ENERGY AND AWAKENING: A PSYCHO-SEXUAL INTERPRETATION OF KUNDALINI AWAKENING

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ABSTRACT: In the Hindu Yoga and Tantric traditions, Kundalini is seen as a “coiled energy” at the base of the spine. Its release (which can be sudden or gradual) results in sudden spiritual awakening, sometimes with disruptive psychological and physical effects. In this article, cases of “kundalini-like” experiences from my research are discussed, highlighting ways in which they seem to differ from kundalini as normally conceived. Here the experiences are interpreted in terms of an “energetic” theory of spiritual awakening. It is suggested that kundalini-like experiences are related to a sudden release of energy normally expressed as sexual energy, or libido. In other cases, spiritual awakening may be related to a dissolution of the normal self-system, or ego. The concept of kundalini arousal may have been developed as a way of describing the transformational experience of a sudden release of concentrated sexual energy. 

KEYWORDS: Kundalini, spiritual awakening, ego-dissolution, awakening experiences, sexual energy.

In the chakra system of the Yoga and Tantra traditions, kundalini—derived from the Sanskrit word kunda, meaning to coil or spiral—lies dormant in the first and lowest of the seven chakras, the muladhara. According to these traditions, once kundalini is aroused, it travels up through the sushumna energy-channel, located roughly in parallel with the spine (hence the slightly inaccurate but common belief that kundalini travels “up the spine” itself). It travels all the way up to the seventh chakra, the sahasrara, in the crown of the head. Here it manifests itself as spiritual awakening. If the energy can be permanently settled or established at the seventh chakra, the individual will be in a permanent state of nirvikalpa samadhi, in union with Brahman, becoming a Brahma-vidya, with knowledge of Creator Brahman.

Many traditional sources describe the awakening and liberating effects of kundalini. The Hatha Yoga Pradipaka—one of the classic texts on hatha yoga, written during the 13th century CE—describes how, when kundalini rises through the sushumna towards the sahasrara, “all the lotuses and all the knots [that is, all of the chakras and all of the ‘energy-knots’ in the nadis] are pierced through.” At this point, “the mind then becomes free from all connections (with its objects of enjoyments) and death is then evaded” (Hatha Yoga Pradipika, 2015).

The Yoga Kundalini Upanishad describes how, with the rising of kundalini, the yogi “attains peace and becomes devoted to atma” (Aiyar, 2015/1914, p. 265). In the Tantric text, the Paratrisika Vivarana, the state is described in terms of
“the universal emission—vibrating within the heart of the sushumna in the great bliss of union” (cited in Silburn, 1988, p.10).

Such sources also discuss processes by which kundalini can be “raised,” including asanas, mudras (gestures), breath (prana) control and forms of meditation. The Yoga Kundalini Upanishad (Aiyar, 2015/1914) states that two things are necessary to raise kundalini: the restraint of prana and the technique of saraswati-chalana (which involves sitting in the padmasana posture, manipulating the breath and holding the ribs, so that the saraswati nadi can be opened and kundalini can flow through). The Khecarīvidyā, a hatha yoga text, states that kundalini can be raised by the kechari mudra (where the tongue is placed above the soft palate towards the nasal cavity) (Mallinson, 2007). Another hatha yoga text, the Goraksasataka, recommends hatha yoga postures such as the mula bandha, the jalandhara bandha and kumbhaka (Mallinson, 2011).

The practice of brahmacarya (usually translated as chastity or celibacy) is also seen as a process by which kundalini may be raised. In kundalini yoga, brahmacarya is characterised as erotic celibacy and also as an inner marriage (Sovatsky, 2014). In other words, it is not a technique of suppression of sexuality, based on a world-denying attitude of duality between the body and spirit (as tends to be the case with celibacy in Christian traditions); brahmacarya is an expressive and dynamic process of transformation, which can be compared to alchemy. This is clearly seen in the practice of urdhva-retas, the grand maturational process of all yoga (Sovatsky, 2014), by which the instinctive energies associated with the lower chakras move upwards and are transformed into the “higher” spiritual energy of ojas. Using an alchemical metaphor, Sovatsky (2014) refers to urdhva-retas in an experiential sense as “the distillation of the secretion-radiance of ojas…into ever more unconditional love” (p. 154).

Traditional Yogic and Tantric texts do not address the potential difficulties of kundalini in great detail, presumably because the phenomenon occurred in the context of spiritual or monastic traditions, under the close supervision of gurus. As a result, such difficulties may have been less likely to occur (Greyson, 1993). Nevertheless, traditional texts do hint at the potential volatility of kundalini. For example, in Jnanesvari’s commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita, written in the 14th century CE, its volatility is described in terms of being akin to “a ring of lightning, folds of flaming fire” (Jnanesvari, 1986, p.130). The Tantric Buddhist text the Tantrasadbhava describes how “dazzling sparks” appear as kundalini rises. It describes how the “fiery energy” of kundalini pierces each of the lower chakras, so that it is able to rise to the highest (cited in Silburn, 1988, p.42).

The Vijnanabhairavatantra—a key text of Kashmiri Shaivism—also speaks of pisacavesa, “demoniac penetration,” which can occur when the energy moves back down through the chakras, resulting in depression and fatigue (in Silburn, 1988, p.69). The Vijnanabhairavatantra describes another problem that occurs if the yogin has not wholly transcended his sense of identification with the
body. In this case, the arousal of kundalini causes powerful, uncontrollable trembling. If this trembling intensifies, the sense of identification with the body becomes stronger. (According to Sovatsky [2014], this trembling occurs when the dorsal paths within the spinal and cranial nerves are activated, and related phenomena occur across cultures—for example, qawaali in Islam, nigun in Judaism, the Christian traditions of glossolalia and the “wailing” of shamanic traditions.)

