and demonstrated his control over the autonomic nervous system. James Funderburk Ph.D. includes all available physiological data arising from the scientific research on yoga in Science Studies Yoga, an overview of experimental results, published in 1977. Laboratory studies have involved yogis and other individuals using a variety of meditative techniques such as Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Zen meditation. Research has also been conducted on the breathing patterns of yogis. The vast literature on meditation research from 1931 to 1996 has been covered by Michael Murphy in his recently published review of contemporary research entitled The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation.<sup>3</sup> At the present time, Vivekananda Kendra Research Foundation in Bangalore is one of the research centres most actively engaged in yoga research, but very little research is being done in the Western world on the medical effects of yoga. According to my research, no longitudinal study has yet been done on spiritual development as the result of practicing yoga, in particular, as the result of the activation of the Kundalini mechanism.

Two American researchers, among others, have studied Kundalini from a scientific perspective, Lee Sannella, M.D., a psychiatrist and ophthalmologist, and Itzhak Bentov (1923-1981), a biomedical equipment inventor who studied altered states of consciousness. Dr. Sannella has been on the staff of several academic establishments, and in 1974 he co-founded the Kundalini Clinic in San Francisco to help people who have experienced a spontaneous Kundalini arousal deal successfully with the psycho-physiological consequences

of such an experience. Sannella has also worked with Bentov conducting laboratory experiments on meditating subjects and persons experiencing a Kundalini awakening.

**Clinical Study: Lee Sannella, M.D.**

According to Dr. Sannella's own clinical study the so-called "awakening of Kundalini" is a reality in contemporary Western society. In his book The Kundalini Experience: Psychosis or Transcendence<sup>4</sup> (1987), originally written for medical practitioners in 1976, Sannella presents seventeen case histories of Kundalini arousal. In this work, Sannella supports the model formulated by Itzhak Bentov, even though it may prove to be only partially correct. Nevertheless, Bentov's model (to be described next) could account for many of the signs and symptoms observed on Kundalini awakening. Sannella mentions that it is the first and only model so far of the Kundalini phenomenon that can be subjected to experimental verification.<sup>5</sup> According to Sannella there are still only two major models of Kundalini activity. The classical model of yoga and Tantric scriptures of India, and Bentov's "physiological model" - even though Bentov's experiments have not yet been replicated.<sup>6</sup> Sannella found that his own clinical observations agreed with Bentov's physiological model as he found that ". . . it was possible to understand a whole range of kundalini phenomena in strictly physiological and physical terms."<sup>7</sup>

Sannella argues in his book that, first, the "awakening of kundalini" is a reality, and second that the Kundalini process "is part of an evolutionary mechanism" therefore, this "process of psychophysiological transmutation" must not be viewed as a pathological development.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the Kundalini process is an important phenomenon to which scientists should pay careful attention. From his point of view, descriptions of the transformative process recorded by various traditions are very similar. He has observed that a

study of the various recorded traditional accounts reveals symptom patterns and experiential phenomena that are “strikingly similar” to those of the clinical cases he cites in his book.<sup>9</sup> Some of these include: automatic body movements, heat and cold sensations, inner sounds, inner light, paralysis, and unusual breathing patterns. Sannella argues that “. . .these common aspects have physiological components,” and that “activation of a single physiological mechanism is at the root of the wide diversity of kundalini phenomena we encounter.”<sup>10</sup>

In his study of the Kundalini process, including the phenomena experienced on Kundalini rising, Sannella stresses the differences between his clinical observations and the traditional yoga classical model of the Kundalini process. As Sannella found the majority of his clinical observations fell into the physiological category, he uses the term “physio-kundalini” to distinguish the differences between his data and the traditional notion of Kundalini as a “spiritual energy.”<sup>11</sup> Dr. Sannella explains one major difference between his clinical observations and the classical model of the Kundalini process in these words:

The most striking difference concerns the movement of the kundalini energy through the body-mind. According to the traditional scriptures of Yoga and Tantrism, the kundalini rises from the center at the base of the spine along the spinal axis to the crown of the head. This description is also part of the self-reports of Swami Muktananda (1974) and Gopi Krishna (1971). By contrast, my clinical data and also some traditional non-Hindu accounts point to a movement of the kundalini proceeding from the feet and legs along the back of the trunk or along the spine to the head and from there down over face, through the throat, and terminating in the abdomen.<sup>12</sup>

We should notice that the Taoist model of the human energy system, discussed in Chapter 4, allows for movement of energy starting from the feet or legs, which agrees with Sannella’s findings. The Taoist model also describes a return route for the energy down the front of the body, also present in Bentov’s model, which differs from the classical yoga Kundalini model.

## **Psychosis and Kundalini**

In his book, Sannella addresses the diagnostic problem of pathological elements present in the transformation process. He recognizes that certain pathological elements could be associated with the awakening of Kundalini. If this is the case, elements that look pathological according to the orthodox Western medical model, may actually be part of a transformation process. For instance, this description, which Sannella regards as a rebirth experience, could be diagnosed as the account of a pathological process:

In a darkened room a man sits alone. His body is swept by muscle spasms. Indescribable sensations and sharp pains run from his feet up his legs and over his back and neck.. His skull feels as if it is about to burst. Inside his head he hears roaring sounds and high-pitched whistling. His hands burn. He feels his body tearing within. Then suddenly he laughs and is overcome with bliss.<sup>13</sup>

Sannella contends that this description is not of a psychotic episode. It is a description of a “psychophysiological transformation” or “rebirth.” He argues that it is only when the symptoms are not understood in the context of a transformative process that they are seen as pathological.<sup>14</sup> Sannella tries to show that it is possible for members of the medical profession to distinguish the physio-kundalini process from psychosis, thus avoiding the diagnostic mistakes made in the past. Heat, one distinguishing feature pointed out by Sannella, is a common sensation in Kundalini states, but rare in psychosis. Also if voices are heard by Kundalini experiencers, they are perceived as coming from within instead of being mistaken for outer realities as is the case in psychotic states. Other typical distinguishing features of Kundalini rising he mentions are feelings of vibration, itching, or tingling in definite patterns over the body.<sup>15</sup>

According to the clinical findings of Dr. Sannella, Kundalini is a positive transformative energy, but the experience itself can cause stress resulting in “severe imbalance.” Sannella states: “Usually the process, when left alone, will find its own natural pace and balance. However, if it has already become too rapid or violent, my experience suggests that its course can be moderated by introducing a heavier diet and vigorous exercise and by suspending meditation.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Physio-Kundalini Syndrome: Itzhak Bentov’s Brain Wave Theory**

Western scientists such as Christopher Hills who is also a yogi, and biochemist Erik Floor, both propose a neurological theory to explain Kundalini. As mentioned in Chapter 1, in “Is Kundalini Real?” Hills states that we mistakenly believe we experience Kundalini moving as energy through the chakras, when in fact, it is experienced in the brain, and not at the base of the spine. According to this theory, every part of the body has a corresponding centre in the brain, and the physical sensations of Kundalini are the effect not the cause.<sup>17</sup> Floor, a Ph.D. who has done research in neurochemistry, psychophysiology, and genetics at Harvard University, also suggests in his article “The Biological Basis of Kundalini” that the site of the biological trigger for Kundalini energy could be in the brain. He writes: “According to this theory, the sensations felt in the spine and internal organs during the arousal of kundalini are the secondary reverberations of a primary activity in the brain that projects outward into the body via the peripheral nerves.”<sup>18</sup> Floor contends that objective evidence could be obtained if a “hypothetical kundalini researcher” were to monitor nerve activity at the base of the spine, and in the brain at the same time with electronic instruments. He predicts that in the above experiment, “. . . nerve activity in the brain would precede nerve activity at the base of the



spine and the *perception of 'energy'* in that area, by a fraction of a second.”<sup>19</sup> For Floor, the problem is the lack of suitable technology for research in this area. (I do not know whether Floor was aware of the electromagnetic technology developed by scientist Hiroshi Motoyama, and the research of biomedical inventor Itzhak Bentov that we will now discuss.)

Itzhak Bentov's original scientific paper on micromotion and the Kundalini mechanism “Micromotion of the Body as a Factor in the Development of the Nervous System,”<sup>20</sup> is of particular interest even though some of the assumptions that he makes in this paper have not been confirmed. This paper is included as an appendix in Sannella's work. Bentov is also the author of Stalking the Wild Pendulum (1977)<sup>21</sup> in which he discusses what he terms the “physio-kundalini syndrome.” His neuro-physical model or physiological model has provided a context within which the medical profession and other practitioners can work. We know from Tantric texts that a sequence of physiological reactions accompanies the awakening of Kundalini, but they are not recognized or understood by the Western medical profession. However, Bentov's model has been used for describing to some physicians cases of the physio-kundalini syndrome which he documented.

Bentov's research involved seated meditating subjects capable of altering or controlling their state of consciousness and whose physiological changes were monitored by the application of a ballistocardiograph.<sup>22</sup> Bentov observed that the ballistocardiogram of a subject in a deep meditative state showed a “rhythmic sine wave pattern.” This he attributed to the development while meditating of a “standing wave” of energy, or vibration in the aorta, (the main artery carrying blood from the left ventricle of the heart), which is reflected in the rhythmic motion of the body. This resonating oscillator, that is, the heart-aorta system, will

entrain four other oscillators resulting in a magnetic field around the head. These five resonating systems are as follows:

1. The heart-aorta system produces an oscillation of about 7 Hz in the skeleton, including the skull. The upper part of the body also has a resonant frequency of about 7 Hz.
2. The skull accelerates the brain up and down, producing acoustical plane waves reverberating through the brain at KHz frequencies.
3. These acoustical plane waves are focused by the skull onto the ventricles, thus activating and driving standing waves within the third and lateral ventricles.
4. Standing waves within the cerebral ventricles in the audio and supersonic ranges stimulate the sensory cortex mechanically, resulting eventually in a stimulus traveling in a closed loop around each hemisphere. Such a traveling stimulus may be viewed as a “current.”
5. As a result of these circular “currents,” each hemisphere produces a pulsating magnetic field. These fields are of opposing polarities.<sup>23</sup>

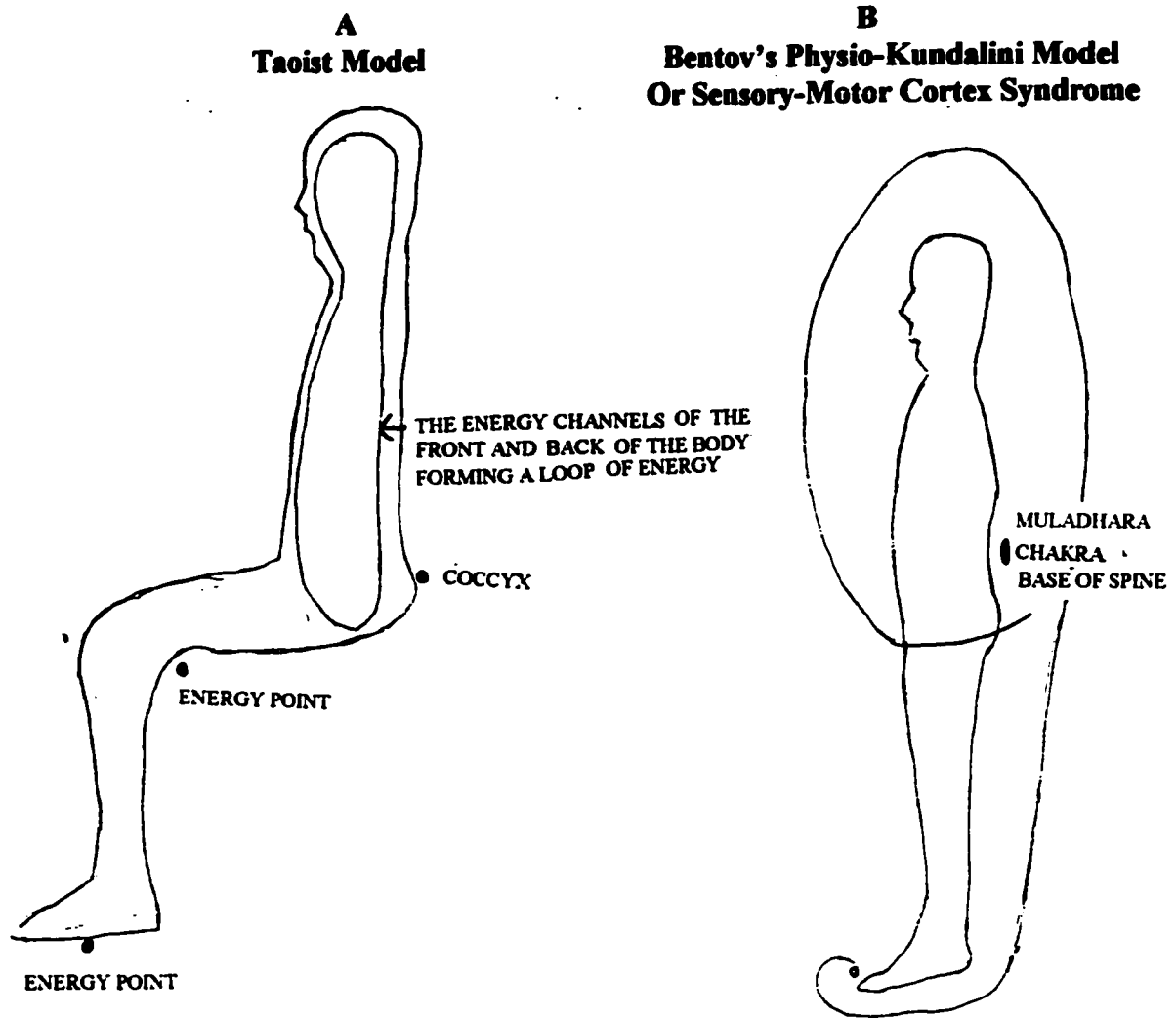
In the introduction of his paper on the Kundalini mechanism, Bentov states that prolonged meditation causes many physiological changes in the body including a change in the way the nervous system functions. He describes what he calls “the rising of the kundalini” in meditative subjects according to his research findings:

Theoretically, when meditation is practiced properly, a sequence of strong and unusual bodily reactions and unusual psychological states is eventually triggered. The “rising of the kundalini,” as described in the classical literature of Yoga, is a stimulus or “energy” activating a “center,” or chakra, at the base of the spine working its way up the spine. The stimulus stops at several centers along the spine, as it rises. These centers are located opposite the major nerve plexuses in the abdomen and in the thorax, which are also stimulated in the process. Eventually the stimulus ends up in the head. Along its path, it often causes violent motion in some

parts of the body, signifying that there is “resistance” to its passage. The rising of the kundalini may happen suddenly or over a period of several years. After entering the head, the stimulus continues down the face into the larynx and the abdominal cavity.<sup>24</sup>

The physical symptoms of the physio-kundalini stimulus, sometimes experienced as a tingling sensation, are in order of occurrence according to Bentov’s model the toes, foot, leg, pelvis, spine, neck, head, eye, face, throat, and abdomen. According to Bentov, the symptoms are caused by a circulating current moving along the sensory cortex. One can compare Bentov’s model which is illustrated in Stalking the Wild Pendulum (p.147) and the Microcosmic Orbit of Taoism as in both models the energy is shown continuing down to the abdomen. This is seen in my diagram of Bentov’s model, and my diagram of the circulating energy in the Microcosmic Orbit (Figure 1). The circulating current in the Microcosmic Orbit is formed by the joining of the front and back energy channels. In the diagram of the Microcosmic Orbit is marked an energy point that according to Taoist texts is situated on the sole of each foot which connects one to the earth energy.

**Figure 1**  
**TAOIST MICROCOSMIC ORBIT COMPARED WITH**  
**ITZHAK BENTOV'S MODEL OF THE PHYSIO-KUNDALINI SYNDROME**



- A. Circulation of Chi.  
 B. Sequence of symptoms experienced by meditators and non-meditators starting in the left foot or toes due to a current moving along the sensory cortex.

An interesting outcome of Bentov's research is that while using a biofeedback technique, he observed that this mechanism triggered in meditators, could also be triggered in nonmeditators:

Most meditators realize that these reactions are caused by meditation and do not become alarmed. However, sometimes this mechanism can be triggered in nonmeditators. Our observations indicate that exposure to certain mechanical vibrations, electromagnetic waves, or sounds may trigger this mechanism.<sup>25</sup>

In Stalking the Wild Pendulum, he writes, "The cumulative effect of these vibrations may be able to trigger a spontaneous physio-kundalini sequence in susceptible people who have a particularly sensitive nervous system."<sup>26</sup> Spontaneous cases of Kundalini arousal have been reported under a variety of circumstances, and according to Bentov, his model may explain some of them.

Bentov states that when the evolution of the nervous system is accelerated spontaneously, or by meditative techniques it results in the triggering of a sequence of events that sometimes causes "unusual bodily reactions" and "unusual psychological states":

The sequence of bodily symptoms usually starts at the left foot or toes, either as a mild tingling stimulus or as cramps. The stimulus continues up the left leg to the hip. In extreme cases, there is a paralysis of the foot and of the whole leg. Loss of sensation in large areas of the skin of the leg may occur. From the hip the stimulus moves up the spine to the head. Here sometimes severe headaches (pressurelike) may develop. In case of prolonged and severe pressures in the head, degeneration of the optical nerve may set in, with accompanying visual impairment. Loss of memory and general disorientation may occur. The psychological symptoms tend to mimic schizophrenia. It is very likely, therefore, that such individuals may be diagnosed as schizophrenics and be either institutionalized or given very drastic and unwarranted treatment.<sup>27</sup>

According to Bentov's research, the observed bodily symptoms of the syndrome start in the left foot, then, the stimulus moves upwards towards the spine and head. It then moves down the face and the front of the body to terminate in the stomach. In another text, Bentov describes the symptoms of the "physio-kundalini syndrome" in these terms: "Respiration may become spasmodic with involuntarily occurring maximum expirations. Various auditory tones have been noted, from constant low-pitched hums to high-pitched ringing. Visual aberrations and a temporary decrease or loss of vision has been observed. The sequence of symptoms continues later, down into the lower abdominal region."<sup>28</sup> This sequence of symptoms viewed by Bentov as an "accelerated evolution of the nervous system,"<sup>29</sup> he terms the "sensory-motor cortex syndrome." Thus, as Bentov points out, in giving the sequence of symptoms experienced by people a title, it puts "the esoteric kundalini into terms of Western physiology."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, his model is a useful working model that can be used by the medical profession for diagnosing Kundalini symptoms: "The model describes the *sequence of symptoms* that allows the interviewing physician to compare the symptoms described by the patient. If the past pattern of symptoms fits the model, then the future symptoms are fairly predictable."<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that Tirtha's description of what yogis experience (see Chapter 2) agrees with Bentov's model, and Sannella's clinical data that show the movement of energy proceeding from the legs.

However, as Bentov himself recognizes, this model only describes the physiological aspect of Kundalini:

This model, which we may call the "physio-kundalini" since it deals only with the physiological part of the kundalini, describes the kundalini as a stimulus spreading along the sensory cortex of the two hemispheres, starting from the bottom of the cleft between the two hemisphere of the brain. The layout of points on the sensory

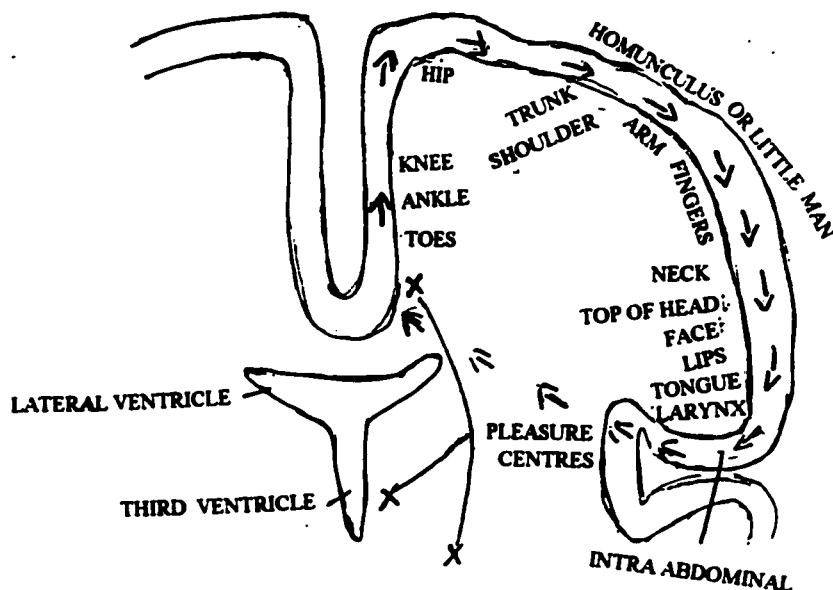
or motor cortices corresponds to points in the body, so that when a point on the cortex, representing, for example, the knee, is electrically or mechanically stimulated, the person feels the stimulus in his knee. He has no way of knowing that the stimulus is caused by his brain being artificially stimulated.

This sequence of points on the cortex is called the “homunculus” or the “little man,” for if one draws a picture of the parts of the body to which the points in the cortex are connected, a distorted human form results.<sup>32</sup>

In the text above, Bentov points out that the stimulus is caused experimentally by artificially stimulating the brain. He is “trying to show that the layout of points on both the sensory and the motor cortices corresponds closely to the path the kundalini takes in the body. This same path is described in esoteric literature.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, he writes, “To cause such a stimulus to move along the cortex, acoustical standing waves in the cerebral ventricles are postulated. These standing waves are triggered by the heart sounds, and they cause vibrations in the walls of the ventricles. The ventricles are fluid-filled cavities in the brain.”<sup>34</sup> Eventually, these vibrations “polarize” the cortex so that it will conduct a signal along the homunculus, starting from the toes up to form a closed loop.<sup>35</sup> My diagram below (Figure 2) loosely based on Bentov’s diagram in Stalking the Wild Pendulum (p.141) represents a cross section of the left hemisphere of the brain showing the parts of the body that correspond to a sequence of points in the cortex called the “homunculus” or the “little man.” The closed loop is shown by a line of arrows.

Figure 2

**CROSS SECTION OF THE LEFT HEMISPHERE OF THE BRAIN  
SHOWING POINTS ON THE CORTEX STIMULATED BY A  
CIRCULATING CURRENT FORMING A CLOSED LOOP**



Therefore, Bentov's model suggests that the stimulation of the sensory cortex by the circulating "current," may offer a physiological explanation for the sequence of symptoms sometimes experienced upon Kundalini awakening. Furthermore, according to Bentov's neurological theory, the ecstatic or bliss states of individuals who experience this closed loop, "... may be explained as a self-stimulation of the pleasure centres in the brain, caused by the circulation of a "current" along the sensory cortex."<sup>36</sup>

For Bentov, the symptoms indicate that a release of stress is taking place. He describes Kundalini as "a great stress-relieving system," and points out that if the person is free from psychological stress, the symptoms of kundalini may go unnoticed. It is only when Kundalini reaches stress areas in the body that problems arise usually experienced as localized



pain.<sup>37</sup> If the symptoms of Kundalini are viewed as stress releasing as Bentov suggests, this process should be regarded as therapeutic rather than pathological.

In concluding his chapter on “The Physio-Kundalini Syndrome” in Stalking the Wild Pendulum, Bentov proposes a theory for this syndrome:

It appears that the purpose of this syndrome is to unite the cerebrospinal and the autonomic nervous systems, thus providing for a possible control of autonomic functions like respiration, cardiac function, blood flow, etc. through the cerebrospinal system. This indeed has been shown in studies performed on yogis who could easily control body functions that in the West were thought impossible to control, for example, heart beat, superficial blood circulation, etc.<sup>38</sup>

Whether or not Bentov’s laboratory experiments produce a genuine Kundalini awakening in subjects, the questions raised by his experiments concerning the physiological expression of a process which appears linked to spiritual experiences are still valid. Bentov has added a cosmic dimension to his perspective by presenting the nervous system as an important component of an evolutionary process moving along spiritual lines. He writes of Kundalini: “This is the next stage in the evolution of our nervous system, and it is a necessary correlate of spiritual development, toward which all mankind is moving.”<sup>39</sup> Such a perspective brings him to lament the fate of those whose Kundalini experience is not recognized as such:

It is ironic that persons in whom the evolutionary processes of Nature have begun to operate more rapidly, and who can be considered as advanced mutants of the human race, are institutionalized as subnormal by their “normal” peers. I dare guess, on the basis of discussions with my psychiatrist-friends, that this process is not as exotic and rare as one would like to believe, and possibly 25 to 30 percent of all institutionalized schizophrenics belong to this category - a tremendous waste of human potential.<sup>40</sup>

Gopi Krishna also adopts a similar perspective in Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man as he emphasizes that on awakening of Kundalini the nervous system is radically affected, so as to move the whole organism further on the evolutionary path.

### **Physiological Correlates of the Kundalini Experience**

Sannella and his colleagues have attempted to measure physiological correlates of meditators who reported experiencing sensations of heat, light, and sound. They observed temperature changes in one case. Sannella points out that Bentov's model alone cannot explain the objective manifestations of extreme heat. Attempts to measure physiological correlates of meditators sound sensations were unsuccessful, and a need for improved equipment and experimental procedures was called for.<sup>41</sup> I summarize below some of the assumptions made by Sannella in correlating the signs and symptoms of the physio-kundalini with Bentov's model:

*Motor Signs and Symptoms.* These may be due to the cerebral current stimulating the motor cortex or thalamic centres associated with group muscle movements.

*Body Sensations.* These may be due to the direct stimulation of the sensory cortex by the current generated in the cerebral hemispheres

*Light and Sound.* These could be the result of standing waves generated in the ventricles, as well as stimulation near the lateral and medial geniculate regions.

*Pain.* This might occur when the current generated in the brain meets resistance.

*Detachment and Dissociation.* They could be the result of the circulating current.

*Out-Of-Body and Psychic Experiences.* Bentov's model is unable to provide an explanation for these phenomena.<sup>42</sup>

### **Other Scientific Research on Kundalini**

In the quoted text below, Christopher Hills points out that Kundalini has been studied by medical doctors in India for many years. What is particularly interesting is his mention of Dr. D. Vinekar back in 1961, who, like Bentov, also attempted to map the path of Kundalini. The following quotation is from an article by John White "Some Possibilities for Further Kundalini Research":

*In Nuclear Evolution*, page 130, Christopher Hills remarks that kundalini "has already been studied objectively by several doctors for many years (to my knowledge at least seventeen years) in yogic hospitals and ashrams such as the Kaivalyadhama laboratory at Lonalva near Poona. A friend of mine, Dr. S. Vinekar, the Director of Research, demonstrated a map tracing of the kundalini path by using EEG and GSR equipment to record its electrical effects in 1961 at a conference of renowned yogis in Patna. . . . The opening of the chakras and the path of the kundalini is described in many ancient texts and Dr. Vinekar merely checked these documented statements from an objective medical and biophysical point of view."<sup>43</sup>

A comparative analysis of Dr. Vinekar's and Itzhak Bentov's findings would be an interesting task for future researchers.

Dr. Sannella and his colleagues conducted an unusual experiment with Japanese scientist Hiroshi Motoyama using his "cakra measuring device," or electric field sensor which showed interesting results. When the subjects sat in this machine, and were in a deep meditative state, the researchers observed a new waveform in the frequency range of 350 to 500 Hz, which is considerably higher than the normal EEG waveform of 0 to 50 Hz. Sannella contends that these higher frequency EEG signals could be an easily measured physiological

indicator of some meditative states, and out-of-body experiences.<sup>44</sup> A study by N. N. Das and H. Gastaut<sup>45</sup> indicates that high frequency waves are a noted characteristic of the deep meditative state.

Christopher Hills, like Motoyama, is also a pioneer inventor of technological devices for Kundalini research. He describes his spiritual devices in two of his works, Supersensonics<sup>46</sup> and Nuclear Evolution.<sup>47</sup> One such device is the “Kundalini Roomph Coil.” This device is designed to let the user know where the Kundalini energy is focused so that one can safely proceed to gradually open each energy centre.

Contemporary scientific research such as Dr. D. Vinekar’s at the Kaivalyadhama laboratory as well as Bentov, Hills, and Motoyama’s, could help to clarify the many contradictory statements made by yogis and other spiritual teachers concerning the Kundalini concept.

## **Discussion**

Experiential accounts, and ancient texts affirm that there are different models of awakening experiences other than the recognized Kundalini experience of energy moving from the base of the spine to the head - an affirmation which my own research supports. For, as Lilian Silburn, a respected leader in studies of the Shaivism of Kashmir postulates in Kundalini: The Energy of the Depths “. . . Kundalini may awaken from any of the centers since she is equally present in all of them.”<sup>48</sup> Likewise, Swami Ajaya points out that in Tantric scriptures there are three different approaches to awakening and directing Kundalini practiced by the kaula, mishra, and samaya groups. According to Ajaya, the kaula group concentrate on the base chakra but do not direct it further than this centre, and are considered to be an inferior group. The mishra group lead Kundalini to the heart centre (anahata chakra). It is the

samaya group, which is considered to be the superior group, that leads the Kundalini from the base chakra to the crown chakra. This results in the union of shiva and shakti.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the method of arousal of Kundalini depends on the scriptures consulted. The model of awakening of Kundalini is clearly not just from the base of the spine to the head, or from the feet to the head. These different approaches will affect the practitioner's experience as Swami Ajaya emphasizes.

Bentov's research has helped inform the medical profession and other health practitioners about Kundalini symptoms, but some researchers of Kundalini question whether his research is related to Kundalini. The main issue seems to be whether one can accept as "spiritual" a process which could be triggered in a laboratory. Psychologist and scholar Mary Scott mentions in Kundalini in the Physical World that there is no reason to doubt the existence of the cycles, but she questions their connection with the uncoiling of Kundalini as understood in Tantric texts. She contends, "That the cycle is not directly connected with spiritual development is demonstrated by the fact it can be artificially induced by the application of electromagnetic fields as Bentov has shown."<sup>50</sup> Kundalini researcher and clinical psychologist Dr. Bonnie Greenwell, author of Energies of Transformation: A Guide to the Kundalini Process, also questions whether Bentov's research is related to Kundalini as the conditions for the experience are simulated in the laboratory. She feels that recognition of the physio-kundalini syndrome need not prove or disprove the awakening of Kundalini. She suggests that Bentov's work may be related to pranic symptoms meditators may experience. Pranic energy can be defined as the life-force that animates the body. Pranic activities or Kriyas may include involuntary movements of the body, and can be experienced even when

Kundalini is not awakened. Greenwell also notes the absence of samadhi-like states in these experiments.<sup>51</sup>

Gene Kieffer, President of the Kundalini Research Foundation in his article “Kundalini and the Near-Death Experience,” mentions that he described to Bentov every detail he knew connected with the awakening of Kundalini, and that he emphasized the process involved the reversal of the reproductive system. (See Chapter 2, Gopi Krishna’s explanation of the Kundalini mechanism.) This, he says, could be observed with one’s own eyes and did not require any electronic measuring devices. In his opinion, Bentov’s theory has nothing to do with Kundalini, and he questions whether any of his subjects actually awakened Kundalini. He contends that many of the symptoms associated with Bentov’s model are “similar or identical to the kriyas reported by those who have experienced shaktipat,”<sup>52</sup> that is, the awakening of the Kundalini force, usually by a guru. According to Kieffer very few people over the last two decades who have received shaktipat have awakened Kundalini.

Dr. Sannella’s suggestion that the physio-kundalini cycle is only a part of the full Kundalini awakening experience, and may be a separate mechanism activated as part of a complete awakening experience may be one solution to the problem.<sup>53</sup> Even though Bentov’s research focused on altered states of consciousness, Sannella stresses that the Kundalini process is not just an altered state of consciousness and an individual can experience many different states of consciousness.<sup>54</sup> Bentov does specifically point out that his research involved measuring the “. . . changes induced by altered states of consciousness on the physiological states of the body.”<sup>55</sup> This must be taken into account when assessing his research as accounts of Kundalini awakening experiences are often expressed in terms of an

expansion of consciousness. Whether or not the physio-kundalini cycle can be considered connected with spiritual development is a matter of interpretation.

### **Summary**

Sannella's clinical study, as well as my own research, suggests that Kundalini awakening experiences are occurring more frequently today in Western society because people are involved in disciplines and practices conducive to psychospiritual transformation, for example, meditation. However, Sannella's observational study of the Kundalini experience shows that people are more likely to experience what can be described as a movement of energy proceeding from the feet and legs along the back or spine to the head, then, down the face to terminate in the abdomen. He points out that this differs from the classical yogic model of Kundalini awakening where the energy moves up from the base of the spine to the head. From a scientific perspective this psychiatrist's clinical findings agree with the physiological model of Itzhak Bentov's laboratory research. This agreement does present a scientific argument for a definite physiological mechanism at work in Kundalini experiences.

