

# Subtle Energies in Therapy, Spirituality, Arts, and Politics

1800–Present

*Edited by*

**Julian Strube, Marleen Thaler  
& Dominic Zoehrer**



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## Subtle Energies in Therapy, Spirituality, Arts, and Politics

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# Introduction

*Dominic Zoehrer, Marleen Thaler and Julian Strube*

When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire and look up, and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come.

EMERSON 1841, 222

•••

Force, Power, Energy ... [these] words, as commonly used, have very loose meanings annexed to them; and their ideas are very uncertain and confused.

HUME 1999 [1748], §61

••  
•

As a skeptical empiricist, the philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) was not willing to readily accept the invisible entities that underpinned Newtonian physics. However, whereas terms surrounding energy were still marked by semantic fluidity during Hume’s time, physicists reached a firm consensus on their formal definitions by the mid-nineteenth century (Smith 1998). Ever since, energy has denoted the ability to do work, which manifests in mechanical, thermal, electrical, magnetic, and chemical forms. According to the laws of physics, one form of energy transforms into another while the total amount of energy remains constant. Energy is the fundamental principle underpinning all physical phenomena. This insight has led to a host of technological revolutions, including, for example, the complete electrification of factories and households. Albert Einstein’s (1879–1955) famous equation describing the equivalence of energy and mass ( $E = mc^2$ ) opened up the additional possibility of tapping into nuclear energy with its far-reaching economic and political consequences in the post-1945 world.

The fact that ideas of energy have played a vital role in the context of modern religion, most saliently in the field of esotericism, has so far received little

scholarly attention. Allusions to physical theories have been a distinctive element of esoteric currents in the nineteenth century, of which the ripple effects still impact popular culture and the contemporary holistic milieu, the flourishing self-help market at the intersection of religiosity and therapy (Heelas et al. 2005: 88–89). Indeed, it has been argued that debates about the meanings of ‘science,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘esotericism’ have been inherently intertwined (cf. Aspren 2014; Bergunder 2016). Their entangled discourse has involved the use of analogies with physical phenomena such as magnetism, electricity, waves, vibration, ether, and energy. Yet, the appeal to science as a ‘language of faith’ in esoteric texts and practices does not merely echo or imitate scientific progress in a purely rhetorical manner (cf. Hammer 2001). Far from being an afterthought to physics, esoteric readings of energy have appeared in tandem with the history of science and produced their very own vibes, stimulating a cascade of practices and social movements.

Proponents of what came to be known as ‘occultism’ in the 1850s not only claimed to unite religion and science but also pursued a decidedly social reformist thrust that placed them at the center of the processes of secularization and modernization (Strube 2016; Bogdan and Djurdjevic 2014, 1–2). Although there is no clear demarcation between ‘esotericism’ and ‘occultism’ in either historical sources or the scholarly literature, several studies have demonstrated the central role of these discourses in the boundary work between religion and science (e.g., Treitel 2004; Wolfram 2009). Recognizing this late modern dynamic and the colonial context that has additionally structured it (especially since the nineteenth century), scholars are increasingly turning their attention to exploring global historical perspectives on the field in contrast to the previous Eurocentric focus on ‘Western esotericism’ (Strube 2022; Aspren and Strube 2021). There is growing consensus that, rather than a unilateral diffusion of ‘Western’ knowledge, esoteric ideas have been shaped by global exchanges, especially between Europe and Asia. This applies particularly to concepts of ‘occult forces’ or ‘energies’ and narratives about the ‘Eastern’ origin of esoteric wisdom, which often served to assert superiority over an allegedly materialistic and reductionist ‘Western science’ (Strube 2023).

Energies in esoteric/occult discourse—henceforth called ‘subtle energies’ to demarcate the term energy from its established scientific use—offer a highly instructive case for late modern reactions to the hegemony of science. A hallmark of nineteenth- and twentieth-century esoteric texts and practices is their enthusiastic engagement with physics, biology, and medicine. The boundaries between science and non-science are thereby blurred and intentionally transgressed. On the one hand, esoteric ideas couch themselves in appeals to authorities of secular knowledge in order to suggest universal credibility.

On the other hand, those same authorities may be subject to esoteric critique in the name of a secret wisdom that is supposedly surpasses modern science. The ascent and prevalence of the idea of subtle energies in the occult mindscape and related fields (i.e., modern yoga and the holistic milieu) thus involved a more complex process than merely justifying reactionary beliefs in pre-scientific powers or a debunked life force. Constituting a phenomenon in its own right, the flourishing of forces, powers, and energies in the esoteric imagination calls for a deeper scholarly investigation.

This volume was born out of the wish for a better understanding of the cultural, social, and political contexts in which beliefs in subtle energies play a significant role. As disparate the concepts subsumed under this term may seem at first, they have evolved to form an interrelated discursive field where they fulfill comparable functions. The volume's aim is to shed light on the history of subtle energies, their manifold semantic layers, and the leading protagonists and movements that were inspired by this idea.

## 1 Methodology

In principle, the theme of subtle energies can be approached in three ways. First, the skeptical view regards any reference to a subtle energy as part of an outdated and redundant scientific theory, reactionary pseudoscience, or outright superstition that ought to be relegated to the cultural dustbin. Advocating for a progressivist model of history, the skeptic demarcates the era of modern science from a dark, pre-enlightenment past and its beliefs in gods, spirits, and magic. As 'energy' is an established term of physics, anyone who uses it outside the realm of science proper is surreptitiously employing scientific language for the appropriation of legitimacy (e.g., see Stenger 1998).

Second, the emic view on subtle energies adopts an inverted form of progressivism: modern science has obfuscated the perennial wisdom underlying the notion of occult powers. However, according to widespread narratives, this supposedly 'rejected knowledge' has survived in the form of cultural undercurrents. The physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), the industrialist and philosopher Karl von Reichenbach (1788–1869), and the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1879–1957) are portrayed as misunderstood geniuses, whose discoveries were discarded by the scientific authorities of their day but have been preserved and further developed by esoteric adepts. In addition to Mesmer's *fluidum*, Reichenbach's *Od*, and Reich's 'orgone,' non-European ideas of semi-transcendent powers are claimed to buttress the existence of an ancient wisdom tradition that has persisted in safe cultural reservoirs. Theories of subtle energy thus form a heterodox stream of secret knowledge that is

expected to set the stage for the next scientific revolution (e.g., see White and Krippner 1977; Bischof 1995; Tiller 1997; McTaggart 2001; Alegretti et al. 2020).

Third, a historical view pays attention to the protagonists of subtle energies, their texts, activities, movements, and the social conditions under which they thrived. It is not fixated on engaging in boundary work between science and non-science but investigates the discourse on subtle energies in its broader cultural context, including religious, scientific, social, and political dimensions. The historian is concerned with lines of reception, transcultural reinterpretations, and the reciprocity between ideas and (ritual) practices. Consequently, the goal is to understand complexity and ambiguity through consistent historical contextualization rather than normative statements.

This volume is committed to a historical examination of subtle energies from a religious studies perspective. Thus, our premise in exploring the theme is less concerned with the question of ontological or epistemological veracity and more with performative utility and cultural relevance. Accordingly, the volume argues that a Eurocentric and positivist narrative of energy that categorizes subtle energies as pseudoscience by default will tend to overlook both their metaphorical nature and their function to “establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” (Geertz 1966, 4). Subtle energies are typically believed to unfold transformative, healing, or restorative effects within frameworks of imagination, embodiment, and ritual. While recognizing the role of (rhetorical) appeals to science and the legitimizing use of secular language, the volume will focus on concrete case studies and examine their origins, their ideological context, and their global trajectories.

Our approach benefits from the global historical perspectives recently discussed in religious studies, which include a stronger consideration of ‘non-Western’ actors and the need to contextualize them within their local settings (Maltese and Strube 2021). On this basis, further comparative analyses will offer deeper insights into given traditions and their impact on contemporary practices. A historiography of subtle energies implies close readings of source materials and the examination of their surrounding discourses. This approach is supplemented by the use of philological and sociological methods in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of subtle energy-based currents in past and present.

## 2 Current State of Research

There does not seem to be a generally agreed-upon beginning point for the term ‘subtle energies’ in the context of alternative religious discourse.

Speculations on subtle, imponderable matter (e.g., ether) and subtle anatomy (e.g., soul, aura, *cakras*) clearly preceded the notion, but the origin of the term still requires a closer examination. What is certain, however, is the influence of particular historical ideas (including the mesmeric *fluidum*, *qi*, or *prāṇa*) on the contemporary notion of subtle energy.

Over the past two decades, a considerable number of scholarly works have been published on specific variants of subtle energy and their associated doctrines, practices, and social formations. *Qi* is a foundational term in East Asian religion, medicine, and self-cultivation practice. The volume *Energy Medicine East and West* (2011), edited by the medical practitioners David F. Mayor and Marc S. Micozzi, features two dozen essays that provide insights into the multilayered meaning of *qi* at the nexus between the real and the imagined. Contrary to the volume's subtitle, *A Natural History of Qi*, the vast majority of contributors were medical professionals whose therapy-centered readings of *qi* ranged from philosophical and psychological to physicalist frameworks. (A notable exception was the anthropologist Nancy N. Chen, who contributed a valuable chapter on the historical role of *qi* in East Asian medical traditions; see Chen 2011.) Similar publications by Micozzi and his co-authors explored a circle of themes loosely subsumed under 'energy, mind, and spirit' in premodern Asian ethnomedicines (Micozzi et al. 2011; Micozzi and McCown 2011).

The first serious historiography of the *qigōng* wave sweeping through China in the 1980s and 1990s was published by David Palmer (2007), who highlighted the significance of the scientific discourse that underpinned *qi*-based practices and traced how *qigōng* organizations crystallized around charismatic leaders. Utiraruto Otehode and Benjamin Penny have further examined the emergence of "*qigōng* therapy" (*qigōng liáofǎ*) in mainland China during the 1950s as well as its successive boom three decades later (Otehode and Penny 2016; 2017). The reverberations of *qigōng* in the United States and its entanglements with politics, science, and the media were outlined in an intriguing cultural history of mind-body medicine written by Anne Harrington (2008: 222–230). Penny (2012) also presented a detailed history of one of the *qigōng* movement's most salient representative, the Falun Gong. The members of this 'biospiritual practice' aim at self-perfection by transforming and cultivating the flows of *qi*. Penny's research demonstrated not only how contemporary discourses of *qi* have reinterpreted Daoist forms of inner alchemy and Buddhist notions of subtle bodies, but also how they are shaping the social and political discourse in China and beyond. Focusing on Japanese-American exchanges, Justin Stein analyzed the transnational development of the discourse on *ki*—the Japanese variant of *qi*—and showed that the term has not only been translated in terms of vital energy or life force but also as 'mind' or 'spirit' (Stein 2024).

South-Asian and Euro-American interactions spawned another plethora of practices and movements revolving around the belief in subtle energies. In two seminal volumes titled *Meditation und Moderne* (2009), Karl Baier shed light on how the mesmeric idea of a cosmic *fluidum* and related occult discourses of the nineteenth century engaged in cross-pollination with Buddhist and Hindu contemplative traditions. This exchange of ideas impacted the rise of modern meditation movements. Having demonstrated the key role of trans-cultural transfers between Western and Indian discourses—the Romantic reception of *prāṇa* being one pertinent example—Baier developed an innovative paradigm that has proven fertile for further research in the areas of holistic mind-body practices and modern yoga studies. On this foundation, Magdalena Kraler investigated the semantic shifts of *prāṇa* in the context of modern yogic breathing techniques. Her study traced how Hindu reform movements, occult milieus, and transnational hygienic discourse have contributed to making *prāṇa* a concept of subtle energy par excellence (Kraler 2022). Kraler's work is the latest of a number of comprehensive studies on the emergence of modern yoga from transnational exchanges that have demonstrated how meanings of *prāṇa* shifted in the frameworks of Hindu reform movements, the Euro-American breath-movement, dance, harmonialism, and occultism (De Michelis 2004; Singleton 2010; Foxen 2020).

Taking the viewpoint of a 'global religious history,' Julian Strube has shown how discourses on *kuṇḍalinī* and the closely related divine force of *śakti* were central to exchanges between learned Indians, orientalists, and Theosophists against the backdrop of the broader horizon of religion, science, and politics (Strube 2022; 2023). Along similar lines, Marleen Thaler explored the scientification of *kuṇḍalinī* and how twentieth-century reinterpretations of *kuṇḍalinī* reflect macro-level social, cultural, and religious processes (Thaler 2024).