Kundalini awakening has been a popular subject of investigation by transpersonal psychologists—e.g., Greyson (1993, 2000), Grof (2000), Sovatsky (1998, 2004, 2009, 2014), and Thalbourne and Fox (1999). In particular, the potentially negative or disruptive effects of the phenomenon have been studied in great detail. As Greyson (1993) noted these difficulties are much more likely to occur outside the original traditions, where there is a lack of proper guidance, and when the energy is awakened too suddenly and dramatically, without the individual being prepared. Some of these negative effects include disruptions to psychological functioning, resembling psychiatric disorders, and often resulting in misdiagnosis of mental illness (Greyson, 1993). Greenwell (1995) noted that unprepared kundalini awakening can cause physical collapse and psychological disturbance. She noted seven key factors of kundalini awakening, including pranic movements (e.g., involuntary jerking movements, such as spasms and vibrations), yoganic phenomena (such as spontaneously performing yoga asanas or mudras), unusual physiological patterns (e.g., burning sensations, hypersensitivity, hyperactivity or lethargy), psychological and emotional upheaval, extrasensory experiences (e.g., hearing voices, visions of lights or symbols), psychic phenomena, and mystical states of consciousness (e.g., a sense of unity and deep serenity).

The nine point kundalini scale developed by Ring and Rosing (1990) – in order to investigate a possible link between kundalini and near-death experiences—concentrates mainly on the physical effects of the phenomenon, including feelings of energy in the hands, deep ecstatic sensations, awareness of energy discharges or currents flowing through the body, and sensations of tickling, itching or tingling on or underneath the skin. Greyson (1993) developed a more rigorous scale, consisting of 19 items, divided into four categories of symptoms: motor, somatosensory, audio-visual and mental. The audio-visual phenomena include internal noises, voices and lights, while the mental phenomena include “Observing oneself, including one’s thoughts, as if one were a bystander,” “Thoughts spontaneously speeding up, slowing down, or stopping altogether,” “Experiencing oneself as larger than the body” and spiritual aspects such as “Sudden, intense ecstasy, bliss, peace, love, devotion, joy, or cosmic unity” (1993, p.49).

**KUNDALINI AS A FORM OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING**

How common are kundalini experiences? Can all cases of spiritual awakening be interpreted in terms of kundalini in some sense, or is the phenomenon simply one form of spiritual awakening amongst other types?
In my PhD thesis (Taylor, 2013), purposive sampling was used to find a group of individuals who reported having undergone permanent spiritual awakening. Following initial contact (which eliminated a number of potential participants who were deemed unsuitable) 25 participants were interviewed, in a phenomenological investigation into the causes and characteristics of reported cases of spiritual awakening.

Analysis of the sample found that five participants reported experiences with strong similarities to kundalini awakening. These five experiences all featured descriptions of a sudden upsurge of energy convulsing or exploding through them, together with many of the physiological, audiovisual and mental phenomena highlighted by Green (1995), Greyson (1993), Ring and Rosing (1990) and Thalbourne and Fox (1999). However, only one person specifically located the source of this energy at or close to the bottom of the spine, and rising through it. In the other four cases, the source and trajectory of the energy was non-specific, or general. For example, one person spoke of “a feeling of an energy rushing through my body,” (Taylor, 2013, p. 262) while another described “a tremendous amount of energy coursing through my body” (p. 282). A little more specifically, perhaps, another participant described how “the energy meridians in my body were energised” (p. 312). It is perhaps possible that these were “classic” kundalini experiences, but that the participants were simply unable to identify the specific source and trajectory of the energy. Alternatively, this may suggest that the upsurge or rush of energy associated with kundalini can arise from other sources rather than solely the mulahudra chakra, as in the classic kundalini experience.

There were two other participants who had some signs of a kundalini-like experience, but not particularly strong or clear ones. One of these participants reported spiritual awakening at the time of her father’s death. At the very moment of his passing, she experienced a “huge golden bright light, circular” rising from her solar plexus: “It seemed to be suddenly there and it was spinning round and round. And that developed and grew brighter, and moved through my body and filled my body. There was a flood of joy right through me” (p. 221). This description has some similarities with the arousal of kundalini. However, the participant specifically referred to light, rather than energy and did not report disruptive after-effects normally associated with kundalini.

The second person described a sensation of “little sparklers going off inside my body and mind,” (p. 321) but again there was no specific description of energy and no reported negative or disruptive effects.

Of the other varieties of spiritual awakening reported by the participants in the study (Taylor, 2013), by far the most frequent was intense psychological turmoil pre-figuring a collapse of the self-system, enabling a new sense of identity to emerge. (A number of participants also reported a very gradual awakening, through many years of spiritual practice and life experience.)

Here I will briefly describe the five experiences reported in Taylor (2013) with strong similarities to kundalini awakening:
Case 1

This experience occurred during a very stressful period of the participant’s life, when he was forced to do a job which he disliked, and when his wife was undergoing tests for cancer. He “literally did not sleep at all for a week due to worry and stress” (p. 302). He described the transformational experience that ensued as follows:

Out of nowhere at 5 a.m. one morning I had what I now realise was a sudden uncontrolled Kundalini awakening... All through the initial experience I was sure I was having some sort of intense spiritual awakening experience but knew nothing about anything like that at the time and had no-one to ask. I initially thought that I was Jesus Christ and that everyone else was as well. At least some sort of Christ consciousness within every one. As I lay on a bare mattress in a locked room on a high security psychiatric ward, my spine and upper body convulsed as I experienced going back into previous lives to work out issues. This went on for about two days but there was no-one to tell about it as the doctors and nurses just look at you every five minutes to make sure you are not doing anything daft. I never spoke to anyone about this at the time, least of all the doctors, because I knew it just meant they would detain me longer in hospital. I had the experience that I could feel my spine from within my body. (p. 302)

Over the following year, the participant spent periods in a psychiatric hospital, on anti-psychotic drugs. He was told that “I had experienced a psychotic episode after first discussing possible schizophrenia” (p. 302).

He described the changes the experience had brought to him as follows:

I found I wasn’t able to work full time anymore. I had to work part-time. I was a service manager at BMW car dealers and I just couldn’t do it anymore, physically and mentally. I had a different perspective, a different outlook on life. I guess I was seeking, searching for answers...