The findings of Sannella and Bentov, however, differ from the findings of my own research discussed in Chapter 6 which shows that only a very small percentage of people experience a pattern of energy movement similar to Bentov's model, that is, movement of energy starting from the toes or feet and terminating in the stomach.

I suggest that one can compare the Microcosmic Orbit of Taoism and the circulating current of energy in Bentov's model as both terminate in the abdomen. I also suggest that movement of energy starting in the left foot, as in Bentov's model, can be compared to the opening of meridians or the channels through which the vital energy flows in the human body as expounded in Taoist texts. Acupuncture based on an Eastern energy model was first

dismissed by Western scientists as not being based on concrete facts. As Taoist master Mantak Chia points out, the “circulating energy known as the Microcosmic Orbit, forms the basis of acupuncture.”<sup>56</sup> A positive correlation between acupuncture points and the electrical resistance of the skin has been experimental shown to exist and is now accepted by Western scientists. Acupuncture is now accepted by at least some members of the Western medical community as an affective model for the treatment of some medical problems even though they are not able to explain how it works. It is possible that in time the Kundalini model could be accepted as an affective model to explain certain physiological processes associated with the transformative process.

Since according to Sannella’s clinical research and Bentov’s laboratory research, the “physio-kundalini syndrome” is not a psychotic episode, we need new models that will help in diagnosing the symptoms experienced on Kundalini arousal. Kundalini symptoms are not easy to diagnose as the symptoms can be related to other problems not related to the Kundalini process. Also there are many symptoms that can be experienced, but no one experiences all of them. Bentov’s neurophysiological model of the so-called Kundalini mechanism is a useful working model, one that can be understood in terms of Western physiology. It is a model within which a particular pattern of experiences can be integrated which are not included in the orthodox medical model. Thus Bentov’s model provides a framework for members of the medical profession to compare their patients symptoms with the “Sensory-Motor Cortex Syndrome.” However, Bentov does emphasize the limitation of his model in these words, “A model is only a model and describes only the mechanical-physiological portion of the kundalini “syndrome.”<sup>57</sup> Bentov’s model is not without its critics, but it is so far the only one that



attempts to scientifically explain the sequence of symptoms experienced by some meditators as well as those experienced spontaneously by non-meditators.

Though the Kundalini model of consciousness is being scientifically investigated, Kundalini itself cannot be measured. As each Kundalini awakening experience is unique, only the movement of “energy” can be monitored and the psycho-physiological phenomena associated with awakening of this mechanism scientifically assessed. Future scientific research on the Kundalini phenomenon will depend partly on the development of new parameters and technological devices to observe and measure what can be observed of the bioenergy associated with Kundalini. Scientists such as Christopher Hills and Hiroshi Motoyama have already developed new devices for Kundalini research. Some scientists have suggested that future neurological research may also provide us with further understanding of Kundalini as the trigger of the mechanism could be in the brain.

## NOTES: CHAPTER 5

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7. Sannella, p.32.

8. Sannella, p.11.

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10. Sannella, p.9

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12. Sannella, pp.32-33.

13. Sannella, p.7.

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16. Sannella, p.111-112.

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18. Erik Floor, "The Biological Basis of Kundalini," in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed. John White, p.292.

19. Floor, p.293.

20. Itzhak Bentov, "Micromotion of the Body as a Factor in the Development of the Nervous System," in The Kundalini Experience by Sannella, pp127-149.

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22. Research techniques are described as follows:

"Small body motions accompanying the motion of blood through the circulatory system may be measured with a capacitive probe apparatus. A subject sits on a chair between two metal plates, one above the head, and one under the seat, 5 to 10 cm from the body." Quoted from Bentov's paper in Sannella, Kundalini, (p.129).

"Frequency distribution measurements of "inner sounds" reported by 156 meditators were made by asking each meditator to compare the sounds heard during meditation with sounds produced by an audio-frequency oscillator through an earphone in one ear. The subject rotated the oscillator frequency control to match oscillator tones with those heard or remembered as the "inner sound." Quoted from Bentov's paper in Sannella, Kundalini, (pp.136-137).

23. Bentov, "Micromotion of the Body," pp.128-129.

24. Bentov, "Micromotion," pp.127-128.

25. Bentov, "Micromotion," p.128.

26. Bentov, Stalking the Wild Pendulum, p.142.

27. Bentov, Stalking, pp.137-138.

28. Bentov, "Micromotion," p.143.

29. Bentov, Stalking, p.137.

30. Bentov, Stalking, p.139.

31. Bentov, Stalking, p.140.

32. Bentov, Stalking, p.140.

33. Bentov, Stalking, p.140.

34. Bentov, Stalking, p140

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36. Bentov, Stalking, p.142.
37. Bentov, Stalking, pp.142-143.
38. Bentov, Stalking, p.146.
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51. Bonnie Greenwell, Energies of Transformation: A Guide to the Kundalini Process (Cupertino, Calif.: Shakti River Press, 1990), p.120.
52. Gene Kieffer, "Kundalini and the Near-Death Experience," Journal of Near-Death Studies 12 (3) (Spring 1994), 173.
53. Sannella, p.107.

54. Sannella, p.10.

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56. Mantak Chia, Taoist Ways to Transform Stress into Vitality (Huntington, New York: Healing Tao Books, 1988), p.63.

57. Bentov, Stalking, p.140.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **MYSTICISM AND KUNDALINI RESEARCH PROJECT**

In order to establish a contemporary set of data for research, I gathered data through a questionnaire and personal interviews. This study on "Mysticism And Kundalini" provided a variety of descriptive accounts of personal experiences in response to my request for accounts of mystical experiences, and Kundalini-type experiences. The data is obviously grounded in the Western contemporary context.

The objective of this analysis is to explore a possible connection between the activation of the Kundalini mechanism and the occurrence of mystical experience. For the purpose of this comparative study mystical and Kundalini awakening experiences have been placed in separate categories. In Eastern religious traditions such a distinction would not be warranted. For instance, according to yogic tradition, mystical states of consciousness can only be obtained on the awakening of a spiritual energy known as Kundalini.

#### **Method**

The questionnaire was designed to gather information about experiences that may be related to the so-called "awakening of Kundalini" (a complex physio-psychospiritual transformative process), from individuals in contemporary Western society who are experiencing or have experienced this phenomenon. Anonymity and confidentiality of all respondents was assured through the assigning of ID numbers to the questionnaires in the order in which they

were given out. Signed consent forms were obtained for all answers or personal accounts quoted in this thesis including names mentioned. Some respondents provided a pseudonym for their personal accounts.

The questionnaire has four components: (1) Spiritual History Inventory; (2) Mystical Experiences; (3) Kundalini Experiences Inventory, and (4) Personal Descriptions. The questionnaire contains structured and open-ended questions and checklists.

One purpose of the questionnaire (Section 2) was to discover if individuals who have experienced a mystical-type of experience might be undergoing Kundalini activity.

The second purpose of the questionnaire (Section 3) was to gather information about Kundalini-type experiences.

The third purpose was to collect personal accounts of transformative experiences related to the Kundalini mechanism.

Fifty questionnaires were distributed, and 35 (70 percent) were returned completed. Participating individuals were recruited by placing an advertisement in Tone a local community magazine, by advertising in various locations around Ottawa, and by personal contacts. The advertisement simply stated that subjects were wanted to complete a questionnaire on mystical, religious, and Kundalini experiences for Ph.D. thesis research.

Each questionnaire was followed-up by a semi-structured interview with consenting respondents in an office setting or by phone. Confidential notes were taken by the researcher.

The 35 respondents had ages ranging from 22 to 67. Twenty-eight were female and 7 were male. They came from a variety of religious backgrounds including Eastern sects and Protestant groups. Some of them had shifted away from their Christian religious background

to embrace a variety of spiritual disciplines and traditions. Their levels of education ranged from grade 11 to a university degree.

The analysis is in two parts: a statistical analysis of phenomena reported in Sections 2 and 3, and a comparative analysis of what people said about their experiences in personal accounts.

Section 2 and Section 3 were compared to check for systematic patterns that allowed both sections to be compared with one another. Significant phenomena reported related to Mystical experiences (Section 2), and significant phenomena reported in Kundalini experiences (Section 3), were statistically analyzed and are presented in table form.

The second objective of this descriptive research study was to analyze accounts of personal experiences for evidence of phenomena related to the Kundalini phenomenon, and selected accounts are presented in this chapter.

## **Results**

All respondents answered yes in response to the question: "Have you ever had what you would describe as a mystical experience?" Ninety-seven percent of people responded positively to the question: "Have you ever experienced a sense of a Presence or power different from your everyday self?"

Table 1 below shows the types of mystical experiences reported. Most people reported experiencing more than one type. The definition of what constitutes a mystical experience was broadened to include various mystical-type experiences.



**Table 1**  
**NUMBER OF MYSTICAL-TYPE EXPERIENCES REPORTED**

	<b>(N=35)</b>
Unitive	29
Bliss	27
Visions	25
Expansive episodes	18
OBE	15
Spiritual rebirth	14
Illumination	14

Twenty-nine or 83 percent of the respondents reported having had unitive experiences such as the feeling of union with God, or the oneness of all things. The age range of those reporting unitive experiences when this type of experience first occurred was 3-65 years, and 12 people reported their experiences as ongoing. Fifteen people reported out-of-body experiences (OBEs) considered by some individuals to be a mystical-type of experience, and 14 people reported having experienced illumination.

Table 2 below shows the number of Kundalini-type experiences reported.

**Table 2****NUMBER OF KUNDALINI-TYPE EXPERIENCES REPORTED**

	<b>(N=35)</b>
<b>Sensations of energy rising up the spine or through the body</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Expansive episodes</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Bliss episodes</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Perception of unusual lights</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Perception of inner sounds</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Sensations of energy, heat, or light rising up the spine to the top of the head</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Wave-like or zigzag movement of energy up the spine</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Sudden long jump of energy from the base of the spine to the top of the head</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Energy moving up the spine in jumps</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Ascending and descending current of energy along the spine</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Sensations of energy travelling up the legs and back to the top of the head, to terminate in the stomach</b>	<b>1</b>

Table 2 shows five specific signs of Kundalini activity. Experiences of energy, light or heat rising up the spine were described as billowing light, and thudding vibrations. Other symptoms of Kundalini-like activity reported included lights, described as seeing a light in the head or externally; expansive episodes, described as a feeling of expansion of consciousness, head or body; bliss episodes, described as overwhelming love; and inner sounds, described as hearing roaring, drumming, hissing, humming, rushing water, and celestial music.

Table 3 below shows the number of people reporting both mystical experience and Kundalini-like experiences.

**Table 3**  
**NUMBER OF PEOPLE REPORTING BOTH**  
**MYSTICAL AND KUNDALINI-TYPE EXPERIENCES**

<b>Reported Experiences</b>	<b>(N=35)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Mystical-type experiences	35	100
Reported some type of Kundalini experience	30	86
Unitive experience, and energy rising up the spine or through the body	21	60
Unitive experience, and energy, heat, or light rising up the spine to the top of the head	12	34

Out of the 35 respondents, 30 reported experiencing some type of Kundalini experience, and people tended to report experiencing more than one type of experience. Two respondents did not complete section 3, and three respondents did not answer this question, but answered other questions in this section. The two individuals who did not complete Section 3, described their mystical experiences in terms of union and peace, and visions, peace, and light.

According to the findings of this survey, certain types of spiritual disciplines and practices trigger mystical experiences as well as Kundalini-type experiences. Meditation was reported as the most common trigger for inducing mystical and Kundalini-type experiences as shown in Table 4 below. Table 4 also shows that for both categories of experience prayer, sleep, and breathing exercises are the most frequent triggers.

**Table 4**  
**TRIGGERS FOR MYSTICAL AND**  
**KUNDALINI-TYPE EXPERIENCES**

<b>Triggers</b>	<b>Mystical (N=35)</b>	<b>Kundalini-Type (N=35)</b>
Meditation	22	22
Prayer	15	12
Sleep	13	10
Breathing exercises	12	13
Reading	10	7
Music	9	8
Chanting	9	8
Body work	8	9
Initiation by a guru	7	3
Near-death experience	5	4
Fasting	3	6
Sex	2	3
UFO	2	1
Physical illness	1	1

As Table 4 shows, there are a variety of triggers or inductive techniques that are associated with both or either mystical states of consciousness and Kundalini-type experiences. In Section 2, nature contemplation was reported as a trigger more than once, and one person reported childbirth. The following triggers were also reported in Section 3 before Kundalini-like experiences of energy, light, or heat moving along the spine: yoga, Tai Chi, vision quest, and the presence of a spiritually developed person. Triggers reported in Sections 2 and 3 but not listed in the questionnaire included Reiki and Wiccan ritual.

When individuals were asked in *Mystical Experiences* (Section 2), if they had noticed any relationship between their experiences and their practice of meditation techniques, 17 answered, yes. Comments reported by respondents suggests that meditation played an important part in inducing their experiences as well as prayer, these included, "meditation seems to

bring on the experience with more frequency" (#2), and "meditation has often led to my mystical experiences" (#7).

A methodological problem emerged from the data, that of conceptually separating mystical and Kundalini experience. One solution is to focus on the physiological aspects of mystical experience and identify those aspects that correspond to kundalini experience.

Table 5 lists the physical phenomena reported in Mystical Experiences (Section 2) in answer to the question, "How did your experience(s) affect you physically at the time?"

**Table 5**  
**PHYSICAL EXPERIENCES REPORTED IN**  
**MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES**

	<b>(N=35)</b>
Feelings of head and/or body expansion	16
Heat-like sensations	13
Uncontrollable body jerks or spasms	11
Uncontrollable shaking	9
Sensations in the genital area	8
Spontaneous body movements	7
Involuntary suspension of breath	6
Spontaneous breathing exercises	6
Contractions of the anus, abdomen, or chest	5
Temporary paralysis in limbs or body	4
Chest pains	4
Fainting spells	1

As Table 5 shows, a variety of physical experiences were reported with expansive states, heat-like sensations and uncontrollable body jerks or spasms being the most often reported. A small number of individuals reported experiencing paralysis in limbs or body, chest pains, fainting spells and sensations in the genital area.

Respondents in Section 2 describe their mystical experiences in terms of energy rising up the spine, intense heat, and hearing inner sounds. These descriptors are also associated with a Kundalini episode. Classical signs of a Kundalini episode may include rushes of energy

and heat up the spine to the head, light and sound phenomena, expansive episodes, and sexual sensations. There may be spontaneous orgasms that feel as if they are directed inward and upward rather than outward.

Table 6 below shows the types of mystical experiences reported with selected mystical descriptors: intense heat, energy rushing up the spine, light, sound - specific signs of Kundalini activity.

**Table 6**  
**MYSTICAL-TYPE EXPERIENCES REPORTED WITH**  
**SELECTED MYSTICAL DESCRIPTORS**

<b>Mystical Experiences</b>	<b>(N=35)</b>	<b>Energy rushing up the spine</b>	<b>Intense heat up the spine</b>	<b>Light</b>	<b>Inner Sound</b>
Union	29	18	9	16	12
Bliss	27	16	9	16	14
Visions	25	13	7	16	12
Expansive episodes	18	13	6	10	7
OBE	15	9	5	9	10
Spiritual rebirth	14	8	6	7	6
Illumination	14	9	2	7	8

An interesting finding is that out of the 29 individuals who have experienced a unitive state, 18 describe their experiences in terms of energy rushing up the spine, and 9 as intense heat rushing up the spine, both experiences characteristic of a classical Kundalini experience.

Inner sounds reported included; thunder, drumming, angelic music, rushing wind, humming, voices, water, and roaring like a jet taking off.

In response to questions in Section 2 concerning the long term physical and psychological effects of their experiences, answers ranged from becoming more healthy, more positive and feeling less worried and afraid, to experiencing depression and anxiety. When respondents were asked how their experiences had affected them psychologically at the time, an-

swers included the following; bliss and joy, fear, confusion, feeling “ungrounded,” hyperactivity, insomnia, and anxiety attacks. The individuals that I interviewed who had experienced pathological problems stated that they now felt like a different person, more grounded, and not so hyperactive as they used to be.

Some people commented that they felt their physical problems such as low back pain, allergies, leg pains, and early menopausal symptoms might be related to the phenomena connected with their mystical experiences

An interesting finding was that forty-nine percent responded positively to the question in Section 3, If you have noticed any association between your experiences reported in Section 2 - Mystical Experiences and those reported in Section 3 - Kundalini Experiences, please explain below? Comments including the following: “I think that it is all related - it’s all part of spiritual development” (#14); “both may be stimulated by meditation” (#33); “the psychic and mystical experiences were the main components of my Kundalini experience” (#5), and “to me, they are one and the same” (#20).

My research shows that for most respondents a typical Kundalini-type experience involves sensations of light, heat or energy rising up the spine or through the body. This phenomenon was reported by 24 respondents. The age range when this experience first occurred was 6-56 years, and eight people reported it as ongoing. Sensations of energy or heat rushing up the spine were also reported by mystical experiencers in Section 2 (see Table 6).

The following Kundalini-type experiences were also reported in Section 3 as shown in Table 2: perception of unusual lights 21; inner sounds 19; expansive episodes 24; and bliss episodes 24. Only 13 individuals had experienced sensations of energy or heat rising up the spine to the top of the head as in the classical yogic model of Kundalini awakening.

Respondents also reported experiencing a variety of energy movements in the body. These included, zigzag or wave-like movement of energy up the spine and ascending and descending currents of energy along the spine. Only five respondents reported experiencing energy moving up the spine in jumps stopping at various intervals as in the Kundalini yoga chakra model. There was only one report of energy travelling up the legs and back to the top of the head, then down the face, to terminate in the stomach. It is significant to note that twenty-five individuals responded positively when asked: "Do you associate these experiences with a spiritual awakening?"

According to my analysis, awakening of Kundalini can be experienced as intense heat, as energy, as well as light, and is described by some individuals as a tingling or creeping sensation, or an electric current moving up the spine which may be accompanied by orgasmic sensations. If the energy reaches the crown of the head, it may result in an orgasm in the head as reported by two people. It may also result in an ecstatic or blissful experience as described in some accounts as well as a feeling of expansion of consciousness.



In Table 7 below, analogous phenomena reported in Section 2 and Section 3 have been placed into two categories - motor and sensory.

**Table 7**  
**MOTOR AND SENSORY PHENOMENA IN**  
**MYSTICAL AND KUNDALINI EXPERIENCES**

	<b>Mystical Experiences (N=35)</b>	<b>Kundalini Experiences (N=35)</b>
<b>Motor Phenomena</b>		
Unexplained body jerks or spasms	11	16
Body shaking	9	16
Spontaneous body movements	7	7
Spontaneous breathing patterns	6	6
<b>Sensory Phenomena</b>		
Lights	21	21
Inner sounds	15	19
Heat-like sensations or hot flashes	13	11

Another physical phenomenon that overlaps with mystical and Kundalini experiences is feelings of head and/or body expansion. This experience was reported by 16 people in Section 2, and 18 in Section 3. The overlap of reported phenomena in Sections 2 and 3 further supports my Kundalini hypothesis that there is a positive correlation between mystical experiences and specific psycho-physiological processes associated with the Kundalini phenomenon.

My comparative analysis of Sections 2 and 3 shows that the sexual organs play a part in mystical and Kundalini-type experiences. Eight respondents in Section 2 reported experiencing sensations in the genital area. In Section 3, six respondents reported that they had experienced involuntary contractions of the anus, abdomen, and throat.

Other experiences reported in Section 3 included the following: changes in sleep patterns, lethargy, heart palpitations, night sweats, cold flashes, uncontrolled weeping or laughing, involuntary dancing, hopping or spinning; recurrent, unexplained back pains, pelvic pains,

violent trembling, inadvertently crying out, sensitive or swollen breasts, and unexplained menstrual irregularities in women. Also, some individuals reported experiencing unexplained mood and energy swings.

Only three people had spoken to their doctors about their experiences, and had received no satisfactory explanation from them. Seven respondents had experienced physical problems that they felt may be directly related with their experiences or Kundalini, and 13 individuals had experienced distressful psychological experiences that they felt may be related with their experiences or Kundalini.

### **Summary**

In comparing the two categories of experience as reported by my respondents, I found that mystical experiencers as well as Kundalini experiencers describe their experiences in similar terms such as an upward movement of energy, light, heat, sound, and expansive episodes.

My analysis shows that Mystical and Kundalini experiencers also experience analogous physical and sensory phenomena, and meditation was the trigger most reported in inducing both types of experience. Nearly all respondents reported signs of Kundalini activity as either ongoing or recurrent.

The overlap of phenomena experienced by individuals between the two sections supports my hypothesis that there could be a relationship between the arousal of the Kundalini mechanism, and mystical-type experiences.

## **Personal Accounts**

One objective of my questionnaire was to collect descriptive accounts from individuals who have had or are now undergoing spiritually awakening or transformative experiences. In this section, I present selected data gathered from 16 individuals in response to my request for personal descriptions of mystical and Kundalini-type experiences. I personally interviewed these sixteen people. Twenty-four personal accounts are presented in this section.

For some, it was the first time they were able to relate their experiences to someone who understood them, and some individuals expressed their gratitude at having the opportunity to describe their experiences.

Some respondents indicated that they would prefer not to provide accounts in Section 4 because they viewed their experiences as sacred or special and not to be shared with others. Others found it difficult to put their experiences into words, or they could not remember the details of experiences that had happened a long time ago. I also noted the controlling influence that a teacher or guru could have so as to prevent their disciples from describing their experiences.

Some reports are quite brief, and others longer depending on the experience and the memory of the individual. The accounts are of spontaneous or induced experiences. Whether or not an individual would call their experiences mystical depended on the individual's definition of the term. However, 22 people answered yes in answer to the question in Section 2: "Do you consider your experience(s) to be mystical?"

I have selected the following personal accounts because they represent the range of experiences reported in the questionnaire. They allow us to compare the similarities and the

variations between each respondent's experience and they may throw some light upon obscure descriptions by well-known mystics of earlier times.

#### #40

Serena who practices aboriginal teachings, was given a meditative visualization technique by her teacher that involved concentrating on breathing while being under water. This experience contains the elements of heat, light, and sound, and was a pleasant one-time experience. It is an interesting description because of its angelic imagery.

*I was sitting on a chair meditating one day, when I suddenly felt a tingling sensation at the base of my spine and heat moving up my back. I also saw different misty colours moving up my back and out from my back. At the same time, I was conscious of a humming sound when the energy started to move.*

*The energy expanded and contracted at different spots as it moved up my spine towards my head. It felt as if it spread out at the sides of my body like wings, and upon reaching my head, it moved up above my head and surrounded it with a halo of white and lavender light. This halo of light moved like a wave, and was white at the crown of my head and lavender at the sides.*

*As I continued to visualize being under water this experience continued, but when I visualized coming out of the water, it seemed as if the energy contracted and things became normal again.*

*This experience left me feeling happy and relaxed.*

This description contains several mystical elements and describes how Serena experienced heat as energy moved up her back to reach her head as experienced on awakening of Kundalini.

#### #33

Lili described a blissful experience that she has had several times while meditating on her breath:

*I sometimes experience while meditating concentrating on my breath, several rushes of energy moving up my back towards my head. When the energy reaches the crown of my head, I see a glowing golden light. This light lasts for a few minutes.*

*I am aware of a buzzing or vibrating sensation at the top of my head and an opening up feeling. The crown of my head also feels quite warm.*

*My body feels less dense, and I experience a sense of being connected to all life. The blissful state that I experience stays with me for a time after this experience.*

The experience of light described by Lili is a well-known phenomenon of mystical experience. It is also associated with the ascent of the serpent power into the crown of the head referred to in Hindu texts as the Sahasrara chakra.

#### **#44**

The following description is of a blissful experience, and like Lili, Kate also experiences light.

*After meditating on my chakras for a few minutes, I feel a tingling sensation at the base of my spine. I experience rushes of energy moving up the centre of my back to my head in waves, and moving out at the top of my head. There is a warm, tingling sensation at the crown of my head, and I feel my consciousness expanding, and an opening up of my chest area. I see a light in my third eye centre, and I step into this light and remain in it for a while.*

*My body feels light, but when I come out of my meditation it feels tired and heavy.*

*The blissful state that I experience stays with me for quite a while after this kind of experience.*

Kate reports experiencing rushes of energy move up her spine to her head as in previous accounts that she describes as “in waves” analogous to a Kundalini experience. Experiencing sensations at the crown of the head is also reported in several accounts.

## #21

The next two brief accounts are from Kathy who has been practicing yoga for 24 years starting with Hatha yoga, and now practices Kundalini yoga. She described to me her ongoing gradual development which has not involved any violent physical movements or psychological problems. This account is of an experience that first occurred in 1994 and still is an ongoing experience.

*While praying, I experienced within a few seconds, a tingling sensation in my lower back that moved quickly straight up my spine. I experienced several rushes of energy moving up my spine in succession. On reaching the crown of my head, I noticed a tingling sensation like static electricity. I did not experience any heat phenomena, physical movements, or a trance-like state.*

This experience points out that while praying, one can unknowingly cause the arousal of Kundalini. Kathy describes how she experiences rushes of energy moving up her spine to the crown of her head where she experiences a tingling sensation.

Kathy has also experienced photism when practicing Kundalini yoga:

*When practicing Kundalini yoga, I often have the experience of seeing billowing golden-white light. This is a very peaceful experience. I also have this when I go for shiatsu treatments. My practitioner also incorporates Reiki, Cranio-sacral Therapy, and energy work, etc.*

This account shows how a variety of triggers can induce a mystical-type of experience.

## #45

The experience of light is a noted component of mystical experience. In the following brief account Anne describes seeing a “blue light” while meditating one day.

*As I was sitting meditating one day, I felt a wave of gentle, dark, warm energy move up from the centre of my back over my head and down to my third eye centre like a cloak.*

*Then, going into a velvety blue darkness, I went into a deep meditative state. There appeared in my third eye centre, a dark blue light that would come and go. My meditation lasted for about one hour.*

Anne's experience of a blue light is one that is sometimes described in yogic texts.

**#47**

Aileen's ecstatic experience, like Kathy's, was induced by praying. She also experienced energy moving up her spine to her head. What is different about this experience is that she describes it in orgasmic terms.

*While praying, I felt a pleasant tingly sensation at the base of my spine, which increased in intensity as I experienced a warm energy accompanied by orgasmic sensations move quickly up my spine towards my head.*

*On reaching my head, I experienced an orgasmic-like explosion in my head. My ecstatic state continued for several days.*

Ecstasy is a noted characteristic of mystical experience, and in Aileen's case is the result of an "orgasmic-like explosion" in her head.

**#2**

Thomas was in an emotionally unbalanced state, and on antidepressants when this unusual experience involving the brain occurred in 1994.

*While lying down meditating concentrating on my breath, I felt as if the right side of my brain had been hit by a bullet from a gun, as if I had been shot in the head while meditating. I experienced several times popping, crackling sounds like electrical activity all around my brain.*

*Initially, I was in a blissful state, and then I became depressed.*

This individual's experience also involved an explosive-type phenomenon in his head as in Aileen's case. He no longer meditates because he believes that meditation triggers his head

experiences. Thomas described his present psychological state to me as that of a transformed person - a more balanced individual.

#7

Jane's account of her "uncoiling" experience while meditating is described using serpent imagery analogous to the Kundalini concept. It is an orgasmic experience, and the zigzag sensation that she experienced went up the front of her body to below her waist, not up her spine, as is sometimes experienced.

*In the spring of 1997, while sitting on my bed meditating one night with a pyramid underneath it on the floor, I experienced within a few minutes a sensation in the front of my body in the pelvic area like a snake uncoiling and moving in a zigzag movement up the front of my body to below the waist. I felt as part of myself had taken the form of a lizard. It was not an unpleasant experience but one in which I experienced sexual feelings and several orgasms.*

*I did not continue to meditate as I found this energy movement too disturbing, and I was a bit scared. This energy movement continued until the morning, when I fell asleep. I did not do anything, and the energy movement subsided by itself. I felt fine after this experience and had no after effects.*

I am including this next short account of Jane's because it describes a dark, frightening experience, not one of ecstasy or bliss. Mystics have also had violent experiences usually explained as being caused by the devil.

*I began meditating, and within two or three minutes I was aware of an uncoiling taking place in my lower body. It was quite violent and it scared me. I tried being in the light, but I was being drawn into a frightening darkness, and I felt that I was losing control so after about twenty minutes I called a spiritual teacher. I was advised to play music and dance, which I did.*

*I felt strange for about a week after this experience with nausea and headaches.*



This experience of “uncoiling” of energy resulted in Jane experiencing unpleasant physical effects, and a feeling of losing control.

#36

Morgan describes her ecstatic experience as “a sense of another presence with me.” Her experience occurred within a ritual context involving 40 people, which consisted of chanting, drumming, and the burning of incense. She achieved a light-trance state, and regards her experience as mystical.

*During a Wiccan ritual, I became “filled with the Goddess.” It happened during a retreat weekend after several intense rituals.*

*I experienced a sense of another presence with me - not in my body precisely, but part of me. I felt an energy or a power coming into my base and second chakras, and intense heat like fire as bursts of energy were rising up and down my spine and throughout my whole body*

*I was in a state of ecstasy for five days. On the fifth day, I felt the presence leave, very suddenly, and I was alone again (and feeling utterly bereft). After the presence left me, I felt depressed and let down for several days.*

*The experience was uplifting, intensely joyous, empowering, strengthening, filling, and fulfilling I was singing and full of the pleasure of the body and spirit as one.*

This description is an example of the variety of energy-type experiences. The energy did not just rise up her spine to her head, but she experienced it as intense heat “like fire” that spread throughout her whole body.

The pathological aspect of some induced experiences is also expressed in the next account by Morgan involving the practice of Kundalini yoga that makes her feel “on fire from the inside.”

*I have been doing Kundalini yoga on and off for nearly a year, and sensations of heat, and rushing, tingling energy are very common during yoga sets. Often by the end of a yoga class, I am virtually on fire from the inside.*

*I continue to do Reiki and other energy work, both in Wiccan ritual and in association with some shamanic healing work, and the Kundalini-type episodes are more or less ongoing but much milder.*

*One set of exercises I participated in last spring brought about a sense of expansion, but I also experienced a sense of profound disturbance both psychically and emotionally including deep depression, which went on for several months. When this began to happen, I simply stopped doing these particular exercises and the symptoms gradually dissipated.*

*I am not sure what triggered what, because there were many other factors that could well have contributed to depression and emotional as well as psychic dysfunction at that time. I am reasonably sure the energy exercises were a factor, and some of the sensations I was having were Kundalini-type.*

The fire phenomenon that Morgan experiences is also a well-known experience of Christian mystics. In Morgan's case, it is triggered by her practice of a set of Kundalini yoga exercises.

#45

This account is of a very powerful "fire" experience that was induced by the individual's meditative practice.

*After meditating for about five minutes, I felt a pressure in my ears, and then a roar like a fire in full heat as the flames rise upwards.*

*Then, I felt a rush of energy move up my spine from the small of my back to the shoulder area, and then to the crown of my head. At the same time, I felt intense heat inside as energy moved up from my pelvic area to the heart centre.*

*I was aware of intense heat in my body, and at the same time I experienced a great rage within myself. Because of the extreme heat, and my intense emotional state, I could not continue medi-*

*tating. I took me several weeks to calm down and recover from this powerful experience.*

Arousal of the life force can be so powerful that the term “fire” is often used to describe it as the physical body is overwhelmed by it. In Anne’s case, it resulted in an intense emotional state.

**#38**

Donna had a confusing spontaneous “fire” experience that she described to me as an “unearthly heat” in 1981. It happened during a healing demonstration that she volunteered to participate in.