Catherine L. Albanese carved out the key assumption underlying American metaphysical religion: individual minds partake in an immanent "flow of spirit energy" (2007, 15) that perfuses the universe, integrating the self and the whole. This energy flow is thought to link the manifested, material world with invisible, essential realities. Whereas healing is the central concern of metaphysical thought and practice, other applications of the energies of mind are equally pragmatic and this-worldly. Examples include the pursuit of psychological well-being, prosperity, and wisdom. Applying "a historiography of connection" (*ibid.*, 515), Albanese laid out the synergies that appeared between European astrology, Hermetic speculation, and Masonic ideology with African magic and Native American religion when they encountered each other in the colonial period. From this original rhizome, Albanese traced the emergence of American metaphysical discourse per se, which encompassed

Transcendentalism, spiritualism, Christian Science, New Thought, and Theosophy, and extends deeply into the New Age genre.

Therapeutic and religious discourses on energy have traditionally been closely intertwined, not only within their local ethnic or national contexts but also through transcultural exchanges and the effects of globalization. Asian medical traditions and American metaphysical religion had an enormous impact on the emergence of contemporary schools of energy healing. Energy healing denotes a globalizing market of healing rituals that aim to stimulate the clients' self-healing process. A number of authors have approached this field from a genealogical and systematic angle (e.g., Albanese 2000; Endler 2020; Zoehrer 2020; 2024; Stein 2022). However, a comprehensive monograph laying out the history of the full spectrum of energy healing modalities remains a desideratum.

Jeffrey Kripal (2007) explored various aspects of the theme of energy that was at the heart of the Esalen Institute's (est. 1962) program to unlock the potentials latent in the human species. Kripal argued that the Californian retreat center provided a fertile ground for combining Asian subtle energy concepts with Western psychological paradigms. Thus, varied interpretations of energy—whether as a life force, a therapeutic tool, or a power that enables altered states of consciousness and drives human evolution—merged into a holistic vision of human potential. This integrative view of energy reflected the Institute's broader mission to transcend traditional religious boundaries and promote a psychologized form of spirituality that was firmly rooted in the human body and personal experience.

Several other versions of subtle energy that gained traction in the twentieth century took on meanings beyond healing and self-development. Strube elaborated how the literary invention of an occult super-force called *vril* (from 'virile') by the famous Victorian author Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873) captured the imagination not only of the early Theosophists but also that of esoteric neo-Nazi circles as well as designers of computer games (Strube 2013; cf. Bulwer-Lytton 1871). Another important form of subtle energy that found its way into popular culture was *mana*. In his book *Mana: A History of a Western Category* (2017), Nicolas Meylan critically investigated Western conceptualizations of *mana*, a term borrowed from Oceanic languages. Meylan delineated how *mana* was first reinterpreted by scholars as supernatural power, and, subsequently, by holistic actors including contemporary Pagan witches as "subtle energy" (ibid., 160). The idea of terrestrial 'dragon energies' in the context of the Earth Mystery movement, which combines Romantic mesmeric and contemporary Pagan ideas with elements of the Chinese art of *fēngshuǐ*, was discussed by Andy Letcher (2004) and Thaler (2023). An economic perspective on

subtle energies was offered by Lisbeth Mikaelsson (2014), who examined how 'energy' functions as the common ideological currency of the New Age market. Its associated metaphor of flow—which one also encounters in Asian models of subtle physiology—displays multiple layers of spiritual, psychological, and financial meanings.

As the above variations of the topos of energy indicate, the secular neutrality and semantic flexibility of this generic term endow it with a unique capacity to integrate indigenous and local elements into a globalizing discourse. Elaborations on the nature and operation of subtle energy are in no way limited to marginal philosophical or religious speculations but are essential to the areas of alternative medicine, mind-body practices, political movements, and the arts. This volume explores the historical and ideological roots of the concept of subtle energies, highlighting major currents as part of a larger, evolving discourse.

### 3 Heuristic Definition

Since this is the first scholarly volume that focuses exclusively on subtle energies as a general theme from a religious studies perspective, a brief remark about how the term will be used is warranted. Although the notion of subtle energies is too protean to be limited to a single, unambiguous denotation, this volume employs it as a broad heuristic term. Subtle energies shall here refer to imagined agents that are claimed to work as an intermediary between physical and nonphysical (e.g., mental, psychic, subconscious, divine, etc.) levels of reality. Inaccessible to the five senses, these agents are yet expected to exert their influence by means of ritual and other techniques. Subtle energies thus serve as a resource that holds out the promise of vitalizing and healing or refining and perfecting the individual self. Furthermore, they may also function as a key to produce the motivations required for the construction and reinforcement of gendered, racial, and national identities. Anthropological and cosmological discourses centering around a form of subtle energy likewise involve spiritual, therapeutic, and socio-political functions and suggest ways of tapping into hidden human potentials.

### 4 Subtle Energies and Subtle Bodies

A note is also due regarding subtle energies' role in connection with subtle bodies, i.e., models of subtle anatomies and physiologies. Ideas revolving

around subtle bodies preceded the notion of ‘subtle energy’ and have been a feature in a variety of philosophical and religious traditions. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) spoke of the soul as a “subtle kind of body” (*soma ti leptomerēs*), Galen (129–216 CE) and the Neoplatonists, including Iamblichus (c.245–325) and Proclus (412–485), referred to a “luminous vehicle” (*augoeides ochema*). The latter’s speculations invoked subtle bodies primarily in soteriological terms, that is, as means of transportation for the soul’s journey through the cosmic spheres (see Cox 2022). Neoplatonic texts played a key role in later philosophical and religious discourses on subtle bodies, most saliently within Sufi traditions and Islamic yoga (Hatley 2007; Samuel and Johnston 2013; Ernst 2016). Augustine (345–430) referred to a *subtile corpus*, and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and René Descartes (1596–1650) had a scholarly debate about the *corpus subtilis* from which the English “subtle body” derives (Cox 2022, 35–38). Likewise, the English orientalist Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837) translated the Sanskrit term *sūkṣma śarīra* as “subtle body,” which was picked up in Theosophical discourse (*ibid.*, 70–74, 108–110; cf. Mead 1919).

In South Asia, subtle body concepts played a minor role in late Vedic texts (c. fourth to first century BCE; e.g., the *Upaniṣads*). Elaborate theories and practices had not developed fully before the seventh and eighth centuries, when medieval *tantra* (i.e., texts) began to offer detailed depictions of a subtle anatomy (Samuel 2008; cf. Samuel and Johnston 2013). David Gordon White defined *tantra* as “that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine *energy* of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that *energy*, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways” (2000, 9; emphasis added). The subtleness of tantric agents, imagined to hover between material or bodily and divine dimensions, is a key characteristic of their transformative quality. Drawing extensively on tantric traditions, premodern South Asian yoga techniques employed conceptions of subtle bodies that inhabit a mesocosmic realm between the microcosm of the human being and the macrocosm of the universe. Integrating physical, mental, and transcendent dimensions, the subtle body constitutes a middle ground—or a mostly psychological “connective tissue”—that triangulates between the human body/conscious self (*ātman*), the greater cosmos, and ultimate reality (Foxen and Kuberry 2021, 41). Comparable visualizations of a subtle, divinized body appear in the *bhakti* tradition (Holdrege 2015).

Before entering *tantra* and *yoga* traditions, South Asian physiological models were most rigorously discussed in Āyurvedic medical literature. Apart from the constituents of the gross material body, these models conceived of more

refined attributes of the body. These included the vital material (*ojas*), found most concentrated in the form of semen; the digestive fire called *tejas*; and the five *vāyus* (winds) that indicate the internal movements of the body's vital substances. The notion of *prāṇa*, the inward directed *vāyu*, also functions as the generic term for all these subtle vital powers and their “flow in, out, and within the body” (Foxen and Kuberry 2021, 42). A yogi's path involves a process of working through the intermediary layers and forces of one's being. This could mean drawing back the vital agents and destroying them as part of an ascetic path, or transforming the body into a perfect vessel of divine energies as in many tantric exercises.

A case in point for both pursuits—the quest for final liberation on the one hand, and the re-creation of the body through the visualized embodiment of divine qualities on the other—is *kuṇḍalinī*-centered practice. Instructions for raising *kuṇḍalinī*, a serpent-like power associated with the divine feminine principle (*śakti*), are enclosed in the text sources of *haṭha* yoga, which began to emerge with greater intensity from the thirteenth century onward (Foxen and Kuberry 2021, 49). Residing at the heart (in earlier sources) or at the base of the spine (in later ones), the *haṭha* yogi's aim is to draw *kuṇḍalinī* up the central subtle channel (*suṣumnā*), to have it pass various *cakras* (circles) of deities or *granthis* (knots), and to either dissolve *kuṇḍalinī* through its ultimate unity with the divine masculine principle or use its power to set free the elixir of immortality seated at the crown of the head for the renewal of the body (ibid., 50; for the transcultural transformation of East Asian subtle body models, see Baier 2016; Leland 2016).

Comparable theories of a subtle physiology and practices aimed at directing the flows of subtle substances through visualized channels and centers were also developed in the Chinese context. Concepts of vital fluids and body cosmology can be traced back to philosophical and medical classics written during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) (Harper 1997). Integrating elements from Daoist cosmology and Chinese medicine, the Daoist body is viewed as the abode of deities, the residence of subtle centers of alchemical transmutation, and hence the main location of cultivating the vital energy known as *qi* (Kohn 2013). In contrast to the ineffable *dào*—the fundamental ground of all being, the organic order of nature, the source of life—*qi* denotes the concrete aspect of the universe. *Qi* encompasses the material potency of all that exists. It animates living organisms and manifests in the human body as a subtle life force that is ingested through the food consumed and the air inhaled. Already in the *Lǚshì chūnqiū* (Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals; c.240 BCE), human health was described in terms of harmonious and smooth flows of *qi* (Kohn 2013, 18–19). Since the third century CE, and building on earlier maps of

the human body as the encapsulation of heaven and earth, Daoist practice has focused on cultivating the body via *qi* with the aim of refining the vital force and its derivatives to render the body a vessel for the divine and immortal. Notably, Daoist descriptions of the self-transformatory path are often laden with shamanistic imagery: an ecstatic flight into ever subtler, lighter, and higher realms until ultimate purity and freedom of the spirit is attained (ibid., 23–31).

These examples from vastly different traditions underpin that theories of subtle bodies have played a crucial role in medical, philosophical, and religious contexts. Cartographies of the subtle body have bridged the gap between the limited, physical body and the celestial or supernatural realms. Subtle bodies typically encapsulate the notion of vitalizing essences and metaphors of flow. Practices involving the visualization of processes in the subtle body are aimed at refining vital fluids—either to harmonize and heal the body or to embody the creative powers of immortal deities. In light of the above heuristic definition, subtle bodies and subtle energies share similar functions as intermediary agents characterized by invigorating, healing, or self-refining potential. Bearing in mind that the term itself is a nineteenth-century invention, super-fine power-substrates flowing through, into, or from the subtle body could retrospectively be labeled as ‘subtle energies.’ However, in order to fully grasp the broader significance of subtle energies, it is important to account for the use of the term outside discourses on subtle anatomies and physiologies. As several chapters in this volume will prove, crucial concepts of subtle energy in the occult and holistic contexts are indeed premised on corresponding subtle bodies (e.g., *prāṇa*, *kuṇḍalinī*, or *qi*). However, this is not generally the case as other striking examples presented in this volume underscore. Subtle energies have been imagined as quasi-physiological agents as well as mental, terrestrial, cosmic, and divine powers.

## 5 Overview of Contents

A total of fifteen contributions shed light on subtle energies from interdisciplinary angles, covering historical and contemporary, theoretical and empirical, as well as local and global aspects. The volume is divided into four major sections. Providing theoretical context to its main theme, Dominic Zoehrer’s overture offers two chapters that juxtapose two distinct modalities of subtle energy: ‘occult physicalism’ and ‘occult orientalism.’ Subtle energies neither have an exact definition nor a single authoritative origin as the term encapsulates ideas of highly diverse backgrounds. Zoehrer examines how this de facto generic category particularly draws from two major pools of influence, namely,

Western scientific (or scientific) concepts—for example, ether, *Od*, and vibrations—on the one hand, and ideas of South or East Asian origin—such as *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qi*—on the other. As distinct and unrelated these notions may first appear, Zoehrer demonstrates that by developing a shared connotation with ‘energy’ they have entered a global discourse that has fundamental roots in nineteenth-century occultism.

The second section examines theoretical and historical aspects of subtle energies with a special focus on alternative healing. Opening this section, Bastian van Rijn takes us to a prototype of subtle energy, the cosmic *fluidum*, which was introduced as an iatrophysical agent by Mesmer. Approaching the evolution of animal magnetism through conceptual metaphor theory, van Rijn highlights how Mesmer originally relied heavily on metaphors of harmony as well as hydraulic images such as currents and resistance. Contemporary Dutch, French, and German practitioners of healing magnetism—despite speaking of ‘energies’ rather than subtle fluids—show varying degrees of continuity with Mesmer’s selection of metaphors.