Some people get this after a bereavement–you suddenly realize what’s important in life and what’s not–big cars and lots of money and all the material trappings isn’t what life is all about. Now I have lost all material desires. I used to think my life would only be complete if I had a newer faster motorbike and drove my wife mad for years with impulsive purchases of dozens of different bikes. At the time of my original breakdown I was consumed with having the latest biggest car and gadgets. This has all dissolved into thin air. I am not at the stage of treating a pebble and a gold nugget the same, but I have no desires now...

I lost all interest in my hobbies and my charity work. I continued my stress free two days a week job as it fits my life very well.

Even my love of football has waned. It was a massive part of my life, but that desire to belong has pretty much gone. Everyone seems to need to belong to a particular group, but I don’t need that anymore. (p. 305)
It took several years for the participant to feel that he had understood and integrated this shift—in fact, it was only in the last year that he had begun to feel fully stabilized, and to experience a degree of real contentment and fulfillment.

It took me a very long time, but I now look forward to nothing better than sitting and meditating in thoughtless awareness. It must seem very strange to an Ego oriented person, the idea of doing nothing. Some people cannot sit still and get bored very easily. I don’t get bored anymore. I only work two days per week and all I do otherwise is read books go for walks and meditate.

In the past, I couldn’t sit still for five minutes. I had to be doing something or going somewhere. The transition from that to being able to sit and do nothing is massive. (p. 305)

Case 2

This transformational experience also occurred following a long period of stress (and depression, in this case) and a short period of sleeplessness (four days). The participant was in poor physical health, and after her husband expressed his concern for her well-being, they had a major argument, which ended with her husband exploding with rage and wrecking the house. And as she described it:

His explosion, and the release of his anger, freed something tremendous in me. It was at that moment that I had an experience of enlightenment.

This experience came with feelings of such perfect joy and peace. I remember thinking afterward “so that’s what I’m supposed to feel like!” This experience was multidimensional. It was physical. I felt a tremendous amount of energy coursing through my body and with the energy came healing. My sinuses cleared instantly, and my lungs cleared out and started working perfectly again. I watched this instant healing with amazement. It was intellectual. The final puzzle piece dropped into place...

Spiritual knowledge was revealed to me, I “knew” it in an instant, and am still to this day learning in a linear conscious fashion what was revealed to me in that instant. I also felt like a ton of stuff went blowing by me and I didn’t pick up on most of it - though I have spent 17 years actively studying and seeking to put this information together into a state that can be perceived with the human mind and heart.

This was the beginning of a remarkable time when a spiritual guide started to have conversations with me. I learned first hand that one has to go through hell before you get to heaven. I also understood about why mystics have talked about: “for all eternity.” In a mystical consciousness, within that one instant, you sense forever and ever, and are forever changed. I guess that was also what was meant by being born-again, to see with the eyes of a child.
I was in an altered state of consciousness, though I was still very much in control in normal consciousness. It was living a life of duality where I could see from either perspective at will, spiritual, or physical. It was an incredible time that I will never forget, and can still access. I felt like I had broken through a barrier, and I was talking back to people left on the other side, and I so wanted to grab them and pull them through with me! (p. 283)

There was an initial difficult phase, during which she found difficulty relating to other people, especially the people closest to her, and found it difficult to understand and integrate her new identity:

I was really blown apart and needed to do a lot of work and seeking to integrate and figure out how to live with this new person I was. I was very confused and often too honest...I find I don’t compromise, so prefer fewer more authentic and congruent relationships. I think I simply needed to learn better social skills. It’s up and down. I find I threaten some people, but relate better to others. Still a challenge. (p. 285)

Case 3

This participant described many symptoms of kundalini awakening very graphically, including audiovisual phenomena, very rapid thought processes, perceptual distortions, psychic phenomena, an awareness of angelic presences, and finally, during the period following the experience, confusion and depression. Although she does not specifically refer to an upsurge of energy during the initial experience (she refers to “a lot of heat around my body and a very bright light”), it was followed by a frequent feeling of “energy rushing through my body with a loud screeching sound” (p. 262).

Her transformational experience appears to have been triggered by the death of her mother. As she describes it:

I was grieving. My mother had died. I was lying in bed in the morning; I smelt her perfume and started to get upset. Then I felt her presence and my body went into a type of paralysis or cramp where I couldn’t move. There was a lot of heat around my body and a very bright light, but my eyes were closed. I couldn’t open my eyes. I was feeling frightened but all the while I could feel a reassuring presence. I remember being very indignant about the whole thing. It felt like I was being reassured but I wasn’t having any of it...

Then every time I napped or slept I had a similar experience. My night time experiences were filled with a feeling of an energy rushing through my body with a loud screeching sound, seeing things visions and faces, colours and maps of the solar system, scientific symbols, things I remember from maths at school, formulae. It was just random information at a very very high speed, like a slideshow, showing frames throughout human history. That was when I closed my eyes. In my waking hours I was seeing colours around people, feeling their feelings, reading their thoughts. The next day there would be a new enhanced
sense or ability. I would look in the mirror and my face would change, I would look at others and their faces would change. I would know who was about to call me or who was about to turn up at my doorstep. I started having physical empathy. I had a nap and found myself in a hospital where people were speaking a foreign language, and I was losing a lot of blood. I had very specific details about where I was. Then I found that my best friend had had a suspected miscarriage in a hospital in Paris. Occasionally there were more pleasant things like angelic presences, an energy form which brought my mother’s presence to me and then took her back to wherever she was. (pp. 262–263)

As with the two previous participants, without a background in spirituality, she struggled to make sense of her experience. As she described it, “I was very sceptical of my own experiences. I held on to that inner observer at the same time as feeling a lot of fear” (p. 263). For several weeks following this initial experience, she was unable to work, or to function in everyday life. She was diagnosed with depression, and then with fibromyalgia, or somatisation of the central nervous system as a result of trauma. She describes the physical symptoms she experienced as follows:

My body was in pain. I was fatigued but couldn’t sleep. I didn’t sleep properly for about 8 months. I had memory problems, and problems with concentration and confusion, particularly in the early stages. I was on a short term memory cycle of about 30 seconds and everything was just sort of slipping through my mind. That occasionally happens now; it depends on how busy or over-stimulated I am. (p. 263)

Disenchanted with conventional medicine, she turned to alternative therapies, which she felt helped to integrate her new state of being. Overall it “took two to three years to feel stable and finally understand what was happening” (p. 263). Now that this integration had taken place, she described her normal state as featuring a constant psychic and spiritual awareness:

Once it stabilised, I realised I was left with abilities that could help other people. I started to get a sense of what the purpose of it was and what good it could do for others. With enhanced sensory awareness I can read what’s going on with people at the unconscious level, and help make those things conscious and help transform them. There’s an awareness of energy or vibration or consciousness, an ability to read that fundamental level of reality, what’s going on beneath the surface...