*I was skeptical but curious as I lay down on the massage table for an ‘examination’ of my spine. The healer started to move his fingers up from the base of my spine until he reached between my shoulder-blades where he stayed for two or three minutes lightly touching. I felt nauseated when he first touched me.*

*Within minutes I felt as though I had been plugged into an electric socket, and the class was very alarmed. My face became very flushed, and the heat I experienced was an ‘unearthly’ heat. I felt as though I was floating, and lost awareness of my body. I was only conscious of the ‘power’ that I was feeling. The healer was quite shaken and concerned that I was all right, and I was able to assure the healer that I was, although for those two minutes or so left me very bewildered.*

*Yes, that experience did alter my life, irrevocably. Consequently, I began to take instructions in meditation and healing.*

Like Anne’s powerful fire experience, Donna’s “awakening experience” is also a powerful one. It suggests that the laying-on-of-hands by the healer was the trigger for this experience which resulted in an altered state of consciousness.

## #25

Evelyn, a student of the late Swami Sivananda Radha, related the following experience that she had while practicing a yogic meditation technique which involved visualizing light:

*While sitting chanting for about ten minutes one day with my eyes closed and visualizing light rising up my spine to the top of my head, I began to feel heat like a flame slowly rising up from the base of my spine towards my head. On reaching the crown of my head, I felt it move out at the top of my head.*

*At the same time as the heat was moving up, I was conscious of a warm sensation at the crown chakra and heat coming down into my body through the top of my head. This experience culminated in me experiencing various visionary phenomena.*

Chanting and singing of hymns of praise is a popular religious activity that can induce mystical states. In Evelyn's case, it is combined with a visualization technique which produced the fire experience as well as visionary phenomena.

## #48

As my research shows, meditation was the most common trigger reported, but respondents also checked a variety of other triggers. The following self-report is from a 22 year old martial arts practitioner:

*While warming up for work one afternoon that consisted of stretching and breathing exercises, I experienced an overwhelmingly powerful union between my mind and body. During my work-out I could feel my awareness expanding, and being sensitive to everything around me. My reflexes were extremely sharp and my movements seemed so subtle yet so much quicker and stronger. I was not thinking about what I was doing - I was just doing it. The whole time I was receiving surges of energy from the base of my spine all the way up my back that felt to me like fire, but this was a cool fire..*

*As the cool fire consumed my back and shoulders, I felt as if I was becoming something else, and I had never felt so acutely sensitive, so aware, and so invincible in my life. The fiery sensation*

*was almost orgasmic yet it gave me this feeling of being guided, and extremely confidence as it passed over my body.*

*This experience lasted about 15 to 20 minutes but it could have been longer. I just could not seem to run out of breath or energy, but I stopped my work-out eventually. Instead of having to catch my breath afterwards, I was completely energized and thrilled by the intensity of the experience.*

Daniel describes his awakening experience in unitive terms. He also experiences rushes of energy up his back, but unlike Anne and Donna, he describes his fire experience as a “cool fire.”

Expansive episodes were reported by mystical experiencers and Kundalini experiencers. The next two accounts are of experiences triggered by sexual relations. Both individuals experienced an expansive episode, and movement of energy up the spine.

#36

*I spent that evening and night with a man for whom I was feeling intense sexual attraction and during that time experienced rushes of energy up and down my spine. I also experienced whole-body rushes of heat and energy, and a sense of all my chakras vibrating with the energetic flow. At the same time I experienced an opening of my inner vision as well as perceiving a green-glow in the tent though there were no lights anywhere and it was in fact pitch black.*

*The following day and for five days after I continued to feel expanded, full of energy and filled with the light of the Goddess. On the fifth day, the sense of divine presence left me suddenly with a whoosh. I felt bereft and alone, but realized that my body could not sustain such intensity for very long. It took about another month for the effects to dissipate.*

*I reduced my intake of meat, caffeine, and alcohol; spontaneously, not as a conscious choice, and had lots of energy for that month or so.*

#20

*On experiencing sexual relations, I felt immense energy moving up my spine, and throughout my whole body. I experienced lights*

*and shapes and colours, and my head felt expansive. There have been times since when I experience similar sensations of expansion and contraction of my whole being - like going from three dimensional to two dimensional, as shapes (stars, triangles, squares, lines, etc.).*

#### #14

Maureen has also experienced expansive episodes:

*I often have the sensation of body expansion during meditation. It feels as if someone has blown you up like the Michelin Man or I feel very tall - like my head is 20 or 30 feet up higher than everyone else.*

In this next account Maureen describes an orgasmic experience that was triggered while meditating on her chakras. Energy moved up her spine in a wave-like movement resulting in an explosive-type phenomenon in her heart chakra.

*One day after I had been doing intensive breath/chakra work, I experienced a kind of orgasm in my heart*

*I experience a wave-like movement up my spine every time that I meditate. It is a gentle spiraling that moves my head in a gentle circle. On one occasion as I started to meditate on my chakras visualizing their colours beginning at the base of the spine, I began to feel a continuous wave-like spiraling sensation move up my spine to the crown of my head. I then felt a tingling sensation in my heart centre as the energy seemed to build up to what I would describe as an orgasm in my heart centre.*

*I was in an ecstatic state for about ten to fifteen minutes and wanted to remain in this state, but I proceeded to close down my chakras and come out of my meditation. As I did this, I slowly came back to my normal state of consciousness.*

*I felt energized after this experience that has occurred only once to me after meditating on my chakras.*

This description focuses on Maureen's heart centre where the energy explodes in an orgasmic experience.

## #23

This is a description of an overwhelming vibratory experience of a powerful force that was witnessed by others. Anita's experience was triggered by practicing a yoga breathing technique.

*A Reiki friend of mine invited me to do the fast soham breathing with her when I was in India. We did it together as her sister and another friend watched.*

*We were sitting back on our heels on a bed, and as we started the fast soham we fell backwards on the bed until we were lying flat. I felt a thudding zigzag or wave-like movement of energy up my spine that was accompanied by a circular clockwise movement in my stomach - solar plexus area. My body was like an earthquake, and my spine and solar plexus were vibrating strongly. I felt vibrations up and down my spine, and my solar plexus was moving continuously involuntarily. I experienced no intense heat, but felt heat in the upper part of my body.*

*Then the observers told us that we both seemed to make "mudras" or hand movements with our hands as in Indian dance. We both tilted our head far back into the pillow and brought our hands together as if in prayer, and then we brought our hands down by our sides facing upwards. This I do not recall, but the observers reported this.*

*The soham breathing lasted 5 to 10 minutes, and the energy movements lasted about 20 minutes. When I felt the thudding movements in my spine, I thought the whole bed was shaking and I tried to stop it, but I could not. I let the sensations follow their own course and subside on their own.*

*I began to believe more intensely in the universal energy that is available for all to tap. I felt after the experience more our god self.*

Anita's vibratory experience is described in terms of a zigzag or wave-like movement of energy as in Kate, Jane, and Maureen's descriptions. She did not experience intense heat as described in other accounts.

**#20**

This individual, a kundalini yoga teacher, described to me an experience that she had while meditating focusing on her breath and third eye. The experience lasted for a few seconds.

*After meditating for about three to seven minutes, I felt a warm sensation, an energy rush, rise up from the middle of my feet, up the back of both legs, and along my back. When the energy reached my spine, it started to change and I experienced a tingling sensation. The energy intensified on reaching the middle of my back, and it became hot and tingly, but it was not so tingly as it reached my neck.*

*Then, the energy moved up from my neck to the crown of my head, and I was aware of a tickling and warm spot on the crown of my head. I felt the energy moving from the crown of my head, and washing down like a shower to my face and throat - sometimes I have the experience of it moving lower down.*

*I experienced a heightened sense of perception that continued for about 30 minutes after this experience, and then things gradually adjusted to normal.*

According to yogic tradition, the seventh chakra is located at the crown of the head, and in a full Kundalini awakening experience the energy rises up to this centre. This account is different because the individual is aware of the energy moving up from her feet to the crown of her head, and then moving down the front of her body.

**#24**

This is a spontaneous unitive-type of experience with no known trigger where the energy moves up from the legs, and goes up the spine and the front of the body. It occurred at a time of stress in her life, and was psychologically uplifting.

*While sitting quietly in a chair, I became aware of three guiding forces in my life, and their different energy coming into my body. I also began to hear inner voices.*



*Then, I felt a warm sensation, a rush of energy moving up my legs and back. At the same time, I experienced a rush of energy moving up the front of my body.*

*I became aware of these two energy movements up the front and back of my body blending together in my solar plexus area. The sensation in my solar plexus continued for about ten minutes, and then slowly dissipated.*

*I found myself crying tears of joy, and I felt a sense of peace and love. This experience gave me a feeling of strength, a sense of centredness, and hope.*

There is an emphasis in this description on the solar plexus area as in Anita's description.

**#38**

Finally, people in whom Kundalini begins to be active can have manifestations of the Kundalini process in their unconscious. This may take the form of dreams, and include transformation symbols. This account is of a dream Donna had in 1985 that brought an end to a period of deep depression.

*In the dream I was at a window watching a planet moving toward the earth. It was increasing in size until it filled the window and more. I was calm and observing that it would soon collide with us. At that moment I heard a loud crack of thunder and said to myself, I have been struck by lightning. I was out of my body and looking down at myself on a large expanse of marble flooring where I lay in priests' robes, face down in the supplicant position. I felt in a very physical way the 'zinging' of electricity begin in my feet and move up my body and out of my head. It seemed to move slowly and deliberately and I was conscious of each body area of the movement. There was also the spitting, humming sound of electricity.*

It is interesting to note that the movement of energy in Donna's dream begins in the feet as in #20's description, and moves up her body and then out of her head.

## **Discussion and Summary**

As my research shows, the notion that spiritually awakening experiences are given only to special people by individuals such as gurus is erroneous. Analysis of personal accounts presented in this chapter tells us that spiritually awakening experiences can occur spontaneously in many different situations with various antecedents.

In interviewing respondents, I found that because some people were not prepared for these kinds of experiences, it could be a disorientating experience throwing the individual off balance for a time. They were in need of support and guidance during their transformation process, but usually no help was available. Some people at the time of their experience such as #47 and #38, had no idea of what had happened to them because they had no knowledge of the Kundalini process. Without a model or paradigm to understand their experience(s), some people experienced fear and panic, and were given drugs as the process they were undergoing was perceived as pathological instead of a natural transformation process that they were undergoing. In my opinion, if people had information about the transformation process that occurs on the “awakening” of the Kundalini mechanism, they could handle the increased energy manifested in a more productive way.

A variety of inductive or manipulative techniques are dominant in these accounts. They range from practicing a variety of meditation techniques and praying to taking part in a Wiccan ritual.

All of the 16 individuals interviewed had reported experiencing several types of mystical experiences and Kundalini-type experiences in Section 2 and Section 3 respectively.

Analysis of the self-reports reveals a common pattern of movement of energy up the spine - a significant characteristic of a Kundalini awakening, suggesting that people may be

experiencing similar experiences. In nine of the accounts people describe experiencing an upward movement of energy from the base of the spine to the crown of the head traditionally described as a classical Kundalini awakening experience.

Two accounts were of movement of energy that started in the feet, and then moved up to the head. Other accounts described a variety of energy-type experiences.

A dominant theme in these accounts is the sensations at the crown of the head described in the following terms: warmth, buzzing, vibratory sensations, tingling, like static electricity, tickling, and orgasmic-like explosion.

There is an overlap of mystical elements, and Kundalini-like phenomena in these accounts. This overlap can be explained by the fact that a classical Kundalini awakening experience could culminate in a mystical experience.

My research findings show that photism, a universal characteristic of mysticism, can be experienced in so-called mystical and Kundalini-type experiences, and is mentioned in five accounts. This suggests that some light experiences viewed as mystical may be due to Kundalini arousal as light is a frequent symptom of awakening of Kundalini.

Most people described their experiences as psychologically uplifting leaving them feeling happy and with a sense of peace and love. Some individuals reported that their experiences left them feeling depressed, angry, and with symptoms of nausea and headaches.

## **Conclusion**

All respondents reported experiencing what they would describe as a mystical experience. Out of these 35 respondents, 30 also reported experiencing some type of Kundalini experience.

**My hypothesis that there is a relationship between Kundalini activity and mystical-type experiences is supported by this survey. Indeed, respondents themselves suggest this connection from their experiential knowledge when asked to compare their experiences in Sections 2 and 3.**

**The respondents use similar descriptors to describe both types of experience, and a significant number reported experiencing rushes of energy up the spine which is a characteristic sign of Kundalini awakening. Even though a classical yogic awakening experience was reported by a small percentage of respondents, my findings show that nearly all respondents who had reported mystical-type experiences had some signs of recurrent or ongoing Kundalini activity which further supports my hypothesis.**

**The format of the research in this chapter of my thesis does not allow us to conclude that any and all Kundalini experiences correspond to a mystical experience. We can at this stage assert only that mystical experiences are often associated with Kundalini-type experiences.**

**To conclude Part I of this thesis: after looking at the Kundalini mechanism in the East, how it is activated then at what is known of this experience in other traditions, it is possible to compare the various models. It is possible to take literary accounts of awakening experiences in the East, the West, and in other traditions as well as contemporary Western personal accounts from my own research study and to recognize them as Kundalini experiences. My research shows that the Kundalini phenomenon is not confined only to the East, but is known cross-culturally. Even though models and explanations of the Kundalini phenomenon vary from culture to culture, the experience itself is certainly a fact. In Part II, we look at St.**

**Teresa of Avila's accounts of her mystical experiences and analyze them from a Kundalini perspective.**

**PART II**

**THE MYSTICISM OF TERESA OF AVILA AND  
THE KUNDALINI PHENOMENON**

## CHAPTER 7

### THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF TERESA OF AVILA

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), a sixteenth-century Spanish mystic and saint of the Roman Catholic Church, was a reformer of the Carmelite Order. She founded enclosed convents of Discalced or Barefoot nuns. Teresa, known by her religious name as Teresa of Jesus, was beatified by Pope Paul V in 1614, canonized by Pope Gregory XV on March 12 in 1622, and in 1969, Paul VI declared her the first woman Doctor of the Universal Church. In 1536, at the age of twenty-one, Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada entered the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in Avila as a novice, and in 1537 she was professed. On the 24th of August 1562, at age forty-seven, Teresa of Jesus founded her first convent, the Convent of St. Joseph, at Avila. From that time on, the saint spent the rest of her life travelling Spain and founding convents while living the contemplative life.

#### (a) Teresa's Writings

Teresa of Avila wrote a number of texts describing her mystical experiences. These texts have become classics in Spanish and Christian literature. The saint's literary works include her autobiography, the Life, which she was commanded to write by her confessors in 1562. This was completed in 1565. The Life (Vida de Santa Teresa de Jesus) covers the first fifty years of her life and has three components, her exterior life, her inner life, and Teresa's doctrine on prayer. In Spiritual Relations (Las Relaciones) which could be considered a sequel to the Life, Teresa wrote more accounts of her spiritual experiences (most Relations

were written either before 1562 or after 1571). Teresa began to write the Way of Perfection (Camino de Perfeccion) in 1565. This book, addressed to the sisters of the Convent of Saint Joseph, is a treatise on the method of prayer and contemplation. The Interior Castle, Teresa's mature work on mystical theology, was begun and completed in 1577. It is known in Spain as Las Moradas (The Mansions). This didactic work of the mystic contains a detailed description of the transforming union of the soul with God or the "Spiritual Marriage," according to her own experience. Teresa's other major writings are as follows: Exclamations of the Soul to God (Exclamaciones del Alma a Dios) written in 1569, Conceptions of the Love of God (Conceptos del Amor de Dios) written between April 1571 and May 1575, and the Book of the Foundations (Libros de las Fundaciones) written between August 1573 and July 1582. All her writings are in accord with the orthodox teaching of the Catholic Church and have been edited by her spiritual directors.

The saint writes as she would speak, and adopts a colloquial style to analyze and describe her experiences. Teresa also uses metaphors, symbols, and images from everyday life to describe her experiences so that they may be understood by her contemporaries. Two dominant symbols that Teresa uses to describe her mystical experiences are water and fire. She is also known for several of her allegories, for example, the allegory of watering a garden in the Life.

Recent scholarship has contributed new material providing new insights on the literary style of Teresian texts. Scholar Deirdre Green who is a specialist in mysticism, proposes in her paper "Saint Teresa of Avila and Hekhalot mysticism," that the structure of the Interior Castle was influenced by Teresa's Jewish ancestry. She postulates that Teresa of Avila's writings contain elements from the Jewish Hekhalot and Kabbalistic mystical tradition. Green



contends that there are “striking parallels between Merkavah mysticism, and *The Interior Castle*.”<sup>1</sup> She points out that Teresa tried to hide her Jewish background, and that Teresa’s Jewish ancestry (discovered in the 1940s) is now generally accepted by scholars. The discovery of Teresa’s Jewish ancestry has provided another way to analyze Teresa’s style of writing.

Scholar Alison Weber has analyzed Teresian texts from a woman’s perspective in her work *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*. Weber points out that Teresa’s strategy of writing was her defence against accusations of being an alumbrado or illuminist.<sup>2</sup> During her lifetime the mystic’s experiences were viewed with suspicion, and after her death theologians of the Inquisition wanted all her books burned. Alumbrados were individuals who considered vocal prayer, meditation, rites and ceremonies, fasts, and penances as well as the religious life unnecessary to achieve a direct experience of God. This could only be obtained by “abandonment to the love of God.”<sup>3</sup> Weber writes that Teresa’s success at “doctrinal discourse” is due to her making “accommodations to the gender ideology of her audience.”<sup>4</sup> According to Weber, “Teresa’s defensive strategy was to embrace stereotypes of female ignorance, timidity, or physical weakness but to disassociate herself from the double-edged myth of woman as seducible/seductive.”<sup>5</sup> This would include conscious rhetorical devices such as adopting the position of a weak and ignorant woman. Thus her style of writing could also be viewed as a survival tactic. Weber also questions whether Teresa of Avila’s self-depreciatory remarks of wretchedness and incompetence were true, or whether self-depreciation was rhetorical, and the “only self-referential language available for woman”<sup>6</sup> of her time. She hypothesizes that “It seemed possible that Teresa’s ‘rhetoric for women’ was a ‘rhetoric of femininity’ that is, a strategy which exploited certain stereotypes about women’s

character and language. Rather than 'writing like a woman' perhaps Teresa wrote as she believed women were *perceived* to speak."<sup>7</sup>

#### **(b) Developmental Chronology of Teresa's Spiritual Life**

Teresa of Avila's treatment of mysticism is descriptive rather than theological, that is, she refers to her own personal experiences and to the experiences of other contemplatives in her writings. One distinguishing feature of Teresa of Avila's mystical experiences was their Christocentric focus. They involved an intimate friendship with Jesus Christ which included a recognition of His Sacred Humanity. Her teachings stressed that one should not give up meditating on the sacred Humanity of Christ as the "Spiritual Betrothal" and the "Spiritual Marriage" or Transforming Union (the last two Mansions in the Interior Castle), cannot be reached without Jesus as one's personal guide.<sup>8</sup>

Teresa does not use any Spanish term that could be translated as "mystical experience" or "mysticism," instead the saint occasionally uses the term "mistica Teologia" (mystical theology) which according to her is used by others. This term as used by Teresa of Avila refers to a sense of the presence of God. It came into Christian use through a writer of the fifth century, now known as pseudo-Dionysius, who wrote a small treatise entitled Mystical Theology. For Teresa, the term theology did not refer to an intellectual study of God but to a direct experience of God. She does, however, use other terms such as union and rapture to refer to a mystical experience which took place in the context of supernatural prayer states. Teresa uses the term "supernatural" to refer to an experience that is given by God. As Dom Edward Butler points out, the word "contemplation" rather than mysticism was used in the Latin Church, and the word "mystical" was not in current use until the later Middle Ages,<sup>9</sup> so mysticism is a relatively recent word.

The spiritual development of Teresa of Avila can be divided into two stages, her early years when she entered the boarding-school of the Augustinian Convent of St. Mary of Grace as an adolescent of sixteen, and her mature stage commencing after what is known as her second conversion when she was approaching middle-age. The saint's gradual development in contemplative prayer is recounted in her autobiography, the Life, in which she describes the four steps or stages to Christian mystical union in allegorical form. Later in her mature work, the Interior Castle, Teresa wrote about her mystical experiences resulting from a further fifteen years of spiritual growth, and divided her development into seven stages. In this work, primarily a treatise on prayer, she maps out her journey towards self-realization, this time using her well known allegory of the castle which contains many mansions. The structure of the book is divided into seven parts known as mansions, each one describing the progressive steps of those who practice prayer and virtue so that the soul can be united with God. The first three successive stages relate to beginners in prayer who make gradual progress. Stage four marks the beginning of passive states or of supernatural prayer. Stage five is a mystical state in which the soul enters a state of union that is of short duration. The sixth stage in the soul's growth and development results in a unitive state in which the soul is intensely aware of the presence of God. At this stage mystical experiences increase, but it is still not a permanent unitive state. It is in the seventh stage of spiritual development that the soul is united with God on a permanent basis. The chronological order of the phenomena experienced by Teresa shows them as signs of the saint's gradual development in mystical consciousness. As Teresa developed spiritually, her experiences became less exteriorized as in the rapture experience, and more interiorized in that she was more conscious of the "Presence of the Lord" in the "centre of the soul" as expressed in the Interior Castle.<sup>10</sup>

In 1536, at age twenty-one, Teresa of Avila entered the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in Avila as a novice. Teresa's early stages of developing a mystical state of consciousness coincided with her early years as a novice. According to Teresa, at the age of about twenty, she had experienced what she calls the Prayer of Quiet, and occasionally the Prayer of Union, although she did not understand what they were at the time.<sup>11</sup> (According to scholar E. Allison Peers, she must have been at least twenty-three.)<sup>12</sup> This seems to be a more probable age as she was using Francisco de Osuna's Third Spiritual Alphabet on contemplative prayer as a guide at the time. It had been published at Burgos in 1537. According to Peers, the book was given to her in 1538 when she was twenty-three. The Prayer of Quiet and the Prayer of Union are defined as progressive stages in contemplative prayer. Teresa's teaching on the progressive stages of contemplative prayer are expounded in the Life with her well-known allegory of watering a garden.

The garden is a metaphor for a soul which can be watered in four ways. The first stage, or what is translated as degree of prayer, requires much effort by the beginner in prayer, and can be compared with taking water from a well with a bucket. The Prayer of Quiet is the second degree of prayer and described by Teresa as a state, ". . . in which the soul begins to recollect itself, borders on the supernatural to which it could in no way attain by its own exertions."<sup>13</sup> It is in this prayer that the soul begins to be enkindled with love for the Lord, and more water is drawn from the well. Less human effort is required in the third degree of prayer; a kind of union in which mystical experiences increase. Here the water symbol denotes water proceeding from its source. Teresa describes the experience as like watering a garden with running water from a spring or river. The Prayer of Union is the fourth degree of

prayer where there is an abundance of water. It is described by Teresa in terms of fire analogous to a Kundalini experience, and defined as “two different things becoming one.”<sup>14</sup>

Besides experiencing the Prayer of Quiet and the Prayer of Union in her twenties, Teresa also experienced an “imaginary” vision of Christ in 1540 (age 25) which she describes in her autobiography, the Life, in these words: “I saw Him with the eyes of the soul more clearly than I could ever have seen Him with those of the body; . . .”<sup>15</sup> After these early experiences, Teresa went through a period of aridity for about eighteen years (her dates do not always fit the facts).

According to Teresa the periods of aridity that she experienced in her early years occurred because she was unable to meditate. She complains about her lack of proper guidance by someone who understands her and the bad advice she sometimes received. This was probably due to her spiritual directors being young theologians and inexperienced in mystical experience. The saint explains that she had difficulty in practicing discursive prayer in these words: “For God had not given me talents for reasoning with the understanding or for making good use of the imagination: my imagination is so poor that, even when I thought about the Lord’s Humanity, or tried to imagine it to myself, as I was in the habit of doing, I never succeeded.”<sup>16</sup> The mystic describes for us the meditation technique that she used as a young nun in these words, “I used to try to think of Jesus Christ, our Good and our Lord, as present within me, and it was in this way that I prayed.”<sup>17</sup> Teresian mysticism consists of a loving relationship with God. In her writings, the saint advises her nuns that the development in one’s interior life depends on not thinking too much, but to love much and to remember one is in God’s presence.

After her second conversion, Teresa gave up the formal practice of discursive mental prayer which involves the use of intellectual reasoning because it resulted in aridity, and she could not reason with her mind. It is because Teresa had difficulty in practicing discursive prayer that she tried to visualize an image Christ, but she could not form any picture of Him. For Teresa, progression in mental prayer should result in a lessening of rational thinking once one experiences active recollection (*Esforzado Recogimiento*). Active recollection is acquired by the person's own active efforts, and consists of the withdrawal of the senses from all outward things so that the soul can be with God. At this stage, one should develop an awareness of the Divine Presence within, and not insist on reasoning with the mind.<sup>18</sup>

Progression in contemplative prayer is considered by Teresa to be a gift, an act of grace which is bestowed by the Lord when He wills it, and not the result of manipulative techniques such as penances and prayers. However, as Teresa writes, even though the work is performed by the Lord, one can prepare oneself to receive the mystical union of the soul with God by creating a disposition for it through the practice of virtues and prayer. In the Interior Castle, Teresa writes, "As far as I can understand, the door of entry into this castle [soul] is prayer and meditation; I do not say mental prayer rather than vocal, for, if it is prayer at all, it must be accompanied by meditation."<sup>19</sup>

On two occasions in 1554, Teresa experienced powerful conversion experiences that changed her life. The first occurred when she saw, on entering the oratory, a new statue representing the wounded Christ. This representation greatly distressed her, and she fell down before it and wept.<sup>20</sup> The second conversion occurred while she was reading the Confessions of St. Augustine. Scholars differ but the generally accepted date of Teresa's conversion experiences is 1554, (1556-7 is the date specified by E. A. Peers as her final conversion).

Teresa was about thirty-nine, or in her early forties. Teresa's final conversion in middle age resulted in a new developmental stage for her. Thus after her early developmental stage spent at the Incarnation convent, Teresa began her active and productive life which resulted in her founding her own convents as well as an acceleration of her spiritual progress. At this time, she began to devote more time to prayer. She also started to receive numerous "favours," a term Teresa sometimes used for her mystical experiences, thus creating a need for her to continually seek spiritual directors for guidance.

At age forty-two in 1557, Teresa experienced her first "locution," or the phenomenon of hearing voices. She heard the first words Christ spoke to her "Serve thou Me, and meddle not with this."<sup>21</sup> At age forty-three in 1558, the mystic experienced her first rapture,<sup>22</sup> and in 1559 or 1560 what she calls her first "intellectual vision" of Christ, that is, Teresa is aware of His presence but does not see Him with the eyes of the body or the soul.<sup>23</sup> In 1559, at age forty-four,<sup>24</sup> Teresa experienced an "imaginary" vision in which her heart was pierced by an arrow. This had happened before since she indicates that this type of experience had occurred more than once.

Teresa continued to receive "favours" that led to her experiencing the mystical state of what she calls "Spiritual Betrothal" which is dealt with in the Sixth Mansions (a section of the Interior Castle). The Spiritual Betrothal is Teresa's term for a transitory stage in which the soul is still not permanently united with God. Finally, at age fifty-seven in 1572, ten years before her death in 1582 (age 67), Teresa experienced the "Spiritual Marriage" or transforming union that she describes in the Seventh Mansions. She describes her own personal experience of the Spiritual Marriage in these terms: "The Lord appears in the center of the soul, not through an imaginary, but through an intellectual vision . . . ."<sup>25</sup> According to

her description, transforming union is a permanent state where one is aware of the continual presence of God and consists of the conformity of the human will with God's will. It is a developmental stage where Teresa's ecstatic and other accidental phenomena decline, but her intellectual visions and locutions do not cease.

It is important to note that Teresa of Avila's spiritual development was also accompanied by psychic phenomena, spiritual gifts, and other related phenomena that she recorded in writing: knowledge of future events, speaking in tongues, writing poetry, as well as understanding Latin as though it was in Spanish.

### **(c) Illnesses and Physical Ailments**

Teresa of Avila's progress in developing a mystical state of consciousness was accompanied by a variety of illnesses and physical problems throughout her life, including paralysis, so much so that she could be regarded as a hypochondriac. These illnesses were sometimes associated with stress periods in her life. It is possible, however, that some of the phenomena associated with what psychologists have termed hysterical illnesses, were related to Teresa's spiritual transformation process. (Some of these phenomena are similar to those observed in cases where the transformative, or purification process of an awakening Kundalini is occurring.) We will now look at the illnesses that effected the saint throughout her life from a developmental perspective.

A crisis point in Teresa's life occurred when she entered the Augustinian Convent of St. Mary of Grace at the age of sixteen in 1531. It was while she was there that she experienced the conflict of trying to make up her mind to be a nun, she writes, ". . . the Lord became more desirous of preparing me for the state of life which was best for me. He sent me a serious illness, which forced me to return to my father's house."<sup>26</sup> At this time in her life



when she had to make a choice to become a nun or marry, she began to suffer from fainting fits, and fever. After she had taken the habit at the Convent of the Incarnation in 1536 at age twenty-one, Teresa's health deteriorated further. Although Teresa records that at this time she experienced joy and happiness upon entering her new life at the Incarnation convent, she began to suffer from physical problems that were difficult to explain. Her fainting fits increased, and she developed heart trouble and other ailments that she attributed to a change of lifestyle and diet. Teresa was sent to a place called Becedas for treatment. Instead of the treatment helping her, the pain in her heart increased, she had a continual fever, and suffered pains from head to foot that she explains as the consequence of her nerves shrinking. This illness culminated in a cataleptic attack on August 15, 1539. It resulted in Teresa being unconscious for four days. Consequently, she was presumed to be dead. The following quotation from the Life is her personal account of her symptoms after this fit:

My tongue was bitten to pieces; nothing had passed my lips; and because of this and my great weakness my throat was choking me so that I could not even take water. All my bones seemed out of joint and there was a terrible confusion in my head. As a result of the torments I had suffered during these days, I was all doubled up, like a ball, and no more able to move arm, foot, hand or head than if I had been dead . . . I could move, I think, only one finger of my right hand . . . I could hardly endure the terrible cold fits of quartan ague, from which I still suffered and which were very severe. I still had a dreadful distaste for food.<sup>27</sup>

Teresa remained in this condition for eight months, but her paralysis, though it improved, lasted for nearly three years.

The saint recovered from this death-like experience, but continued to experience ongoing health problems, some of them severe. Teresa complains particularly about her heart and digestive problems in the following text:

In particular, for twenty years I suffered from morning sickness, so that I was not able to break my fast until after midday - sometimes not until much later. Now that I go oftener to Communion, I have to bring on the sickness at night, with fevers or some other way, before I go to bed, . . . but if I let it take its course I feel much worse. I think I can hardly ever be free from aches and pains, and sometimes very serious ones, especially in the heart, although the trouble which I once had continually now occurs only rarely, and I have been free for quite eight years from the paralysis and the feverish complaints from which I used often to suffer.<sup>28</sup>

Other symptoms that St. Teresa of Avila complains of in the Life are severe depression, confusion, anger, and crying spells. She endured both spiritual trials and bodily pains:

I had sometimes to endure - and still have, though to a lesser degree - the sorest spiritual trials, together with bodily pains and tortures, so severe that I could do nothing to ease them. . . . It was when both kinds of distress came upon me together that my trials were so great and caused me such deep depression. . . . For, when a person is in this condition, the understanding becomes stupid; and so I was tormented by a thousand doubts and suspicions.<sup>29</sup>

At the end of her life the mystic suffered from vomiting, and problems with her throat, bones, and head.

To summarize, the life and writings of Teresa of Avila show that she was a very creative woman, but the ability to describe in writing the content of her experiences was limited by the culture and times that she lived in. Analysis of her texts, however, show that she did manage to convey detailed descriptions of her mystical experiences through the use of rhetorical devices acceptable to the Spanish culture and male theologians as Alison Weber suggests.

In the following chapters, I first present how Teresa's life and mystical experiences has been perceived by Western psychologists. I then apply the Kundalini model to analyze two

types of mystical experiences which Teresa of Avila terms “the flight of the spirit,” and “rapture.”

## NOTES: CHAPTER 7

After the first reference to any of St. Teresa's works using the full title, I will abbreviate the title in future notes.