Reminiscent of Mesmer 150 years earlier, the yogi-scientist Dewanchand Varma (1872—c.1954) also sought to establish his innovative therapeutic practice in Paris. The life and work of this notable figure of the French alternative medical discourse is portrayed by Léo Bernard who zooms in on *la prânothérapie*, i.e., Varma’s technique of spinal manipulation that purportedly improves the flow of ‘prana’ in a subject’s body. The yogi’s laboratory research led to the development of electrical devices for measuring the ‘frequency’ of pranic currents circulating in the body, thus alluding to prana as ‘primary energy’—a monistic agent designed to fuse Hindu cosmology and modern physics.

Justin Stein similarly argues that ‘energy’ serves as a master metaphor that effaces historical and cultural difference, thus rendering various healing practices intelligible to culturally distant communities. Belief in a single form of subtle energy as a divine healing agent employs a perennialist paradigm that rhetorically bridges the ancient and the contemporary, ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ traditions, and religious and biomedical frames of reference. By tracing the genealogies of two prominent schools of energy healing—Reiki and Therapeutic Touch—Stein demonstrates the emergence of these practices from particular twentieth-century occult milieus and how the notion of energy obscures those origins in a pragmatic move toward universalism.

Despite large areas of overlap with other forms of subtle energy, Kin Cheung’s chapter underscores the unique set of semantics associated with *qi* and its particular applications for restoring well-being. Employing his own innovative method of ‘filial ethnography,’ Cheung examines the case of a

Chinese American healer based in New York City, his father Cheung Sen Kan (b. 1955). Cheung junior provides an illustrative example of a working-class immigrant's code-switching that oscillates between *qi*-based and biomedical interpretations.

Swinging from Greek antiquity to the Amazon forest, Wouter Hanegraaff examines the role of subtle energy in entheogenic spirituality. Taking the Greek term *energeia* as his point of departure, he discusses the problem of 'translating' the experience made in ayahuasca healing ceremonies—a practice that has been common among Indigenous peoples for millennia, which involves ingesting a psychoactive brew extracted from a liana. Hanegraaff makes the case that, as unspeakable and hidden qualities, 'ayahuasca energies' require an alteration of consciousness to be fully known.

Marleen Thaler looks at subtle energies through an eco-spiritual lens, highlighting the discourse on terrestrial energies, and thus expanding the topic of subtle energies beyond an anthropo-centric scope. After outlining central components of 'terrestrial physiology,' i.e., Earth chakras, Earth energies, and Earth grids, she compares two US-American representatives of terrestrial energy healing, Robert Coon (n.d.a.) and Drunvalo Melchizedek (né Bernard Perona; b. 1941).

The volume's third section focuses on the cross-cultural transformations of ideas and practices relating to subtle energies in yoga and tantra. Its contributions underline the variety of (re-)interpretations of subtle energy as they have been expressed by guru-centered groups in South Asia, the Americas, and Europe.

Keith Cantú kicks off this section with a chapter on the Tamil yogi and author Sri Sabhapati Swami (c.1828–1923/4) and his theory of initiation (*dīkṣā*) that was formulated in three works between 1890 and 1913. Departing from the synthesis of mesmerism and yoga in the writings of the early Theosophical Society, Cantú demonstrates how this discourse influenced Sabhapati's thought on energy transference. Sabhapati constitutes an instructive case within the global history of mesmerism in particular and subtle energies in general.

Hugh Urban traces the development of the concept of *kuṇḍalinī*, a key element in tantra, from early South Asian texts to its Western popularization. He puts a spotlight on the controversial Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (aka Osho; 1931–1990). While traditional forms of tantra described *kuṇḍalinī* as the cosmic energy of the goddess (*śakti*) inherent within the physical body, Rajneesh redefined *kuṇḍalinī* primarily as sexual energy. Urban demonstrates how Rajneesh's 'spiritual sexology' drew on post-Freudian psychology and new experimental therapies practiced at the Esalen Institute.

*Kuṇḍalinī* and *śakti* are also central terms in Tova Olsson's chapter, but with a focus on the lineage and teachings of Sally Kempton (1943–2023), a disciple of Swami Muktananda (1908–1982), the founder and guru of Siddha Yoga. As a missionary of the 'Goddess of Yoga,' Kempton carried on her guru's tradition of transmission (*śaktipāta*) with her own feminist spin. Her writings show how she navigated between the patriarchic (and indeed abusive) environment of Siddha Yoga, her own feminist ideals, and psychologized interpretations of spiritual energies.

According to the French yoga pioneer and prophet Serge Raynaud de la Ferrière (1916–1962), the cultivation of *kuṇḍalinī* and *prāṇa* is the most efficient way to bring about inner transformation. De la Ferrière's teachings, referred to as Yoghism, synthesized yoga with astrology, mysticism, Christian symbolism, Kabbalah, and numerology. Adrián Muñoz outlines de la Ferrière's enduring influence in Latin America with an eye to his method of energy control and related astrological imagery.

The fourth section poses the question of the broader cultural significance of subtle energies. Notions of immaterial powers have not been confined to practices of healing or self-perfection but were also imagined as agents that advance the transformation of society at large. As the contributions in this section vividly demonstrate, subtle energies permeate yogic opera singing, *völkisch* nationalism and neo-Nazi symbolism, and Theosophical discourses on gender and race.

Magdalena Kraler explores subtle energies within the context of voice culture by showcasing the Austrian *fin-de-siècle* singer and breath therapist Benno Max Leser-Lasario (n.d.a.), who contributed to the development of a practice of vowel breathing (*Vokalatmung*) that supposedly improves the singing voice, promotes health, and unleashes hidden potentials. Kraler demonstrates how Leser-Lasario bridged Viennese occultism, *völkisch* ideas, and Ariosophy with transnational developments of early modern yoga—including *Mantramistik*, a system of mantras introduced by the German yoga pioneer and influential apologist of 'Aryan faith' Peryt Shou (1873–1953).

Julian Strube further scrutinizes the awkward relationship between subtle energies and blunt politics surrounding notions of race and nationality. His chapter traces how Bulwer-Lytton's fictional concept of *vril* became associated in Theosophical, Anthroposophical, and Ariosophical circles with 'Atlantean' and 'Aryan' occult wisdom. From an early point on, occult and fascist authors had related *vril* to South Asian concepts of subtle energy to envision the formation of a 'heroic' élite that was supposed to spearhead a national and racial awakening. His focus on Shou and the Austrian 'free energy' inventor Karl

Schappeller (1875–1947) exemplifies the acute political dimension of far-right occultism.

The volume's final contribution considers the dimensions of race and gender in the occult discourse on subtle energies. Jessica Albrecht examines the lives and work of the Theosophists Frances Swiney (1847–1922) and Ida Craddock (1857–1902) in the historical context of first-wave feminism, sexual reform, and eugenics. Both authors used the concept of vital forces and energies as a frame to blend esoteric receptions of 'Eastern religions' and yoga with science, female sexuality, and youth education.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

Claims of the existence and efficacy of subtle energies form one of the most pivotal and enduring elements of modern esoteric discourse and related contemporary religiosities. The ongoing transformation and dissemination of this idea has resulted in an impressive range of schools, ideological currents, and movements. Subtle energies thus form a distinctive nexus that deserves a closer historical and comparative investigation. The gist of this volume is not to capture in an essentialist manner what subtle energies *are*, but rather to highlight *how* the notion has been used across a broad semantic range. This compilation underscores that the application of subtle energies has not only decisively influenced alternative healing practices, esoteric anthropologies, or self-cultivation paths. They have also had a profound, although little recognized, impact on music and visual arts, debates on gender and race, as well as political and ecological movements. Furthermore, the volume illuminates how particular forms of subtle energy are intertwined with each other, thus forming a characteristic globalized discourse over the span of the past two hundred years.

The dazzling theme of subtle energies may well appear in many ways to be 'alien,' to borrow an adjective from Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), but it poses by no means a case of 'rejected knowledge' in the sense that it would constitute the suppressed wisdom of a secret undercurrent (see Asprem 2021). Nonetheless, the globalized discourse of subtle energies has clearly been overlooked by academia for too long as a serious subject of research. This volume aims to serve as an antidote to this scholarly omission and illuminate at least some critical aspects of the multilayered history of this fascinating idea. We thus hope to offer an insightful contribution to the study of esotericism and related currents, and stimulate debate in the fields of religious and cultural studies.

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**PART 1**

*Prelude*





# Historical Roots of ‘Subtle Energies’: Occult Physicalism

*Dominic Zoehrer*

It is interesting to note that the attempt of the scientist to release the energy of the atom is of the same general nature as the work of the esotericist when he endeavours to release the energy of the soul.

ALICE ANN BAILEY (1880–1949)<sup>1</sup>



## 1 Introduction

Few ideas have fueled the imagination of late modern culture as powerfully as ‘energy.’ It is a key term in a wide array of holistic healing systems and mind-body practices, as well as within martial arts, neo-paganism, and eco-spirituality. Concepts of energy have been employed by the protagonists of alternative religious discourse since the late nineteenth century. The American psychologist William James (1842–1910) captured the theme in his essay “The Energies of Men,” in which he discussed how to unlock “reservoirs of energy” (1907, 4) to quicken the mind and the body. Acknowledging the psychological aspect of these energies, he investigated how dormant powers could be unleashed through a wide range of approaches, including yoga, auto-suggestion, religious conversions, and the techniques of the American mind-cure movement (i.e., Christian Science and New Thought). To date there is no precise definition of energy in the religious-therapeutic milieu, where the term functions as a floating signifier with various context-dependent readings. Although there is no single authoritative interpreter of the idea, it has been historically bound up in a web of physical, medical, and occult theories that is yet to be reconstructed.

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<sup>1</sup> Bailey 1953, 5.

Although energy is chiefly regarded as a physical quantity, the term is characterized by multileveled semantics that go well beyond the boundaries of science. Whereas physics applies a mathematically precise definition of energy, the fuzzy, 'esoteric' notion of energy is connotated more closely with colloquial meanings—for example, 'to feel full of energy' (or a lack thereof), 'to boost your energy level,' or to relax and 'let the energy flow.' In the 1970s, a genre of popular literature on physics emerged that bolstered parapsychological and mystical outlooks, which expanded further into the areas of holistic healing and self-help a decade later (cf. Leane 2007, 32–35). Riding on this wave of popular physics, William A. Tiller (1929–2022) proposed the term 'subtle energies' in order to acknowledge *human* perceptions that may be described as 'energetic.'<sup>2</sup> A Stanford physicist and prolific author of the 'New Age science' genre, Tiller asserted that if current physical models are unable to explain energy healing,<sup>3</sup> homeopathy, or psi-phenomena such as psychokinetics, then their premises must be incomplete. To account for subjectively experienced powers that supposedly exceed conventional physical explanations, he suggested to introduce 'subtle energies' as a complementary to the acknowledged fundamental forces of physics (Tiller 1977; 1993).

'Subtle energies' rapidly entered the standard vernacular of the holistic milieu as an umbrella term during the 1980s and subsumed—academically homeless yet immensely widespread—vitalistic notions such as 'life force,' 'universal life energy,' 'vital energy,' or 'bioenergy' (Davidson 1987; Werthmüller 2005; White and Krippner 1977). Tiller himself contributed regularly to the journal *Subtle Energies* (1990–2010), which aimed at studying the physiological and therapeutic effects of biofeedback, energy healing, yoga, and other mind-body exercises.<sup>4</sup> Subtle energies may include gentle physical applications such as the use of light and colors; magnetic, electrical, and electromagnetic impulses;

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2 It should be noted that although Tiller was an influential disseminator, he was by no means the first author to use the term, which can be traced to nineteenth-century occultists who explicitly mention 'subtle energy' in passing (see section 6).

3 Energy healing involves methods that are applied within the dyadic relationship of healer and healee, for example, mesmeric strokes, laying-on-of-hands, the clearing and charging of *cakras*, healing at distance, etc.

4 *Subtle Energies* was a follow-up project to the volume *Energy Medicine Around the World* (1988) edited by the Indian biomedical engineer and 'yogi scientist' T. M. Srinivasan. The journal was co-founded by Srinivasan, the American biofeedback and *kuṇḍalīnī* researcher Elmer E. Green (1917–2017), and the American psychologist Carol J. Schneider (b. 1938). In 1996, the journal was renamed *Subtle Energies & Energy Medicine*, emphasizing a therapy-oriented shift and a lesser focus on theoretical speculation. Before the launch of *Subtle Energies*, the book *Subtle Energy* (1987) by the British author John Davidson had already underscored the broad range of fields to which concepts of subtle energies are applied, including holistic

acoustic vibrations (e.g., singing bowls); as well as the soothing effects of physical touch (e.g., laying-on-of-hands). Likewise, the term has been used to signify teleological agents, powers associated with magical symbols, the qualitative state of a social or organizational system, as well as creative, transcendent entities.