There’s also a more expanded awareness and a realisation of our context in the universe, an expanded understanding of the journey of the soul and the continuity of consciousness, an understanding that physical life is just one dimension of reality.

I walk between two worlds a lot of the time. I’m learning to enjoy physical reality and family life, and just the simple things in life. That’s become heightened - an appreciation of everyday life. I always had a sense of beauty, but it’s become more heightened now. There’s certainly a connection with
nature and because of the openings and awareness of energy and vibration and I can certainly delight in nature and feel its forces and its cycles. When that first happened, I thought I was losing the plot, when I thought I could almost feel a tree speaking to me, but now I realise I was just picking up on the energy...

What was interesting was that I moved back down to Devon (my home town) and was fully expecting to walk into the room and for family and friends not to recognise me. I felt so different, like a completely different person to be honest. All my internal frames of reference have changed. I no longer experience life as a random sequence of disconnected, separate events of which I am merely a passenger or victim. I experience life as an interconnected co-creative partnership with some kind of intelligent force or ever-present sentiency. I live as a timeless soul enjoying my physical experience. That is my daily reality. (p. 267)

**Case 4**

This participant’s transformational experience began after he had travelled to India to learn Ashtanga Yoga. He had suffered from psychiatric problems for a period earlier in his life, and shortly after his return from India, he experienced his “first manic episode for 10 years” (p. 311). He had “several experiences where my consciousness seemed to rise suddenly, the energy meridians in my body were energised, and my mind became sharper and clearer” (p. 312). Although he was sure he was having some form of spiritual experience, he was admitted to a psychiatric ward, where the staff were sceptical and hostile. However, he “persuaded them to discharge me while I was still unwell” (p. 312).

On the same day that he was discharged, he felt he experienced a “breakthrough”:

> I felt a shift in my consciousness, something I hadn’t felt before. My mind was becoming quieter, and at the same time the world was becoming sharper, more real, and the experience was lasting. I went for a swim while my friend taught a class at the gym, and for the first time in my life I experienced myself as consciousness.

> I went home that night still feeling very clear, and my mind was still quiet…. (p. 312)

This was followed a few weeks later by a second shift, which occurred during a camping trip with his brother, while having a shower:

> I was in that vibrant dimension of clarity, laughing my head off, absolutely elated. I realised a profound truth, what it meant just to be alive and to be able to have a shower, and have a bed to sleep in, and food to eat. I met my brother in Edinburgh that night and I was amazed at the quality of the
The colour of the sky, it had never looked like that before, and the warmth on my skin, it was like the world had been made anew...

After the episode of illness, I felt like a new person. The things that used to bother me didn’t any more. I threw out every possession I had that reminded me of the past. I fictionalised my experience to explain it to myself and others, and believed that on that day when I had the peak experience in the shower I’d actually died, my life energy had left my body and taken all my old issues and neuroses with it, and had new energy had entered my body. I’d re-incarnated in the same body in the same lifetime, changed.

I doubt if that’s the truth, I just couldn’t rationally explain why I emerged from a manic episode with better mental health than I’ve ever had before. I spend a lot of time in the present now, more than I ever did, and I can quiet my mind easily when I want to. My family have often remarked on my positive changes, and my psychiatrist told me recently that I’m one of the most psychologically healthy people she’s ever met. I’ve not been able to tell her that when I recovered from the last episode of mania most of my fears and anxiety were gone...

Life is simple. And life is precious. All forms of life are sacred. Life is a miracle, and it is to be enjoyed. Every moment is different; every moment is alive with possibilities. If I was to lose everything tomorrow, I’d be okay. The greatest way I can use my life is to contribute toward the well-being of all forms of life... I’m fine the way I am. I spend most of my time in the moment, and in many ways encourage others to do the same. There’s nothing lacking from my present situation. I don’t feel uneasy when I’m lacking direction or stuck. All of the difficult things in my life happened to get me to where I am today – and I’m very happy with who I am and where I am – so I no longer label experiences as good or bad. (pp. 314–315)

Case 5

This transformational experience is less overtly kundalini-like than the previous four, in that the participant does not specifically refer to a feeling of rising energy. However, she does describe experiencing a sudden “rush of love, like I was burning up. My whole body was being flooded with light” (p. 241). I felt that this could refer to a kundalini awakening, especially since many of the other characteristics of the experience were similar to the phenomenon:

I’d been depressed for quite a few years before then, although it was nothing definite. There was just a lot of stress leading up to it. I’d been in a very close relationship with a friend, and it had got to the point where it was suffocating and breaking down. I was also drinking quite a lot and taking drugs, living in quite a self-destructive way.

It happened very suddenly, one night. I’d taken ecstasy but only a small amount. I ended up having a proper conversation with my friend. She was
great – it was a very deep honest conversation. Suddenly I felt a rush of love, like I was burning up. My whole body was being flooded with light. It was a realising that everything in my life had led up to this point. It got scary when I went to bed. I closed my eyes and I was going to down a portal. I could see blue electricity around me. I felt like I was dying.

After that my whole senses opened up, and I found everything overwhelming. I was completely blown open too fast. I had no filter. I was so open and so delicate. Whenever I went out it was very chaotic. I was having psychic episodes but I didn’t understand them. I could sense other people’s thoughts.

I thought I was going bonkers [insane], but I was aware that I was going bonkers, and I had a sense that I needed to work through it, that it would play itself out. It lasted for about two years, before it started to stabilise. I was working in a bookshop at the time but had to stop because I was ill. I was diagnosed with ME. I was too ill to go out.