1. Deirdre Green, "Saint Teresa of Avila and Hekhalot mysticism," Studies in Religion, 13.3 (Summer, 1984), 282.
2. Alison Weber, Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), p.34.
3. Kieran Kavanaugh, "Spanish Sixteen Century: Carmel and Surrounding Movements," in Christian Spirituality, eds. Louis Dupre and Don Saliers (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p.73.
4. Weber, Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity, p.36.
5. Weber, p.36.
6. Weber, p.11.
7. Weber, p.11.
8. Interior Castle, vi, vii, p.305.
9. Edward Butler, Western Mysticism (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), p.4.
10. IC, vii, ii, p.334.
11. Life, iv, p.23.
12. L, note 2, p.23.
13. L, xiv, p.83.
14. L, xviii, p.106.
15. L, vii, p.40.
16. L, iv, p.24.
17. L, iv, p.23.
18. Way of Perfection, xxviii, pp.114-115.
19. IC, i, i, p.203.

20. L, ix, p.54.
21. L, xix, p.115.
22. L, xxiv, p.155.
23. L, xxvii, p.170.
24. L, xxix, pp.192-193.
25. IC, vii, ii, p.334.
26. L, iii, p.18.
27. L, vi, p.32.
28. L, vii, pp.42-43.
29. L, xxx, p.197.

## CHAPTER 8

### PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF MYSTICISM: PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEWS OF TERESA OF AVILA

The focus in this chapter is on the Western psychological theories of mysticism and how they have been applied to Teresa of Avila. St. Teresa describes and classifies stages of spiritual development in terms referring to what is seen today as psychological development. Teresa is of psychological interest because she personally describes the psychological processes accompanying the development of her own mystical state of consciousness as well as describing in detail her subjective psychological states.

As John Welch, a religious scholar and Catholic priest in the Carmelite Order, points out “Teresa has been called a psychological mystic because the journey to God, for her, is also a journey to the self.”<sup>1</sup> This ecstatic mystic’s process of growth towards a higher state of consciousness is classified into seven stages in the Interior Castle. (These seven steps to mystical union are discussed in Chapter 7.) Teresa’s Interior Castle is a detailed document of her psychological development expressed through a variety of images that according to Fr. Welch “tell not only her story, but the story of the human psyche.”<sup>2</sup> In this work, Teresa describes her progress toward mystical union and she documents her own experiences in such detail that she even informs the reader on how such development affected her physical body. Teresa’s developmental stages are mapped out in Chapters 7 and 9 of this thesis. The question

is, how has the development of Teresa of Avila's mystical state of consciousness been analyzed by psychologists?

As already mentioned, according to the Christian religious model the mystical experiences of the religious are due to Divine intervention or the supernatural. In this chapter, in contrast to the theological view of mystical experience, we are concerned with interpreting mystical experience from the Western psychological point of view which calls upon unconscious processes to explain or describe inner experiences. This chapter begins with a historical survey of the main early psychological views of mysticism which includes among others Freud's regression theory, and Jung's archetypal theory. This survey also includes William James, and James H. Leuba's views of Teresa of Avila's ecstatic experiences. Then, I introduce the work of a contemporary scholar, Catherine Romano, and her psychoanalytic views of Teresa of Avila. This is followed by a look at contemporary theories of mystical experience from a developmental perspective in contrast to the dominant pathological view expressed by early psychologists. Finally, to conclude this chapter, I discuss the views of Swami Rama who compares the yoga psychological model with the Jungian psychoanalytical model, a comparison which points out the limitations of Western psychology.

Most psychological studies of mysticism rely on the writings of and about mystics. The problem in interpreting mystical experience is that hagiographic texts are written by religious individuals who do not critically analyze mystical experience, and ignore the psychophysiological components of religious experience. The lack of medical knowledge at the time resulted in people believing that all unusual experiences were of the supernatural. Negative experiences were often explained as resulting from the intervention of the devil. Another problem is that according to present day medical knowledge, hagiographic writings

show that the saints did suffer from organic problems. For example, recorded information on Catherine of Genoa's physical condition shows that she had symptoms which suggest kidney damage.<sup>3</sup> Viewing the psychophysiological phenomena of mystics and saints purely from the supernatural perspective has resulted in ignoring these problems. Therefore, the interpretation of mystical experience presents us with the problem of, do we accept the religious, or the psychological explanation, or alternatively can a scientific model allow for the supernatural? The Kundalini model, unlike the Christian model and the orthodox scientific model, allows for a physical and spiritual interpretation of human experiences.

**(a) A Historical Survey of Psychological Approaches to Mysticism:**

The scientific study of religion by early psychologists was very concerned with the study of mysticism then identified with hysteria. These psychologists included: Starbuck, 1899; Coe, 1900; James, 1902; Leuba, 1925; and Pratt, 1920; all students of the famous Clark School of religious psychology.<sup>4</sup> Their main objective was to demystify the phenomenon of mysticism. They argued that mystics misinterpreted their experience of union with God. The general view of investigators was that mystical experience was of a pathological nature.<sup>5</sup> Granville Stanley Hall, founder and president of religious psychology at Clark University, was the first to scientifically document the role of bodily processes in religious experience.<sup>6</sup> The interest in mysticism declined after this initial concern until it became of scientific interest again in the 1970s.

As psychologist David M. Wulff points out in Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Views, a succession of critical works was published by Catholic scholars who took exception to the "efforts to develop a psychopathology of religion."<sup>7</sup> According to him these scholars argued that the theoretical explanations of psychologists could not explain the



whole of mystical experience, and their theories did not allow for Divine intervention which only philosophy and theology are able to discuss. However, psychologists and psychoanalysts brought their own interpretations to mystical experience.

### **William James (1842-1910): A Case Study of Religious Pathology**

William James presented his Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1901-1902. These lectures in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) have had a major impact on the psychology of religion and his work is still widely read today. William James in his well-known classic descriptive study of religious phenomena was one of the first psychologists to publish their interest in the pathological elements of religious experience. He noticed the similarity between the mystic and schizophrenic experience. James's early research suggests that pathological elements may be a component of a genuine religious experience and mystical elements may be present in insanity. James made the connection between mysticism and insanity in the following statement:

. . . for religious mysticism is only one half of mysticism. The other half has no accumulated traditions except those which the text-books on insanity supply. Open any one of these, and you will find abundant cases in which "mystical ideas" are cited as characteristic symptoms of enfeebled or deluded states of mind. In delusional insanity, paranoia, as they sometimes call it, we may have a *diabolical* mysticism, a sort of religious mysticism turned upside down. . . . the same voices and visions . . . the same controlling by extraneous powers; only this time the emotion is pessimistic: instead of consolations we have desolutions; the meanings are dreadful; . . . . It is evident from the point of view of their psychological mechanism, the classic mysticism and these lower mysticisms spring from the same mental level, from that great subliminal or transmarginal region of which science is beginning to admit the existence, but of which so little is really known. That region contains every kind of matter: "seraph and snake" abide there side by side.<sup>8</sup>

Thus James distinguishes between “classic mysticism” and the pathological states identified with what he terms “diabolical mysticism.” James says that his “empiricist criterion” for judging a genuine religious experience from the psychopathic is “By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots,”<sup>9</sup> in other words, by what was the outcome of these experiences.

James admits that Teresa of Avila “wrote admirable descriptive psychology,” but was a “typical shrew.”<sup>10</sup> According to James it was a “pity that so much vitality of soul should have found such poor employment.”<sup>11</sup> In referring to the ecstasies of Teresa, James writes, “To the medical mind these ecstasies signify nothing but suggested and imitated hypnoid states, on an intellectual basis of superstition, and a corporeal one of degeneration and hysteria.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, James contends, Teresa’s “. . . idea of religion seems to have been that of an endless amatory flirtation . . . between the devotee and the deity; and apart from helping younger nuns to go in this direction by the inspiration of her example and instruction, there is absolutely no human use in her, or sign of any general human interest.”<sup>13</sup> James’s negative comments have also been expressed by others as we shall see in this chapter.

### **Sigmund Freud (1856-1939): Regression Theory of Mysticism**

Studies of mystical experience in the first half of the twentieth century were dominated by Freudian concepts but Freud never published any extensive material on mystical experience. Freud interpreted the unitive experience in Civilization and Its Discontents as a regressive state, consequently he viewed mystics from a pathological perspective. Even though Freud had not experienced the “oceanic feeling,”<sup>14</sup> he did acknowledge that it could have been experienced by many people. For him, this “oceanic feeling” associated with the mystic’s experience of union is a regressive experience which can be traced back “to an early phase of ego feeling.”<sup>15</sup> Thus as mysticism results in a withdrawal from the external world of

reality, Freud would consider it to be pathological. (The regressive nature of the mystic's experience of union is also a characteristic of schizophrenia.)

### **Carl G. Jung (1875-1961): Archetypal Theory of Mysticism**

Jung was once asked how mysticism fitted into his psychological model. Jung replied: "Mystics are the people who have a particularly vivid experience of the processes of the collective unconscious. Mystical experience is experience of archetypes."<sup>16</sup> According to Jung's concept, the collective unconscious contains inherited elements which belong to the whole of the human race. Therefore, according to Jung's archetypal theory, mysticism is a universal phenomenon applicable to Eastern and Western mystics.

Jung seeks to confirm not the existence of God through a theological argument, but the psychological existence of an activated archetypal God-image in the collective unconscious. Indeed, Jung believes that "in God we honour the energy of the archetype."<sup>17</sup> Jung distinguishes between the archetype and the actualized symbol in which it expresses itself. On becoming conscious, the archetype manifests as an archetypal image and it can manifest in an infinite variety of forms of expression depending on the individual consciousness (cultural, historical, etc.) in which it occurs. Jung postulates: "It would be a regrettable mistake if anybody should take my observations as a kind of proof of the existence of God. They prove only the existence of an archetypal God-image, which to my mind is the most we can assert about God psychologically."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, he writes "And since experience of this archetype has the quality of numinosity, often in a very high degree, it comes into the category of religious experiences."<sup>19</sup> Jung clarifies his use of the term religion in terms that could apply to mystics as ". . . the attitude peculiar to a consciousness which has been altered by the experience of the numinous."<sup>20</sup>

As Jung's theory of mystical experience reduces it to an archetypal experience, it conflicts with the theological notion of a transcendent God. He expresses this conflict in the following text:

It is only through the psyche that we can establish that God acts upon us, but we are unable to distinguish whether these actions emanate from God or the unconscious. We cannot tell whether God and the unconscious are two different entities. Both are border-line concepts for transcendental contents. But empirically it can be established, with a sufficient degree of probability, that there is in the unconscious an archetype of wholeness which manifests itself spontaneously in dreams, etc., . . . .<sup>21</sup>

Thus according to Jungian psychology, the experience of God or the Other of the mystic, is an experience grounded in the human psyche, that is, the unconscious and its archetypal powers.<sup>22</sup> According to Jung's theory, "The archetypes are the numinous, structural elements of the psyche and possess a certain autonomy and specific energy which enables them to attract, out of the conscious mind, those contents which are best suited to themselves."<sup>23</sup>

Jung's analysis of mysticism depends on his concept of the master archetype; the "Self," or God archetype. In Jungian psychology the unitive state of the mystic is termed the "Self" where a connection is made with the centre of one's being through the collective unconscious. According to Jung, the Self is the power that unites the ego with the unconscious. For Teresa of Avila; according to Jungian psychology, Jesus is the archetypal God-image that leads to union (coniunctio) of the conscious and unconscious - the Self. Jung, however, would caution about unqualified union as risking the ego being merged in the centre - and lost to it permanently in psychosis. He believed that in mystical experience the ego was replaced by the powerful numinous forces of the unconscious that arose from the God or Self archetype.

The numinous is the mystical element in Jungian psychology defined in Rudolph Otto's terms as "a dynamic agency or effect not caused by arbitrary act of will."<sup>24</sup> Jung links his concept of archetypes and Otto's concept of "numinosum" by referring to the archetypes as numina and their effects as numinous. The numinous phenomenon is expressed in Jung's terms as a power that "seizes and controls the human subject, who is always rather its victim than its creator."<sup>25</sup>

According to Jung's energy model, a mystic would be aware of godlike figures and the experience of being possessed by a force or power because:

The energy underlying conscious psychic life is pre-existent to it and therefore at first unconscious. As it approaches consciousness it first appears projected in figures like mana, gods, daimons etc., whose numen seems to be the vital source of energy, . . . But as these fade and lose their force, the ego - that is, the empirical man - seems to come into possession of this source of energy, . . . on the one hand he seeks to seize this energy, to possess it, and even imagines that he does possess it; and on the other hand he is possessed by it.<sup>26</sup>

Jung's archetypal theory of mystical experience proposes that excess libido is responsible for religious symbolic processes, that is, the symbol acts as an expression for the libido. According to Jung's energy model, the source of the libido is in the unconscious. He explains the connection between libido and the symbolic process in these words: "The detachment of libido from the object transfers it into the subject, where it activates the images lying dormant in the unconscious. These images are archaic forms of expression which become symbols."<sup>27</sup>

Jung contends that the divine figure is a phenomenon connected with excess libido. He writes: "It is a well-known fact that scenes of mystic union with the Savior are strongly tinged with erotic libido."<sup>28</sup> Psychologically speaking, ". . . God always denotes the highest value, the maximum sum of libido, . . ."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, he says, "I am therefore of the

opinion that, in general, psychic energy or libido creates the God-image by making use of archetypal patterns, and that man in consequence worships the psychic force active within him as something divine.”<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, Jung’s psychological model of mystical experience suggests that excess libido or accumulation of energy visibly expressed as a symbol, is responsible for the religious symbolism of mystics such as Teresa of Avila.

#### **James Henry Leuba (1868-1946): Hysteria and Woman Mystics**

James Henry Leuba was a member of the American Clark School of religious psychology which focused on religious development and conversion. Leuba, and Edwin Starbuck, another member of the Clark School, were known for their research on religious conversion. Leuba believed that mystical experience could be satisfactorily explained in terms of psychophysiological processes. He contends in his work The Psychology of Religious Mysticism that in seeking unity with God in “excruciating delights” the mystics have followed the wrong way. These experiences, he says, do not reveal the Christian God, “but the lawful working of our psycho-physiological organisms.”<sup>31</sup>

As Walter H. Clark in his article “Intense Religious Experience” states, “The tone of most psychological judgments on mysticism was set for modern times by Leuba (1925), a lifelong student of the field. For him the typical mystic was a woman, probably a hysteric deprived sexually and emotionally.”<sup>32</sup> In The Psychology of Religious Mysticism (1925), Leuba uses case studies to illustrate his negative approach towards women mystics, and as Walter H. Clark points out, “He compares the ecstasy to the trance and drugged states and, . . . . . relegates the business of mysticism to the realm of the abnormal.”<sup>33</sup>

Mysticism and sexual energy are linked according to Leuba's thesis. For Leuba, erotic mysticism was embodied mysticism. Indeed, Teresa of Avila has been assessed by Leuba as an erotic personality. He contends that as Christian mystics had no natural outlet for their sexual energy, and that the bliss experienced by great mystics which can ". . . transcend everything which the world and the senses can procure, involve some activity of the sexual organs."<sup>34</sup> For example, according to Leuba, Teresa of Avila's mystical text which describes her heart being pierced by an angel with a fiery arrow contains "auto-erotic phenomena." He comments:

There remains, however, enough to indicate, it seems to us, the participation of the organs of sex in the extraordinary enjoyment of union with the heavenly Bridegroom. On several occasions she had the vision of an angel who "held in his hands a long golden dart, tipped with fire." She relates that "from time to time he would plunge it through my heart, and push it down into my bowels. As he withdrew the dart, it seemed as if the bowels would be torn away with it; and this would leave me aflame with divine love."<sup>35</sup>

Leuba assumes from this so-called erotic text of Teresa of Avila, and from those of other "great mystics," that they were, "without being aware of it, . . . sexually excited by their 'spiritual' love for Jesus or the Virgin Mary; and also, in most cases, for persons of the opposite sex."<sup>36</sup> (I discuss an alternative explanation for this wounding, or piercing sensation of Teresa's in Chapter 9.)

Leuba discusses in Chapter 8 of his work The Psychology of Religious Mysticism a paper by Jesuit, G. Hahn of the school of Charcot on "Hysterical Phenomena and the Revelations of Santa Theresa," which appeared in the Revue des Questions Scientifiques (1883). Leuba quotes Hahn's conclusion of the saint's ailments as follows: "We are in the presence of an instance of organic hysteria as characteristic as possible; the disease reaches in

truth its highest limit. . . . It is the *Grande Hysterie* with its prodromes, its contractures, and its attacks which recall closely the frightful fits of epilepsy.”<sup>37</sup> However, Leuba, does mention that Hahn indicates features that separate Teresa from ordinary hysterics and that Hahn’s knowledge of hysteria is obsolete. Furthermore, Basil Douglas-Smith in “An Empirical Study of Religious Mysticism” points out that the diagnosis of hysteria has been replaced by hysterical personality, and according to him, Leuba’s view of mysticism could be tested by comparing mystical experience with this diagnostic term.<sup>38</sup>

Teresa of Avila suffered from serious pains in her heart. Leuba quotes Richer as saying in Etudes Cliniques that heart palpitations are associated with “the attack of hystero-epilepsy.”<sup>39</sup> Teresa also experienced digestive problems and nausea regarded by Hahn as hysterical symptoms. Her difficulty in swallowing, he attributed to “globus hystericus,”<sup>40</sup> that is, spasms of the pharynx. It is a fact that Teresa of Avila experienced symptoms described as hysterical reactions such as paralysis, or vomiting, but it does not necessarily mean that she was a hysteric as Leuba and Hahn suggest. (I mention her physical illnesses and health problems in Chapter’s 7, 9, and 10.) My thesis suggests an alternative explanation for the physical problems experienced by some women mystics.

Teresa also complained of hearing whistling and other sounds in her head. According to Hahn, nearly all hysterical patients complain of hearing whistling in the ears - I discuss in Chapter 9 the sound phenomena experienced by Teresa of Avila according to Eastern concepts.

Leuba concludes that St.Teresa of Avila as well as St. Catherine of Genoa, Mme Guyon, and St. Marguerite Marie all suffered from hysterical attacks. He believes that mystics “Because of the ideal they had formed and of the method of life they had chosen, their deepest



instincts and desires could not be gratified in the ordinary way. And they aggravated repressions and conflicts, in themselves sufficient to cause a variety of psychoses, by excessive and persistent ascetic practices, and thus exhausted themselves to the point of inanition."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, he proposes that if mystics such as Suso, St. Teresa, St. Catherine of Genoa, Mme Guyon, and St. Marguerite Marie, had been able to have access to the psychotherapy of today, they would have saved themselves a great deal of physical and spiritual suffering. It would have lead them, he says, ". . . along natural ways to an earlier self-fulfilment and to a degree of perfection in no way inferior, ethically or otherwise, to the one which they attained during the active phases of their lives."<sup>42</sup>

### **Henri Delacroix (1873-1937): Analytical Study of Christian Mystics**

The pathological hypothesis of mysticism was not accepted by all scholars. Psychologist Henri Delacroix's classic study of mysticism Etudes d'histoire et de psychologie du mysticisme. Les grande mystiques chretiens (1908),<sup>43</sup> is an analytical study of Saint Teresa, Madame Guyon, Heinrich Suso, John of the Cross, and Saint Francis de Sales. After studying these individuals, Delacroix concludes that they had a rich subconscious life. He also found that pathological elements in his subjects diminished over time. Delacroix presents a more positive approach to mysticism, and points out that the objective of mysticism is not ecstasy but the transformation of the personality.<sup>44</sup> As Anton T. Boisen points out, Delacroix concludes in his work that the cause of mystical experiences in his subjects was an inner conflict or crisis.<sup>45</sup> However, Evelyn Underhill stresses Delacroix's reductionist conclusion, ". . . after an exhaustive and even sympathetic analysis of St. Teresa's progress toward union

with the Absolute, ends upon the assumption that the God with whom she was united was the content of her own subconscious mind.”<sup>46</sup>

### **Pierre Janet (1859-1947): Study of Ecstatic Madeleine and Religious Mania**

Janet was a student and associate of Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1893) who was well known for his exploration of hysteria by means of hypnosis at the Salpetriere; the famous neurological clinic in Paris. Janet is well-known for his contribution to the psychology of religion, and his case studies of exceptional religious states, in particular, that of “ecstatic Madeleine.” He was an important contributor to the French psychopathological tradition, and Carl G. Jung studied with him for a time. According to D. Wilfred Abse’s article “Hysterical Conversion and Dissociative Syndromes and the Hysterical Character” in the American Handbook of Psychiatry (vol.3), the term hysteria is derived from the Greek hystera, which means uterus, thus a connection was made between the reproductive organs of women and hysteria. This naturalistic view was rejected in the Middle Ages, and replaced by a belief in the demoniacal origin of hysteria.<sup>47</sup> According to the authors of Abnormal Psychology, Janet diagnosed hysteria as “a splitting off from conscious experience of certain ideas that still continued to influence behavior.”<sup>48</sup>

Psychiatrist Pierre Janet’s study of ecstatic Madeleine and religious mania is of particular interest as it shows the presence of mystical elements in the symptomology of the mentally ill. Madeleine, who came from a Catholic background, was a psychopathic patient at the Salpetriere in Paris between 1896 and 1904. She was treated for religious mania. Madeleine experienced psychological states of a mystical nature analogous to those of the great saints.<sup>49</sup> As Roger Bastide the author of The Mystical Life points out, Madeleine speaks

of the presence of God in the same terms as Teresa. She also experienced ecstasies and raptures analogous to those described by Teresa of Avila in her works. Both women comment on the benefits of the ecstatic experience.<sup>50</sup> According to Wulff, by comparing Madeleine's experiences with great Christian mystics especially St. Teresa, "Janet concluded that underneath the shifting states of mystical consciousness lies the disorder of psychasthenia, a now-obsolete term for what today is called an obsessive-compulsive."<sup>51</sup> This term ordinarily covers a group of mental disorders of an obsessive and anxiety type such as scruples and doubts characteristically experienced by the religious.

Roger Bastide disagrees with Janet's generalization of the data as he stresses that there are fundamental differences between ecstatic Madeleine and the great mystics, which Janet did not deny. He also questions whether the mystic is an unconscious mythomaniac.<sup>52</sup> A mythomaniac has been defined psychologically as: "Tendency towards the narration of imaginary adventures; elaborations of suggestions given, frequently exhibited in hypnosis."<sup>53</sup> Bastide believes Madeleine's psychological states were self-suggested and founded on former experiences, thus he concludes that she was an "imitative" mystic. It is because of Janet's background in investigating hysteria by means of hypnosis, one can question if some of the phenomena experienced by Madeleine were the result of hypnotic suggestion.

Bastide also hypothesizes that Madeleine may have based her experiences on Teresa's because Madeleine's parents had a library and it is quite possible she could have read Teresa of Avila's works. Also, being a neurotic individual she had a "highly developed local hypermnesia" (an unusual degree of retention and recall). The problem remains, are the mystical elements manifested by ecstatic Madeleine who was diagnosed as suffering from religious mania, analogous to those of a recognized saint and mystic such as Teresa of Avila?

One recognizes that there can be a fine line between genius and insanity, but there are definite differences between a genuine mystic and the mentally ill.

**(b) A Contemporary Psychological Analysis of Teresa of Avila**

A contemporary study of the psychological development of Teresa of Avila is by Catherine Romano who uses Freudian insights. According to my research, there is no other recent contemporary critique of Teresa's psychological development by a woman. In her article "A Psycho-Spiritual History of Teresa of Avila: A Woman's Perspective," Romano suggests that Teresa is an "erotic libidinal type" as described by Freud in Character and Culture.<sup>54</sup> According to her, Teresa was a neurotic whose inner conflicts were expressed in hysterical illness. Romano also suggests that Teresa had a neurotic need for love that was satisfied in the attention and love that she received through being ill. She points out that according to Freudian analysis, Teresa's illness, which resulted in a loss of consciousness and paralysis, would be regarded as a hysterical fit. According to Romano, Teresa's cataleptic attack may "serve the purpose of some sexual gratification."<sup>55</sup> Romano also suggests that Teresa's piercing sensations were also of a sexual nature. In referring to Teresa's twenty years of vomiting, Romano writes, "This symptom might reflect an identification with her mother," or "It may be a sign of her Oedipal desire for her father's love."<sup>56</sup> According to Romano's analysis, Teresa, in her later years, slowly relinquished her hysterical symptoms that affected her physically, and her hysterical attacks became restricted to moments of ecstatic union with Christ, her lover.

Romano concludes her assessment of Teresa of Avila's life by saying that she was successful according to "the two basic areas that Freud used to measure healthy integration: love and work."<sup>57</sup>

### **(c) Contemporary Views of Mysticism**

Some of the contemporary researchers may look at mystical experience from a developmental point of view in contrast to the dominant pathological view of early psychologists.

According to Edward M. Podvoll there has been a paradigm shift in the understanding of mysticism in recent times by Western psychology as he points out in his article "Psychosis and the Mystic Path (1979)":

Until only recently, Western psychology has tended to see mysticism as a pathological manifestation, . . . . We are coming to have greater understanding of practitioners of the mystic path and are no longer obliged to see them only as victims of psychopathology or developmental failure. There is a gathering body of work - of which this article is a part - that sees the mystic experience within a psychosis as most vital attempt at recovery and a direct expression of the desire to transcend and remodel an intolerable image of self and life situation.<sup>58</sup>

Dr. Podvoll in his article draws a parallel between the developmental stages of chronic schizophrenia and the stages of the mystic way:

I believe that these stages of the "mystic way" have clearly recognizable and therapeutically important parallels in the life experiences of chronically schizophrenic subjects. Intensive psychotherapeutic work with these people and often their autobiographical writings reveal the form of a mystic path not only within childhood developmental histories but also within the structure and progression of a long psychotic experience.<sup>59</sup>

Psychologically, the mystics approach to the Transcendent is a developmental one that can exhibit pathological features. As described by Teresa of Avila in the Interior Castle, the mystic way is a gradual process. Evelyn Underhill in Mysticism names these developmental stages as awakening, purgation, illumination, surrender, and union.<sup>60</sup>

This new diagnostic approach in Western psychology is also mentioned by Dr. Kenneth Wapnick, a clinical psychologist. In his article "Mysticism and Schizophrenia," he discusses the mystical life of Teresa of Avila. He states that "Recently in psychology a new direction in the understanding and treatment of schizophrenia has developed. A primary tenet of this position is that the psychosis is a part of an ongoing constructive process, wherein the individual attempts to correct the inadequacy of his functioning."<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Wapnick says, "Mysticism and schizophrenia have often been linked in psychiatric literature. Some writers have suggested that mystics demonstrate a special form of schizophrenia or other psychopathology."<sup>62</sup> Though many aspects of these two experiences are similar, Wapnick attempts to clarify the similarities and differences of the two processes.

As psychologist Michael Argyle, author of Religious Behavior, mentions, many well-known religious leaders and mystics have had symptoms resembling those of hysteria, schizophrenia, etc., but have lived productive lives which would not have been possible if they were genuinely mad.<sup>63</sup>

#### **(d) Yoga Psychology and Psychotherapy.**

Swami Rama, a medical doctor and religious scholar, compares the Western psychoanalytical model with yoga psychology in Yoga and Psychotherapy, written in collaboration with two of his students. He states:

When psychoanalytic therapy succeeds in expanding the underdeveloped ego enough for it to be able to operate more effectively in the world, more often than not the patient considers himself "well" and is ready to end treatment. There is often little interest in the evolution of states of consciousness or levels of growth and maturity that lie beyond what is comfortable and adaptive. For this reason, psychoanalysis and most of modern psychotherapy might be called "deficit" or "illness-oriented," when compared to yoga psychology which is "growth oriented."<sup>64</sup>

It must be noted that the orthodox Western psychoanalytic model, in contrast to yoga psychology, does not view so-called pathological features expressed in the mystic as elements in the growth process.

In this work, Rama discusses Jung and the Eastern concepts he contends Jung borrowed but did not understand. He states that Jung, “. . . actually regarded Eastern concepts as manifestations of his ‘universal archetypes’ and saw them in the context of his own thought.”<sup>65</sup> Rama compares Jung’s concept of the Self or God archetype with the Self of Indian psychology. He points out in Yoga and Psychotherapy that Jung’s Self is different from the Self of Indian psychology “This yoga Self . . . is a level of consciousness far beyond the mental plane of ego-consciousness.”<sup>66</sup> Rama believes that because Jung was not able to see beyond his Western point of view, he was unable to conceive of a state of consciousness beyond the ego. Furthermore, he says, “To him, departure from ego-consciousness could only mean insanity, psychosis.”<sup>67</sup>

According to Rama, Jung’s problem was based on his belief that the “higher voice,” came from “a primitive, instinctual collective unconscious.”<sup>68</sup> This notion, Rama says, affected Jung’s understanding of yoga.

However, Rama states that a complementary relationship can be seen between the approach of yoga and that of modern psychology because they both focus on the growth process, the difference being in their approaches to the process of growth. “Psychotherapy concentrates primarily on the areas of growth that lie just before the ego. Yoga is interested primarily in development and growth beyond the ego.”<sup>69</sup> Rama points out that modern

psychologists and psychotherapists are now trying to “conceptualize growth as it extends beyond the ego.”<sup>70</sup>

### **Summary**

Many theories have been proposed to account for mysticism including the supernatural theory of the Christian religious, and the pathological perspective of some Western psychologists.

It is a fact that women mystics such as Teresa of Avila had illnesses and physical problems that were sometimes difficult to explain, but all of their experiences cannot be categorized as pathological as some early psychologists, and contemporary schools of psychology suggest.

In contrast to the Western psychological model which reduces mystical experiences to psychological processes, yoga psychology as expounded by Swami Rama and his students in Yoga and Psychotherapy, proposes that there is growth beyond the ego, and that mystical union is not a pathological state.

There are indications of a new direction in psychology which views pathological elements manifest in genuine mystics and mystical elements present in certain psychotics as part of a constructive developmental process. This suggests that the development of a mystic should be judged according to James’s criteria as mentioned earlier in this chapter.

According to contemporary psychological studies discussed in The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach, Chapter 12, “Religion And Mental Disorder,” there is no research evidence proving that religious persons become psychotic more or less frequently than the non-religious. The researchers point out that the pathological hypothesis of religious figures is unjustified:



. . . much work claims inordinate amounts of breakdown and extreme pathology among clergy and renowned historical figures, but an overview of this literature shows that the majority of clerics and saints either are or were, in their own time, quite normal, if not exceptional in a positive sense.<sup>71</sup>

Therefore, the researchers state, the assumption that mysticism is “pathological” is unwarranted, particularly as contemporary survey research indicates that 30-40 percent of people in American and Britain have experienced mystical-type phenomena, this indicating that mysticism is normal rather than pathological.<sup>72</sup>

Recently an important diagnostic breakthrough has been made in contemporary psychology through the official recognition of spiritual experiences by the American Psychiatric Association. This recognition is confirmed by a new non-pathological diagnostic category called “Religious or Spiritual Problem” (V62.89) in the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), 1994.<sup>73</sup> The term “spiritual problem” depathologizes unusual human experiences such as a mystical experience, and recognizes that a spiritually transformative experience is not pathological, though problems may arise.

What is interesting, according to my research, is the increasing recognition of the Kundalini phenomenon by certain members of the medical profession when assessing psychotic, or mystical-type phenomena. For example, psychiatrist Tomas Agosin in “Psychosis, Dreams, and Mysticism in the Clinical Domain,” mentions that mystical-type experiences in certain pathological cases begins with an increase of sexual libido, and ends with “feeling one with God (religious libido).”<sup>74</sup> He writes, “This awakening of the libido, which moves from the erotic to a union with the Divine, has a quality “reminiscent of what yogis call Kundalini awakening.”<sup>75</sup> Likewise, Psychologist, Fredrica R. Halligan is also aware

of Kundalini. In her article “Keeping Faith with the Future: Toward Final Conscious Unity,” she discusses libidinal energy and spiritual experience.<sup>76</sup>

Neither Christian theology nor the Western psychological theories discussed so far can satisfactorily explain the range of Teresa of Avila’s mystical experiences and their accompanying phenomena. A better understanding of mystical experiences would be provided by a model taking into account physiological processes as well as psychological processes. In the following chapters, instead of the Christian theological model and the orthodox Western psychological model, St. Teresa’s mystical experiences and spiritual development are analyzed according to the Kundalini model. This psychophysiological model considers both the experience of the numinous and bodily experiences, including the sexual element in the transformative process.

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## **CHAPTER 9**

### **TERESA OF AVILA'S MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES: THE FLIGHT OF THE SPIRIT, AND THE RAPTURE EXPERIENCE COMPARED WITH YOGA SAMADHI**

Teresa of Avila's development of a mystical state of consciousness was accompanied by intense physical manifestations that could at times disrupt the entire religious community. Thus Teresa's behavior pattern and the physicality of her prayer life was witnessed by others. This ecstatic mystic experienced various states of consciousness including trance-like states that were associated with what she calls union and rapture.