As a generic category, ‘subtle energies’ encompasses heterogeneous ideas that hail from diverse cultural and historical sources. Jürgen Wolf’s entry on “Power” in the *Brill Dictionary of Religion* (2006) discussed the central role of ‘energy’ or ‘cosmic power’ in “today’s independent religiosity” including yoga, therapeutic applications, or the Earth mysteries movement (“geomancy”)<sup>5</sup> (Wolf 2006, 1484). Wolf gave a glimpse of the vast number of presumed synonyms that typically appear in the religious discourse on energies:

The two areas, physical and spiritual, are connected by a super-fine matter. This energy too is quasi-identified with the Melanesian *mana*, the Indian *prana*, the Chinese *ki*, and, finally, *od* or ether, and Wilhelm Reich’s (1879–1957) *Orgone*, which last is said to correspond to the ‘ether’ (the physical cosmos of light waves). (Wolf 2006, 1485)

Wolf’s description reflects the eclecticism one often encounters in source material on subtle energies.<sup>6</sup> Implicitly, this condensed list of the semi-transcendent powers most prominent in the field indicates two distinct pools of influence that have merged into the idea of subtle energies: out-of-date or fringe scientific theories (ether, *Od*, *Orgone*) on the one hand, and terms of non-European origin (*mana*, *prāṇa*, *qi*) on the other. As disparate as these concepts may first appear, they can be shown to have formed a shared discursive nexus that has

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anthropologies, energy healing, the work with crystals, practices based on Earth energies including *Fēng Shuǐ*, and dowsing.

5 For a discussion of terrestrial subtle physiology in the context of eco-spirituality see Marleen Thaler’s contribution in this volume.

6 To give a recent example for an emic explanation of ‘subtle energy’ that captures the vast range of the term’s potential meanings: “Subtle Energy is not an easy subject to pin down. The name itself reflects the difficulties in the detection of this type of energy. No standardized vocabulary for it exists: many different names for it are used around the world. East Indians call it Prana, and the Chinese call it Chi. In Europe, it is called Bio-Energy and the Field of Information, in North America, Subtle Energy. Physicists variously refer to it as Unified Energy, Universal Energy Field, the Field of Quantum Potential, the Zero Point Field. Other people call it Supreme Consciousness, Divine Power, or God. But we are all talking about the same thing” (Strashun 2023, 18). Remarkably, this description embraces the range of physical, vital, mental, and transcendent semantics associated with ‘subtle energy’ but omits older physicalist notions—e.g., *fluidum*, *Od*, ether, or *Orgone*—that typically make it into the list.

roots in nineteenth-century occultism. This and the next chapter explore the notion of subtle energies by outlining two sub-discourses that profoundly influenced its genesis, namely, occult physicalism and occult orientalism.

## 2 The Inversion of Scientific Naturalism

The formalization of energy as a scientific term was a key moment for the advancement of physics. In the mid-nineteenth century, physicists introduced a definition of energy that soon became the foundational and unifying principle of physics and the natural sciences. Physical energy came to denote a quantity measurable in terms of work. A set of energy equivalences allowed physicists to link thermal, electrical, chemical, and biological processes, eventually leading to the universal application of the notion of energy within the sciences. The basic theory of energy that is still valid in contemporary science emerged from the particular context of a German-British discourse as vividly illustrated in Crosbie Smith's (1998) cultural history of Victorian physics. Notably, the motive for establishing the term of energy in physics derived from the study of physiology and the aim to set up the field on a rigorous mechanistic foundation.

The question of teleology, that is, purposeful organization, was still an intricate part of the biological and physiological discourse in the early nineteenth century. Physiologists harboring Romantic vitalist convictions drew from earlier medical and biological discussions about the existence and function of the soul as a hidden, organizing force. In this vein, the German physiologist and *Naturphilosoph* Johannes Müller (1801–1858) pondered the origin and nature of the soul's supposed forces in his magnum opus *Handbuch der Physiologie des Menschen*<sup>7</sup> (1833–1840). Taking recourse to the *anima*-theory of the physician Georg Ernst Stahl (1659–1734), Müller speculated that the manifestations of two principles—the 'vital' (*Lebensprincip*) and the 'psychic' (*psychisches Princip*)—have their common root in a reasonable soul. Whereas psychological reason can only be *conscious* of the reasonable, the life principle *generates* the purposeful organization of biological matter, albeit in an unconscious manner (Müller 1835, 821).

Regarding both the vital and psychic principles as being 'immaterial,' Müller did not identify them with known physical phenomena. However, for the sake of illustration, he drew parallels with the effects of 'imponderable substances'

7 The title literally translates as Compendium of Human Physiology. Müller's work was translated into English by the British physician William Baly (1814–1861) as *Elements of Physiology*.

on matter. In a section of his compendium titled “Physics of Nerves” (*Physik der Nerven*), Müller cautiously suggested an analogy between influences of immaterial agencies on organisms (i.e., conscious actions or unconscious self-organization) and transfers of ‘imponderables’ between material bodies:

There are, however, forces of nature, or imponderable substances, which—although not independent of matter—can leave a body without changing its material state and pass over to others, such as light, electricity, magnetism. The existence of these principles, their appearance in the bodies, and their flowing over from one body to another, shows us clearly that materialism, which recognizes nothing but the forces of atoms, is groundless; and without remotely wishing to compare the life-principle and psychical principle with those imponderable substances or forces, we see at least that there is nothing in the facts of physics which cancels the possibility of an immaterial principle that is independent of matter, though acting in the matter of organic bodies. (Müller 1835, 822; my translation; cf. Müller 1838, 824–25)<sup>8</sup>

Within a decade, Müller’s vital principle and similar notions of ‘life force’ were rendered superfluous through the introduction of the idea of energy (Smith 1998, 129–31). In 1847, an outstanding student of Müller, the German physician and physicist Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894), articulated the conservation law of energy in its general form. This law stipulates that the total amount of energy in a closed physical system is neither created nor destroyed; it remains constant. One form of energy (e.g., motion) can be transformed into other forms of energy (for instance, electricity). Superseding the concept of imponderables, the notion of energy enabled precise calculations of the properties of physical systems, including physiological organisms. The hypothesis of a soul and its vital forces had no function in ‘exact science’—characterized by mathematical models, empirical verification, and predictive power—and

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8 “Es gibt allerdings Kräfte der Natur, oder imponderable Substanzen, welche, wenn auch nicht von der Materie unabhängig, doch ohne eine Veränderung in dem materiellen Zustande des Körpers sie verlassen und auf andere übergehen können, wie Licht, Elektrizität, Magnetismus. Die Existenz dieser Principien, ihr Erscheinen an den Körpern, und ihr Ueberströmen von einem auf den andern Körper zeigt uns deutlich, dass jener Materialismus, welcher ausser den Kräften der Atome nichts anerkennt, grundlos ist; und ohne entfernter Weise das Lebensprincip und psychische Princip mit jenen imponderablen Substanzen oder Kräften vergleichen zu wollen, sehen wir wenigstens, dass in den Thatsachen der Physik nichts ist, welches die Möglichkeit eines von der Materie unabhängigen, wenngleich in den organischen Körpern in der Materie wirkenden immateriellen Principis aufhobe.”

was deemed to be without heuristic value. As a consequence, assumptions of an inherent purpose or organizing principle operating in living organisms—a crucial idea among Romantic scientists and physicians—went out of fashion within the natural sciences and academia at large (cf. von Stuckrad 2022).

Speculations on a vital principle had been the hallmark of German *Naturphilosophie*. Although identical with science throughout most of European history, *Naturphilosophie* came to be distinguished from the natural sciences when the latter emancipated from philosophy in the eighteenth century, institutionally reflected in the formation of separate faculties at European universities. Idealistic and Romantic representatives of *Naturphilosophie* variably positioned their projects either as a rival enterprise to science, its speculative prelude, or a philosophical engagement considered superior to science. However, compared with the progress in physics, chemistry, and biology, *Naturphilosophie* ultimately proved too narrow and pretentious to provide orientation for the empirical sciences (Böhme 1989, 7–9; cf. Mutschler 2002, 7–13).

*Naturphilosophie* faded out as a philosophical pursuit and university discipline in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Against this backdrop, new types of thinking about nature took the stage. Some philosophizing scientists, such as the physician Ludwig Friedrich Büchner (1824–1899) or the biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), asserted the sole autonomy of science and advocated for a materialist *Naturphilosophie* as the basis for an inductive metaphysics.<sup>9</sup> Other scientists and laypersons still adhered the emotional appeal of Romantic *Naturphilosophie* and envisioned a cosmos that was replete with vital, teleological, and/or divine powers. Putting science into the service of anthropocentric worldviews, physical terms such as force, ether, vibrations, and energy were recharged with meanings that went beyond the qualities of inanimate matter and were applied to vitalist agents and mental powers.<sup>10</sup> A decisive player in this type of reaction to the pressure of scientification was occultism, an array

9 In his introduction to *Force and Matter* (1864), the English edition of *Kraft und Stoff* (1855), Büchner argued for materialism as the “ideal conception” to overcome the focus on specialized details and “perceive the connection of the whole” (xiv). His project aimed to grasp nothing less than the “unity of all physical and mental existence in the same fundamental laws and causes” (ibid.; emphasis in the original). Like Büchner, Haeckel belonged to the foremost popularizers of Darwin’s theory of evolution in the German-speaking world. From his synopsis of the sciences in his book *Die Welträthsel* (1899), he inferred a monistic philosophy that supposedly crowned the “century of science” (*Jahrhundert der Naturwissenschaft*) (Haeckel 1899, iii–iv).

10 The German philosopher Aloys Wenzl (1887–1967) argued that fundamental definitions of physics were derived from the bodily, human sphere of experience in the first place (see Mutschler 2002, 188).

of authors and movements that envisioned social reform by advocating for a new synthesis of science and religion (Bogdan and Djurdjevic 2013, 1–2). By embracing a belief that hidden, supernatural forces were at the disposal to the adept, occultism (metaphorically speaking) formed a photographic negative to naturalist scientism.

Scientism *sensu lato* refers to worldviews in which science wields the highest epistemic authority and ‘the’ scientific method is held to provide the most trustworthy knowledge about reality (see Bogner 2021, 121). Olav Hammer applied the notion of scientism to his analysis of late modern esoteric discourses and defined scientism more narrowly as the “active positioning of one’s own claims in relation to manifestations of any academic scientific discipline,” without using “methods generally approved within the scientific community” (2001, 206). In other words, scientific models borrow from the dominant scientific culture and aim to partake in its authority and prestige without being constrained by its rules. A problem with this definition is the implied clear-cut distinction between socially accepted science on the one hand and ‘esoteric,’ science-related speculation on the other. However, given that science is a gradual process, such a binary opposition overlooks the more nuanced differences between proto- (emerging), para- (lateral), and pseudo- (false or fraudulent) science and their highly intricate historical relationships (cf. Rupnow et al. 2008, 8). As Richard Noakes (2019) has argued for Victorian physics, the interest in occult and psychical themes immensely enhanced the curiosity and creativity in scientific and technological endeavors, which underscores the fluidity of boundary walls set up around science.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, from a history of religion perspective, it suffices to acknowledge that in late modernity anyone who claims an integrative worldview—be it a naturalistic or an esoteric one—is practically compelled to take science as a reference point and resort to science as a “language of faith” (Hammer 2001, 205). The assumption of a hierarchy of sciences stems from the cultural pre-eminence of the exact sciences as they consolidated in the nineteenth century: physics and the interaction of elementary particles came to be regarded as the most fundamental science which determines the principles of inorganic and organic chemistry; the biological sciences (including physiology); and ultimately psychology and the social sciences. This order was first proposed by the

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11 To be clear, scientism is here used as a neutral, descriptive term and must not be conflated with the pejorative notion of pseudoscience. What counts as science, scientism, or imitations of science remains problematic as the question involves normative standards that are defined according to particular rules in a given scientific community. However, this analysis is concerned with the cultural history of an idea, not its scientific validity.

French mathematician and positivist philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte conceived his scale of “purity” and “relative perfection of the different sciences” based on the criteria of abstraction, precision, and application of mathematical analysis (1853, 29). His blatantly reductionist approach led to the conviction that physics somehow encompasses all other sciences.

The term ‘physicalism’ first emerged within the Vienna Circle in the early 1930s and stressed the idea that all sciences could in principle be expressed through the terminology of physics (see, in particular, Carnap 1931; 1934). Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970), the major spokesman of logical empiricism, identified the logical-mathematical language of physics as an intersubjective, universal language that supposedly serves as the foundation of a “unified science” (*Einheitswissenschaft*).<sup>12</sup> Pursuing the coherence of and the inter-translatability between the sciences, the Vienna Circle argued that all meaningful sentences are expressible in one language and all facts are knowable by means of a single methodology. This ideal was thought of as the linchpin of a “scientific world conception” (*wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung*) (Stadler 2015, 231–32, 361). The Vienna Circle formed the pinnacle of scientific naturalism—the secularist variant of scientism—that emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century and sought to elevate the authority of science over matters of worldview, thus forging a materialistic version of *Naturphilosophie* (Böhme 1989, 9).<sup>13</sup>

The hegemonic position attributed to physics has thus impacted philosophical critiques of religious views and the field of religion itself. Although ‘modern esotericism’ has been argued to be a form of knowledge popularization in the ideological heritage of *Naturphilosophie* (Hanegraaff 1998; Hammer 2001; Erdbeer and Wessely 2009), the widespread image of physics as the most rigorous and fundamental of sciences inevitably came to function as its social currency (cf. Leane 2007, 6–7). As major players of modern esotericism, occultists shared a “strong belief in ‘science’ as an arbiter of truth” (Hanegraaff 1998, 66), although their views were starkly opposed to any form of scientific positivism. Occultists aimed to undermine materialism by lending a scientific (or rather scientific) explanatory framework to cosmologies, anthropologies, and therapeutic-soteriological ideas: if everything in the universe—including life, mind, and the soul—could be reduced to matter and force (or energy),

12 Similarly, the philosopher of science Otto Neurath (1882–1945), a co-founder of the Vienna Circle, argued that the language and methods of physics are the paragon for meaningful and precise scientific propositions.