The past seven years has been about integrating the old and the new. Over the last three or four years I’ve reached a more stable state. I’ve worked through the chaos and I don’t feel vulnerable anymore. I feel a lot more peaceful and stable now.

I feel a completely different person. I used to be very cynical and intolerant and judgmental. I was also anxious and neurotic and insecure. I’m a lot more intuitive and in touch with myself, a lot more aware of my own energies. People are so surprised at how sorted I seem. People who knew me in the past can’t believe that I’m the same person, they’re amazed at how calm and centred I am. Now I’m really happy being me. I used to feel a general anxiety all the time.

I still have psychic experiences sometimes, like pre-cognitive dreams. Sometimes I just know things without knowing why I know them. And sometimes synchronistic things happen. (pp. 241–242)

**Summary of Case Studies**

In relation to kundalini experiences, then, Taylor (2013) elicited the following findings:

- Five participants had kundalini-like experiences, with many of the classic characteristics of the phenomenon; although in four cases they did not specifically locate the “rush of energy” they experienced near the base of the spine, or describe it rising up through the spinal area. This observation suggests either that these four participants were simply unaware of the exact source or trajectory of the energy (perhaps it was the bottom of the spine), or that the upsurge of energy associated with kundalini may sometimes occur in a different form, from a source other than the *muladhara-chakra*, or through the channel of *sushumna*. 

*Energy and Awakening* 229
- Kundalini-like experiences were more likely to occur in people who were not engaged in spiritual practice, and did not have a prior interest in spirituality.

- The kundalini-like experiences confirm the resemblance between kundalini-like experiences and psychiatric problems. Four of the five participants were diagnosed (mis-diagnosed?) with and treated for psychiatric problems, although they were all convinced that they were undergoing some form of spiritual experience.

- The participants found that the state stabilized after a period. The disruptive elements they experienced - including the psychological disturbances and physical difficulties - eventually became less intense, or faded away altogether. This process, however, was very gradual, extending over several years. This process of integration and stabilisation was no doubt partly due to increased understanding of their experience, creating a conceptual framework within which they could make sense of it. But it also seems to suggest that kundalini arousal has a natural dynamic of de-intensifying and settling over time.

- Other modes of spiritual awakening were experienced besides kundalini-like experiences. The most common type of transformation described by the participants was a sudden awakening following a long period of psychological turmoil, apparently caused by a dissolution of their normal self-system. Although these experiences occasionally have an energetic dimension to them, they usually do not feature the same overt sense of explosive, flowing or flooding energy as kundalini-like experiences. Most of these participants also experienced some negative or disruptive effects, although these tended not to be as intense as kundalini-like experiences. Those who did not experience problems, undergoing a fairly smooth integration into their new state of being, were in almost all cases those with a previous interest in spirituality, who were engaged in spiritual practice at the time of their transformation. A smaller number of participants in Taylor (2013) experienced a very gradual awakening, with no disruptive effects, following long periods of spiritual practice and personal development.

**INTERPRETING KUNDALINI EXPERIENCES**

In previous papers (Taylor 2005, 2009, 2012b), I have attempted to explain some temporary awakening experiences - or higher states of consciousness - in terms of energy. I have suggested that there are two basic types of awakening experiences. These roughly correspond to the distinction made by Fischer (1971) between ergotropic higher states of consciousness - that is, “high arousal,” active or ecstatic experiences - and trophotropic higher states - that is, “low arousal,” more serene experiences.

First, there are temporary awakening experiences caused by homeostasis-disruption – that is, when our physiology and brain chemistry is powerfully disrupted by external influences e.g., fasting, sleep deprivation, self-inflicted pain, hyperventilation, psychedelic drugs, etc. Awakening experiences do not
always result from these states, of course - usually homeostasis-disruption has
to occur in a religious or spiritual context, and with conscious intent (Taylor,
2005, 2010, 2012b). In Fischer’s distinction, these experiences are more likely to
be ergotropic or high arousal higher states.

Second, there are temporary awakening experiences of an energetic nature.
These are often related to what has been termed a state of intensified and stilled life-energy (ISLE state) (Taylor, 2010, 2012b). These usually occur
in the context of peaceful, relaxing activities such as meditation, contact
with nature, yoga, running or swimming, listening to or playing music. These
activities and environments may have the effect of reducing the mental
or psychic energy the individual expends through mental functions such as
concentration, cognition or perception. Mental energy which was previously
monopolised by these functions is retained. At the same time, psychic
or mental energy often becomes stilled, in the sense that there are fewer
thoughts, perceptions and items of information passing through conscious-
ness. This process may result in an awakening experience of a trophotropic
low arousal type. In a study of 161 awakening experiences (Taylor, 2012b),
awakening experiences related to ISLE states were found to be significantly
more common than those related to HD states. Around 80% were related to
ISLE states, with 10% related to HD (homeostasis-disruption) states, while
the others had no clear origin.

The existence of “life-energy” is, of course, controversial. Materialistic science
clearly does not accept the concept of a non-physical energy within the human
organism. This is not the place for an extended discussion of this concept, or an
attempt to justify it (see Taylor, 2010, 2012b for this). It is important to note,
however, that this concept has been central to many cultures throughout
history - in fact, the modern paradigm of materialistic science is possibly the
first belief system in history to question its existence. As well as being central
to traditional Hinduism, the concept was a central part of Chinese Daoist
philosophy. Belief in a life-force was also common to the ancient Egyptians
(ka), the ancient Greeks (pneuma), and to indigenous tribal peoples all over the
world. To take a few examples, the Maoris of New Zealand used the term tapu,
the Algonquian Indians called it orenda, while the Ainu of Japan called it ramat
(which also refers to a an all-pervading universal spirit-force) (Levy-Bruhl,
1965; Monro, 1962).

Early psychologists such as William James (1917), Freud (1923/1962) and Jung
(1988) assumed the existence of a non-material psychic energy, and even an
avowedly materialist contemporary psychologist such as Csikszentmihalyi
(1992) speaks of psychic energy and attentional energy, tacitly assuming
the existence of a non-material energy. In the transpersonal field, Michael
Washburn (1998) suggests that the essence of our being is a life-energy which
expresses itself in three different ways: as psychic energy, as libido (or sexual
energy), and as spiritual power. He notes that psychic energy is used continually,
fueling our ongoing conscious experience, while libido and spiritual power are
both potential energies, which are usually latent but become activated by certain
stimuli.
In a sense, the phenomenon of kundalini awakening can be seen as evidence for the existence of life-energy too, and is certainly only explicable in terms of the concept. Kundalini awakening is a high arousal energetic awakening experience. It can be seen as an especially extreme example of the connection between life-energy and awakening experiences.