The physicality of mystical experiences has been a problem for the church, even more so where women are concerned. Teresa of Avila was aware of the part that the body played in her experiences. Since she centred her mystical life on Christ and stressed his humanity that is, his embodiment, she was ready to accept the role of the body in her mystical experiences. For Teresa, Jesus was her model for mysticism, and her model of life. As Jesus is both human and divine, this allowed for the unity of the human being with the divine. The saint writes that, His life is, "our best pattern."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is necessary as far as Teresa's mystical experiences are concerned, to consider both their spiritual and physical aspects.

Teresa of Avila's mystical experiences took place in the religious context of the Roman Catholic Church of the 16th century in which the physical aspects of women's experiences were suspect. Her experiences are available to us for analysis only through the



censored material we have. One problem in analyzing Teresian texts is the ambiguity of some of the saint's categories and her sometimes contradictory use of these terms. This makes it difficult to compare Teresa's typology of mystical experiences with other typologies. However, her descriptions of the experiences themselves are very detailed and contain many references to the accompanying physical components. Rather than rely on the terms or categories that she uses, I analyzed the texts by looking at these physical components.

A problem in analyzing Teresa of Avila's texts stemming from the inconsistency in her terminology, is that terms referring to ecstatic states are used to describe a variety of experiences. These terms are: suspension, elevation, rapture, transport, and flight of the spirit. Teresa of Avila, however, distinguishes between her various experiences and she expounds five main categories of phenomena in her autobiographical texts. These are: transport (*arrebatamiento*), flight of the spirit (*vuelo de espíritu*), union, rapture (*arrobamiento*), and spiritual wounds (*heridas*). Teresa concludes, "I should like . . . to be able to describe the difference between union and rapture, or elevation, or what they call the flight of the spirit, or transport - it is all one. I mean that these different names all refer to the same thing, which is also called ecstasy."<sup>2</sup> Her explanation that the different names all refer to ecstatic states, suggests that they are basically varieties of the same type of experience, but differ by degree.

What has been overlooked by commentators interpreting Teresa's mystical experiences is the fact that these experiences were affecting her physically, mentally, as well as spiritually. In particular, her spiritual disciplines and practices and her ecstatic experiences were associated with physiological processes. Teresa of Avila was aware that when she experienced an intense love of God, or was involved in meditation and prayer, she sometimes experienced a great force that moved up to her head. It is possible that this force could be

interpreted as due to the arousal of the Kundalini mechanism, and that some energy akin to Kundalini was awakened by Teresa of Avila. A comparative analysis of her texts with yogic texts may help us to understand if Yogis and Christian mystics are describing a similar type of energy experience associated with Kundalini rising with its associated phenomena.

Christian mystics and saints often describe in their autobiographical texts experiencing upward movement of energy in their physical bodies, usually explained as due to the Holy Spirit or the supernatural. Whether the terms they use are metaphorical or descriptive of concrete experiences is not easy to determine. For example, St. John of the Cross, an apophatic mystic, describes in similar terms to Teresa such an experience in The Living Flame of Love. In this work of St. John, the flame is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, it is a “living flame” that rises upward. Thus, St. John’s experience of the Holy Spirit is described in terms similar to those of a Kundalini experience.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I analyze two types of mystical experiences described by Teresa of Avila according to the Kundalini model. In Part 1, I analyze the flight of the spirit and I will be presenting textual evidence of activation of the Kundalini mechanism in Teresa of Avila. Eastern explanations of the fire phenomenon will then be presented as a possible explanation for the mystic fire experienced by Teresa of Avila and other Christian mystics. In Part 2, I analyze the rapture experience, equated with the flight experience, and compare it with yoga samadhi. According to St. Teresa, the difference between these two experiences is that the flight of the spirit happens suddenly and is more violent than rapture which manifests gradually. My objective has been to select from the saint’s works, descriptive texts of her so-called mystical experiences that are analogous to the classical Kundalini model. This

comparative analysis also leads to a reinterpretation of the wounding experiences and sound phenomena experienced by the saint according to the Kundalini model.

**Part 1:**

**Flight of the Spirit (vuelo de espíritu): The Mystic Fire of Teresa of Avila**

I presented my research on the mystical experiences of Teresa of Avila and the Kundalini phenomenon at the Kundalini Research Network's International Conference 1993, in Toronto, Canada. In this paper I compare the saint's metaphor of fire, which she applies to God as a great force, with explanations from Eastern sources of the fire phenomenon. The metaphorical language of Teresa of Avila provides a key to interpreting her experiences according to the inner fire or Kundalini-Sakti.

The question is, what is this fire of love, the incendium amoris of the Christian mystic?

The importance of the fire image in Teresa of Avila's descriptions of her mystical experiences is interesting because it is one we find frequently used in the literature pertaining to the awakening of Kundalini. In her writings, often using the metaphor of "fire," Teresa of Avila describes the arousal of an energy from below that rises upwards in a way analogous to the descriptions found in Eastern texts on Kundalini arousal. She also compares the experience to a flight which suggests physical motion.

**a) Flight of the Spirit: Teresa's Fire Metaphor  
Compared with the Kundalini Phenomenon**

The following account is of one kind of experience that Teresa calls the flight of the spirit in which she uses the metaphor of fire. It is an example of the type of metaphors, symbols, and images that she uses:

The flight of the spirit is something which I do not know how to describe - it is an uprising from the very depth of the soul. . . . It seems to me that the soul and spirit are one and the same thing. It

is as with a fire which is large and has been prepared for lighting. The soul has been prepared by God, and, like the fire, blazes up quickly and sends up a flame which soars high: yet this is just as much fire as the other which remains below - however high the flame rises, the fire below is still there. So it is here, with the soul: there seems to come out of it something swift and subtle which rises to its higher part and goes whither the Lord wills. More than this it is impossible to explain: it is like a flight and I know nothing else with which to compare it. I know that this can be very clearly apprehended and that there is no way of preventing it.

It seems, then, that this little bird of the spirit has escaped from the misery of this flesh and from the prison of this body and that it is thus the better able to busy itself with the work given it by the Lord. The flight of the spirit is something so subtle and precious, as the soul understands it, that when it occurs there seems to be no possibility of delusion or any such thing.<sup>4</sup>

The question is, what is this experience Teresa of Avila is describing?

According to Teresa's text quoted above, the kindled fire that she experiences which can be aroused by spiritual disciplines and practices, rises upwards "to its higher part" like a flame. This "higher part" to which she refers is explained anatomically in the Fourth Mansions of the Interior Castle where she describes the noises in her head - I discuss this phenomenon in Section (c). She explains in this text that the sounds are "in the upper part of the head, where the higher part of the soul is said to be."<sup>5</sup> According to Teresa this energy or fire rises suddenly and quickly, yet the source of this energy (fire) remains below. These characteristics are all analogous to a Kundalini experience. Teresa of Avila's account can be compared with Eastern accounts in Chapter 2, and contemporary accounts in Chapter 6 gathered during my research, for example, #45.

The account below is of an experience that Teresa of Avila describes as another kind of rapture or the "flight of the spirit." In this account, Teresa describes the flight of the spirit in terms of a very powerful experience that involves speed and motion:

**There is another kind of rapture, or flight of the spirit, as I call it, which, though substantially the same, is felt within the soul in a very different way. Sometimes the soul becomes conscious of such rapid motion that the spirit seems to be transported with a speed which, especially at first, fills it with fear. . . . We have even read in some authors that the body is transported as well as the soul, without knowing whither it is going, or who is bearing it away, or how, for when this sudden motion begins the soul has no certainty that it is caused by God.**

**Can any means of resisting be found? None whatever: on the contrary, resistance only makes matters worse.<sup>6</sup>**

The mystic describes this type of experience in physical terms. It is so powerful that she does not have control over this experience, so she offers no resistance to it.

The text below is from Teresa's teaching on the four degrees of prayer in which she compares the soul to a garden which has to be watered. Teresa encountered God in the water and fire that she experienced as rising up within her. I suggest that she unconsciously uses the water symbol to refer to her physical sensations of movement of energy which accumulates through her spiritual exercises. Teresa, however, uses the image of fire; which suggests sensations of heat, and motion to describe the actual unitive process described as a flame rising, which is akin to the experience of energy moving upwards. Thus fire and water complement each other. I selected this text because it describes an experience in terms similar to the previously quoted text which has the fire metaphor.

**The way in which this that we call union comes, and the nature of it, I do not know how to explain. It is described in mystical theology, but I am unable to use the proper terms, and I cannot understand what is meant by "mind" or how this differs from "soul" or "spirit". They are all the same to me, though the soul sometimes issues from itself, like a fire that is burning and has become wholly flame, and sometimes this fire increases with great force. This flame rises very high above the fire, but that does not make it a different thing: it is the same flame which is in the fire. . . . It is quite clear what union is - two different things becoming one.<sup>7</sup>**

This text from the Life is also analogous in its imagery to the phenomena associated with the Kundalini mechanism where the fire moves from below and rises upwards.

In the following text, Teresa describes the spontaneity of this type of experience as an “awakening” which is a term often used by Eastern mystics. It is interesting to note that originally Teresa used the phrase “or a lightning-flash.”<sup>8</sup> but she deleted it. (This is a term used by Swami Sivananda to describe a Kundalini experience.)<sup>9</sup> She also describes this type of experience in vibratory terms as expressed in the term “tremble”:

For often when a person is quite unprepared for such a thing, and is not even thinking of God, he is awakened by His Majesty, as though by a rushing comet or a thunderclap. Although no sound is heard, the soul is very well aware that it has been called by God, so much so that sometimes, especially at first, it begins to tremble and complain, though it feels nothing that causes it affliction. It is conscious of having been delectably wounded, but cannot say how or by whom; but it is certain that this is a precious experience and it would be glad it were never to be healed of that wound. It complains to its Spouse with words of love, and even cries aloud. .

10

The saint describes wounding experiences using Christian terminology that are analogous to the piercing of the granthis or knots in the Kundalini yoga model (see Chapter 1). When Kundalini is awakened, She has to break through or pierce these three knots in order to ascend upward to the Sahasrara. Swami Narayanananda in The Way to Peace, Power, and Long Life describes how there will be intense pain at the entrance of the Sushumna canal when Kundalini enters it for the first time.<sup>11</sup> (This would be at the Brahma granthi - located at the muladhara chakra.) Teresa, in expounding on the wound of love, describes in ecstatic terms a similar type of wounding experience in the Interior Castle. She describes this spiritual wound as a penetrating of the bowels with an arrow, and that when “. .

. He that has wounded it draws out the arrow, the bowels seem to come with it, so deeply does it feel this love.”<sup>12</sup> (A further discussion of the piercing phenomenon is in Part 2 of this chapter.)

In the above texts, using the metaphor of fire, the mystic uses descriptive terms that confirm she is describing a physical experience. The saint describes how she experiences an energy or powerful force that moves from below upward, or to use Teresa’s words “to its higher part,” and a piercing or wounding that takes place in the lower part of her body. All of this is analogous to a Kundalini awakening experience.

#### **(b) Rekindling of the Spiritual Flame or Dormant Energy**

As previously discussed in Chapter 7, after Teresa’s early mystical experiences, she went through what she describes as a period of aridity. This state of aridity, as expressed in the text below, is not permanent as she indicates that the spiritual flame can be rekindled. The following text is associated with Teresa’s teaching that it is impossible to remain in a state of perfect contemplation for ever, but one can retain something of it:

The soul is desirous of employing itself wholly in love and it would be glad if it could meditate on nothing else. But this it cannot do even if it so desires; for, though the will is not dead, the fire which habitually kindles it is going out, and, if it is to give off heat of itself, it needs someone to fan it into flame. Would it be a good thing for the soul to remain in that state of aridity, hoping for fire to come down from Heaven to burn up this sacrifice of itself which it is making to God as did our father Elias?<sup>13</sup>

Teresa experiences her God as a fire (psychosomatic heat) as expressed in the following text in which she describes God in terms of *fire* reminiscent of the words in Hebrews 12:29 “For our God is a consuming fire.” She again explains how this fire

experience, and the pain associated with it may not be permanent. The same impermanence characterizes Kundalini awakening. Teresa says:

I have just been wondering if my God could be described as the fire in a lighted brazier, from which some spark will fly out and touch the soul, in such a way that it will be able to feel the burning heat of the fire; but, as the fire is not hot enough to burn it up, and the experience is very delectable, the soul continues to feel that pain and the mere touch suffices to produce that effect in it. This seems the best comparison that I have been able to find, for this delectable pain, which is not really pain, is not continuous: sometimes it lasts for a long time, while sometimes it comes suddenly to an end . . . . Although occasionally the experience lasts for a certain length of time, it goes and comes again; it is, in short, never permanent, and for that reason it never completely enkindles the soul; for, just as the soul is about to become enkindled, the spark dies, and leaves the soul yearning once again to suffer that loving pain of which it is the cause.<sup>14</sup>

As Teresa points out, the fire has to be rekindled, and in the following text she mentions that the arousal of this fire or energy from its dormant state requires personal effort. (My research of Mysticism and Kundalini shows that though the awakening of Kundalini can be a spontaneous event, some respondents consciously awakened Kundalini through practicing a variety of meditative techniques.)

When, therefore, the aforementioned fire is not kindled in the will, and the presence of God is not felt, we must needs seek it, since this is His Majesty's desire, as the Bride sought it in the *Songs*. Let us ask the creatures who made them, as Saint Augustine says that he did (in his *Meditations* or *Confessions*, I think) and let us not be so foolish as to lose time by waiting to receive what has been given us once already. At first it may be that the Lord will not give it us, for as long as a year, or even for many years: . . . .<sup>15</sup>

Teresa's explanation of the impermanence of this raised energy or "mystic fire" can be compared with the following Kundalini text by Swami Sivananda Radha.

A major misconception about kundalini is to think that, once it has been raised, kundalini will stay there. Like any spiritual flame in



oneself, unless it is nourished and attended to, unless it dominates one's life, kundalini will simply disappear like water in quicksand. . . someone may compose one beautiful melody and never do so again. It was a temporary flare-up of creative energy. One can only produce according to the skills one has. Therefore if kundalini has been raised inadvertently or unknowingly, one would still have to acquire the skill to handle that energy.<sup>16</sup>

Sivananda Radha also points out that Kundalini can be raised spontaneously, and if it is one has to have the ability to control this energy. According to yogic texts, it is possible for people to awaken Kundalini and experience related phenomena such as creative or psychic activity, but few can take it to the crown chakra where it must remain permanently for liberation to occur.

That this energy or spiritual flame can become dormant and requires spiritual exercises to arouse it agrees with the next text from The Serpent Power.

But this Kundalini does not stay in the Sahasrara for a long time. It always tends to return, and does return to its original position. The process should again and again be repeated by the aspirant several times, until the Sakti makes a permanent stay with her Pati (husband).<sup>17</sup>

As Teresa of Avila discovered, this energy or, to use her term "fire," needs to be rekindled as the spiritual flame can become dormant. This is analogous to the Kundalini experience when compared with the above yogic texts.

### **(c) Teresa's Sounds in the Head**

In the final stages of Teresa of Avila's development of a mystical state of consciousness, she began to experience sensations and noises in her head. Occurring at the end of her life, Teresa's experience of hearing noises "in the upper part of the head" are analogous to the sound phenomena experienced by people undergoing the Kundalini process. Teresa complains about how difficult it is for her to write, ". . . because for the last three

months I have been suffering from such noises and weakness in the head that I find it troublesome to write even necessary business.”<sup>18</sup> She describes these noises in this personal account:

As I write this, the noises in my head are so loud that I am beginning to wonder what is going on in it, . . . . My head sounds just as if it were full of brimming rivers, and then as if all the water in those rivers came suddenly rushing downward; and a host of little birds seem to be whistling, not in the ears, but in the upper part of the head, where the higher part of the soul is said to be; I have held this view for a long time, for the spirit seems to move upward with great velocity.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to note that Teresa herself, in this text, makes a connection between the sounds in her head, and her experience of a powerful upward movement of energy as in the flight of the spirit.

Teresa’s description of noises in the head can be compared with the descriptions of inner sounds (nada) heard by yogis. For example, Swami Muktananda, like Teresa of Avila, also experienced sounds in the head. He connects nada with a higher state of meditation that he achieved in the Sahasrara (the crown chakra). This state is known as Nadaloka. He postulates, “Now I began to apprehend all ten grades of nada: . . . peals of bells, strains of conch, quiverings of a veena, clash of symbols, lilt of a flute, . . . roll of kettledrums, and roar of thunder.”<sup>20</sup> He also heard sounds of birds and those of the ocean. Muktananda associates hearing sounds at the top of the head with Kundalini. He defines nada as the “Absolute reality,” and states that “It is the vibrating current, set in motion by Kundalini.”<sup>21</sup> Muktananda states that these sounds originate not in the ear but at the crown of the head as Teresa explains in the text, that is, in the akasha of Sahasrara. For Teresa of Avila, this phase of development occurred at the end of her life. Similarly, for Muktananda the nada experiences

represented the last phase of his “dynamic Kundalini.”<sup>22</sup> By comparing Muktananda’s explanation of the sound phenomenon with Teresa’s description of the phenomenon, it is conceivable to posit that Teresa’s noises in her head could be explained as resulting from the Kundalini process.

**(d) Eastern Explanations of the Fire Phenomenon  
Generated by Spiritual Disciplines and Practices**

In this section, I present Eastern texts that describe the mechanism, which according to Eastern practitioners, is responsible for the the fire phenomenon similar to the one described by St. Teresa in metaphorical terms. Both Eastern and Western mystics describe a spiritual energy or force generated by their spiritual exercises in terms of “fire.”

Swami Rama explains in yogic terms why spiritual exercises can generate intense heat:

In most people prana flows outward connecting the mind with the senses, but when this energy is concentrated and channeled upward through the chakras, the mind becomes detached from the senses and the physical body and becomes inwardly absorbed in meditation. A number of related spiritual exercises have the effect of withdrawing energy from two subtle nerve channels (called ida and pingala) that run along the spinal cord, and channeling this energy through a third channel (sushumna), which runs along the center of the spine. A form of prana that normally travels upwards (prana vayu) is brought down, while the normally downward - flowing energy (apana vayu) is brought upward so that the two merge. The union of these two pranic currents in the central canal creates intense heat. In the Upanishad they are called upper and lower arni. By the friction produced between them, fire is created. Kundalini is thereby aroused, and flows upward through a channel at the center of the spine called Brahma nadi.<sup>23</sup>

This mechanism described by Swami Rama has also been described by M. P. Pandit in Kundalini Yoga. He compares it to a hollow tube with a piston working at both ends. As the central air cannot escape, it becomes heated, and Kundalini aroused by this heat becomes a kinetic force.<sup>24</sup>

Compare this to Teresa's description in the four degrees of prayer of the accumulation and movement of energy as the senses are withdrawn from all outward things. The symbol of water is used by Teresa to describe this development as expressed in these words: "the water of grace rises to the very neck of the soul."<sup>25</sup> Her development in prayer culminates in union described in terms of *fire*, in a way similar to the text above by Swami Rama.

In Raja Yoga, Swami Vivekananda describes in yogic terms the process of accumulation of energy as the result of intense meditation:

When, by the power of long internal meditation the vast mass of energy stored up travels along the sushumna and strikes the centres, the reaction is tremendous [ . . . ].

Whenever there was any manifestation of what is ordinarily called supernatural power or wisdom, there a little current of kundalini must have found its way into the sushumna. Only, in the vast majority of cases, people had ignorantly stumbled on some practice which set free a minute portion of the coiled-up kundalini. All worship, consciously or unconsciously, leads to this end.

The man who thinks that he is receiving response to his prayers does not know that the fulfillment comes from his own nature, that he has succeeded by the mental attitude of prayer in waking up a bit of this infinite power which is coiled up within himself. What, thus, man ignorantly worships under various names, through fear and tribulation, the yogi declares to the world to be the real power coiled up in every being, the mother of eternal happiness, if we but know how to approach her. And yoga is the science of religion, the rationale of all worship, all prayer, forms, ceremonies and miracles.<sup>26</sup>

In this text, Vivekananda posits the universality of the mystic fire or Kundalini. He also states that it can be unconsciously aroused by spiritual practices such as prayer.

In "The Psychophysiology of Kundalini," Haridas Chaudhuri refers to Christian mysticism and the universality of the psychophysiological mechanism experienced by all meditators. His use of both religious and scientific terminology, in this case nuclear physics, in

reference to Christian mysticism and the Holy Ghost is controversial for Western thinkers but the underlying statement remains valid.

The awakened physionuclear energy is invariably experienced by all meditators and yogis as some kind of supernatural or divine energy. The Vedic and Zoroastrian mystics called it the mystic fire. Endless hymns of adoration have been composed in recognition of its ability to carry the human soul to higher realms of consciousness on to the unsurpassable glory of the supreme Godhead. In ancient mythology it is described as the mythical sunbird Garuda which soars up in the sky carrying the serpent in its beak, i.e., transforming the libido energy into passion for the divine.

The more the physionuclear energy rises upward, the more the meditator's energy level rises, and in consequence his consciousness also rises.

In Christian mysticism it is the same physionuclear energy which has been perceived as the Holy Spirit or Ghost. It is the divine spark transmitted to the mortal frame. Since in Christian theology, the body and the spirit, the natural and the supernatural, the impure flesh and the pure divine energy are diametrically opposed substances, it has not occurred to Western mystics that they might have been made of the same ultimate stuff.<sup>27</sup>

According to Chaudhuri, Christian theology because it separates flesh and spirit, has been the cause of Christian mystics not recognizing the source of the Holy Spirit or Ghost. Chaudhuri contends that the "mystic fire" or Kundalini is "physionuclear energy" which as it rises upward raises consciousness. Chaudhuri also refers to the part that libidinal energy plays in the transformation process.

### **Summary**

Teresa of Avila's personal accounts of the "flight of the spirit," suggest that she had experiences similar to a classical Kundalini experience where the energy moves up from the base of the spine to the crown of the head, and that she is describing Kundalini experiences in metaphorical terms. My hypothesis is supported by Eastern presentations of the mechanism

responsible for the fire phenomenon generated by spiritual disciplines and practices. Teresa's image of a flame of love, is her way to express a real physical experience.

Teresa of Avila herself confirms for us that accumulation and movement of energy are linked to her practice of meditation culminating in mystical experiences in this statement, "As I meditated in this way, my soul began to be more vehemently enkindled and there came to me a transport of a kind which I cannot describe."<sup>28</sup> Flesh and spirit are united in this type of experience.

An analysis of her texts also shows that the saint experienced phenomena associated with a Kundalini experience such as a powerful force, extreme heat, vibrations, piercing sensations, head sensations, and inner sounds.

One can compare Teresa's texts describing noises in her head with analogous Eastern texts and recent research. Sensations at the crown of the head and hearing inner sounds were phenomena also reported by respondents in my questionnaire study. A contemporary experience of the sound phenomena is also mentioned by Lee Sannella in case history #4 as a "low-pitched buzzing in her head and throat during meditation."<sup>29</sup> Sannella comments that tonal experiences were reported by most cases that he studied, and they seemed to vary with the type of meditation practiced.<sup>30</sup> Thus the Kundalini hypothesis may provide an interpretation for these unexplained sounds experienced by Teresa of Avila given the label of auditory hallucinations by psychiatrists.

## **Part 2:**

### **Rapture (arrobamiento): Teresa of Avila's Rapture Experience Compared with Yoga Samadhi**

There developed in Spain at the beginning of the sixteenth century what has been referred to as a golden age of spirituality, a movement away from objective spirituality which

involved vocal prayer and external works, to a movement of subjective spirituality with an emphasis on development in prayer and personal experience.<sup>31</sup> There also developed at the same time an infatuation with ecstasy and other extraordinary phenomena particularly noted in women.<sup>32</sup>

Ecstasy and trance-like states are characteristics of both Eastern and Western mysticism. Bliss is a common translation of the Sanskrit word *ananda*; a term used by yogis to describe spiritual ecstasy, a characteristic of Samadhi which is linked to the awakening of Kundalini. Even though Samadhi or the mystical trance of yogis, and the rapture experience of Western Christian mystics are similar types of experiences, they are usually culturally defined as two different categories of experience.

Indian mysticism is associated with Sushumna, that is, the central subtle channel through which Kundalini, residing in the root chakra, rises to Sahasrara (crown chakra) to unite with Siva residing at the top of the head. The superconscious state of Samadhi (the prefix *sam* indicates union) is defined as the union of Sakti and Siva initiated through intense meditation. Samadhi has also been defined as “an intense and prolonged concentration of the mind”<sup>33</sup> which can produce trance-like states. This unitive state is also defined as the union of the individual consciousness with the cosmic consciousness.

There are various levels or degrees of the Samadhi experience differing in texts as regards their number and names. Samadhi cannot be defined as an identical experience in all yogis as it varies in each individual. In comparison with Samadhi, Teresian mysticism also has degrees in the order of its development towards a unitive state. The Samadhi experience is usually associated with the arousal of Kundalini, but Swami Sivananda writes that it is also possible for a yogi to experience a Samadhi state without arousing Kundalini.<sup>34</sup> Swami

Narayanananda, however, states that Nirvikalpa Samadhi, a higher form of Samadhi, can only be achieved “. . . when the Kundalini Shakti reaches Sahasrara, [the centre at the top of the head] . . . never otherwise.”<sup>35</sup> Nirvikalpa Samadhi (nar - free from, vikalpa - imagination), is a formless and imageless state of mystical consciousness. According to Swami Narayanananda, Samadhi is the result of sublimated sexual energy: “To attain Samadhi the sex energy must be conserved, controlled and converted into its causal state and reunited with Shiva. This unity takes place in the Sahasrara with the full rising of the Kundalini Shakti.”<sup>36</sup>

In the Western Christian tradition, ecstasy is the transcendent experience one attains by contact or union with God. In Mysticism, Death and Dying, Christopher Nugent points out that “. . . the Latin for both “ecstasy” (excessus) and “rapture” (raptus) are derivative of forms of the verb, “to die.”<sup>37</sup> Both Samadhi, and the rapture experience of Teresa of Avila, are referred to as death-like states, Samadhi in yogic texts, and rapture in the saint’s autobiographical texts. Teresa of Avila uses the term “rapture,” which is a noted characteristic of her mystical experiences, to describe a trance-like state that she regards as a special favour. This rapture, a form of ecstasy, is an interior and exterior state in which the body becomes rigid and immobile while the soul is possessed by the Lord. Teresa tries to differentiate between her various experiences by describing the flight of the spirit as being transported by a violent force, but in analyzing rapture and transport, she writes: “The difference between rapture and transport is that in rapture the soul gradually dies to these outward things, is deprived of its senses and lives to God.”<sup>38</sup>

A recognized difference between Teresian mysticism and the Samadhi of a yogi is that for Teresa her unitive experiences are a supernatural gift in which the individual soul is united with a personal God in love, but remains distinct from God. For the Hindu mystic, the unitive



experience is one in which the individual self is identified with Brahman and is the result of one's own efforts through the practice of various physical and psychological techniques.

#### **(a) The Development of Teresa's Rapture Experience**

St. Teresa of Avila experienced her first rapture, her term for a trance-like state involving body and mind, in 1558 when she was forty-three. She describes this psychophysiological phenomenon in great detail because of its importance in her purification and transformation process, and as guidance for others in her community. The saint tells us that once when she had spent the whole day in prayer seeking guidance, she began reciting the hymn *Veni Creator*, when: "While I was reciting it, there came to me a transport so sudden that it almost carried me away; I could make no mistake about this, so clear was it. This was the first time that the Lord had granted me the favour of any kind of rapture. I heard these words: I will have thee converse now, not with men, but with angels."<sup>39</sup> In describing this particular experience, Teresa uses the terms "transport," as well as "rapture" interchangeably. She describes this rapture experience in terms that express it is a new stage in her personal development, "Since that day I have been courageous enough to give up everything for the sake of God, Who in that moment - for I think it happened in no more than a moment - was pleased to make His servant another person."<sup>40</sup>

In 1562, Teresa relates that her raptures had increased, and that they were very powerful experiences. Unlike locutions (hearing words spoken interiorly) and visions, Teresa's raptures could be publicly seen by others: "My raptures have become more numerous, and often they come upon me violently, and in such a way that they are recognizable by external signs, and, even when I am with others, I cannot resist them. For they come in a way which cannot be hidden . . . ."<sup>41</sup>

Towards the end of her life, around 1570, Teresa's public raptures began to decrease. Words she heard interiorly explained that public raptures were no longer necessary.<sup>42</sup> Raptures further diminished when Teresa of Avila reached the seventh stage of spiritual development, the "Spiritual Marriage." In the Seventh Mansions of the Interior Castle (1577) she explains the changes that occurred thus:

And I am quite dazed myself when I observe that, on reaching this state, the soul has no more raptures (accompanied, that is to say, by the suspension of the senses), save very occasionally, and even then it has not the same transports and flights of the spirit. These raptures, too, happen only rarely, and hardly ever in public as they very often did before. Nor have they any connection, as they had before, with great occasions of devotion; if we see a devotional image or hear a sermon, it is almost as if we had heard nothing, and it is the same with music. Previously, the poor little butterfly as always so worried that everything frightened her and made her fly away. But it is not so now, . . . . Well, sisters, I do not know what the reason may be, but, when the Lord begins to reveal the contents of this Mansion and brings souls into it, they lose the great weakness . . . . Perhaps the reason is that the Lord has so greatly strengthened and dilated and equipped the soul . . . .<sup>43</sup>

In the above text, Teresa explains that the somatic accompaniment of ecstatic experiences cease when the soul is brought into this Mansion as it has been prepared and strengthened.

In her autobiography the Life, Teresa of Avila identifies the criteria to judge genuine rapture experiences from pseudo-ecstatic trances. They are loss of fear, relinquishing of attachment to earthly matters and one's own free-will to conform with God's will.<sup>44</sup>

To summarize, Teresa of Avila's rapture experiences began in 1558 when she was forty-three. They increased, becoming more violent and occurring publicly, but as she aged her raptures decreased, and began to become rare in public.

### **(b) Teresa of Avila's Rapture Experience**

My analysis of Teresa's texts found that a variety of triggers caused her rapture experiences. Some of these were: prayer, meditation, music, occasions of devotion, hearing a sermon, and reciting a hymn.

Teresa in the following text defines her use of the term rapture in which the faculties are suspended and the body becomes cold.

Rapture and suspension of the faculties, in my opinion, are one and the same thing; I generally describe them as suspension, so as not to use the word rapture, which frightens people; and as a matter of fact this union which has been described may also be called suspension. The difference between it and rapture is that rapture lasts longer and is more readily perceptible from without, for little by little breathing diminishes, so that the subject cannot speak or open the eyes. Though this same thing happens in union, in rapture the operation is more powerful, for when the rapture is deep the natural warmth vanishes, I know not whither, and to a greater or a lesser extent this is characteristic of all these types of prayer. When the rapture is deep, as I say, the hands become as cold as ice and sometimes remain stretched out as though they were made of wood. The body remains standing or kneeling, according to the position it was in when the rapture came on. And the soul is so deeply absorbed in the joy of what the Lord is showing it that it seems to forget to animate the body and goes away and abandons it. If the rapture lasts, the nerves, too, are affected.<sup>45</sup>

Yogis also experience similar death-like phenomena in the mystical state of Samadhi on arousal of Kundalini.

The following rapture account of Teresa's also describes a death-like state. The body becomes very cold, and the breathing seems to have stopped altogether.