13 For a philosophical discussion of physicalism and its relation to materialism, see Stoljar 2023. For an enchanting account of the Vienna Circle’s members’ avid interest in magic, neopaganism, occultism, and the paranormal, see Josephson-Storm 2017.

a physical explanation could in principle be provided for the domains of the occult. ‘Occult physicalism’ shall here be understood as the appeal to physical terms and theories with the aim of rationalizing an inherently occult worldview. Its emergence is concomitant with the rise of physics as the dominant science in the nineteenth century and its quest for uncovering fundamental natural laws behind the plethora of phenomena.

The genre ‘occult physicalism’ extends previous discussions on ‘occult forces’ (Hanegraaff 2006, 885–86). As indicated in the program of the Theosophical Society (est. 1875; see section 5), ‘occult forces’ encompassed those qualities or phenomena that could not easily be assimilated into mainline empirical science. Whereas electricity, magnetism, and the curative effects of medical substances had been increasingly understood and hence demystified by modern science, other phenomena remained mysterious—for example, the altered states of consciousness produced by animal magnetism and spiritualists. Paying little attention to rivalling psychological explanations, the quest for unlocking psychic, spiritual, or divine powers believed to perfuse the cosmos and the human soul has been a keen interest of occultists and closely related scientific and religious figures.

What I argue in this chapter is that the occult discourse on energy emerged from an inversed scientific naturalism that was propagated by Romantic mesmerists, (proto-)spiritualists, (post-)Theosophists, and New Thought adherents. Their scientific apology presumed that the hidden powers of nature could in principle be unveiled by modern science. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how the idea of subtle energies resulted from a—never fully completed—physicalization of occult worldviews. Responding to the scientific discourse of their time, occultists sought to subsume the belief in vital forces and the power of the human mind (loosely corresponding to Müller’s ‘vital’ and ‘psychic’ principles) within a physical frame of reference. Five key themes have decidedly informed the semantics of subtle energies: (1) the mesmeric *fluidum*; (2) Reichenbach’s *Od*; (3) ether models; (4) the concept of vibration as the mediator between mind and matter; and (5) occult energy theories. These themes will be elaborated on in the next sections, followed by a discussion of the main features of occult-physicalist agents.

### 3 Mesmer’s *Fluidum*

Arguably, the most outstanding precedent to the physicalism of nineteenth-century occultists was the cosmological model conceived by the Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815). Mesmer theorized that disturbances

in the human body were caused by obstructions of a natural agency that he referred to as *fluidum*, that is, streams of an extremely fine matter that hypothetically permeates the cosmos. The restoration of health depended on harmonizing the *fluidum's* flow via so-called magnetic strokes above the patient's body. Other mesmeric interventions involved the concentrated gaze at or gentle breath upon a patient, as well as the use of non-human media of transmission such as the administration of magnetized water or group therapies around a 'baquet,' a vessel filled with magnetized objects (Baier 2020b).

Mesmer introduced his medical theory of 'animal magnetism' to the public in 1775 as a therapeutic application of the physics of his time (Feldt 1985, 31). He promoted his approach to the Bavarian Academy of Sciences (est. 1759) as an enlightened and rational alternative to the exorcism practiced by the Roman-Catholic priest Johann Joseph Gaßner (1727–1779). As he was able to produce similar cures as Gaßner without recourse to religious notions such as demons, possession, or Christ, Mesmer enhanced his scientific reputation even if only for a short period. Conversely, as Karl Baier has pointed out, it is highly probable that Mesmer was influenced by Gaßner's method of laying-on-of-hands, which prompted him to dispense with magnets and rely on his hands as the chief therapeutic instrument for radiating the *fluidum* (Baier 2015, 60–61).

The term 'energy' was rather uncommon in the scientific mindscape of the eighteenth century, which was primarily occupied with discussing 'forces' (Feldt 1985, 31). Distinctions between physical, physiological, and psychological processes had not yet been strictly drawn. Thus, notions such as magnetism, heat, aether or ether, *spiritus*, soul, and life force (*vis vitalis*) were still integral part in the investigation of the so-called imponderables, that is, postulated material substances whose weight could not be quantified. In theorizing his universal *fluidum*, Mesmer variably referred to the known imponderables of gravity, light, heat (or fire), electricity, and magnetism, finally settling on the latter (*ibid.*, 33). Mesmer did not view his *fluidum* as operating in an intermediate position between physical and trans-physical dimensions that might suggest the "unification of opposites: religion and science, mind and matter, even God and the universe" (Hanegraaff 1998, 435)—an interpretation that would emerge among Romantic mesmerists. Rather, he remained a firm physicalist in his cosmological outlook. Instead of supposing the existence of spirit or soul, he proposed that matter and movement were the two fundamental principles of the universe, both having their transcendent origin in God (Baier 2024, 556).

Despite Mesmer's enormous influence on nineteenth-century occult discourse, it would be anachronistic to classify him as an occultist. He was a physician who embedded his therapeutic method within the program of the

so-called iatrophysics of the Leiden School. This medical current was initiated by Herman Boerhaave (1668–1738) and aimed at developing medicine on the basis of René Descartes (1596–1650) and Sir Isaac Newton's (1643–1727) mechanical theories of nature (see Baier 2024, 545). Not only did Mesmer present his approach as a science-based substitute for exorcism but also claimed to have found a superior medical theory that explains the nervous system's role in the origin of disease. However, his theory of a fluidal curing agency and the almost theatrical performances of collective healing séances in Paris did not escape the criticism of the scientific community. Although animal magnetism was at first repudiated by the Viennese and Parisian medical establishment, it repeatedly drew intense academic interest in the nineteenth century, particularly during the Romantic period (Baier 2020a, 18–19; 2020b, 43–48). The interpretational ambiguity of the *fluidum* and the phenomenon of trance induced through mesmeric séances significantly influenced (1) Romantic philosophy, medicine, and religious thought (c.1790–1820); (2) the development of hypnotherapy and psychotherapy; (3) the evolution of nineteenth-century new religious movements encompassing spiritualism, New Thought, and Theosophy; as well as (4) research in parapsychology.<sup>14</sup>

Mesmer's physicalist framework proved too rigid to fully explain the idea of *fluidum*, which from the outset had a salient psychological aspect and was thought of as responsive to the mindset of the mesmerist. Bertrand Méheust distinguished three major branches of animal magnetism that emerged in France by the mid-1780s (Méheust 1999; cf. Société de l'Harmonie d'Ostende 1786):

- (1) The mesmerists (*mesméristes*) followed Mesmer in explaining the physiological and psychological changes generated by magnetization as a result of the *fluidum's* circulation. This position was decidedly physicalistic.
- (2) A branch headed by the theosopher Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803), termed by Méheust as “spiritualists” (*spiritualistes*), dismissed the agency of a *fluidum* and interpreted animal magnetism as the direct influence of the magnetiser's will and prayer. In exceptionally gifted subjects so-called somnambulant states were induced for the purpose of contacting celestial entities.
- (3) The psychofluidists (*psychofluidistes*) that were inspired by the teachings of Armand Marie Jacques de Chastenet de Puysegur

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14 For comprehensive reception histories of mesmerism, see Ellenberger 1970; Crabtree 1993; Winter 1998; Baier 2009; 2015; 2020; Brand 2014.

(1751–1825), who coined the term somnambulism (*somnambulisme*) to describe the sleep-like state induced by mesmeric techniques. Puységur acknowledged the *fluidum* but regarded it the substrate of the will, which he understood to be the primary principle behind the subtle influences on magnetized subjects.

This latter line of interpretation diverged from a purely physicalist framework without giving up the concept of a physical substrate. Puységur's school was crucial in the development of new forms of 'religious psychology' including New Thought (see section 6). Adam Crabtree went a step further and suggested that mesmerism was a prelude to what could be termed "the psychological turn in the West" that opened the path toward psychiatry, hypnosis, and depth psychology (Crabtree 2019; cf. 1993).

Theories of 'energy' were one of several attempts to revise the concept of *fluidum*. French mesmerists of the Romantic period still spoke of "energy" (*énergie*) not as a physical agent but as a mental force akin to "confidence" (*confiance*) and the power of "will" (*volonté*) (e.g., Deleuze 1819: 21–22, 55; Dupotet de Sennevoy 1838, 218, 220). The practitioner's skill in using his mental energies was seen as the key to the success of a magnetic treatment. In the medical literature of the anglosphere before 1800, energy had adopted a physiological connotation in the form of 'nervous energy.' In 1845, the majority of physiological textbooks in Germany, France, and England still assumed the existence of a "nerve principle" (*Nervenprinzip*), "nervous force" (*Nervenkraft*) or "energy" (*Energie*) that provided a material explanation for the nervous system's organic functions (Heidler 1845, 1).

Along these lines, the English poet and mesmerist Chauncy Hare Townshend (1798–1868) crafted a monumental apology for animal magnetism titled *Facts in Mesmerism or Animal Magnetism, with Reasons for a Dispassionate Inquiry into it* (1840). Seeking to render mesmeric phenomena consistent with reason, Townshend thought of the mesmeric influence as a "subtle, elastic, and ethereal medium" that constitutes the power of human vitality known as "nervous energy" (Townshend 1840, 504–5). Suggesting a synthesis of physiology and metaphysics, Townshend postulated that this subtle agent could bridge the "palpable hiatus" between "mind and matter," "the visible and the invisible," and "the subtle and the gross" (505). He thought the agent to be "within the domain of physics" (408) and that it could excite the nerves to vibrate in unison "just as tended strings have a capacity to vibrate in correspondence with the air" (463). Townshend regarded this "vibratory medium" to be a necessary hypothesis to explain the "nearly simultaneous and correspondent action of the nervous systems" of a mesmerizer and patient when in the state of "rapport" (464; cf. Anonymous 1845, 219).

Rivalling theories strove to reestablish animal magnetism even firmer on (iatro-)physical ground. An early attempt to substitute the cosmic *fluidum* itself with energy as a purely physical term was put forth by the British physician William Newnham (1790–1865) in his book *Human Magnetism: Its Claims to Dispassionate Inquiry* (1845)—the title clearly echoing Townshend’s apology. Drawing on the ideas of Casimir Chardels (1777–1847), a psycho-fluidist of Puysegur’s school, and the British physicist Robert Hunt (1807–1887), Newnham postulated that the mesmeric healing agent constituted the “principle of life” emanating from the sun.<sup>15</sup> He identified this vital principle with “energia,” an “imponderable element” coined by Hunt (Newnham 1845, 193–95; cf. Zoehrer 2024). Newnham quoted the definition of “energia” directly from Hunt’s *Researches on Light* (1844):

*Energia*, that power which effects all the changes, whether chemical or molecular, which are constantly in progress; it is that agent which is for ever quickening all the elements of growth, and maintaining the conditions of a healthful vitality. (Hunt 1844, 270; emphasis in the original)

It does not appear that Newnham’s identification of the magnetic *fluidum* with “energia” found much resonance among scientists, physicians, or other practitioners. A probable reason was that Newnham himself retracted the term in a post scriptum where he pointed out that the British Association for the Advancement of Science recommended to abandon Hunt’s notion of “energia.” The term was at the time limited to describing the “principle of a substantial element” (including light), that is, the purely physical realm. To denote chemical and biological processes through another term, i.e., “actinism,” was therefore suggested (Newnham 1845, 213). In any case, to Newnham it was “obvious that the change of *term* will exert no influence upon” his basic physical theory (*ibid.*; emphasis in the original).

Within the narrow context of mesmeric theories, the above examples already revealed multilayered meanings connected to the term energy in the first half of the nineteenth century. Energy continued its semantic career through the texts of the New Thought movement, where its physical and psychological dimensions were expanded to include divine powers. However, two other notions should be discussed beforehand: *Od* and ether. These were

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15 Already the late Mesmer—probably under the influence of Romantic thought—considered the sun to be the central source of movement, i.e., the cosmic *fluidum*, that “ensouls and enlivens” (*beseelt und belebt*) the solar system (Wolfart 1814, 291). Identifying the animating force of the sun with the work of God, he suggested the introduction of a solar cult at the center of a future folk religion (*ibid.*, 290–295; cf. Barkhoff 1995, 203).

employed to revive the idea of a mesmeric agent and would crucially shape occult views of energy.