In Taylor (2010, 2012b) it is suggested that there is a correlation between the intensity of ISLE states, and the intensity of awakening experiences: the greater the intensification of energy, the more intense the awakening experience, and this principle applies to kundalini arousal too. Since it releases a great of energy very suddenly, the awakening experiences it generates are usually of a high intensity. In fact, whereas ISLE states are normally associated with temporary awakening experiences, because of its intensity, and its dramatic disruptive effects, kundalini arousal generally brings a permanent shift in identity and consciousness.

The explosive high arousal nature of kundalini awakening suggests a similarity with awakening experiences related to homeostasis disruption. However, it is important to note that, with HD states, awakening experiences are caused by powerful physiological changes, while in kundalini awakening, physiological disruption is an effect of the explosion of energy.

KUNDALINI AND SEXUAL AWAKENING EXPERIENCES

Sexual awakening experiences can also be of a high-arousal explosive nature. In fact, there are significant similarities between kundalini experiences and sexual awakening experiences, which are important to consider in relation to the question of what kundalini energy actually is, and where it originates.

These similarities were highlighted by a kundalini experience which was reported to the researcher as a part of a different study (Taylor, 2010), when the aim was to collect examples of awakening experiences to study their different causes or triggers. This experience occurred after a long period of meditation. During one meditation session, the participant felt what she describes as a “forceful, pushing sensation near the base of my spine.” And as she continued breathing:

This sensation continued to rise in my spine, getting and higher with each in-breath. It was a magnificent but intensely intimate and sexual experience. It was at that point where the sensation was arriving at my neck that I panicked. I knew that if I did not resume control, this force would pass through my head and out through the crown and as a result I would scream and be forced to run around the room like some crazy person...[For weeks afterwards] my face shone with a new happiness and many people commented on the “new image” – lively, awake and laughing. I had boundless energy and required little or no sleep. I was surrounded by people wanting to talk to me. (Taylor, 2010, pp. 145–146)
Some sexual awakening experiences are sedate and serene experiences, due to a quietening and stilling of energy. The sheer pleasure of sex creates a state of intense absorption. Attention is taken away from associational mental chatter, which quickly begins to subside. Sexual pleasure may overwhelm the individual to such an extent that their attention is effectively closed to everything beyond the desire and pleasure they feel. In this sense, sex can have a meditative effect. Here is an example of this type of sexual awakening experience which was given to me, in which a woman describes how she typically feels after having orgasms:

I feel as if I haven’t got any weight. There’s a warm feeling running all through my body...Nothing else seems to matter, problems cease to exist, as if the feeling takes you over so much that there’s no room for anything else. I feel capable of doing anything...

I also look at things more clearly, look beyond what I usually look at. The colours seem more distinct; if you look at, say, a tree, you see it for what it really is, not just as a tree. You see it as nature, not just as an object. (Taylor, 2010, p.142)

However, some sexual awakening experiences can be more explosive high arousal experiences, more similar to kundalini experiences, in that they seem to involve the sudden release of previously dormant energies. Wade collected many examples of altered and higher states of consciousness occurring during sex, finding that “sex can take people to the same realms as trance, meditation, drugs” (Wade, 2000, p.120). Many of the experiences she collected had similarities to kundalini experiences. As Wade described it, “Some people report strange energies coursing through the body. Sometimes it starts with a sense that the sexual charge normally rooted in the genitals is spreading throughout the entire body, lighting it up with crackling power and fireworks” (Wade, 2004, p. 27). One person described it as “electric, really light-oriented, very much upwardly oriented” (p. 29); another spoke of “energy, patterns, and electric colors...burning energy” (p. 30), while another person described an “electrical feeling that moves up my body and just goes out my eyes. When it’s intense, it’s almost blinding” (p. 29).

Here is a similar (previously unpublished) sexual awakening experience (sent to me after I published a blog article on transcendent sexual experiences [Taylor, 2012c), which also has similarities to kundalini arousal:

I was making love and suddenly the pleasure was all throughout my body, then I was nothing but the pleasure. I was no longer in my body in a physical sense, I was energy. My partner’s energy and mine merged together, and I saw that energy while simultaneously being that energy. Then I began seeing a pattern, maybe an energy pattern, maybe a light pattern, but nonetheless it was something I had never seen or heard of before in reality so I have nothing to compare it to. Then, I passed through “something,” into another universe, dimension, realm or whatever, and became the pattern that I was seeing. I was no longer in the room, I wasn’t
anywhere; I was in an all-encompassing void, only existing as the energy or light pattern. Instinctively I knew, not believed, that this was where I was before my first memories and first became conscious in human form.

Greenwell (1995) also comments on the strong connection between kundalini and sex, noting that kundalini awakening can be triggered by a powerful sexual encounter and also that, in the aftermath of kundalini awakening, the individual may experience spontaneous orgasm, and veer from extremely heightened to unusually quiescent sexual desire.

These transcendent sexual experiences—and more generally, the Tantric view of sexuality as a sacred spiritual aspect of human life with great transformational potential—correspond to Foucault’s concept of ars erotica (literally, erotic arts). Foucault suggested that ars erotica is a typically Eastern (or ancient) attitude, treating sex as a source of profound pleasure and utilising erotic techniques to access and heighten these pleasures. He distinguished ars erotica from the more common physical and emotionally motivated sexuality (Foucault, 1990).

**BRAHMACARYA**

The connection between kundalini and sex—and in a more general way, between sexual energy and spiritual awakening or development—is also evidenced less directly by the Indian Yogic practice of brahmacarya. This can be conceived as a lifestyle of inner marriage, even whilst the adept is conventionally married or single (Sovatsky, 2014). It can also be seen as an example of Foucault’s ars erotica.