For when He means to enrapture this soul, it loses its power of breathing, with the result that, although its other senses sometimes remain active a little longer, it cannot possibly speak. At other times it loses all its powers at once, and the hands and the body grow so cold that the body seems no longer to have a soul -

sometimes it even seems doubtful if there is any breath in the body. This lasts only for a short time . . . because, when this profound suspension lifts a little, the body seems to come partly to itself again, and draws breath, though only to die once more, and, in doing so, to give fuller life to the soul. Complete ecstasy, therefore, does not last long.<sup>46</sup>

Teresa continues by describing her trance-like state after this ecstatic experience in terms of sleep:

But, although relief comes, the ecstasy has the effect of leaving the will so completely absorbed and the understanding so completely transported - for as long as a day, or even for several days - that the soul seems incapable of grasping anything that does not awaken the will to love; to this it is fully awake, while asleep as regards all that concerns attachment to any creature.<sup>47</sup>

These are the most usual characteristics of rapture described by Teresa of Avila:

For, while the rapture lasts, the body often remains as if dead and unable of itself to do anything: it continues all the time as it was when the rapture came upon it - in a sitting position, for example, or with the hands open or shut. The subject rarely loses consciousness: I have sometimes lost it altogether, but only seldom and for but a short time. As a rule the consciousness is disturbed; and, though incapable of action with respect to outward things, the subject can still hear and understand, but only dimly, as though from a long way off. I do not say that he can hear and understand when the rapture is at its highest point - by "highest point" I mean when the faculties are lost through being closely united with God. At that point, in my opinion, he will neither see, nor hear, nor perceive; but, . . . this complete transformation of the soul in God lasts but a short time, . . .<sup>48</sup>

The usual characteristics of rapture according to Saint Teresa can be summarized as follows: the breathing diminishes, but one usually remains conscious though the body appears as if dead remaining in the same position it was in when the rapture began. The individual can still hear and understand, but the senses are suspended when unity occurs, also the eyes can be opened or closed, and the trance-like state is usually short.

**Teresa of Avila also describes the rapture experience; which includes ecstasy as well as abnormal bodily changes, in terms of upward motion as experienced in the flight of the spirit. Teresa tells us that it was impossible for her to resist this powerful force that suddenly overpowered her:**

**In these raptures the soul seems no longer to animate the body, and thus the natural heat of the body is felt to be very sensibly diminished: it gradually becomes colder, though conscious of the greatest sweetness and delight. No means of resistance is possible, whereas in union, where we are on our own ground, such a means exists: resistance may be painful and violent but it can be almost always be effected. But with rapture, as a rule, there is no such possibility: often it comes like a strong, swift impulse, before your thought can forewarn you of it or you can do anything to help yourself; you see or feel this cloud, or this powerful eagle, rising and bearing you up with it on its wings.<sup>49</sup>**

**Flight is a significant symbol for Teresa of Avila, and is used to describe an upward motion that she experiences in a particular type of experience. The image of a bird in flight expresses the powerful upward movement of this energy, or to use Teresa's term "spirit." If Teresa resists this powerful energy she feels that she has been "fighting with a powerful giant," or "lifted up by a force beneath my feet so powerful that I know nothing to which I can compare it."<sup>50</sup> This last statement refers to Teresa's experience of levitation. She explains that sometimes her whole body has been affected, so that she has been literally raised up from the ground. Teresa is reputed to have been embarrassed because she sometimes levitated and had to be held down by her nuns.**

**Furthermore, Teresa of Avila informs us that after she has experienced a rapture her body "seemed as light as if all weight had left it." Sometimes, she says, "this is so noticeable that I could hardly tell when my feet were touching the ground."<sup>51</sup> This phenomenon is one of the experiences on awakening of Kundalini. Swami Sivananda in Kundalini Yoga also tells us,**

**“When your body becomes light like air, when you possess inexhaustible energy for work, know that Kundalini has become active.”<sup>52</sup>**

**In this next account of a rapture experience achieved after intensive mental prayer, Teresa of Avila again describes a state of consciousness comparable to yoga Samadhi in which she ceases to breathe and mental and physical activity ceases:**

**While seeking God in this way, the soul becomes conscious that it is fainting almost completely away, in a kind of swoon, with an exceeding great and sweet delight. It gradually ceases to breathe and all its bodily strength begins to fail it: it cannot even move its hands without great pain; its eyes involuntarily close, or, if they remain open, they can hardly see. If a person in this state attempts to read, he is unable to spell out a single letter: it is as much as he can do to recognize one. He sees that letters are there, but, as the understanding gives him no help, he cannot read them even if he so wishes. He can hear, but he cannot understand what he hears. He can apprehend nothing with the senses, which only hinder his soul's joy and thus harm rather than help him. It is futile for him to attempt to speak: his mind cannot manage to form a single word, nor, if it could, would he have the strength to pronounce it. For in this condition all outward strength vanishes, while the strength of the soul increases so that it may the better have fruition of its bliss. The outward joy experienced is great and most clearly recognized.<sup>53</sup>**

**In the Life, Teresa describes the state of consciousness of a person who experiences rapture: “True, they are generally absorbed in the praises of God or in an attempt to comprehend and realize what has happened to them. But even so they are not wide awake: they are like a person who has been asleep for a long time and has been dreaming and has not yet fully awakened.”<sup>54</sup> In comparing the states of consciousness in rapture and Samadhi experience, it is interesting to note that Narayanananda describes Nirvikalpa Samadhi, considered to be the highest state of Samadhi and a state of non-duality, as “the state of conscious deep-sleep.”<sup>55</sup>**

Teresa of Avila describes her state of consciousness or trance-like behavior after rapture in these words, “. . . if the rapture has been deep, the faculties may remain absorbed for a day or two, or even for as long as three days, and be as if in a state of stupor, so that they seem to be no longer themselves.”<sup>56</sup>

### **(c) Samadhi**

The death-like state that Teresa calls rapture is similar to the yogi's mystical state of consciousness termed Samadhi. This state was observed by Jagadananda in his guru and he describes it in these words: “the guru, whose eyelids were half-closed and whose body remained rigid, appeared not to be breathing at all and remained in this state for many hours.”<sup>57</sup>

Swami Sivananda in Kundalini Yoga explains the reason for the death-like coldness of the body experienced by a yogi in the superconscious state of Samadhi in the following text:

The body becomes cold as a corpse as the Sakti leaves it, due not to the depletion or privation of the static power at the Muladhara but to the concentration or convergence of the dynamic power ordinarily diffused over the whole body, so that the dynamic equivalent which is set up against the static background of Kundalini Sakti is only the diffused fivefold Prana gathered home - withdrawn from the other tissues of the body and concentrated along the axis. Thus ordinarily, the dynamic equivalent is the Prana diffused over all the tissues: in Yoga, it is converged along the axis, the static equivalent of Kundalini Sakti enduring in both cases.<sup>58</sup>

According to Sivananda, the body becoming as cold as a corpse is the result of Savikalpa Samadhi (a state of duality): “In Savikalpa Samadhi the life-force or Prana of the Yogi is withdrawn from the body. The body appears to be dead, motionless and rigid. Breathing suspended. He is unaware of his bodily condition or suspended breath.”<sup>59</sup> In describing the experiences on awakening of Kundalini, Sivananda writes: “When the breath stops without

any effort, when Kevala Kumbhaka comes by itself without any exertion, know that Kundalini Shakti has become active. When you feel currents of Prana rising up to the Sahasrara, when you experience bliss . . . . know that Kundalini Shakti has awakened.”<sup>60</sup>

Narayanananda, however, in discussing the classical model of Kundalini awakening and attaining of Nirvikalpa Samadhi, points out that in that state also the breathing, the heart beat, and all mental and physical activity ceases automatically.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, he states that Nirvikalpa Samadhi is not an unconscious state though it appears to be.<sup>62</sup>

Samadhi, like Teresa’s rapture, is usually associated with a trance state in the West, but the term trance can refer to many distinct states. The trance-like state experienced by Teresa which she calls rapture, is accompanied by depressed breathing or it is suspended altogether, and may result in total anesthesia. Teresa describes it as a dream-like state from which it may take her a few days to recover.

According to Gilbert Rouget who discusses trance states in Music and Trance, the notion that Samadhi or Teresian ecstasy is a trance state is a debatable question. He writes: “. . . . trance usually comprises a convulsive stage, accompanied by cries, trembling, loss of consciousness, and falling. Nothing of this order occurs in fana, Samadhi, or in the weak form of Teresian ecstasy.”<sup>63</sup> Even though an individual may achieve a trance-like state, it does not necessarily mean that they have aroused Kundalini because a genuine arousal of Kundalini results in an ongoing transformation process.

Samadhi is not an unconscious state, but a state of deep sleep. The induction of the classical state of Samadhi by a yogi, and the state of consciousness achieved is described in the following text from Tantra: The Yoga of Sex:



Tantrik gurus point out that it is no coincidence that in inducing the classical state of samadhi, the yogi more or less duplicates the mechanism of sleep. He slows the rhythm of his breath, regulates and deepens his respiration. He effects a general relaxation of the muscles. By inhibiting the nerve centers, the threshold of awareness that responds to stimuli is raised, as it is in sleep. Moreover, the electrical activity of the brain during samadhi, as measured by the electroencephalograph, shows the same characteristics as those recorded during deep sleep.<sup>64</sup>

Thus if the yogi experiences a state of deep sleep as this text suggests, this would agree with Teresa's teachings of the state of consciousness in the rapture experience. It is not an unconsciousness state, but a sleep-like state (see note 54).

John Woodroffe in The Serpent Power provides another aspect of the phenomena experienced on arousal of Kundalini-Sakti. Kundalini, according to Woodroffe, is first experienced as intense heat, and then as Sakti ascends the body becomes inert and cold as it is depleted of bioenergy. The following text describes the somatic phenomena experienced by a yogi in the unitive process:

There is one simple test whether the Sakti is actually aroused. When she is aroused intense heat is felt at that spot but when she leaves a particular centre the part so left becomes as cold and apparently lifeless as a corpse. The progress upwards may thus be externally verified by others.

When the Sakti (Power) has reached the upper brain (Sahasrara) the whole body is cold and corpse-like; except the top of the skull, where some warmth is felt, this being the place where the static and kinetic aspects of consciousness unite.<sup>65</sup>

Observable verification of the physical phenomena experienced by a successful yogi on Kundalini arousal, in particular, the coldness of the body, is a fact according to Woodroffe:

Those, therefore, who are sceptical can easily verify some of the facts should they be fortunate enough to find a successful Yogi who will let them see him at work. They may observe his ecstasis and the coldness of the body, which is not present in the case of what is called Dhyana-Yogi, or a Yogi operating by meditating

only, and not arousing Kundalini. This cold is an external and easily perceptible sign. Its progression may be seen, obviously denoting the passing away of something which supplied the previous heat. The body seems lifeless, indicating that its supporting power has (though not entirely) left it. The downward return of the Sakti thus moved is, on the other hand, indicated by the reappearance of the warmth, vitality, and the normal consciousness. The return process is one of evolution from the highest state of attainment to the point of departure.<sup>66</sup>

A trance-like state, breath suspension, coldness and immobility of the body are all objectively verifiable characteristics of both rapture and Samadhi. By comparing the writings of Teresa on rapture to Eastern texts on the Samadhi experience, we can see that the rapture experience of Teresa of Avila, a Christian mystic, is similar to the Samadhi experience of a yogi. The similarity of these experiences can be assumed because a comparative textual analysis of these two experiences shows that Teresa of Avila's rapture experience involves similar psychophysiological processes as those experienced in the yogis state of Samadhi on arousal of the Kundalini mechanism.

#### **(d) The Body, Kundalini, and the Transformation Process**

Fire is a symbol of the transformation process taking place in Teresa of Avila. She went through a longitudinal transformative process involving body and mind. Teresa's rapture experience is associated with purifying and transforming processes also described in the Kundalini process. The psychophysiological components of her mystical experience are important to note because they are a sign of the transformation process taking place in her.

Paradoxically, the rapture experience has two aspects, the positive aspect which results in a transformation of consciousness, and the somatic effects which are painful. Nevertheless, Teresa describes the transforming effect of rapture on her physical health in the following text:

Often a person who was previously quite ill and troubled with severe pain finds himself in good health again, and even stronger than before, for what the soul receives in rapture is a great gift, and sometimes, as I say, the lord is pleased that the body should have a share in it because of its obedience to the will of the soul.<sup>67</sup>

Teresa stresses the benefits both spiritual and physical derived from the rapture experience even though her ecstatic experiences caused her pain. In Spiritual Relations she writes: "For more than six months past I have felt remarkably well as to bodily health, and during this period I have experienced a number of raptures."<sup>68</sup> She claims that she analyzed this very carefully and that it was not a product of her imagination. Teresa also describes the transformation of consciousness achieved in rapture in these words: "Now the soul has grown new wings and has learned to fly,"<sup>69</sup> She explains that transformation of the soul takes place in rapture without any effort and is achieved more quickly than any other experience.

The following account of the transverberation or the piercing of the saint's heart with an arrow in 1559 (age 44-45), is an example of a paradox in Teresa's mystical experiences in which she experiences both physical pain and ecstasy. This well-known rapture or ecstatic experience of St. Teresa is depicted in a sculpture by Bernini in which an angel can be seen piercing her heart with a golden spear.

In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that no one can ever wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it - indeed, a great share.<sup>70</sup>

Teresa emphasizes that her body played a major part in this ecstatic experience. It is possible that this wounding experience, which is both physical and spiritual, described in terms of “fire” by Teresa, is similar to what yogic texts describe as piercing the heart chakra. Swami Rama explains that “There are three granthis (knots) through which the energy has a difficult time passing. In piercing the abdominal knot, pain or physical disorders may occur. . . . It is said that bringing kundalini to the anahata [heart] chakra at the cardiac plexus is the most difficult task.”<sup>71</sup> (See Part 1 of this chapter for discussion on the piercing of the lower centre.) In the following descriptive text in which Teresa uses the term “impulses,” she describes her own bodily experience of a piercing sensation which is analogous to this yogic concept:

These other impulses are very different. It is not we who put on the fuel; it seems rather as if the fire is already kindled and it is we who are suddenly thrown into it to be burned up. The soul does not try to feel the pain of the wound caused by the Lord’s absence. Rather an arrow is driven into the very depths of the entrails, and sometimes into the heart, so that the soul does not know either what is the matter with it or what it desires, . . . . No words will suffice to describe the way in which God wounds the soul and the sore distress which He causes it, . . . . Yet so delectable is this distress that life holds no delight which can give greater satisfaction. . . .<sup>72</sup>

Teresa finds the paradox of the pain and ecstasy felt in this type of experience difficult to understand. She writes: “This distress and this bliss between them bewildered me so much that I was never able to understand how such a thing could be.”<sup>73</sup>

In the Life, Teresa tries to explain the great distress that she has experienced after her raptures, distress that is not only felt by the soul, but also by the physical body. One distress is the dislocation of her joints and bones. In the following text the mystical doctor describes the pain that she experiences in her physical body as a result of her rapture experience:

. . . although the pain is so excessive that one hardly bear it, and occasionally, according to those of my sisters who sometimes see me like this, . . . my pulses almost cease to beat, my bones are all disjointed, and my hands are so stiff that sometimes I cannot clasp them together. Until next day I have pains in the wrists, and in the entire body, as though my bones had been wretched asunder.<sup>74</sup>

The Hindu mystic Sri Ramakrishna who continually fell into trance states also experienced similar phenomena:

. . . I heard clattering sounds in the joints of my body and limbs. They began in my legs. It was as if someone inside me had keys and was locking me up, joint by joint, turning the keys. I had no power to move my body or change my posture, even slightly. I could not stop meditating, . . . I was forced, as it were, to sit in the same posture until my joints began clattering again and were unlocked, beginning at the neck, this time, and ending in my legs.<sup>75</sup>

Thus we can see that in comparing these texts of physical manifestations experienced by Teresa of Avila, a Christian mystic, and Ramakrishna, an Eastern mystic, that both mystics have experienced similar phenomena during their transformation process.

Even though Teresa complains of the physical pain that she sometimes suffers because of her raptures, she reiterates the importance of the transformative or purification process of experiencing the “mystic fire”:

Afterwards I was amazed at having experienced this fire, . . . for, however much I desire and strive and am consumed with the effort to attain it it is only when His Majesty so pleases, as I have said on other occasions, that I am able to obtain so much as a single spark. It seems to consume the old man, with his faults, his lukewarmness and his misery; it is like the phoenix, from the ashes of which, after it has been burned, . . . comes forth another. Even so is the soul transformed into another, . . . It seems not to be the same as before, but begins to walk in the way of the Lord with a new purity.<sup>76</sup>

The transformation process expressed in the text above by St. Teresa, can be explained according to the Eastern concept of Kundalini. Swami Vishnu Tirtha, author of Devatma

**Shakti**, informs us of the relationship between Kundalini and the transformation process. He writes: “When Kundalini awakens, She spiritualizes the body and mind as if the divine influence of God has descended on the physical plane.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore:

When the power of Kundalini awakens, the whole of the person from the physical plane upwards becomes changed and spiritualized. He begins to feel the divine influence over his body, mind and intellect all hours. He begins to feel the divine presence in himself at all hours.<sup>78</sup>

Transformation, according to Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri who proposes an analogy between Kundalini and the Holy Spirit, occurs in the physical body and consciousness on the arousal of Kundalini.<sup>79</sup> This is analogous to the process occurring in Teresa’s ‘fire’ experience. Since according to yogic texts an ongoing transformation process occurs in the body and mind when Kundalini is awakened, in the same way the mystic fire of Christian saints and mystics could thus be defined as a transformative, or purification process.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Teresa of Avila experienced God as a powerful force who is often described in her writings in terms of “fire.” Eastern texts describe the fire phenomenon according to the Kundalini model.

A comparative analysis of Teresa of Avila’s rapture texts with Eastern texts of the Samadhi experience, show that both rapture and Samadhi are similar states of consciousness which exhibit the same characteristics thus supporting my hypothesis that the arousal of Kundalini could be associated with both experiences. These characteristics can be objectively verified and include: immobility and rigidity of the physical body which becomes as cold as a corpse as the life-force is withdrawn from the body, depressed respiration, insensibility to external stimuli, and attainment of a trance-like state. The superconscious state attained in

rapture and Samadhi also results in an ecstatic state upon union with the Divine. Therefore, my research suggests that the Christian mystic and the Yogi are describing a similar type of experience attained by using similar methods, the difference being in the interpretation of the so-called mystical trance.

I hope that by presenting selected Eastern texts that describe the effect of spiritual disciplines and practices especially meditation on accumulation of energy and awakening of Kundalini, will promote better understanding of the fire phenomenon experienced by Christian mystics among religious scholars.

In Chapter 10, I discuss the role of the physical body in mystical experience. In particular, ecstasy as the result of the sublimation of sexual energy, and mystical experience and sexual orgasm.

## NOTES: CHAPTER 9

After the first reference to any of St. Teresa's works using the full title, I will abbreviate the title in future notes.

1. Life, xxii, p.139.
2. L, xx, p.119.
3. St. John of the Cross, Living Flame of Love, trans. & ed. E. A. Peers (New York: Image Books, 1962), pp.32-34.
4. Spiritual Relations, V, p.330.
5. Interior Castle, iv, i, p.234.
6. IC, vi, v, p.293.
7. L, xviii, p.106.
8. IC, note 1, p.276.
9. Swami Sivananda, Kundalini Yoga (Sivanangagar, U.P., India: The Divine Life Society, 1971), p.lx
10. IC, vi, ii, p.276.
11. Swami Narayananda, The Way to Peace, Power, and Long Life, 3rd ed., (Rishikesh, India: Narayananda Universal Yoga Trust, 1970), p.38.
12. IC, vi, ii, p.277.
13. IC, vi, vii, pp.305-306.
14. IC, vi, ii, p.277.
15. IC, vi, vii, p.306.
16. Swami Sivananda Radha, "Kundalini: An Overview," in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed. John White (New York: Paragon house, 1990), p.56.
17. John Woodroffe, The Serpent Power (Madras, India: Ganesh & Co., 1989), p.250.
18. IC, p.199.



19. IC, iv, i, p.234.

20 Swami Muktananda, Guru (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p.146. Reprinted in expanded edition as Play of Consciousness (Oakland, Calif.: S.Y.D.A. Foundation, 1974).

21. Muktananda, p.148.

22. Muktananda, p.148.

23. Swami Rama, "The Awakening of Kundalini," in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed. John White, pp.36-37.

24. M. P. Pandit, Kundalini Yoga (Madras, India: Ganesh & Co., 1971), p.56.

25. L, xvi, p.96.

26. As quoted in M. S.S.Gurucharan Singh Khalsa with Yogi Bhajan, "Exploring the Myths and Misconceptions of Kundalini," in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed. John White, p.137.

27. Haridas Chaudhuri, "The Psychophysiology of Kundalini." in Kundalini, Evolution and Enlightenment, ed. John White, pp. 62-63.

28. L, xl, p.290.

29. Lee Sannella, The Kundalini Experience (Calif.: Integral Publishing, 1987), p.62.

30. Sannella, p.96.

31. Kieran Kavanaugh, "Spanish Sixteenth Century: Carmel and Surrounding Movements," in Christian Spirituality, eds. Louis Dupre and Don E. Saliers (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp.1-2.

32. Henry C. Lea, Religious History of Spain (New York: Burt Franklin, 1967, originally published in Philadelphia 1890).

33. Fernando Tolo, and Carmen Dragonetti, The Yogasutras of Patanjali, trans K. D. Prithipaul (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), p.74.

34. Sivananda, Kundalini Yoga, pp.xlvii-xlviii.

35. Swami Narayanananda, The Secrets of Mind-Control (Rishikesh, India: Universal Yoga Trust, 1970), p.228.

36. Narayanananda, A Practical Guide to Samadhi (Rishikesh, India: N. K. Prasad & Co., 1957), pp.141-142.
37. Christopher Nugent, Mysticism, Death and Dying (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p.16.
38. SR, V, p.329.
39. L, xxiv, p.155.
40. L, xxiv, p.156.
41. SR, II, p.314.
42. SR, XII, p.339.
43. IC, vii, iii, p.342.
44. L, xx, p.127.
45. SR, V, pp.328-329.
46. IC, iv, iv, p.291.
47. IC, vi, iv, p.291.
48. L, xx, pp.125-126.
49. L, xx, pp.119-120.
50. L, xx, pp.120-121.
51. L, xx, p.125.
52. Sivananda, Kundalini Yoga, p.257.
53. L, xviii, pp.108-109.
54. L, xx, p.126.
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## CHAPTER 10

### THE BODY AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

This chapter addresses several issues related to the role of the body in mystical experiences. These issues arise for two reasons: the first one being that mystical experiences are also bodily experiences, the second reason being that Teresa as a woman is directly affected by the Christian views on sexuality. In Part 1, I first look at the perception of the role of the body in the mystical experiences of medieval women and the part that the Christian model of *imitatio Christi* played in women's experiences during the same period. Then I discuss the physicality of Teresian mysticism in sixteenth-century Spain. In Part 2, I look at the transformation process, and the physical problems that were experienced by Christian mystics while developing a mystical state of consciousness. In Part 3, I consider the issues of sexuality and the part that celibacy, and the sublimation of sexual energy play in mystical experiences according to Eastern texts. Finally, I discuss the link between mystical and orgasmic experiences.

As religious texts throughout the ages have shown, spiritual practices, if carried out for an intense period of time, have resulted in mystics experiencing a variety of psychophysiological phenomena. Furthermore, both male and female mystics manipulated their bodies for religious purposes. For example, St. Teresa and others in sixteenth-century Spain practiced a manipulative technique known as *recojimiento* (mental prayer, or concentrating one's attention upon God which alters one's body chemistry). The model of

Christian spirituality, however, does not readily allow or consider the psychophysiological aspects of mystical experience. Nevertheless, it is by recognizing that the flesh plays a major role in mystical experience, and that psychophysiological components are a necessary part of the development of a mystical state of consciousness, that can help us to throw a new light on the phenomenon of mysticism.

A major problem in examining mystical experience in the West has been the lack of recognition and even denial by the Christian Church<sup>2</sup> of the part that the sexual life of the mystic plays in mystical experience. The Church has always viewed negatively the part that sexual energy could play in the unitive experience.

Religion and sex have appeared together throughout the course of history suggesting that there is a relationship between them. However, the body and its sexual aspect have been a problem for Christianity since its beginning. St. Paul's views on celibacy were a strong expression of the ambivalence of the early Church's views on sexuality. Throughout its history, the Christian Church, in particular, the Roman Catholic Church, has tried to suppress sexual feelings which resulted in asceticism. This sometimes led to pathological means of religious expression. However, the medical profession of medieval times was very much aware of the problems faced by the religious as a result of repressed sexuality and celibacy. The problems of celibacy are examined in the Breviarium Practice which was written in a monastery at the end of thirteenth century. "In different monasteries and religious places one comes across numerous men who, sworn to chastity, are often tempted by the Devil; . . . ."<sup>1</sup> The authors of Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages point out the conflict between medicine and theology: "We have seen elsewhere how sharp the conflicts between the religious imperative and medical knowledge could become when the patient belonged to the

monastic community. The theologians proclaimed that sexual abstinence was possible, whereas, as we have emphasized several times, this ideal was difficult to reconcile with medical theories, . . . .”<sup>2</sup> It seems that even though the monastic individual hoped for sexual sublimation, it was an impossibility in most cases, so that one usually had to settle for sexual repression. In contrast to the Christian tradition, the sexual aspect of spiritual development has historically not been a problem in the Hindu tradition. We can, however, see the relationship between sexuality and religious feelings expressed in the writings of Eastern and Western mystics. Their erotic texts provide evidence of this relationship, for example, the ecstatic texts of union with the Divine in which the body plays a vital role. It is one objective of my thesis is to point out that more consideration should be given by Christian theologians to the role of the body in mystical experience, since contact by a human being with God or Ultimate Reality, can only take place by means of the physical body.

### **Part 1: Woman’s Body and Mystical Experience**

#### **(a) Medieval Women’s Model of Spirituality: Imitatio Christi**

As this thesis concerns the mystical experiences of a woman mystic, this section looks at the role of women’s bodies in mystical experience in medieval times, and Imitatio Christi as a pattern of behavior particularly noted in women. The question is, what role did mystical experience play for medieval women in a misogynistic society, and what was the religious significance of the female body? As Laura A. Finke, a feminist literary critic, in “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision” postulates:

The church strictly defined and controlled the nature and content of mystical experience. . . . for the Middle Ages, mysticism was a public discourse. It was neither private nor passive, but communal, dialogic, and active. The mystical experience was highly structured, and it was the church that provided both structure and

content because it controlled through various means the lives and learning of women in religious communities.<sup>3</sup>

The Church controlled all aspects of women's lives, but women did deliberately manipulate their physiological conditions and their environment, including religious superiors so as to gain access to mystical experiences. Men also manipulated their mystical experiences. They used manipulative techniques that involved the physical body: physiological deprivation such as fasting and sleep deprivation as well as excessive sensory stimulation through flagellation (whipping). This resulted in ecstatic experiences as well as visionary or hallucinatory-like phenomena.

As pointed out by several authors such as Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, the religious life provided women mystics with a chance to be leaders in their society by transcending cultural restrictions. Medieval women mystics more than men, achieved a reputation as spiritual leaders through experiences such as ecstasies and visions which they encouraged by spiritual disciplines and practices. Petroff in her article "Medieval Women Visionaries: Seven Stages to Power" writes that the medieval woman mystic:

. . . was representative of a sizeable group of medieval women with religious vocations, for whom their fantasies - their visions - were the signal to others that they were women of power. Visions were the necessary credentials for a medieval woman whose abilities and strengths demanded that she take an active role in a larger world. . . Her power was used to improve the human condition and to encourage others in their paths of self-hood and union with the divine.<sup>4</sup>

It has been argued by scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum, a professor of history at Columbia University, that the female pattern of bodily behavior that we see in medieval women mystics resulted from the women being controlled by men. She argues in "The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages" that ". . . women had to stress the



experience of Christ and manifest it outwardly in their flesh, because they did not have clerical office as an authorization for speaking. This argument must also recognize that the clergy themselves encouraged such female behavior . . . .”<sup>5</sup> From this perspective women’s mystical experiences, as in Teresa of Avila’s case, could be viewed as a means of female empowerment. As Prof. Bynum mentions in her article “ ‘...And Woman His Humanity’: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages”: “The religious authority and significance of holy women for others in the society (both male and female) lay more centrally in their charismatic, especially their prophetic, gifts, whereas male saints often owed their power to ecclesiastical or even secular office.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus it was through their mystical experiences that women could empower themselves within a religious community and outside of it. Within a religious community women were relieved of pregnancy and childbearing. It also provided them with an opportunity to read and write, thus allowing medieval women to express themselves as independent individuals, and to be accepted in society as spiritual leaders.

One way in which the empowerment of women was expressed was through the Christian model of *imitatio Christi*. (As previously mentioned in Chapter 9, for Teresa of Avila, Christ, was her “pattern.”) The involvement of the body in religious expression of Christian women has been different than men as Joanna E. Ziegler points out in “Reality as Imitation.” For example, many medieval Christian woman’s experiences were based on the model of *imitatio Christi*, that is, they tended to imitate the humanity of Christ. Ziegler writes: “Women as we have heard so often from scholars, generally took much farther than men the prevalent desire to live in imitation of Christ. They did so by manifesting extreme bodily reactions - stigmata, excreting bodily fluids, other forms of bleeding, paralysis, and the

like.”<sup>7</sup> (See page 110 for cases of temporary paralysis reported in my research project.) Mysticism and Kundalini.) Female self-modeling after Christ (*imitatio Christi*) began according to E. Ann Matter, a scholar of religion, “as a radical, form-breaking type of self-expression”<sup>8</sup> in the late Middle Ages. However, Matter informs us that women’s experience of *imitatio Christi*, “. . . became by the sixteenth century a more conformist and less expressive manner of self-interpretation.”<sup>9</sup> Matter points out that this was the behavior pattern of many women, “. . . if one looks beyond the category of canonized saint, it is almost astonishing how many Christian women can be easily found who molded their lives in the same pattern, and who left autobiographical testimony to the spiritual grace of their rapturous union with the suffering Christ: . . . .”<sup>10</sup>

Elizabeth Robertson in her article “Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich’s Showings” discusses the culminating image of fire in the *Ancrene Wisse* in which the author compares “God’s love to Greek fire.” This work is a religious guide written by a man for women, and expresses medieval views on the biology of women. Robertson writes: “The explosiveness of the image might even suggest orgasm, which the medical texts considered necessary for women both to conceive and to help purge moisture.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, contends Robertson: “As the culminating image of the work, Greek fire crystallizes the overall theme: the bodily realization of union with Christ.”<sup>12</sup> Robertson states “That the author intends the anchoress to equate union with Christ with sexual union with an earthly man is made explicit at the end of this section, where he introduces images of heat in the context of a discussion of the inadequacies of earthly sexual intercourse in comparison with union with Christ.”<sup>13</sup> Robertson believes that what is significant about the “Greek fire” passage “. . . and different from medieval conceptions of

male spirituality is that for women, union with Christ occurs not as an allegory of the ascent of the mind to God, but as concretized erotic experience, one that redeems her fleshliness and her excess moisture through orgasm.”<sup>14</sup>

Bynum writes in Holy Feast and Holy Fast that the “late medieval notion of *imitatio Christi*” can be understood as “fusion with the suffering physicality of Christ, and late medieval notions of the female as flesh.”<sup>15</sup> She points out in her book that the physicality of the relationship between women mystics and Christ is expressed particularly by fasting. She mentions that Christian saints who fasted believed that they were fed by Christ physically and spiritually from the eucharist.<sup>16</sup> One can see that this obsession with the eucharist provided an emotional high for the mystic. Consequently such strong emotions could cause physiological disturbances. In her article “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages,” Bynum points out that “Female *imitatio Christi* mingled the genders in its most profound metaphors and its most profound experiences. Women could fuse with Christ’s body because they *were* in some sense body, yet women never forgot the maleness of Christ. Indeed, exactly because maleness was humanly superior, the God who especially redeemed and loved the lowly stooped to marry *female* flesh.”<sup>17</sup>

Bynum points out that “The spirituality of medieval women owed its intense bodily quality in part to the association of the female with the fleshly made by philosophers and theologians alike.”<sup>18</sup> Bynum also writes, “Compared to other periods of Christian history and other world religions, medieval spirituality - especially female spirituality - was peculiarly bodily; this was so not only because medieval assumptions associated female with flesh, but also because theology and natural philosophy saw persons as in some real sense body as well as soul.”<sup>19</sup>

### **(b) Teresa and the Body**

As discussed in Chapter 9, Teresa of Avila's mysticism was focused on the humanity of Christ, he was her model for spirituality. Therefore, Teresa of Avila's spirituality was rooted in the physical, her attitude toward her bodily involvement in mysticism being a positive one. She stresses in her writing the important part that the body played in her mystical experiences. Even though her writings focus on the bodily aspect of mysticism, in no way does she deny Christ's divinity.