#### 4 Reichenbach's *Od*

A universal, imponderable agent of a slightly different kind that prefigured the notion of subtle energy was postulated by the German industrialist and chemist Karl Ludwig Freiherr von Reichenbach (1788–1869). From 1841 and until his death, Reichenbach asserted the existence of a fundamental force-principle (*Dynamid*) he christened *Od* (derived from Odin, the Norse god), which supposedly combined the qualities of electricity, magnetism, heat, and vital force. He claimed that *Od* emanated from both physical objects and biological organisms, but that its mysterious rays were immeasurable by instruments. They were perceivable only by ‘sensitives,’ the majority of whom happened to be women and children. Notably, Reichenbach counted himself among those who were blind to the Odic radiations (Noakes 2019, 34–35).

In his two-volume tome *Physikalisch-physiologische Untersuchungen* (1849), Reichenbach referred to *Od* as a “world force” (*Weltkraft*), the source of all known physical and chemical phenomena as well as the force of life itself (*Lebenskraft*, also referred to as *Biod*) (von Reichenbach 1849, 120, 164). Although he was reserved toward animal magnetism, Reichenbach *de facto* rehashed Mesmer’s physicalist notion of *fluidum*, including its features of polarity, imponderability, and therapeutic means. Thus, pouring old wine into new wineskins, he classified mesmerism as a subordinate “special application” (*spezielle Anwendung*) of the Odic force (von Reichenbach 1854, xxix). As a recognized natural scientist (*Naturforscher*), Reichenbach assumed the role of a detached and objective investigator, and developed a sophisticated series of tests with the aim of proving the existence of his postulated agent.

Nonetheless, the broad scientific disapproval of the *Od* theory was anything but subtle.<sup>16</sup> Reichenbach’s teaching was alternately derided as delusion, heresy, fiction, and pseudoscience. James Braid (1795–1860), the Scottish surgeon and pioneer of hypnotism, viewed the effects described by Reichenbach’s “new force” as “due entirely to a mental influence” and “attributable to the power of the mind” on human physiology. (Braid 1846, 214, 216).<sup>17</sup> A scathing

16 The scientific critique of Reichenbach presented here in staccato is more elaborately discussed in Erdbeer 2008.

17 In his article “The Power of the Mind over the Body” (1846) published for *The Medical Times* (in print between 1839 and 1851), Braid wrote: “I had not proceeded far [with

polemic was meted out by the German physiologist and staunch critic of vitalism Emil du Bois-Reymond (1818–1896), a friend of the aforementioned Helmholtz. He described the doctrine on the *Od* as “magnetic wizardry” (*magnetischer Zuber*) and the “New Testament of Mesmerism” (*Neue Testament des Mesmerismus*) (du Bois-Reymond 1847 [1845], 522). In his inaugural address in Munich, the German chemist Justus von Liebig (1803–1873) explained “why the new *Od*-science will find no entry into the natural sciences.”<sup>18</sup> Inducing “visual and perceptual apparitions in neurasthenic ill persons” could provide no evidence for the “existence of a new natural force” (von Liebig 1852, 18–19).<sup>19</sup> At the outset of his rise as a science popularizer and leading spokesman of scientific naturalism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Büchner conducted his own series of experiments in order to test Reichenbach’s hypothesis because he could not believe “that anybody could invent such a web of lies” (Büchner 1854, 11).<sup>20</sup>

A more sophisticated refutation of Reichenbach’s *Od* was put forth by Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887), a physicist and pioneer of the neurophysiological measurement of sensation. In a tragicomical autobiographical narration titled *Erinnerungen an die letzten Tage der Odlehre und ihres Urhebers* (Memories of the Last Days of the *Od* Doctrine and its Originator; 1876), Fechner offered his critique of what he admitted to think to be “a kind of subjective phantasmagory.”<sup>21</sup> The historian of science Robert M. Erdbeer pointed out that in contrast to many of the aforementioned opponents, Fechner’s scientific satire did not dismiss Reichenbach from a materialistic point of view

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perusing the *Abstract of Researches on Magnetism* (1846) by the Scottish chemist William Gregory (1803–1858)—an abridged version of von Reichenbach 1850, Gregory’s translation of von Reichenbach 1849], when my experience with hypnotic patients enabled me to perceive a source of fallacy, of which the Baron must either have been ignorant, or which he had entirely overlooked. From whatever cause this oversight had arisen, I felt confident that, however carefully and perseveringly he had prosecuted his experiments, and however well-calculated they had been for determining mere physical facts, still no reliance could be placed upon the accuracy of conclusions drawn from premises assumed as true, where especial care had not been taken to guard against the source of fallacy to which I refer—viz., the important influence of the *mental* part of the process, which is in active operation with patients during such experiments” (214).

18 “warum die neue Odwissenschaft keinen Eingang in das Gebiet der Naturforschung gefunden.”

19 “Kein Verständiger kann glauben, daß durch Gesichts- und Gefühlserscheinungen, welche in nervenschwachen Personen hervorgerufen werden, die Existenz einer neuen Naturkraft begründet werden könne.”

20 “Ich konnte mir nicht denken, daß jemand ein solches Lügengebäude erfinden könne.”

21 “von dem ich in der Tat gestehe, daß ich es für eine Art subjectiver Phantasmagorie halte.”

but sought to establish clear boundaries around what constitutes exact science, and demarcate it from now disreputed *Naturphilosophie*.<sup>22</sup>

Relentless criticism notwithstanding, Reichenbach must be credited as the last experimental scientist who seriously attempted to explain the full range of physical, biological, and psychic phenomena by means of a *single* agent (Erdbeer 2008, 143). His case is particularly instructive as it illustrates the emergence of a fracture in the style of thought (*Denkstilwechsel*) that led to the bifurcation of the scientific and occult discursive cultures in the mid-nineteenth century (ibid., 146). Despite the clear refutation of the Odic force as a *qualitas occulta* by the experimental science of his day, his work vigorously stimulated the transatlantic discourses on mesmerism, spiritualism, and psychical research during the latter half of the nineteenth century (Nahm 2012, 322). European and American occult authors readily welcomed Reichenbach's ideas as an authoritative scientific reference point that justified their belief in subtle powers (e.g., Hittell 1860; Sawicki 2017, 236–48). Interpretations of the material property of the *Od* ranged from an ephemeral ray, glow, or current to a form of subtle matter, sometimes identified with the 'ectoplasm' postulated by spiritualists (O'Byrne 1926, 1).

A notable systematic theory of *Od* was formulated by the German philosopher and occultist Carl du Prel (1839–1899).<sup>23</sup> In his final work *Die*

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22 While Fechner stood on the firm ground of experimental research and mathematical theory-building, he was a leading advocate of a panpsychist worldview. A central aspect of his thought was the idea that the whole universe was permeated by soul and that the highest purpose and essence of nature was life itself. This motive clearly bears the influence of the *Naturphilosophie* of Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) and Lorenz Oken (1779–1851), who by the mid-nineteenth century had largely fallen into disrepute among the scientific establishment (Windelband 1910). Thus, like Reichenbach, Fechner was on the defensive against the materialistic attack on the belief in the soul, and pursued a realignment of *Naturphilosophie* while recognizing the advancements of exact science (Erdbeer 2008, 159). With his book *Zend-Avesta* (1851), Fechner envisaged his own meta-scientific form of a devotional text that aimed to defend the idea that “all of nature is living and divinely ensouled” (*die ganze Natur lebendig und göttlich beseelt sei*; Fechner 1851, iii). His approach was to combine “refined religious views” (*geläuterten religiösen Ansichten*) with the “requirements of an exact science” (*Forderungen einer exacten Naturwissenschaft*), while keeping the two distinct (ibid.).

23 Due to the Hodgson Report, which had investigated fraud allegations against Blavatsky, Du Prel left the Theosophical Society in February 1886 after only one and a half years. In the Fall of the same year, he founded the Psychologische Gesellschaft with the Theosophist and publisher Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916) in Munich, following the model of British Society for Psychical Research (est. 1882).

*Magie als Naturwissenschaft* (1899),<sup>24</sup> du Prel dismissed both monistic materialism and Cartesian dualism, and argued that *Od* could explain the mind-body-interaction. Reinforcing Reichenbach's vitalism and in line with Müller's distinction between vital and psychic principles, he stated that the *Od* constituted the vital substrate (*Lebenskraft*)—an agent that governs both subconscious self-organisation of the body and conscious mental activity.<sup>25</sup> Du Prel imagined *Od* to be the subtle medium underlying magnetic rapport, somnambulism, clairvoyance, dream oracles, and other psychical phenomena (du Prel 1899b, 1–25), including apparitions of ghosts (du Prel 1916). His elaborate project amounted to a list-ditch attempt to defend the idea that all physical, vital, and psychological phenomena could be accounted for by a unifying agent. Whereas du Prel's efforts to establish the credibility of the *Od* in academic circles were mostly unsuccessful, his thought on the unconscious, dreams, and the afterlife attracted considerable interest among writers, artists, and psychologists.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to serving as the cornerstone of grand occult narratives, the *Od* also provided a conceptual framework for practical applications. Under the impact of Reichenbach's theory and in parallel to the discoveries of electromagnetism, X-rays, and radioactivity, occult theories moved from 'magnetic' or 'fluidal' imageries toward those of radiation (Haupt 2005, 173). By the dawn of the twentieth century, the discourse surrounding the rays of *Od* had merged with alternative medicine. A case in point was the introduction of a technical device named "Od-ray apparatus" (*Odstrahl-Apparat*), invented by the Swiss homeopath and naturopath Hermann Ulrich Ottinger (1879–1924). In external appearance and function, Ottinger's machine was comparable to other contemporaneous medical devices for phototherapy or electrotherapeutics and similarly described in technical language (Bigalke 2019, 23–24). To market his odic-magnetic machine more effectively, Ottinger—who practiced in

24 Literal translation: The Magic as Science. The work was published in two volumes titled *Die magische Physik* (The Magical Physics) and *Die magische Psychologie* (The Magical Psychology).

25 For du Prel's influence on *prāṇa*-based therapeutic concepts see Zoehrer 2020; 2021.

26 Du Prel's work was demonstrably noted *inter alia* by the avant-garde author and psychiatrist Oskar Panizza (1853–1921), the poet Hanns von Gumpenberg (1866–1928), the poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), and the novelist and essayist Thomas Mann (1875–1955) (Pytlík 2005, 143–145). Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) regarded du Prel as a "spirited mystic" (*geistreicher Mystiker*) and cited him approvingly on several issues, for example, the difference between the waking consciousness and the soul, the role of dreams in opening the "gate to metaphysics" (*Pforte zur Metaphysik*), and the vital importance of the unconscious for creative activity (Freud 1914, 48, 384, 474; cf. Pytlík 2005, 146–149; Josephson-Storm 2017, 191).

Riethüsli, a neighborhood in St. Gallen—added the title ‘Yogi’ to his name in advertizing brochures. He did so not to underscore his mastery of a South Asian spiritual practice but rather to endow his therapy with the flair of the exotic and mysterious (Klatt 2009, 13 n. 13).<sup>27</sup> Ottinger had befriended Franz Hartmann (1838–1912), a physician, close associate of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), and prolific key figure of German and international Theosophy with a keen interest in occult healing approaches. During the winter of 1911/12, in the final months of his life, Hartmann applied Ottinger’s invention for treating his ailments. Although he reported a reinvigorating effect on his body, the *Od* emitter did not prevent the inevitable (Priem 1912, 50).<sup>28</sup>

Of more lasting influence than Ottinger’s therapy would be the ‘iatro-physical conception’ of the American physician Albert Abrams (1863–1924). Abrams’ medical theory formed a central reference point for the development of machines that prefigured both ‘energy medicine’ (the use of electromagnetic fields for diagnosis and cures; cf. Oschman 2000), and ‘radionics’ (a device-based form of distant or psychic healing; cf. Tansley 1972). Abrams was convinced that “[d]isocculting the occult” was achievable if odic sensations, spiritualist materializations, and psychometry (the ability to diagnose disease via touch) were explained in terms of the unifying principle of “energy” (Abrams 1916, 9–11, 255–56). However, among early-twentieth century occultists, more in vogue than energy was the concept of ether.

## 5 Occult Ether Theories

Next to the cosmic *fluidum* and Odic emanations, a third important precursor to the notion of subtle energies were ether theories. The idea of a superfine, invisible substrate that permeates the universe enticed the imagination of occult thinkers, who built on both ancient and modern ether theories.<sup>29</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, the notion of ether received increased attention and credibility from the side of Victorian physicists. It should be stressed that ether physics proved to be a highly fruitful scientific hypothesis,

27 For a conspicuously similar case of a ‘Yogi’ inventor selling a subtle agent-based apparatus for therapeutic purposes, see Léo Bernard’s chapter in this volume.