For many spiritual traditions—particularly monastic orders—celibacy has been an essential practice, a prerequisite of spiritual development. This tradition of celibacy may initially appear puzzling in terms of a connection between sexuality and spirituality. If sexual energy is spiritual in nature, then why has sexual energy been denied expression?

In dualistic anti-physicalist traditions—such as monastic Christianity—celibacy can be seen as a heavy-handed attempt to suppress sexual energy, the result of seeing the “flesh” as being opposed to the “spirit.” Sexuality is part of the “lower” animalistic nature, which it is necessary for us to overcome. However, in Yogic and Tantric traditions, brahmacarya or celibacy does not involve a suppression of sexual energy, but a transmutation (or perhaps also a maturation, in Sovtsasky’s [2014]) terminology). In Foucault’s (1990) terms, Brahmacarya is a lifestyle of ars erotica. There is a recognition of the potentially spiritual nature of sexual energy, and an aim of controlling, re-directing and transforming it. As Swami Prabhavananda and Isherwood put it, “Sexual activity, and the thoughts and fantasies of sex, use up a great portion of our vital force. When that force is conserved through abstinence, it becomes sublimated as spiritual energy” (1969, p. 72). In the words of the early English scholar of yoga Ernest Wood, celibacy “leads to a sublimation of the bodily energy,
which would otherwise have been expended wastefully, into the functions and powers of the higher mind” (1959, p.41). Or as Patanjali (in Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1969) states in the Yoga Sutras, the yogin who practices brahmacarya gains virya (or vigor). As described earlier, the practice of urdhva-retas specifically aims to raise the energies associated with the lower chakras, transforming them into more subtle spiritual energy. There is a very similar idea in Daoism, where spiritual development (or cultivation, as it is more usually referred to) is also seen as an inner alchemy. In Daoism, the essential energy of our being is called jing, and associated with sexual energy, or libido. The aim of Daoist cultivation practices is to transmute jing into qi (usually translated as life-energy) and then from qi into shen (usually translated as spirit). So, just as in the Yogic model, instinctive energy is transmuted into a higher, more subtle and spiritual form.

Brahmacarya is one aspect of the broader tradition of tapas (literally “heat,” often translated as asceticism), the general purpose of which is to conserve and transmute energy. Frustrating the body’s desires and instincts fills us with spiritual radiance and vitality, and generates the numinous energy of ojas which pervades the whole of the body and mind (Feuerstein, 1990). Tapas is mentioned in the Rig-Veda, which describes how the practice generates “an inner heat” that leads to states of ecstasy, visions of gods and psychic powers. In his eight-limbed path, Patanjali included tapas as an essential observance and recommended such practices as prolonged standing, fasting, bearing cold and heat, and prolonged silence (in Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1969). The inner heat may also be spontaneously generated during puberty, pregnancy and menopause (Sovatsky, 2014).

It is interesting that, in the influx of Indian spiritual ideas into the West in recent decades, brahmacarya has been largely ignored – including as a method of raising kundalini, or a lifestyle of ars erotica—presumably because it fits less well with permissive and hedonistic Western cultural tendencies.

**KUNDALINI AND SEXUAL ENERGY**

The connection between kundalini awakening and sexual awakening experiences may provide a basis for understanding the origins of the energy associated with the phenomenon.

In order to understand this matter fully, it is necessary to briefly consider how the life-energy of human beings is affected by our psycho-physical development, from childhood to adulthood. Young children possess an abundance of free-flowing energy. (In Yogic terminology, this can be described as pranotthana, a state of uplifted or intensified life-energy [Sovatsky, 2014]). Washburn describes this very vividly, writing that children are “bathed in the water of life. Ripples and waves of delicious energy move through the infant’s body, filling it with delight. When its needs are satisfied and it is otherwise content, [it] experiences a sea of dynamic plenitude, blissful fullness” (Washburn, 1980/1995, p.82).
It is because of this abundance of rich energy flowing through their being that, as was argued in Taylor (2009), young children naturally experience certain perceptual and affective features normally associated with awakening experiences, or an ongoing “wakeful” state. These include a more intense perception of the phenomenal world, a sense of the aliveness of phenomena which normally appear inanimate, a sense of meaning or of an atmosphere of harmony, and a sense of inner well-being, bliss or joy. (In Tantra, the powerful fertility of the puberty phase is seen as a siddhi - the power to create life - leading to grihastha [the stage of life devoted to marriage and family], which can serve as a path to enlightenment through devotion, compassion and familial love [Sovatsky, 2014]). This is not to suggest that children are “enlightened” or “awakened” in the same sense that spiritually developed adults may be. There are aspects of adult “wakefulness” which children do not appear to have access to, such as an all-embracing sense of love and compassion and the capacity for introvertive withdrawal from the external world into a state of pure consciousness (Taylor, 2009).

Here it is important to note the three ways in which, according to Washburn (1998), our life-energy expresses itself: psychic energy, as libido (or sexual energy), and as spiritual power. Young children have such powerful free-flowing energy—or in Washburn's terminology, such intense spiritual power—because little of their energy is expressed through the psyche, or through the libido. Energy is not concentrated into these areas, and so, in Washburn’s terms, they possess a large degree of “spiritual power.” (There is a clear parallel here with the Daoist concepts of jing, qi and shen.)

The adult ego confers massive benefits—abstract and logical thought, conceptual knowledge, self-reflection, impulse control, exercise of the will, the ability to organise, to make decisions, to plan, to manipulate our surroundings, etc. (Jung, 1928/1988; Loevinger, 1976; Washburn, 1980/1995; Wilber, 1996). At the same as being a giant “leap,” however, the development of the ego entails a “fall,” mainly because of the massive amount of life-energy (as psychic energy) that the ego requires for its functioning, and to maintain its structure. In particular, the cognitive activity of the ego—both conscious rational or logical cognitive activity and involuntary thought-chatter—consumes a great deal of energy. As a result, less energy is available for direct, immediate perception, which entails a loss of the intense perceptual awareness of childhood. In Deikman’s (1963) phrase, perception becomes automatized. According to him, mystical experience involves a de-automatization of perception, which can be cultivated through meditation.