In the following statements, Teresa links soul and body when discussing bodily phenomena: ". . . He seems not to be satisfied by literally drawing the soul to Himself, but will also have the body, mortal though it is, . . ."<sup>20</sup> (The emphasis placed on the texts by underlining them is mine.) She again stresses the part that the body plays in her experiences in these words, "These effects are very striking. One of them is the manifestation of the Lord's might power: as we are unable to resist His Majesty's will, either in soul or in body, . . ."<sup>21</sup> In referring to one of her experiences (favour) Teresa writes, "in this favour the Lord is pleased that it should be shared by the very body."<sup>22</sup>

Teresa's insistence on the bodily aspect of her experiences is of interest to us because it helps us to understand the somatic components of her mystical experiences. She had developed an acute awareness of her bodily reactions to the force or power that overwhelmed her during her experiences over which she had no control. This intense awareness enabled Teresa to describe her experiences in writing for the benefit of others. Her experiences are of psychological as well as of theological interest.

There was in Spain at the time of Teresa of Avila a rapid growth of mysticism which was expressed by ecstasies and trances, especially in women. Therefore, it was not unusual in

sixteenth-century Spain for Teresa to be emphasizing the bodily aspect of her mysticism. According to historian Henry Charles Lea, mysticism was a national problem in Spain, and was fashionable at all levels of society. He mentions in his work the Religious History of Spain that it became such a problem that it was necessary to repress “mystic ardor” before it became uncontrollable, and spread in a contagious manner among the masses.<sup>23</sup> This the Spanish Inquisition attempted to do. The emotional and suggestible nature of Teresian mysticism is expressed by Lea in these words, “Her immense renown and the circulation of her writings did much to stimulate the increase of the crowds of beatas who emulated her ecstasies and trances and miracles, and who, had not the Inquisition suppressed them with no gentle hand, might have elevated hysterics into a national religion, for there seemed to be no limit to the capacity of popular credulity.”<sup>24</sup>

As Lea points out, women did imitate Teresa of Avila, especially those who were easily influenced by suggestion. He also mentions that Teresa was one of many women venerated by the general public. This fashionable trend resulted in imposters of mysticism who sought recognition as saints. Women, as Lea points out, did imitate the phenomena of others for their own self-importance. The growth of mysticism is expressed by Lea in these words: “As the century drew to a close and as the fame of Santa Teresa spread, everywhere there were women throwing themselves into trances and retailing their visions and revelations and prophecies.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, this pattern of behavior in women was not uncommon in sixteenth-century Spain, the phenomena experienced being viewed as supernatural gifts.

One element that led to an increase of physical symptoms was the spread of a way of prayer named *recojimiento* (recollection). Kieran Kavanaugh points out in his article “Spanish Sixteenth Century: Carmel and Surrounding Movements” that “the way called ‘recollection’

produced the first great mystics of the golden age.”<sup>26</sup> According to Kavanaugh: “The way comprised three parts: self-knowledge, the imitation of Christ, and union with God. Its essential characteristic was the union with or transformation in God - not by way of intellect but through love.”<sup>27</sup> Lea describes the system in these words:

. . . contemplation or “mental prayer” - *recojimiento* or the concentration and abstraction of the faculties, abstraction from all external things and concentration upon God. To attain this efficacious means were found in the mortification of the flesh - fasting, scourging, the hair shirt and other devices familiar to ascetics. . . . He was to avoid thought and reason and was told to fix his mind on God or on the Passion of Christ. With practice, the intellect could thus be made wholly to disappear; the soul threw off the fetters of the flesh; . . . it became conscious only of God; . . . .<sup>28</sup>

As Lea mentions, Teresa of Jesus’s mentor, Franciscan San Pedro de Alcantara (1499-1562) was aware of the abuse of this system, and warned his readers in a manual that the health can suffer if this spiritual practice is carried out to excess.<sup>29</sup> Francisco de Osuna, as Lea points out, was also aware of the physical problems experienced as a result of overindulgence in mental prayer. It was Osuna’s book The Third Spiritual Alphabet (*Tercera Abecedario Espiritual*) on the way of recollection that influenced Teresa to practice the prayer of recollection. Lea describes the physical phenomena expounded by Osuna in his book:

Osuna describes for us the physical results of this hyper-excitation of the nervous centres. In the divine abstraction all control over the limbs is lost, and when the devotee emerges he is as though crippled and unable to move. In many persons it was accompanied with involuntary gesticulations and with screams peculiarly loud and piercing, or with heavy groans which no self-control could stop. One devotee had his head so habitually bent backwards that in order to elude observation he would talk about the roof and its timbers as though he were intently considering them. The appetite failed and all food became tasteless. Healthful sleep was replaced with spiritual excitement. . . . The power of sleep thus was gradually lost; perfected adepts customarily slept but three hours a day . . . . We can, in fine, readily believe Santa Teresa when she

tells us that the bodily agony which accompanied the perfected forms of contemplation was the severest that the human frame can endure.<sup>30</sup>

Lea's text continues describing the phenomena experienced such as ecstasies and trances in terms of hysteria:

The mental condition thus superinduced was a veritable hysteria, assuming various forms, of which the most usual consisted in ecstasies and trances. Sometimes it manifested itself in complete insensibility, . . . . More commonly the attack was one in which the soul seemed to leave the body, entering into converse with God and enjoying divine revelations. This, which has always been a prominent feature of advanced mysticism, was the development which principally attracted popular veneration, and we shall meet with so many cases of it that Santa Teresa's description of its subjective phenomena is not without interest for us. When mental prayer . . . reached the degree of Union with God, she tells us that there was ecstasy or trance, which might be of various degrees of intensity.<sup>31</sup>

Osuna, as Lea points out, insisted that one must not miss practicing *recojimiento* as much as possible even if one experiences physical problems.<sup>32</sup> The physical and mental phenomena associated with this overindulgence of mental prayer is of particular interest to us in our investigation of the Kundalini phenomenon.

### **(c) Gender Difference in Religious Expression**

Finke explores in her article "Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision" the gender component of Christian dualism which she believes results in men and women experiencing the limits of their bodies in different ways. Finke explains that "Medieval Christianity construed man as spirit and woman as body. Like the body, woman is accident to man's essence, despite claims of the spiritual equality of all believers."<sup>33</sup> The consequence of gender difference, as Finke points out, is that women in the later Middle Ages were more likely than men to achieve a reputation as spiritual leaders because of their mystical experiences. She

writes “Perhaps because they were in an ‘oppressed social situation,’ women were especially drawn to radical forms of religious experience.”<sup>34</sup>

Gender difference in religious expression is discussed by Bynum in her article “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages.” She points out that “cases of psychosomatic manipulations (or manipulation from within) are almost exclusively female.”<sup>35</sup> Bynum also mentions that “Trances, levitations, catatonic seizures or other forms of bodily rigidity, miraculous elongation or enlargement of parts of the body, . . . are quite common in the vitae of thirteenth-century and fourteenth-century women.”<sup>36</sup> The gender difference in expressing spirituality is underlined by Bynum in the following text:

. . . as many recent scholars have argued, the spiritualities of male and female mystics were different, and this difference has something to do with body. Women were more apt to somatize religious experience and to write in intense bodily metaphors; women mystics were more likely than men to receive graphically physical visions of God; both men and women were inclined to attribute to women and encourage in them intense asceticisms and ecstasies.<sup>37</sup>

According to Bynum, women experienced their spirituality in a variety of ways, some experienced Christ maternally, others erotically, or as mother, but, she says, “women mystics often simply became the flesh of Christ, because their flesh could do what his could do: bleed, feed, die and give life to others.”<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, it was not unusual given the medieval view of women’s spirituality for Teresa of Avila to focus on the physicality of her experiences. Bynum sums up how medieval thinkers viewed the role of the body in medieval women’s experiences in these words:

“Medieval thinkers associated *body* with *woman*; they therefore expected women’s expressiveness to be more physical and physiological than men’s. They also associated body with God, through the doctrine of the Incarnation, and eschewed sharp



soul/body dichotomies more than did either patristic theologians or those of the early modern period. They could, therefore, give to the bodily experiences of member of both sexes a deeply spiritual significance.”<sup>39</sup>

## **Part 2: Physical Illness and the Development of a Mystical State of Consciousness**

One significant component of gender difference in religious expression is the emphasis on religious women’s illnesses. As Bynum points out: “another kind of bodily experience - illness or recurrent pain - was also more apt to be given religious significance in women’s lives than in men’s.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, illness is a prominent component of women’s spirituality as Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell’s (1982) study shows.<sup>41</sup> It was a sign of sanctity, and some mystics even prayed for a physical illness as in St. Teresa’s case. Other prominent women mystics who suffered from physical problems include Catherine of Genoa, and Catherine of Siena. Bell in Holy Anorexia writes that even though males may have accepted the sick suffering of the holy female as a sign of saintliness, they eventually admitted that illness was not saintly. Women then gradually moved away from this model of religious expression.<sup>42</sup> Even though women were more likely than men to report on their bodily pains and sickness, this does not mean that men’s spiritual development took place without physical involvement, pain, or sickness.

In this section I discuss the physical problems that a mystic, male or female, may experience as the direct result of spiritual growth and development. As the brain and nervous system are involved in the spiritual development of a mystic, it is only to be expected that their physical and mental health will be affected by processes generated by their spiritual disciplines and practices that the physical body has not been accustomed to handling. For example, as is shown in Chapter 9, Teresa did have a problem in handling the increased energy or “force”

that she describes in religious terms. In the Eastern tradition, Yogis have always recognized this problem, therefore, they have stressed that spiritual development depends on a having a physically fit body, and a nervous system strong enough to handle the increased energy resulting from a Kundalini awakening. From their perspective, the nervous system plays a major role in the development of a mystical state of consciousness, and if it is not strong enough, it can result in a breakdown of one's physical health. It can also result in negative experiences.

We will now look at the physical problems experienced by St. Teresa and other Christian mystics from a Kundalini perspective as the Kundalini model recognizes and accepts psychophysiological changes as a natural development of a mystical state of consciousness. Both Eastern and Western mystics undergo a psychophysiological transformation in the development of a mystical state of consciousness.

Teresa of Avila was a highly emotional individual who suffered many illnesses throughout her life. The development of Teresa's spiritual life shows that it was accompanied by physical, emotional, and psychological problems. One way of interpreting the physical problems that accompanied her spiritual development, in contrast to the orthodox psychological model that sees them as peripheral phenomena, is to address them as expressions and part of her spiritual development. Such a perspective is found in the Kundalini model of spiritually transformative processes, which takes into account physiological events as well as mental events. Some of the psychophysiological phenomena experienced by Teresa are very similar to those experienced during the Kundalini process as described in the Eastern sacred literature and Western scientific studies. These include, intense heat, heart problems, throat problems, fainting spells, moving pains, digestive problems, nausea, paralysis, and

contraction of her nerves, all physical phenomena reported as signs of an awakened Kundalini in yogic texts.

The physical problems experienced as the result of a spiritual awakening would depend on individual differences. It is possible of course that Teresa might have suffered from pseudo-illnesses or illnesses that we would now be able to diagnose, but were not understood by physicians at the time.

Other mystics like Teresa of Avila have also suffered from unexplained illnesses and phenomena similar to those experienced as a result of a spontaneous Kundalini awakening. For example, St. Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897)<sup>43</sup> also experienced unexplained body movements, fever, fainting spells, and rigidity of the body. Her physician was convinced that it was not hysteria, but was unable to satisfactorily diagnosis her attacks. St. Therese of Lisieux, like St. Teresa of Avila, believed that some of the symptoms she experienced were the work of the devil, this being the usual explanation for extraordinary phenomena experienced by the religious. Another possible explanation for the extraordinary phenomena that befell these mystics and saints of the Christian Church is that they unknowingly had awakened the Kundalini mechanism. They could have been suffering from symptoms associated with the awakening of Kundalini.

According to yogic texts, Kundalini is a self-directing energy that reawakens the physical body as it continues its transformative process throughout the whole psychophysiological system of an individual. Consequently, it is possible for a person to experience a pseudo-illness during the Kundalini process as this transformative energy purifies the nadis or channels of vital force by removing energy blocks, so that the increased pranic energy can flow freely through. Removal of these energy blocks may cause pain in some

individuals. Swami Muktananda in Play of Consciousness postulates that during this process “occasionally the Shakti will produce some common ailment, which soon clears up, as diseases that have been latent in the body are brought to the surface and expelled.”<sup>44</sup>

Similarly to someone who has awakened Kundalini, Teresa of Avila also went through a purification process, and she describes the physical pain that she sometimes suffered because of her “interior fire.” One perspective on this “fire” phenomenon, and of the physical problems that accompany it is provided by Swami Narayanananda in The Primal Power in Man. He discusses the problems that the spiritual seeker faces on awakening Kundalini, in particular, the problems caused by the psychosomatic heat generated by Kundalini. Narayanananda contends that too much heat sent out by Kundalini can affect the brain and cause brain disorders, insanity, incurable diseases, and hyperactivity. According to Narayanananda, problems can arise if the hot currents get stuck in the body organs or energy centres, for example, in the heart, where they can cause heart palpitation and burning sensations.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Teresa of Avila complained about serious pains in her heart. According to Narayanananda’s assessment of the problems that some individuals can face on awakening Kundalini such as heart problems, it is possible that Teresa could have been suffering from symptoms associated with what is now referred to as “Kundalini psychosis” also known as “Kundalini syndrome,” the result of ungrounded energy or too much energy to handle.

Mantak Chia, a Taoist master, explains why “Kundalini psychosis” or “Kundalini syndrome” occurs:

Without grounding, the practitioner may experience many negative side effects from energy practices. Among the many possible side effects, “Kundalini psychosis” (also known as “Kundalini syndrome”) is one of the most common. Kundalini psychosis occurs when too much hot or Yang Chi rushes up the spine (or right or

left psychic channel) to the brain and gets stuck there. Symptoms include intense heat and/or pressure in the head or heart, visual and auditory hallucinations, paranoia, disorientation, obsessive thinking, and insomnia. These symptoms can persist for days, weeks, or even longer.

Some people have experienced Kundalini psychosis spontaneously, without having done any energy practices at all. Others have activated it accidentally through recreational drug use. There are also some who have triggered Kundalini psychosis as a result of doing meditation practices that do not emphasize balanced energy circulation.<sup>46</sup>

Chia also mentions that too much “hot energy” (or in Taoist terms Yang chi) in the brain results in an overheating of the brain, and that the practice of celibacy results in the building up of a great deal of energy.<sup>47</sup> Recognition of “Kundalini psychosis” or “Kundalini syndrome” would provide an explanation for undiagnosable physical phenomena experience by Christian mystics and saints of the past as well as for contemporary individuals. The Kundalini syndrome, for example, could account for the hyperactivity of some mystics, and their inability to sleep. A knowledge of the symptoms associated with the Kundalini syndrome would be especially helpful for people who have experienced problems because of intense spiritual practices. If the Western medical profession knew more about Kundalini (including psychosis-like symptoms) many people could be more appropriately treated.

To summarize, it is possible that some of the physical problems that Teresa of Avila as well as other mystics experienced were due to the transformative process of Kundalini. If St. Teresa, had unconsciously activated the Kundalini mechanism, she could have been suffering from Kundalini syndrome.

### **Part 3: Mystical Experience and Sexuality**

#### **(a) Ecstasy: Sublimation of Sexual Energy**

In this section I present Eastern texts and concepts that could provide a physical explanation for the ecstatic or rapture experience, a prominent characteristic of Teresian mysticism. Bliss, joy, or ecstasy are common characteristics of Eastern and Western mystical experience, but Eastern texts explicitly link ecstasy, mystical experiences and sexuality. This raises the question of sexuality and orgasm as metaphors for a mystical experience. We will look at how mystical experience is linked with the sublimation of sexual energy in the Kundalini model of Eastern texts.

According to the Kundalini model the sexual libido of a yogi is transformed on awakening of Kundalini. The sublimation hypothesis expounded in yogic texts states that, semen and female secretions are transmuted into a potent form of energy called “ojas.” The conserving, controlling, and converting of sex-energy into a subtle energy called “Ojas Shakti” results in the ecstasy of Samadhi, and this is why yogis such as Narayananda advocate celibacy (Brahmacharya).<sup>48</sup> Celibacy, the retention of sexual energy, as Ajit Mookerjee informs us in Tantra Asana “. . . increases inner pressure, thus transmitting the sex forces into a potency so tremendous that the psychic current is liberated.”<sup>49</sup> The notion that “Ojas Shakti” is poured into the brain via the spinal cord or Sushumna producing an ecstatic state is controversial for the West. Sannella reports an interesting experience involving sexual processes. The experience was preceded by the individual engaging in intense spiritual practice including meditation and chanting at Swami Muktananda’s hermitage in India.

This intense spiritual discipline stimulated the kundalini energy in the region of the first and second cakras. As a result he experienced powerful surges of energy that sent his uro-genital

system into orgasmic spasms. He felt his semen flow upward through the body's central channel (traditionally known as sushumna-nadi).

He later understood that this experience was associated with the "piercing of the first knot." He spontaneously entered a period of complete celibacy.<sup>50</sup>

It must be pointed out that according to yogic texts, the semen or sexual-energy of a celibate yogi is conserved and converted into "Ojas," a higher form of energy, and it is this energy that moves upward, not semen.<sup>51</sup>

The Samadhi experience is the result of the union of Sakti and Siva. Gopi Krishna refers to this union in his autobiography, and describes his rapture experience as a blissful sensation that intensified as it moved up his spine to pour into the upper region of his brain. Krishna describes this experience in the following account which can be compared with the Western sublimation account above.

. . . it mounted upwards with a still more exquisitely pleasant feeling to pour into the upper region of the brain a rapturous and exhilarating stream of a rare radiating nerve secretion . . . I call it nectar, a name given to it by the ancient savants. All authorities on Kundalini Yoga are agreed about the reality of the ambrosial current, which irrigates the seventh centre in the brain at the moment of the union of Shakti with Shiva, . . . it is said that the flow of the nectar into it or into one of the lower centres on spinal axis is always accompanied by a most exquisite rapture impossible to describe, exceeding many times in intensity . . . the orgasm, which marks the climax of sexual union.<sup>52</sup>

Gopi Krishna observed that his intense meditation practice had prematurely opened up a usually dormant centre or area of the brain called Brahma-randhra. It is located at the crown of the head where the Hindus keep a lock of hair. He mentions in his autobiography that he was constantly aware of energy rushing upward from his reproductive region to feed this brain centre.<sup>53</sup>

One symptom of Kundalini arousal is an increase of sexual sensations as documented by Muktananda in his spiritual autobiography. (Activation of the Kundalini mechanism as described in Chapter 2, results in increased activity in the genital area.) Being celibate Muktananda was unprepared for this to occur while he was meditating. Thus he regarded it as a disaster until he found out in a book that it was connected with Kundalini and the process of becoming an urdhvareta. An urdhvareta is an individual whose sexual energy is directed upward - the process involves the sublimation of the male semen or female ovum into a subtle energy. When Muktananda realized that this was a positive sign, and not a negative one, he then accepted it as a normal part of his spiritual transformation.<sup>54</sup>

People who have experienced a Kundalini awakening may report an increase of sensations in the genital area, but there is no scientific evidence to support the sublimation theory of yogis. Also, it is usually not mentioned that people can experience sexual sensations when involved in intense meditation and prayer. My research shows that people are not aware that it is common to experience an intensification of sexual energy and spontaneous orgasmic sensations during a spiritually awakening experience. According to Narayanananda, religious individuals experience a problem if Kundalini-sakti remains in Swadhisthana chakra (the genital centre). He states that if Kundalini stays in the genital centre for too long one is "actually in hell fire," and it can affect one's physical and mental health, therefore, it must be moved out of Swadhisthana chakra.<sup>55</sup>

In contrast to the positive Eastern view of increased sexual activity as a part of spiritual development, increased sexual arousal was recognized by Christian monastic doctors and theologians as a problem which required medical advice - recognition of sexual arousal in religious institutions was applicable to men and women. As mentioned in Sexuality and



Medicine in the Middle Ages, cases of increased sexual arousal were dealt with in the Breviarium Practice.<sup>56</sup> The author of the Breviarium Practice recommended a suitable diet aimed at diminishing the quantity of sperm in some cases. In other cases of sexual arousal caused by thoughts of coitus, doctors prescribed fasting and flagellation.<sup>57</sup>

Krishna links sublimated sexual energy and mystical experience when he states that the Kundalini process causes an increase in the production of a more potent form of bioenergy which flows into the brain via the spinal cord. It is this process that accounts for the ecstatic visions of the mystic.<sup>58</sup> According to Gopi Krishna, the bliss phenomenon experienced by mystics, is created by this more potent form of bioenergy:

The bliss of ananda, repeatedly mentioned in yoga manuals and other spiritual books, refers to the transformed rapturous consciousness created by the flow of the bioenergy drawn from the nerves feeding the reproductive system and spread all over the body. The distinguishing feature between this bioenergy and that normally feeding the brain is that the former appears like a glowing radiance in the head, spread around the body, and, when the attention is directed inward, spreading far and wide to reveal a throbbing world of lustrous, intensely blissful life.<sup>59</sup>

Krishna also makes a connection between the light phenomenon experienced by mystics, and this bioenergy. This enhanced form of bioenergy he says “appears as a luminous cloud in the brain,” and “For this reason the visionary experience of mystics is almost always bathed in light.”<sup>60</sup>

Gopi Krishna, however, mentions the potential negative or pathological aspect of the sublimation process. Referring to sublimated sexual energy and the rapture experience, Krishna explains how the mystic’s experience may produce a negative state he terms the “dark night.”

**When the organism is in perfect conditions, the sublimated energy streams into the brain, raising the consciousness to impressive heights of oceanic knowledge and rapture. But when the system is impure and the pranic radiation becomes even slightly contaminated, then nature tries to adjust the situation in two ways: The radiation either still finds entry into the brain in the contaminated form, leading to anxiety, fear, tension, depression, craving for some kind of excitement or mind-altering drugs or the like. This is the “dark night of the mystic,” the depressive, sterile mood of the genius, or “a fit of the blues” of the intelligent mind.<sup>61</sup>**

Here Krishna suggests that “contaminated” energy entering the brain may account for the negative aspect of the development of a mystical state of consciousness with its possible psychotic elements. Negative experiences are also reported by Western mystics, for example, Catherine of Genoa at the end of her life experienced what Friedrich Von Hugel terms “psychopathic” ecstasies because of physical exhaustion.<sup>62</sup> Another example of a negative experience is given by Teresa of Avila when she describes how her ecstatic experiences also caused her pain. Both Catherine’s and Teresa’s ecstasies diminished in their later years.

The Taoist energy model also links mystical experiences and sexuality. A Taoist master in discussing the conserving and transforming of sexual energy in the male, mentions the importance of the male hormonal system and glands working harmoniously together. He makes a connection between hormonal balance, sexual energy, and the bliss experience of mystics:

**The pituitary gland in turn regulates the activity of the other glands. When they are in perfect harmony they secrete an exceptionally fine nectar - a superfine hormonal substance undiscovered by scientists - which floods the nerve centers of the brain and helps create the feeling of bliss described by so many mystics. This is only one phase of spiritual development, but one that is powerfully affected by the balance of sexual energy in the body.<sup>63</sup>**

This hormonal theory is interesting but is not based on scientific fact. Unfortunately, ancient Eastern texts are written mainly by males from a male point of view so it is difficult to find precise information pertaining to the sublimation process in women. In Teresa of Avila's case, the sexual aspect of her experiences would not consciously be expressed in her writings even though it may be alluded to and any such references would have been censored by her spiritual directors.

Swami Sivananda Radha, however, points out that it is unfortunate that Kundalini energy has been associated mainly with sex in the West. According to the Swami, this is because there is a lack of understanding in the West of the real nature and purpose of Kundalini. She contends that Kundalini “. . . has become a word and a concept that serves as an excuse for many things. Attributing events to kundalini energy and its overwhelming power, men and women throw aside sexual inhibitions and indulge in all sorts of illicit sexual activity.”<sup>64</sup> In discussing the unitive state, Radha postulates that “true oneness is only achieved in a particular state of mind for which the sex act itself is not essential.”<sup>65</sup> Radha states that there is much more to Kundalini than sexuality. She points out that the unitive state is not a sexual experience stimulating the pleasure centre of the brain, but a uniting of the individual consciousness with cosmic consciousness

#### **(b) Mystical Experience and Sexual Orgasm**

The relationship between erotic texts and the mystical experience of mystics has been a problem for Christianity. Descriptions of ecstatic experiences such as Samadhi and the rapture experience of Christian mystics have lead some members of the Western medical profession and others to assert that there is a relationship between sexual orgasm and mystical experience. According to Andrew M. Greeley, author of Ecstasy: A Way of Knowing, “. . . it

is not unreasonable to believe that under some circumstances sexual orgasm can trigger an ecstatic experience.”<sup>66</sup> In his view, “while it is not the same kind of experience as mystical ecstasy . . . the two experiences are similar enough that it is not surprising that one could lead to the other”<sup>67</sup>

Chapman Cohen in his work Religion and Sex presents erotic texts of religious individuals as well as citing the opinions of members of the medical profession on ecstasy and rapture. He quotes Dr. Maudsley in reference to Catherine of Siena and St. Teresa’s ecstatic trances as saying “. . . they believed themselves to be visited by their Saviour and to be received as veritable spouses into His bosom, were, though they knew it not, little better than vicarious sexual orgasm; a condition of things which the intense contemplation of the naked male figure, carved or sculptured in all its proportions on a cross, is more fitted to produce in young women of susceptible nervous temperament than people are apt to consider.”<sup>68</sup> For Cohen, erotic texts express suppression of sexual feelings. He concludes, “. . . if the religious associations were dispelled, there would be no mistaking the nature of feelings that originated much of this class of writing, or the feelings to which they appeal.”<sup>69</sup>

Eastern texts, however, state that experientially there is no comparison between the intensity of a sexual orgasm and ecstasy on union with the Divine. As Krishna explains, “. . . there is no comparison between the climax of conjugal union and the rapture caused by the flow of this divine fire from the base of the spine to the head.”<sup>70</sup> Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, in comparing the ecstatic experience of a mystic with the “ecstasy of sex,” explains that what the mystics have been talking about is, “a greater orgasm, a cosmic orgasm.”<sup>71</sup> Hindu monk and scholar Aghananda Bharati also explains that what the mystic experiences is an orgasmic experience in these words, “The mystic merges, his ecstatic, often eroticized report is much

more than an analogy to him; he does it - he actually transgresses the rules of his society, he elicits within himself the keenest pleasure, and if successful, he creates what no husband, lover, or lecher succeeds in doing: he makes orgasm permanent, uninterrupted.”<sup>72</sup> The question is, can we compare a mystical experience with an orgasmic one as suggested by some Western individuals?

In her article “The Psychobiology of Sexual Experience,” Julian M. Davidson, a neuroendocrinologist, discusses the analogies between sexual orgasm and mystical experience. She points out that individual descriptions of orgasms found in Hite (1976), Laski (1961), and Lessing (1962), remind one of accounts of mystical experiences.<sup>73</sup> She writes: “For instance, there is the resemblance between the condition of sensory loss in orgasm and the state of total detachment from the environment achieved in the deep state of meditation known as *samadhi*.”<sup>74</sup> Davidson also mentions that in the Oriental tradition, “prolonged intercourse without ejaculation is used to induce mystical experience.”<sup>75</sup> Thus because research suggests that the two experiences are similar, some people have concluded that the experiences of ecstatic mystics such Teresa of Avila are sexual ones.

Orgasmic experiences are common on the arousal of Kundalini. In my research of Mysticism and Kundalini, some individuals reported experiencing orgasmic sensations moving up the spine, orgasms in the head, and in other non-erotogenic zones. Individuals that I interviewed did not interpret these orgasmic sensations as sexual ones, but related them to a mystical experience on arousal of Kundalini. That some accounts of rapture and ecstatic experiences are reminiscent of sexual experiences could be explained by the transformative process of Kundalini, which as Krishna’s texts show, involves the brain and the reproductive system.

There has been no understanding by the Christian Church that the mystics' own sexual energy could have played an important part in their spiritual development. Mystical experiences described in erotic terms by mystics such as Teresa of Avila are usually explained by Western psychologists as due to sexual repression. Sexual imagery is a noted part of mystical experience, it suggests the bodily component of mystical experience. Erotic texts may indicate the part that the reproductive system plays in the transformative process of Christian mystics. Mystics and saints of the Church unconsciously sublimated their sexual energy as a means to raise their consciousness, and thus produce mystical experience. My thesis suggests that the Kundalini hypothesis which involves the transmutation of libidinal energy, is a viable alternative hypothesis to interpret the erotic texts of mystics.

### **Summary**

The emphasis on the physical that Teresa of Avila placed on her mystical experiences was not unusual according to the cultural and social times that she lived in. Teresa, like other medieval women modeled her spiritual life on the Christian model of *imitatio Christi* thus acknowledging the physical aspect of spirituality. Nevertheless, the physical component of women mystics' experiences has been a problem for the Christian church.

Both Eastern and Western mystics undergo a psychophysiological transformation in their development of a mystical state of consciousness which involves positive and negative aspects. One can compare the psychophysiological phenomena experienced by St. Teresa with the psychophysiological phenomena described in Eastern texts.

Some Western theories suggest that accounts of mystical experiences are similar to some of those associated with sexual orgasm. Robertson contends that the fire image in the Ancrene Wisse refers to a bodily experience, and might indicate an orgasmic experience. It is

possible the erotic texts of Christian mystics which would include those of St. Teresa, indicate the part that their sublimation of sexual drives plays in their mystical experience.

According to yogic texts ecstatic states are the result of sublimated sexual energy which is transmuted into a higher form of energy called "Ojas Shakti." Thus according to this Eastern theory, the sublimation of sexual energy is the sine qua non of a mystical experience. Teresa of Avila's experiences are an example of the involvement of libidinal forces, therefore, the sublimation theory of yogis is a viable explanation for the rapture experience of Teresa, and can be applied cross-culturally. The sublimation theory expounded in yogic texts would also provide an explanation for the decline of her ecstatic experiences in later years when the availability of sexual energy had diminished. This theory is supported by Gopi Krishna's self-observation of the rapture phenomenon which he explains in these words, "the experience of oceanic consciousness on the first occasion, marking the arousal, consumed the entire store of pranic content of the reproductive system. This store had to be replenished before another similar experience could occur."<sup>76</sup> However, the Samadhi experience is not regarded as a sexual experience by a yogi, nor is the rapture experience regarded as a sexual one by Christian mystics.

## NOTES: CHAPTER 10

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**CONCLUSIONS:  
THE MYSTIC FIRE OF TERESA OF AVILA AND  
THE KUNDALINI PHENOMENON**

I argued in this thesis that if there is a biological basis for the Yogis transformative experience, Teresa of Avila and other Christian mystics could have undergone a similar psychophysiological process. Cross-culturally mystics, including Teresa of Avila, report experiencing a phenomenon that they describe as a fire, a circulation of light, or a current of energy described in kinetic terms as circulating through the body. Kinetically this type of experience has been described by Teresa of Avila as a force, sometimes violent, or a flame which acts as a consuming fire that arises suddenly and unexpectedly and completely overwhelms her. This type of experience can be compared with the Kundalini experience.

I believe that the force experienced by Teresa of Avila is not fully understood, and needs to be examined in a new light. According to my research, there are parallels between the experiences of Christian mystics and Eastern mystics. In my opinion, Teresa's "fire" image is not just a metaphor; it describes a real experience, and can be explained by the arousal of a spiritual energy referred to as Kundalini in Hindu texts. Yogi mystics contend that they can arouse this energy/force defined by Swami Sivananda as the "coiled up, dormant, cosmic power that underlies all organic and inorganic matter within us"<sup>1</sup> through practicing a variety of manipulative techniques such as physical exercises, and breathing techniques. My research

suggests that Christian mystics can also arouse this energy, perceived as an act of grace, through practicing their own spiritual disciplines and practices.

According to my research and the evidence presented in Part I, Kundalini is a real phenomenon experienced in cultural contexts outside of the yogic tradition. Thousands of people in many cultures, have discovered that the intense practice of meditation or other spiritual disciplines and practices over a period of time, sometimes results in the stimulation and arousal of an energy which is often referred to as a “fire” because of the intense heat-like sensations that accompanies this experience. My research findings also show that this spiritual or transformative energy is not the prerogative of the mystic, the guru, and the religious, but that this force can in many different ways and circumstances be activated in the unprepared as well as the prepared.