28 I thank Karl Baier for providing this helpful reference on Hartmann’s biography.

29 Descartes’ interpretation of the ether had demonstrably influenced Mesmer’s conception of *fluidum* (Feldt 1985, 34). In contrast, Reichenbach only made scant references to ether (also spelled ‘aether’). He left open the question whether the emanations of the *Od* were of substantial or non-substantial quality (von Reichenbach 1854, 228, 340; 1849, 19), reflecting the already contested status of ether theories during his time.

ultimately leading to the foundation of classical electrodynamics by the Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell (1831–1879) in 1873 (Maxwell 1873; cf. Asprem 2011, 132).

The hypothesis of a subtle substrate that transmits light and other electrodynamic waves was taken up by trendsetting occult authors. A pivotal example of occult physicalism as a literary topos with a predilection for ether theories is provided by the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, Madame Blavatsky. In her first major work *Isis Unveiled* (1877), Blavatsky crafted a loose synthesis of Mesmer's *fluidum*, Reichenbach's *Od*, and the concept of ether or 'Astral Light' in proposing a cosmic, magical agent (Blavatsky 1877, 125–62; cf. Baier 2009, 280). One of the major sources for *Isis Unveiled* was the English translation of *A History of Magic* (1854). Written by the Tyrolean physician Joseph Ennemoser (1787–1854), the book argued that Mesmer's teachings contained the scientific key to explaining magic and related phenomena, including alchemy, witchcraft, astrology, precognition, visionary states of mind, and religious ecstasy (Baier 2009, 258–59). Ennemoser's attempt to provide a theoretical framework that could lend plausibility to magical practices took the same line as Mesmer and other mesmerists who sought to explain the miraculous in scientific terms and trace them to natural causes. However, it was his systematic and historical overview and its translation into English that reached an international audience. He thus paved the way for the Theosophist conception of occultism as a scientific program (*ibid.*, 260).

A second crucial influence on *Isis Unveiled* was the French author Alphonse Louis Constant (1810–1875), better known by his pen name Éliphas Lévi. This pioneering figure of nineteenth-century occultism unleashed a renaissance of magic in France that would spread to the rest of Europe and the United States.<sup>30</sup> Lévi had adopted the widespread interpretation of magic as an application of the all-connecting mesmeric *fluidum*, which he also identified with Reichenbach's *Od* but preferred to call "astral light" (*lumière astrale*) (Lévi 1860, 19). As Julian Strube has argued, Lévi most likely discovered the notion of *lumière astrale* in the writings of Jean Du Potet de Sennevoy (1796–1881), the most vocal representative of the French *magnétistes spiritualistes*, to whom he explicitly referred (Strube 2016a, 65). Lévi was convinced that the astral light functioned as a *médiateur plastique* and was the power not only behind animal magnetism but the ultimate cause of magical operations. With Du Potet he agreed that this *agent magique* had been known to and employed by the Chaldean magicians, the Gnostics, the alchemists, and the Kabbalists (*ibid.*).

30 For a comprehensive study of the entanglements between French occultism, Catholicism, and socialism in Lévi's work and network, see Strube 2016b.

Having both natural and divine properties, the astral light functions as a universal medium that communicates between the corporeal and the spiritual spheres—a marked deviation from Mesmer’s physicalist cosmology. While the astral light itself is “blind” (*aveugle*), it may be directed by “spirits of energy and action” (*les esprits d’énergie et d’action*) (Lévi 1860, 19) as well as the power of “will” (*volonté*) (Lévi 1856, 185).<sup>31</sup> The key to controlling the astral light was thus the refinement of the will, a notion that Lévi adopted from the Puysegur school—despite sharply distinguishing his own approach from somnambulism (Strube 2016a, 65–66).<sup>32</sup>

Lévi thought of the astral light in abstract terms as a “system of vibrations” (*système des vibrations*; 1856, 184) and retained metaphors of subtle matter throughout his work. However, in contrast to Ennemoser, he was more reluctant regarding the explanatory power of animal magnetism and the interpretation of magic by recourse to natural forces. His critical stance again drew major inspiration from Du Potet, who did not think of animal magnetism as an enlightened science that supersedes magic but rather as a still imperfect attempt to revive the teachings of the ancient adepts. Accordingly, he applied signs and symbols from old works on magic, wizardry, and the kabbalah in his practical experiments, which he believed to be derived from a universal language known to the priests and magicians of primeval times (Strube 2016b, 461–62; cf. Baier 2009, 269–70).

Ennemoser and Du Potet/Lévi thus represent two attitudes toward science that would prefigure downstream positions of occult authors. The first view was optimistic that the progress of science could shed light on ancient mysteries, and rationalized the belief in the supernatural by appealing to contemporaneous scientific frameworks. The second held ancient knowledge to be superior to science in its current state. *Isis Unveiled* mediated between both points of view. On the one hand, Blavatsky named luminaries of physics and technology such as Michael Faraday (1791–1867), Thomas A. Edison (1847–1931), Alexander G. Bell (1847–1922), William Crookes (1832–1919), and John Tyndall (1820–1893) as

31 For example: “In the case of the clairvoyant, [the astral light] is subordinate to the intelligence, subject to the imagination and dependent on the will” (Lévi 1856, 185; my translation).

32 Lévi suggested that astral light turns into human light at the moment of conception, thus forming the seed for the astral body. The latter reflects the character of a person and mediates between the soul and the material body. Despite this intermediary function, the agency of astral light is not restricted to subtle bodies but is also transmitted through the nerves and concentrated in bodily centres (Baier 2009, 269). For the relationship between occult conceptions of ether and Lévi’s highly influential theory of subtle bodies, see Asprem 2011, 150–53.

witnesses for the ‘etheric’ effects seen in contemporary discoveries and inventions. With the advances in understanding magnetism and electricity, and the invention of telegraphy and telephony, a full scientific explanation of a universal magical agent seemed more feasible than ever. On the other hand, Blavatsky more emphatically argued in line with Du Potet and Lévi that science was still a long way from fully grasping the ether as the force that is at the root of both physical phenomena and occult powers (Asprem 2011, 143). Her “master-key” would unlock those powers by unveiling the knowledge encrypted in the “science” of the ancient mysteries (Blavatsky 1877, title).

‘Energy’ was a secondary term in Blavatsky’s oeuvre. Her occult quest in *Isis Unveiled* revolved around the mesmeric *fluidum*, Reichenbach’s *Od*, and the “nature of the vital force, and how to command it” (Blavatsky 1877, 475). She employed fluidal and aerial metaphors interchangeably. *Od* could thus encompass “vital fluid” as well as the “breath of God” (ibid., 145–46; Blavatsky 1888, 76). Diving deeper, in *The Secret Doctrine* she suggested a causal reality behind all life and its biological and spiritual evolution that she called “the one Universal Life” (Blavatsky 1888, 634). This divine “Source of Life” is identified with “the Breath of the absoluteness,” the god Viṣṇu, and the “Solar active energy” from which “seven rays” emanate (290, 592). The latter signified seven gods, the creative forces of nature, and—more concretely—the known physical phenomenon (“light, heat, electricity, terrestrial magnetism, astral radiation, motion”) plus consciousness (“*Intelligence*”) (562; emphasis in the original).

Blavatsky associated (and practically identified) the “one life”<sup>33</sup> with a fundamental occult force that she named “Fohat,” the objectified manifestation of the divine and absolute “Universal Mind” (Blavatsky 1888, 110; emphasis in the original). On the earthly plane, Fohat’s influence is generated by the will of the mesmerist. On the cosmic plane, it is the “creative Logos” and formative power behind the planetary system and living organisms (ibid., 110–11). Fohat’s properties are explicitly energetic: it is described as “the energising and guiding intelligence in the Universal Electric or Vital Fluid” (ibid., 493), “the Solar Energy” and the “personified electric vital power, the transcendental binding Unity of all Cosmic Energies” (ibid., 111). By the late 1880s, imaginations of a psycho-physical agent of divine origin that are found scattered throughout Blavatsky’s work had already been a central theme in the blossoming New Thought movement (discussed in the next section).

33 A likely influence on Blavatsky’s notion of “one life” was Swedenborg’s identical term that appeared in *Arcana Coelestia* (2009 [1752]) (e.g., n. 3001, n. 3484). The notion was taken up by other authors at the intersection of New Thought and occultism. For instance, see Evans 1884, 24; Ramacharaka 1906, 206.

Theosophical publications on the ether outlasted the climax of the scientific discourse on this hypothesis. Although the Michelson-Morley experiment (1887) and Albert Einstein's (1879–1955) special theory of relativity (1905) ultimately rendered the ether redundant, a few high-ranking physicists continued to promote the idea. Perhaps most influential in this regard was the English physicist, spiritualist, and prolific writer Sir Oliver Joseph Lodge (1851–1940) (Bowler 2001, 89–101). From the 1880s until the early 1930s, Lodge developed a complex theory of ether as “the living garment of God” that combined physical, philosophical, and theological elements (Asprem 2011, 141–42; cf. Raia 2007).<sup>34</sup> His writings provided ideological fuel to early twentieth-century Theosophists who held on to “their old argument that modern science was catching up with, and helping to support, occult wisdom” (Noakes 2019, 311).<sup>35</sup>

## 6 New Thought and the Vibrations of Mental Force

New Thought was a vigorous religious-therapeutic movement that first developed in New England during the 1860s and spread to the rest of North America between 1885 and 1895. Its key tenet was the firm belief that “faith is a force” (Horowitz 2014, 30). New Thought authors developed a plethora of practices around the idea that the “mind possesses an actual ethereal power” over the body and physical reality (ibid., 101). The “religion of healthy-mindedness” (James 1902, 78) has been counted as belonging to ‘American metaphysical religion’—a broader complex of ideological currents that additionally includes Transcendentalism, mesmerism, spiritism, and Theosophy, with offshoots extending far into the twentieth-century New Age movement.

Catherine L. Albanese identified ‘movement and energy’ as one of four central themes characterizing metaphysical religion.<sup>36</sup> In the metaphysical vision of energy, “the practical imagination joins forces with will” in order to change the fabric of reality, bring about healing, and overcome obstacles on the path to personal success (2007, 15). This characterization appears filtered through

34 Lodge acted as the president of the Society for Psychical Research from 1901 to 1903 and again in 1932, which underscores his commitment to the field of paranormal research (Tynn 2015).

35 For Theosophical references to Lodge, see, e.g., the revised edition of *Occult Chemistry* (1919; first published in 1908) by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater; *Rational Mysticism* (1924) by William Kingsland (1855–1936); and *Primer of Occult Physics* (1927) by William Coode-Adams (1895–1961).

36 The other three being (1) the preoccupation with the mind's powers, (2) the correspondence principle, and (3) salvation-as-healing.

the lens of New Age rhetoric, where ‘energies’ are indeed ubiquitous. However, in the context of New Thought in the decades around 1900, energy was only one among several physical terms used to describe the connection between the mind and outer reality.

The specific combination of physicalism and psychologization that is so prevalent in New Thought has its roots in American mesmerism. In contrast to the tendency of psychological or spiritualistic interpretations in Europe, American mesmerists preferred a scientific basis for their practice and refused subjectivizing explanations (Fuller 1986, 38; cf. Noakes 2019, 29). In reaction to the rise of science, scientism was an integral part of the New Thought movement from its inception: “The modern faith in science and utility was felt in the realm of the spirit, too” (Horowitz 2014, 114–15).<sup>37</sup> Initially sparked by the magnetic healer Phineas Quimby (1802–1866), protagonists of New Thought occasionally employed the notion of energy without making it central to their healing theories. A more widely used physical term among New Thought acolytes was ‘vibration.’

Olav Hammer (2001, 270) suggested that the New Age theme of ‘vibration’ echoed the work of the British-American author Alice Bailey. However, earlier occult sources on the power of vibration can be traced. As mentioned above, Lévi already spoke of the astral light in terms of vibrations. Five decades later, Annie Besant (1847–1933) and her co-Theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater (1847–1934) suggested in *Thought Forms* (1905) that thoughts produce “a radiating vibration.” This vibration would affect the various levels of “mental matter” but weaken “in proportion to the distance from their source” (21–23).<sup>38</sup>

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37 Mitch Horowitz concisely described how scientism perfused New Thought: “Among New-Thoughters, the language for this project [i.e., a modern, rational program for psychological health] had long been in place. ‘We must deal scientifically with our faults,’ Emma Curtis Hopkins [1849–1925] had written. Phineas Quimby had foretold a ‘science of health and happiness.’ Poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox [1850–1919] wrote of ‘The Science of Right Thinking’ and Wallace D. Wattles [1860–1911] of ‘The Science of Being Great’” (Horowitz 2014, 115).