A similar process occurs with sexual energy. As we enter adolescence and sexual impulses and desires (and the siddhi of fertility, potentially leading to parenthood) begin to develop—at roughly the same time as the self-system becomes strongly developed—life-energy becomes concentrated and expressed as sexual energy (libido). Thus, life-energy is diverted to two new sources (the ego and sexuality), both of which reduce the amount of energy available to be expressed through direct perception.
It was mentioned earlier that temporary awakening experiences of an energetic nature can occur when energy normally monopolised by the ego is conserved or released. This is the origin of ISLE (intensified and stilled life-energy) states, induced by—for example—meditation, contact with nature, relaxation, listening to music and so forth. However, the explosive sexual awakening experiences examined earlier suggest that temporary awakening experiences can arise from a different energy source too: when the life-energy normally monopolised by sexual impulses and desires is released. These experiences tend to be explosive simply because that is the nature of sexual or libidinal energy. As Washburn (2003) notes, whereas psychic energy is used continually, sexual energy is often dormant or potential, awaiting a stimulus to be aroused. It is very powerful and concentrated, which is why—as Freud (e.g., 1991) pointed out—its repression can have such harmful consequences.

I suggest that the phenomenon of kundalini awakening also involves a sudden, dramatic release of this libidinal energy. The energy does not express itself directly as libido (or jing, in the Daoist sense), but flows through—or explodes through—our whole being. However, the energy does not necessarily become completely free of its sexual association. As the experience reported to me above shows, there may still be a sexual aspect to kundalini, or at least it may feel reminiscent of sexual arousal. While, as noted above, intense sexual experiences may also enable the release of this energy.

It may be that, while sexual desire or activity usually arouses this libidinal energy to some degree, it is only rare that the energy is aroused in its most concentrated and intense form. This process occurs in kundalini awakening, and occasionally in sexual encounters—when the experience no longer becomes specifically sexual, but more generally spiritual or mystical (Wade, 2000, 2004).

The sudden release of sexual energy may therefore be the basis of kundalini-like awakening experiences. It may be that the concept of kundalini arousal, as developed by ancient Yogic and Tantric teachers and philosophers, was developed as a way of describing and explaining this phenomenon. Perhaps this suggestion is substantiated by the fact that some of the participants in Taylor (2013) described energy flowing through them, but did not specifically locate it as arising from the bottom of the spine or flowing up through it.

**TWO MAJOR MODES OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING**

It is not coincidental that the two major modes of sudden spiritual awakening described by the participants in Taylor (2013) are related—in psychodynamic terms—to the ego and the libido. They both involve the two centres of concentrated life-energy formed in psycho-physical development, during later childhood and adolescence. In Taylor (2013), ego-related transformational experiences were more common: a sudden dismantling of the self-system in response to intense psychological pressure or turmoil. This turmoil took various forms, including bereavement, illness and depression, leading to a sense of identity loss. (See Taylor, 2012a for a more detailed description of this
process.) Libido-related experiences—which may be interpreted as experiences of kundalini arousal—are the second major mode. Interestingly, ego-related spiritual awakening appears to less likely to feature descriptions of rushing or flowing energy suddenly being released or exploding. The reasons for this observation are not clear, but perhaps it is related to how life-energy is used by these two different “centers” (that is, the ego and libido). In the case of the libido, the energy remains in a fluid, dynamic state, close to its original form, whereas in the case of the ego or self-system, the ego is used to maintain the structure of the ego, and to fuel its cognitive functioning, so that the energy becomes less dynamic and more “processed,” moving away from its original form.

**SPIRITUAL OPENING?**

It is because concentrated libidinal energy arises so suddenly and powerfully that it has such disruptive effects. Sudden awakening related to ego-dissolution can also be disruptive, but usually not to the same extent. (For example, it is less likely to feature physical problems, and its psychological disturbances tend to be less intense.) In fact, kundalini-like experiences are a useful corrective to the naive view that spiritual awakening is a wholly *positive* phenomenon. Spiritual awakening—or the state of being “enlightened”—is often conceived as a state of blissful serenity in which all problems disappear, and in which the awakened person always behaves with ethical perfection. The “enlightened” person is free from all anxiety and is incapable of behaving improperly (e.g., Cohen, 2011; Tolle, 1999).

As Forman has suggested (2011), however, this view may well be a romanticisation, since a person who undergoes the transformational experience of spiritual awakening does not automatically become free of previous psychological issues, or negative behavioural traits and tendencies. The concepts of “spiritual emergency” (Grof, 2000) and “spiritual crisis” (Clarke, 2010) also clearly express the inherent difficulties of sudden spiritual transformation. Sovatsky (2004) uses the term *spiritual surpassing* to refer to the potential problems which arise with the attainment of an enlightened state. In Taylor (2013), transformation was reported as a primarily positive problem-free process *only* when it occurred gradually, as a result of long term spiritual practice, or when participants had previous knowledge of spirituality (e.g., a background in spiritual traditions) or were engaged in spiritual practice at the time of the shift. The other participants experienced significant difficulties.

Terms such as *awakening* and *enlightenment*—with their positive overtones—may not be so appropriate to describe this process. The term *spiritual opening* (as originally employed by Grof [e.g., 2000]) has more descriptive accuracy, referring to a psychological shift which brings a more intense and expanded awareness, but which can be a difficult process, especially if it occurs suddenly, and without a conceptual framework to help make sense of it. Previously stable psychological structures are broken down, creating disturbance and instability, causing physical problems and disrupting psychological functions such as
concentration and logical or abstract thinking. The opening of previously stable self-boundaries may also lead to a sense of being overloaded with perceptual information, and a sense that life has become overly complicated.

However, as was the case with the participants of Taylor (2013), after a certain amount of time, and especially once the individual has established a conceptual framework to make sense of their experience, these difficulties and disturbances may gradually fade away. With kundalini experiences, the initially volatile energy seems to have a natural tendency to settle and stabilise, even though this may take up to several years.

At this point, when the shift has been fully integrated, the individual has, in a sense, returned to the free-flowing energetic richness and openness of childhood—only with the intellectual and cognitive benefits of adult development retained.

References


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