My thesis hypothesis that a specific “psychophysiological mechanism” referred to as Kundalini in Hindu texts is responsible for, or associated with, mystical experience provides a missing link in our understanding of the transformation process experienced by Teresa of Avila and other Christian mystics. It would account for some of the unexplained psychophysiological phenomena associated with mystical or religious experience and the physical symptoms that may accompany the mystic’s process of spiritual transformation. I am not suggesting in this thesis that the Kundalini model replace the Christian religious model, or negate the orthodox Western psychological model. The Kundalini model, however, can be used as a theoretical model to describe the process of spiritual development thus allowing the integration of unusual or extraordinary phenomena experienced by mystics and saints as well as other people. It can also serve as a model to interpret and explain experiences of a material

or physical nature associated with spiritual development when the former models are not able to do so in a satisfactory way.

My major conclusions from research of mystical experience and the Kundalini phenomenon are:

(a) Since Kundalini is defined as a psychophysiological mechanism, it is amenable to scientific observation.

(b) Kundalini experiences are often associated with mystical experiences.

(c) The Kundalini hypothesis places mystical experiences within a cross-cultural framework.

(d) The Kundalini model offers a wider understanding of mystical experiences at an organic level as it includes the involvement of the reproductive organs, the nervous system and the brain in the transformation process of the mystic.

(e) The Kundalini mechanism can provide a physiological explanation for the fire phenomenon experienced by mystics in diverse cultures and spiritual traditions.

(f) The Kundalin hypothesis provides a link between the inner experience of the mystic and its observable physical manifestations.

(g) Viewing the mystical experiences of Teresa of Avila from a Kundalini perspective allows us to analyze Teresian texts in such a way as to account for physiological processes.

The first part of this thesis explored the Kundalini phenomenon from a theoretical and practical perspective. There is an emphasis in Part I on presenting literary accounts and self-reports of mystical and Kundalini-like experiences from the East, the West, and other cultural contexts. The accounts show the variety of spiritually awakening experiences as well as the

common elements of a Kundalini experience such as intense heat, movement of energy up the spine, inner light, and inner sound. In comparing these cross-cultural accounts of mystical and Kundalini-like experiences, this study has tried to show the universal nature of the Kundalini mechanism, and that mystical elements can accompany the Kundalini experience.

As mentioned earlier, contemporary scientific research has been conducted on the Kundalini phenomenon, but further research is needed, especially brain research. My contribution to the research on Kundalini has been through my questionnaire study; presented in Chapter 6, of "Mysticism And Kundalini," and the personal accounts collected during this study in Ottawa, Canada, in 1997-98. According to researchers such as Sannella, and Stanislav Grof the number of people experiencing Kundalini is growing in the West. I suggest that the Kundalini mechanism has had a major impact on many individuals' lives in a historical as well as a contemporary context. Like mystics and saints of the past, many ordinary individuals in Western society today are involved, some for many years, in spiritual disciplines and practices. My questionnaire research study found that individuals who have had Kundalini-like experiences usually have a background in practicing a variety of meditation techniques, some long-term. We know today that meditation produces physiological changes in the physical body, and can alter brain wave patterns. Therefore, if all forms of meditation, including Christian contemplative prayer as practiced by St. Teresa, can awaken Kundalini, the phenomenon can be considered a universal human experience.

Mystical experiences are not unusual; all of my respondents reported experiencing what they would describe as a mystical experience. An unsurprising result given that the sample was self-selected for mystical and Kundalini-like experiences. Furthermore, 97% of respondents reported experiencing a sense of a Presence or a power different from their



everyday self. The results of my questionnaire show that there is an overlap of phenomena experienced between mystical experiencers and Kundalini experiencers. Mystical experiencers reported experiencing similar phenomena to Kundalini experiencers such as intense heat, inner sounds, inner light, expansive episodes, bliss episodes, and a systematic pattern of experiences involving energy moving up the spine as well as a variety of involuntary bodily movements. The most common trigger for both types of experiencers was meditation. What is most interesting as far as my thesis hypothesis is concerned, is that 60% of respondents reported experiencing a unitive experience which involved energy rising up the spine or through the body as in a Kundalini experience.

A classical yogic Kundalini episode can culminate in a mystical experience, or an expansion of consciousness. I conclude from the evidence gathered in Part I of this study that mystical experiences in the West are often associated with Kundalini experiences. The findings of my questionnaire study supports the thesis hypothesis that there is a relationship between the arousal of the Kundalini mechanism and mystical experience, indeed, some respondents suggested this connection according to their experiential knowledge. The findings of my study differ, however, from Sannella and Bentov's research on Kundalini which found that movement of energy starting from the toes and moving upward was more common than the classical yogic model of Kundalini awakening where the energy starts from the base of the spine and moves up to the head. In my study, movement of energy starting from the toes is recorded in two personal accounts, and only once in the questionnaire as moving up the legs to the head, and terminating in the abdomen (see Table 2).

In Part II of this thesis, we focussed on the mysticism of Teresa of Avila and the Kundalini phenomenon. My objective has been to discern the activity of the Kundalini mechanism in the life and spiritual development of Teresa of Avila by making a comparative analysis of the texts describing her personal experiences with Eastern texts of the Kundalini phenomenon. Understanding the mystical experiences of Christian mystics by means of the Kundalini model of consciousness is new in the West. The question is, can we interpret the descriptions of the mystical or religious experiences of a Christian mystic such as Teresa of Avila according to Eastern concepts? I believe that my research findings support the notion that there is a specific psychophysiological mechanism in the human body known as Kundalini, which can be experienced in a variety of ways. The main difference resides in the interpretations of the experience, each set of interpretations being framed by the cultural and religious context.

In this thesis, I analyzed two types of mystical experiences described in physical terms by St. Teresa: the flight of the spirit, and the rapture experience. In applying the Kundalini model to my reading of Teresa's texts, I found textual evidence (presented in Chapter 9) that Teresa, who had no knowledge of the Kundalini concept, describes using the metaphor of "fire," a type of experience she calls the flight of the spirit in terms analogous to a Kundalini experience. This evidence suggests that Teresa did unconsciously arouse this energy/force through her spiritual exercises.

Historically, traditional notions of the Kundalini yoga model are not easily compatible with the religious assumptions of orthodox Christianity. Nevertheless, I conclude from my research that the Kundalini mechanism could provide an explanation for the fire phenomenon experienced by St. Teresa as well as other Christian mystics. The experiences themselves are

amenable to comparison as they appear to be a similar type of experience. (The “fire” experience often described in terms of the Holy Spirit, is also experienced by secular individuals as some accounts in Part I show.)

As far as St. Teresa’s rapture experiences are concerned, they can be compared with descriptions of the Samadhi experience of yogis on Kundalini arousal. I found that Teresa’s rapture experience has characteristics similar to Samadhi. This suggests that Christian mystics and yogis are describing a similar type of experience associated with the arousal of Kundalini. The only difference is in the interpretation of the experience from a cultural and religious perspective.

I also applied the Kundalini model in analyzing the unusual phenomena experienced by the saint, in particular, her wounding experiences, and sounds in the head. I found that St. Teresa describes the wounding experience in terms analogous to the piercing of the granthis or knots, components of the Kundalini yoga model. Teresa’s description of her wounding experience in the lower part of her body is similar to that experienced on the awakening of Kundalini as it pierces Brahma granthi located at the muladhara chakra. If my interpretation of this type of experience is correct, it could also be applied to Teresa’s experience of her heart being pierced with an arrow, or what is described in yogic terms as piercing the heart chakra. My interpretation of these wounding experiences from the perspective of the Kundalini model provides for a transformative interpretation for this type of experience rather than the usual sexual one of psychologists such as Leuba.

St. Teresa’s spiritual development culminated in her experiencing sounds in her head which gave her a great deal of trouble. I compared these sounds in her head with Eastern

descriptions of the phenomenon, and found that similar sounds are also experienced by yogis as a result of the Kundalini process. Teresa's wounding experiences, and the sounds in her head when compared with Eastern texts show that such experiences are associated with the Kundalini process. I suggest that by applying the Kundalini model in interpreting this unusual phenomena experienced by the saint, one can provide a positive explanation for these experiences since, according to this yogic model, they are connected with the transformation process of Kundalini arousal.

This study of Teresa of Avila's mystical experiences established that her physical body played an important part in her developmental process as well as her mystical experiences. Teresa of Avila is known as an ecstatic mystic, and in Chapter 10 we looked at interpretations of the ecstatic experience according to Eastern theories that emphasize the importance of the reproductive system in the transformation process. According to yogic texts, activation of the Kundalini mechanism increases sexual sensations because of the involvement of the reproductive system in the sublimation process. This aspect of the transformation process is usually overlooked when analyzing the mystical experiences of Christian mystics, or the sexual element is interpreted in a negative way. If the activation of the Kundalini mechanism is responsible for St. Teresa's mystical experiences, as my research suggests, then, we could conclude that according to this Eastern concept, Teresa's ecstatic states are linked with sublimated sexual energy. I suggest that if we view the ecstatic experience from this yogic perspective, it adds another dimension to the interpretation of mystical experience. However, according to my research, there have never been any scientific studies done to investigate these yogic theories of the sublimation of sexual energy in the transformation process. In my opinion, one advantage of applying the Kundalini model when assessing a mystic's

experiences, is that it allows for the sexual element to be viewed in a positive way in the developmental process of a mystic.

The evidence presented in this thesis suggests that when we examine the relationship between the phenomenon of Kundalini viewed as a psychophysiological mechanism and the psychophysiological transformation of Teresa of Avila, we may have to re-evaluate our preconceived notions of mystical or religious experiences.

From an Eastern perspective, Teresa's spiritual developmental process fits with the Kundalini model. She would be seen as one more classic example of Kundalini at work. From a Western Christian perspective, however, is there anything to be gained from applying an Eastern model to Christian experiences? I believe there is. As a scholar of mysticism, and a Kundalini researcher, I have applied the Kundalini model in analyzing the descriptive texts of the experiences of Western mystics and saints, in particular, St. Teresa. This is the first study to compare Teresa of Avila's mystical experiences using the Kundalini model. Were we to analyze the religious texts of other mystics and saints of the Church, we will probably find that they too have experienced psychophysiological phenomena similar to those experienced in a spontaneous Kundalini awakening. The psychophysiological components of mystical experience are important because they could be a sign of a transformative process taking place in the mystic corresponding to those expounded in yogic texts. I believe that if access to information concerning the Kundalini mechanism had been available to Christian mystics such as St. Teresa, they would have accepted the arousal of this energy/force as a natural outcome of their spiritual exercises and not punished the physical body which was involved in the process. I believe that the Kundalini model provides a new way to interpret, and explain the

phenomena associated with mystical experience. It also allows for the prediction of phenomena that could be experienced as the result of deliberate manipulation of physiological conditions.

One objective of this thesis is to raise awareness of the Kundalini phenomenon in Western society and the universality of the associated physical symptoms experienced on its activation. As my findings show that the awakening of Kundalini can be activated through prayer and meditation, it is important for spiritual directors to be knowledgeable concerning the Kundalini mechanism as physical symptoms can occur on one's spiritual journey. Christian theologians are not aware of, nor do they recognize a possible correlation between the arousal of this psychophysiological mechanism and the process of spiritual transformation. Such correlation may include the sexual aspect that I discussed in Chapter 10 of this thesis. This study of mystical experience and the Kundalini phenomenon found that as this transformative energy can be aroused through prayer as well as other spiritual practices, it may bring psychophysiological problems for the uninitiated which would require expert counseling. The need for such help is answered in part by Yvonne Kason M.D., a Family Physician and GP-Psychotherapist on the faculty at the University of Toronto, Canada who counsels individuals undergoing the Kundalini process, and other transformative experiences. She is the founder and director of the Spiritual Emergence and Referral Clinic in Toronto, Canada.

My longitudinal research of experiences interpreted as the power of the Holy Spirit, found that some of these experiences are indeed akin to Kundalini experiences. Hyperemotional arousal caused through the calling on the Holy Spirit in Christian circles can arouse this transformative energy. It is not recognized, or identified in positive terms by

orthodox Western spiritual traditions. There is no scientific theory to explain the experience of the Holy Spirit, but the Kundalini model may be useful in understanding some of the phenomena associated with such experiences.

Through becoming acquainted with a variety of descriptions of transformative experiences, religious scholars, and priests as well as concerned individuals may hopefully gain insight into the transformation process corresponding to the Kundalini phenomenon. I hope that this thesis will be of help to those undergoing a spiritually transformative process. It is possible people will find in the accounts presented in this thesis descriptions of experiences that are similar to their own.

My research of this transformative mechanism is important and timely because in this so-called "New Age," phenomena associated with "Kundalini rising" have affected thousands of Westerners in secular and religious environments who have no knowledge of the Kundalini phenomenon, consequently, they do not know what is happening to them. It is urgent today that people be informed of the Kundalini process because according to the evidence obtained during my research, misinterpretation of the symptoms experienced on awakening of Kundalini can have serious consequences for individuals undergoing the Kundalini process. According to anecdotal evidence, the "Rising of Kundalini" in the West, the serpent power of yogis, has resulted in many cases of individuals undergoing transformative experiences and receiving psychiatric treatment including drugs instead of allowing a natural process to take place within themselves. The problem is, Western people in whom the Kundalini mechanism has been consciously or unconsciously activated may seek help for the psychophysiological phenomena that they are experiencing from members of the medical profession, the clergy, and others who are usually lacking knowledge of the Kundalini mechanism, and the physical

and psychological consequences of its arousal. Indeed, some individuals have found the information that they are seeking concerning their experiences not from individual counsellors but in ancient scriptures and yogic texts.

Today the development of contemporary views on reality calls for a new bridge to be built between Western spiritual traditions and the philosophy of Eastern texts, and this is why my thesis hypotheses is relevant in the year 2000. This research of "Mysticism and the Kundalini phenomenon" is an endeavor to contribute a new understanding of human experiences specifically those of a mystical nature. I believe that the Kundalini hypothesis should be taken into account when analyzing religious texts as it adds to the understanding of the transformation process undergone by a mystic.



**NOTES: CONCLUSIONS**

1. Swami Sivananda, Kundalini Yoga (Sivanangagar, U.P., India: The Divine Life Society, 1971), p.viii.

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**APPENDIX 1:**  
**MYSTICISM AND KUNDALINI RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE**

**MYSTICISM AND KUNDALINI  
RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE**

**CONFIDENTIAL**



# MYSTICISM AND KUNDALINI RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

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Please do not put your name anywhere on the questionnaire as a confidential ID # will be assigned to you to identify your questionnaire.

Unless specified otherwise, write in letter of answer A, B, etc., or Y for yes, N for no, in right-hand column.

### Section 1 - Spiritual History Inventory

1. Have you ever believed in a higher power/universal intelligence or God? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you now believe in a higher power/universal intelligence or God? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_
3. At what age did you develop an interest in religion or spirituality? \_\_\_\_\_ years
4. How would you rate the intensity of your spiritual interest now?  
(A) extremely low (B) less than average (C) average  
(D) more than average (E) extremely high
5. How would you rate the intensity of your spiritual interest in your childhood?  
(A) extremely low (B) less than average (C) average  
(D) more than average (E) extremely high
6. What was your religion of childhood? \_\_\_\_\_  
(A) Christian (B) Jewish (C) Muslim (D) Hindu  
(E) Buddhist (F) Sikh (G) Bahai (H) Aboriginal Traditions  
(I) none (J) other \_\_\_\_\_
7. In which, if any, religious or spiritual tradition are you presently active (from list in #6)? \_\_\_\_\_
8. At what age did you begin to pray? \_\_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ never
9. How often do you pray?  
(A) never (B) irregularly (C) weekly (D) daily  
(E) several times daily \_\_\_\_\_
10. Have you ever received instruction in spiritual disciplines and practices from a structured religious organization or spiritual organization, e.g. meditation, concentration exercises, fasting, including physical disciplines such as Yoga, Tai Chi, etc. (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

11. If you have ever been or are presently under the direct supervision of a spiritual teacher, please list the following:

Spiritual Teacher	Spiritual Affiliation (from list in #6)	From yy-mm	To yy-mm
_____	_____	__-__	__-__
_____	_____	__-__	__-__
_____	_____	__-__	__-__

12. Are you presently practicing a meditative or concentration technique? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
 If yes, give the length of time you have been practicing. \_\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_\_  
 y-m y-m

13. How often do you presently meditate?  
 (A) never (B) irregularly (C) weekly (D) daily \_\_\_\_\_  
 (E) several times daily

14. How long do you meditate each time? \_\_\_N/A \_\_\_mins \_\_\_hrs

15. Describe your meditation technique(s). Check those applicable.

- (A) not applicable..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (B) concentrate on the crown of the head ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (C) concentrate on the point between the eyebrows . \_\_\_\_\_
- (D) concentrate on the heart ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (E) concentrate on the solar plexus ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (F) repeat a mantra ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (G) visualize energy/light rising up the spine..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (H) empty the mind, cessation of thought ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (I) observing the flow of thought ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (J) concentrate on or visualize a holy image ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (K) other \_\_\_\_\_

Section 2 - Mystical Experiences

16. Have you ever had what you would describe as a mystical experience? (Y/N) \_\_\_

17. Have you ever experienced a sense of a Presence or a power different from your everyday self? (Y/N) \_\_\_

18. Which of the following types of mystical experiences have you had?  
 Please check the first column if you have had the experience. If an experience fits more than one category, please mark it once only, in the category it fits best. In the second column, indicate how many times experienced. (A) once only (B) 2-3 times (C) 4-5 times (D) 6=times (E) ongoing  
 In the third column, please indicate in years when this type of experience first occurred.

	# of age check times began	
(A) Unitive experiences - such as an expansion of consciousness and feeling of union with God, or the oneness of all things.		
(B) Bliss episodes - ecstatic experiences of overwhelming love, great joy.		
(C) Mystical visions - such as visions of religious figures, e.g. Christ, Buddha, saints, religious icons or spiritual archetypes.		
(D) Expansive episodes - a sense of dramatically expanded consciousness in which the individual point of perception expands to a greater size.		
(E) Spiritual rebirth - spontaneous religious conversion or dramatic spiritual awakening.		
(F) Illumination - a profound intellectual revelation beyond normal analytical reason of new knowledge for humankind.		
(G) Out-of-body experience - such as a near-death experience - a mystical and out-of-body experience		

If you answered questions 16-18 please answer the following questions, if not, please go to Section 3.

19. Please describe your major/most dramatic mystical experience. Use extra paper if needed.

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At what age did it happen? \_\_\_\_\_ years

20. Have you had any other less dramatic mystical-type of experiences? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, please describe. Use extra paper if needed.

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At what age(s) did they happen? \_\_\_\_\_ years

21. At what age did your first mystical experience occur? \_\_\_\_\_ years

22. How long did your first experience last? Write in number of mins. etc.  
\_\_\_\_\_seconds \_\_\_\_\_minutes \_\_\_\_\_hours \_\_\_\_\_days \_\_\_\_\_weeks  
\_\_\_\_\_months \_\_\_\_\_years

23. Have these experiences affected your spiritual beliefs in any way? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, In what way? \_\_\_\_\_

24. Have these experiences changed your outlook on life in any way? If yes, please explain. (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_

25. Check any of the following that would describe your mystical experience(s).

- (A) Expansion/explosion of consciousness ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (B) Union/merging with the divine consciousness ... \_\_\_\_\_
- (C) Bliss or ecstasy ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (D) Intense feeling of peace ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (E) Sensation of white light or luminosity ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (F) Inner sound (rushing of water, humming, music).. \_\_\_\_\_  
Specify \_\_\_\_\_
- (G) Sensations of energy rushing up the spine..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (H) Sensations of intense heat in the body ..... \_\_\_\_\_
- (I) Sensations of intense heat rushing up the spine \_\_\_\_\_
- (J) Overwhelming vibratory experience of a powerful-force ..... \_\_\_\_\_

25. (K) Whirling sensations .....    
 (L) Overwhelming sense of love .....    
 (M) New understanding of spiritual truths .....    
 (N) Acquisition of new knowledge beyond normal reasoning .....    
 (O) Ineffable, indescribable .....    
 (P) Marked increase in sensitivity of the 5 senses. ....    
 (Q) Experiences or visions of dieties, gurus, icons, saints or mystics .....    
 (R) Fear, panic .....    
 (S) Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

26. Please check if any of the following triggers occurred immediately/within 30 minutes prior to your mystical experience(s).

- (A) Meditation .....    
 (B) Prayer .....    
 (C) Music .....    
 (D) Chanting .....    
 (E) Reading of a poem or other literature .....    
 (F) Nature contemplation .....    
 (G) Body work (acupuncture, massage, shiatzu, etc.) .....    
 (H) Breathing exercises or pranayama .....    
 (I) Sexual relations .....    
 (J) Childbirth .....    
 (K) Physical illness .....    
 (L) Fasting .....    
 (M) Sleep .....    
 (N) Near-death experience .....    
 (O) Shaktipat (transmission of energy from one person to another, usually a guru, for the purpose of awakening Kundalini) , , , , .....    
 (P) "UFO" experience .....    
 (Q) Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

27. How did your experience(s) affect you physically at the time?

Please check if you experienced any of the following.

- (A) Spontaneous body movements such as yogic postures .....    
 (B) Temporary paralysis in limbs or body .....    
 (C) Uncontrollable shaking .....    
 (D) Uncontrollable body jerks or spasms .....    
 (E) Feeling of head and/or body expansion .....    
 (F) Fainting spells .....    
 (G) Sensations in the genital area .....    
 (H) Heat-like sensations .....    
 (I) Spontaneous breathing exercises .....    
 (J) Involuntary suspension of breath .....    
 (K) Chest pains .....    
 (L) Contractions of the anus, abdomen, or chest ...    
 (M) Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

28. Have your mystical experience(s) left you with any long term physical effects? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, please explain \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

29. How did your experience(s) affect you psychologically at the time? Please explain.

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30. How has your experience(s) effected you psychologically in the long term? Please explain.

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31. Please describe any health problems that you feel may have any relationship to the phenomena connected with your mystical experiences.

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32. Do you consider your experience(s) to be mystical? (Y/N) \_\_\_  
If yes, In what way? \_\_\_\_\_

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33. Have you noticed any relationship between your experiences (from #25) and the practice of your meditation technique(s) from #15 that you have done? (Y/N) \_\_\_ or (N/A) \_\_\_  
If yes, please describe \_\_\_\_\_

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**Section 3 - Kundalini Experiences Inventory**

34. Have you ever experienced any of the following Kundalini-type experiences?

Check in the first column if you have had the experience. In the second column, indicate how many times experienced. (A) once only (B) 2-3 times (C) 4-5 times (D) 6+times (E) ongoing  
In the third column, please indicate in years when this type of experience first occurred.

	<u># of age</u> <u>check times began</u>	
(A) Sensations of energy rising up the spine or through the body - rushes of light, energy or heat.		
(B) Perception of unusual lights or sparks; pervasive luminosity; the enhancement of your visual perception.		
(C) Perception of inner sounds - such as (humming, hissing, roaring, music) Specify _____		
(D) Expansive episode(s) - a feeling of expansion of your consciousness, head and/or body.		
(E) Bliss episode(s) - a sensation of profound bliss, overwhelming joy.		
(F) Sensations of energy, heat, or light rising up the spine to the top of the head.		
(G) Wave-like or zigzag movement of energy up your spine.		
(H) Sudden long jump of energy from the base of the spine to the top of the head.		
(I) Energy moving up the spine in jumps, stopping at various intervals.		
(J) Ascending and descending current of energy along the spine.		
(K) Sensations of energy travelling up the legs and back to the top of the head, then down the face, to terminate in the stomach.		
(L) Other (specify) _____		

34. (M) None. I have had none of the above experiences  
(A-K). (check) \_\_\_\_\_
35. Do you associate these experiences with a spiritual  
awakening? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_
36. Are you a recipient of shaktipat, (so-called transmission  
of energy from one individual to another for the purpose  
of awakening Kundalini). (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_
37. Please check any of the following that were done prior  
to any of your experiences of energy, light, or heat  
moving along the spine.
- |  |       |
|--|-------|
| (A) Prayer .....                                 | _____ |
| (B) Meditation .....                             | _____ |
| (C) Yoga .....                                   | _____ |
| (D) Tai Chi .....                                | _____ |
| (E) Body work (acupuncture, massage, etc.) ..... | _____ |
| (F) Breathing exercises or pranayama .....       | _____ |
| (G) Near-death experience .....                  | _____ |
| (H) Severe physical illness .....                | _____ |
| (I) Chanting .....                               | _____ |
| (J) Music .....                                  | _____ |
| (K) Fasting .....                                | _____ |
| (L) Shamanistic vision quest .....               | _____ |
| (M) Sexual relations .....                       | _____ |
| (N) Sleep .....                                  | _____ |
| (O) Presence of a spiritually developed person . | _____ |
| (P) Reading spiritual material .....             | _____ |
| (Q) Initiation by a guru .....                   | _____ |
| (R) "UFO" experience .....                       | _____ |
| (S) Other (specify) _____                        | _____ |
38. Indicate, using the letter from #37, what you were doing  
prior to the first time you experienced 'energy' moving  
along the spine. \_\_\_\_\_
39. Indicate for how long. Write in number of seconds, etc.  
\_\_\_\_seconds \_\_\_\_minutes \_\_\_\_hours \_\_\_\_days \_\_\_\_weeks
40. What was your first experience? From the list in question  
#34. (N/A) \_\_\_\_\_
41. How long did this first experience last? Write in the  
seconds, etc.  
\_\_\_\_seconds \_\_\_\_minutes \_\_\_\_hours \_\_\_\_weeks \_\_\_\_days  
\_\_\_\_months \_\_\_\_years
42. Indicate, using the letter from #37, what you were doing  
immediately before your most intense experience of 'energy'  
rising up the spine. (N/A) \_\_\_\_\_
43. Indicate for how long. Write in the number of seconds, etc.  
\_\_\_\_seconds \_\_\_\_minutes \_\_\_\_hours \_\_\_\_days \_\_\_\_weeks

44. What is the highest point or chakra that the energy has ever risen?  
 (A) lower back (B) umbilical level (C) heart/mid chest level  
 (D) base of neck/throat (E) forehead/third eye center  
 (F) crown of head (G) other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
45. What has the 'energy' felt like rising up the spine?  
 List all that apply.  
 (A) intense heat (B) brilliant light (C) a tingling  
 or creeping sensation (D) electric current jumping  
 (E) orgasmic feelings (F) luminosity/glowing  
 (G) other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
46. If the energy reached the crown of the head, what did you experience? List all that apply.  
 (A) never reached the crown (B) fainted (C) a near faint/swoon  
 (D) seizure/epileptic attack (E) no effect (F) inner light  
 (G) inner sound (H) expansion of consciousness (I) bliss  
 (J) orgasm in the head (K) psychic episode  
 (L) mystical experience (N) revelation  
 (O) other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
47. What sensations have you ever experienced in your sexual organs when the energy was rising up the spine. List all that apply.  
 (A) nothing (B) downward pressure (C) upward sucking  
 (D) something streaming upwards towards the brain  
 (E) sexual arousal (F) genital orgasm (G) spastic contractions of the testicles  
 (H) other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 
48. Have you ever had any sensations of an orgasm when the energy was moving along the spine? List all that apply.  
 (A) no (B) orgasm in genitals (C) orgasm in back  
 (D) orgasm rising to head (E) orgasm in head  
 (F) orgasm exploding in head
49. Have you noticed any intermittent swelling or shrinking of your sexual organs, not related to sexual stimulation?  
 (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_
50. Have you ever had unusual sensations or undiagnosable pains:  
 (A) at the base of the spine? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
 (B) in your pelvic region? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
 (C) in your lower back? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
 (D) in your chest? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
 If yes, for either A, B, C, or D, describe  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

51. Have you ever experienced energy entering the top of the head and moving down? (Y/N) \_\_\_  
 If yes, please describe \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
52. Have you ever noticed any unusual sensations in the center of the brain, just above the palate? (Y/N) \_\_\_  
 If yes, please describe \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
53. Have you ever felt any sensations at the crown of the head e.g. pain or pressure? (Y/N) \_\_\_  
 If yes, please describe \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
54. Check any of the following that you have experienced. Check all that apply.
- (A) unusual flows of energy through and/or around your body ..... \_\_\_
  - (B) unexplained vigorous body jerks or spasms ..... \_\_\_
  - (C) body shaking or vibrations ..... \_\_\_
  - (D) violent trembling ..... \_\_\_
  - (E) whirling sensations ..... \_\_\_
  - (F) involuntary contractions of the anus, abdomen and throat ..... \_\_\_
  - (G) involuntary dancing, hopping or spinning ..... \_\_\_
  - (H) spontaneous Yogic postures ..... \_\_\_
  - (I) spontaneous Yogic breathing ..... \_\_\_
  - (J) inadvertently crying out, grunting, or uttering noises resembling animal sounds ..... \_\_\_
  - (K) moving unexplained body pains ..... \_\_\_
  - (L) recurrent, unexplained back pains ..... \_\_\_
  - (M) recurrent pelvic pains ..... \_\_\_
  - (N) hot flashes/heat intolerance ..... \_\_\_
  - (O) night sweats ..... \_\_\_
  - (P) cold flashes/cold intolerance ..... \_\_\_
  - (Q) sleepiness or changes in sleep patterns ..... \_\_\_
  - (R) feelings of head and/or body expansion ..... \_\_\_
  - (S) unexplainable mood and energy swing ..... \_\_\_
  - (T) uncontrollable weeping or laughing ..... \_\_\_
  - (U) unexplained menstrual irregularities in women . \_\_\_
  - (V) sensitive or swollen breasts ..... \_\_\_
  - (W) heart palpitations ..... \_\_\_
  - (X) drowsiness, lethargy ..... \_\_\_
  - (Y) none of the above ..... \_\_\_
55. Do you have any health problems that you feel may have had any relationship with your experiences or with Kundalini? Indicate below. (Y/N) \_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

56. Have you ever experienced any physical problems that you feel may be directly related with your experiences or Kundalini? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, please explain.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

57. Have you experienced any distressful psychological experiences that you feel may be related with your experiences or Kundalini, e.g. felt emotionally out of control? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, please explain.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

58. Have you spoken to a doctor about your experiences? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
If so, did the doctor give you any satisfactory explanation for your experiences? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
If so, what? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

59. If you have noticed any association between your experiences reported in Section 2 - Mystical Experiences, and those reported in Section 3 - Kundalini Experiences, please explain below. (N/A) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

60. Have the experiences reported in Section 3 affected your spiritual beliefs in any way? (Y/N) \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, In what way? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

If you wish to add any personal comments regarding your experiences not discussed in the questionnaire, these would be most appreciated by the researcher.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### Section -4 - Personal Descriptions

Please describe any experience which includes phenomena specified in Section 3, as precisely as you can in your own terms, including the conditions that preceded it. Include age, triggers, how long it lasted (seconds, minutes, years, etc.), and detailed descriptions of sensory experiences. Add on an additional sheet if necessary.

**APPENDIX 2:  
CONSENT FORM**

## CONSENT FORM

**Project: Mystical Experience and Kundalini Awakening Experiences**

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This questionnaire has been developed to gather information from individuals who have had mystical experiences or have experienced awakening of Kundalini or similar phenomena.

The statistical results of this questionnaire including selected personal accounts are to be included in a Ph.D. thesis.

Publication in the form of articles and/or a monograph may also ensue.

No compensation will be given for participation in this project.

Your participation in this project is appreciated, but you can refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time.

Confidentiality of personal identifying information will be ensured by the use of a pseudonym and identification number (see below).\*

Questions concerning the ethical performance of the research may be addressed to the Secretary of the University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/o School of Graduate Studies and Research, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5; telephone: (613) 562-1246.

\*If you agree to any of your answers or personal accounts being quoted in the thesis, please initial \_\_\_\_\_

Give the name that you wish to be identified by \_\_\_\_\_

If you do not want to be quoted at all, please initial \_\_\_\_\_



**Would you be willing to be interviewed by the researcher at a later date? If so, please write your name and phone number below.**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone** \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator's signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I have received a copy of this form and I agree to the conditions stated above.**

**Subject's signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**If you are interest in obtaining a copy of the results of the research, please identify yourself below.**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address** \_\_\_\_\_ **Apt.** \_\_\_\_\_

**City** \_\_\_\_\_ **Code** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone # ( )** \_\_\_\_\_

**Assigned Confidential ID#** \_\_\_\_\_

**If you know of any person(s) who you believe have had similar experiences and would be willing to complete the questionnaire, please ask them to call me at this number 731-0252 or write to me at the University of Ottawa, Department of Classics and Religious Studies, so that I can send them a questionnaire.**