38 The introduction of *Thought Forms* offers a perfect example of how occult physicalism uses vague references to both proven and disproven notions of a physical agency in order to brand clairvoyance, telepathy, and telekinesis as “physical phenomena” (Besant and Leadbeater 1905, 12): “Ether is now comfortably settled in the scientific kingdom, becoming almost more than a hypothesis. Mesmerism, under its new name of hypnotism, is no longer an outcast. Reichenbach’s experiments are still looked at askance, but are not wholly condemned. Rontgen’s [sic] rays have rearranged some of the older ideas of matter, while radium has revolutionised them, and is leading science beyond the borderland of ether into the astral world. The boundaries between animate and inanimate matter are broken down” (ibid., 11).

Their book set out to explain the idea that ‘thoughts are things,’ a tagline that was coined by the American journalist and New Thought popularizer Prentice Mulford (1834–1891).

‘Vibration’ had been a key term in the writings of the first theorist of New Thought, a New England-based Methodist minister-turned-Swedenborgian by the name of Warren Felt Evans (1817–1889). In *The Mental Cure* (1869) Evans wrote that mental force is transmitted through the “vibrations” of an all-pervading “semi-spiritual essence,” which is “far more refined, elastic, and subtle, than the ether” or Reichenbach’s “odic force” (271, 251). He thought of this essence as the agent that is active between two minds in mesmeric and hypnotic rapport, and that it allows the mind to act upon matter (272).

In *Divine Law of Cure* (1884), Evans championed a monistic worldview in which mind and matter form “one substance under two forms of manifestation” (174). Regardless of his allusions to Newton and other eminent figures of modern science in defending his theory of vibration, Evans ultimately argued in terms of ancient metaphysics and identified the subtle essence as the Platonic “*animus mundi*, the soul of the universe” (206, 356). Moreover, Evans was a strong believer in German idealism and the radical idealism of the Irish philosopher Bishop George Berkeley (1685–1753) (9, 154). Citing Berkeley that “there is not any other substance than spirit,” Evans suggested a continuum between matter and to mind:

If, as modern science affirms, all the properties of matter are forms of force, and we go one step further, as we inevitably must, and show that all force is spiritual, and all causation mental, then matter itself becomes only the manifestation of spirit, and mind the only real substance. (Evans 1884, 146–47)

Hovering between science talk and religious thought would remain a hallmark in Evans’ system. Evans mentioned ‘subtle energy’ in passing in *The Primitive Mind-cure* (1885), his penultimate book, when hailing the power of thought as “the primal force and most subtle energy in the universe” (13). Pure thought is energy, spirit, and the “first emanation from God” (14). Following Hegel, Evans thought that spirit would precede all action—both divine and human—and in contrast to matter was characterized by “freedom and spontaneity” (*ibid.*).

To further explicate his mind-over-matter theory, Evans provided a similar interpretation of ‘nervous energy.’ Arguing on the basis of a passage in the second volume of Johannes Müller’s *Elements of Physiology* (the English translation of Müller’s above-mentioned compendium), which discusses the effects of ideas (e.g., the thought of food) on bodily secretions (e.g., saliva), Evans

proposed a form of cosmic physiology. Müller explained that a thought related to a secreting organ “causes a stream of nervous energy to be directed towards” the respective gland (Müller 1842, 1398).<sup>39</sup> The effect of secretion would be more marked if the thought was accompanied by passion or emotion. Evans extrapolated Müller’s physiological account into an eclectic cosmo-theology that combined philosophical idealism, the Gospels, American Transcendentalism, and Blavatskian Theosophy. The ‘nervous energy’ only exemplified a more general principle that Evans preferred

to call the universal, divine life-principle in nature, the *akasa* (pronounced *ahasa*) of the Hindu metaphysics, an all-pervading, omnipresent, vivific principle of life and motion identical in its higher aspects with the Holy Spirit of the Gospels. An act of faith determines a current, so to speak, of this inconceivably subtle life-force toward the result aimed at and desired. Hence through faith, which is but a mode of thought in union with feeling, a disease is curable that otherwise would be incurable. (Evans 1885, 68–69; emphasis in the original)

This description prefigures twentieth-century discourses of subtle energies on three counts. The first is the manner of arguing for a ‘subtle life-force’ by means of an amalgam of scientific and orientalist notions, although ‘force’ will give way to ‘energy’ and references to *ākāśa* (literally: ether, space) will be replaced by *prāṇa* (see next chapter). Second, it anticipates the association of energy and glands, an idea that was picked up by early twentieth-century esoteric authors and integrated into more elaborate *cakra* systems (Leland 2016, 226–36). Third, it departs from the brain-body system to envision a universal, quasi-divine vital principle that mediates between the ontological levels of teleology (or mind) and matter. This rehabilitation of the vital principle (albeit outside the realm of scientific discourse) effectively reversed Helmholtz et al.’s dismissal of the vague notion of a life force and preference for exact description.<sup>40</sup>

According to Evans, the true adept supposedly holds the key to the universal life-principle and thereby becomes a master of “magic,” “the science of sciences” (Evans 1885, 141). Among the applications enabled by knowledge of the

39 The German original reads “stream of the nerve-principle” (*Strom des Nervenprinzips*) (Müller 1840, 568) instead of “nervous energy.”

40 In Evans’ further discussion of the “occult properties” of the “universal life-principle” the overlap with Blavatsky’s cocktail of references is obvious: it ranges from Du Potet’s occult adaptations of mesmerism, Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s (1803–1873) fictional force of *Vril* to the “Shekinah” in Hebrew Scriptures, the “Holy Spirit” of the New Testament, and the “astral light of the Kabala” and the Rosicrucians (Evans 1885, 136ff.).

life principle were “the relief of pain and the cure of disease” (140), ways to obtain longevity (147), “psychological telegraphy” (199), and the attainment of salvation, or “the true spiritual life” (215). With recourse to Blavatsky, Evans wrote that with every inhalation humans imbibed the universal life-principle into their bodies, thus suggesting once more an influx of subtle *matter*, while simultaneously insinuating that the potential of the vital agent could only be activated through “*will and spirit*” (137; emphasis in the original).

Evans was a theoretician first and foremost and provided only few practical guidelines and exercises, mostly in the form of prayers or affirmations. A more detailed set of practices related to an occult subtle agent would be developed by the exceptionally prolific author William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932).<sup>41</sup> Atkinson substantially drew from the ideological ocean of mesmerism, science, and the occult that stretched out between Theosophy and New Thought (Albanese 2007, 438). He extended the Theosophical disdain for control of trance mediums by spirits to the battle against the domination of an undisciplined and obstructive inner dialogue (*ibid.*). Espousing mental magic—the command of the conscious over the subconscious mind in order to realize personal goals—Atkinson taught lessons on how to attain mastery over ‘thought vibrations,’ which he described in terms borrowed from physics.

Atkinson’s book *Dynamic Thought: The Law of Vibrant Energy* (1906) openly opposed “the Materialistic school” and declared that a “New Science” of force and energy was on the rise, providing a “new platform” to philosophy (24–25). He references the state of the art of physics when explaining that “all forms of Energy”—e.g., heat, magnetism, electricity, light, and X-rays—are produced by the vibration of substantial particles (125, 154, 171). The idea of ether had already been declared obsolete in the physics of his day. Nonetheless, Atkinson introduced the notion by invoking its sternest defender, Lodge, who had defined ether as “a perfectly continuous, subtle, incompressible substance” that functions as the “one universal medium” of motion and energy (Lodge 1889, 339, quoted in Atkinson 1906, 102). After illuminating its paradoxical features, Atkinson identified the ether with an ultra-fine substance he termed “Mind” (172)—or more precisely, a “Life and Mind Principle” (155) inherent in matter. On this basis, he declared “Vital-Mental Action” to be the more fundamental principle than mechanical vibration. This action is supposedly the ultimate source of all energy and all inorganic and organic matter (156). Capital-m “Mind” would perform its work in the brain and nervous system by virtue of its “Finer Force,” producing thought, and from thought mental “Force and Energy”

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41 For an in-depth discussion on Atkinson’s decisive role in early modern yoga, see Kraler 2022.

(212). Atkinson assertively claimed that his theory would explain mesmerism, suggestion, hypnotism, and telepathy (209). Taking it a step further into the occult, he suggested that the “currents of Fine Force coursing through his nervous system” produced “an ‘Aura’ or egg-shaped projection of Mind” in a person, and that emotions and states of mind would correspond to a spectrum of colors in the Aura, as reported by “Occultists” (220–22). Atkinson’s ‘thought-stuff’ thus rehashed Besant and Leadbeater’s aforementioned ‘thought forms,’ once again underscoring the blended discourse that was shared by New Thought and Theosophy.<sup>42</sup>

In *The Kybalion* (1908), “one of the most important and influential occult texts written in America” (Deslippe 2011, 1), Atkinson—under the pseudonym “Three Initiates”—reiterated the idea of a psycho-physical continuum, that encompassed mind, matter, and energy as modes of vibration:

Modern Science has proven that all that we call Matter and Energy are but “modes of vibratory motion,” and some of the more advanced scientists are rapidly moving toward the positions of the occultists who hold that the phenomena of Mind are likewise modes of vibration or motion. (Three Initiates 1908, 138)

Vibration, force, and energy were interchangeable key terms in the books that Atkinson wrote in the guise of his yogi-persona Ramacharaka between 1903 and 1909. “All is in vibration. From the tiniest atom to the greatest sun, everything is in a state of vibration” (Ramacharaka 1903, 51), he wrote in *The Hindu-Yogi Science of Breath*. By tuning into the rhythm of his body and the universe via “rhythmic breathing,” the yogi absorbed “Prana,” that is, “the spirit of life” (17), “nerve force” (19), “vital force” (10), “vital energy” (56), and “Absolute Energy” (16). Control over “Prana” allows the yogi to strengthen his body and acquire desired physical and mental qualities, transmute sexual into “creative energy,” communicate by telepathy, project “Prana” to heal others, and attain enlightenment or the “state of Universal Consciousness” (50–73). But Atkinson was less an innovator than a skillful systematizer of already abounding ideas. A decade before him, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) had disseminated

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42 Atkinson’s book is essentially another elaborate commentary on Mulford’s motto that ‘thoughts are things.’ Mitch Horowitz argues that a likely source for Mulford’s phrase was a Swedenborgian description of the spiritual world, the dwelling place of the “inner man,” laid out in Evans’ book *Soul and Body* (1876, 83): “In that world thoughts are things, and ideas are the most real entities of the universe.” Mulford reinterpreted “thoughts are things” as a formula for attracting prosperity, thus turning around Swedenborg’s introspective view (Horowitz 2014, 83).

his theory of an identity between *prāṇa* and energy on the one hand and related yogic exercises on the other for the attainment of superhuman powers (Zoehrer 2020; 2021; cf. next chapter).

Steeped in the occult mindscape, Atkinson tended to heavily frame his theories in scientific language and yogic teachings. In contrast, more Christian-leaning authors of the New Thought genre produced less exuberant amalgams of terms, and directly identified energy with God. In this vein, the homeopathic physician and New Thought author Harriet Emilie Cady (1848–1941) depicted God in *Lessons in Truth* (1896) as “spirit, or the creative energy which is the cause of all visible things” (8). This energy again bore the qualities of “life and intelligence” (*ibid.*) and was the source of all physical things and living beings.<sup>43</sup> The idea of God-as-Energy foreshadowed later New Age theologies, where notions of ultimate reality alternated between a personal deity (or superconscious mind) and energy as the fundamental principle, source, or essence of the universe (cf. Hanegraaff 1998, 187; Wolf 2006, 1484).

“New spirituality in America meant energy spirituality, and the energies of mesmerists and ether vibrations were only preparation for what had transpired” (Albanese 2007, 514). The ‘good vibrations’ of New Thought physicalism reached a preliminary end point in holistic interpretations of quantum physics. In this variant of scientific metaphysics, subtle energy is associated with the powers of ‘consciousness’ and their supposed influence on subatomic wave functions, hence material reality.<sup>44</sup> Inspired by both Theosophy and New Thought, a major figure that bridged the occult and holistic discourses on ‘atom consciousness’ was Alice Bailey, whose esoteric cosmology represented the shift from ether to energy.

## 7 From Ether to Energy

Speculations on the ether were an expression of a much larger Theosophical agenda. In an early mission statement of 1886—later entitled by its editor

43 The identity of God and energy was not a New Thought invention. For example, the forerunner of American spiritualism Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910) had described the universe in his channeled tome titled *The Principles of Nature* (1847) as the manifestation of the “active energies of the Positive, Divine Mind” that influence all creation toward spiritual perfection (Davis 1847, 148–49). The notion of divine influence (Latin: *influx*) undoubtedly bears the mark of Emanuel Swedenborg’s (1688–1772) teachings (see, e.g., Swedenborg 2009 [1752], 1962, 2333–34).

44 See, for instance, Capra 2000 (1975), 140–41; McTaggart 2008 (2001); Horowitz 2014, 268–72; Laszlo et al. 2016; cf. Hammer 2001, 270–303.

C. Jinarājādāsa “The Original Programme of the Theosophical Society”—Blavatsky defined four objectives for her organization: first, to establish a Universal Brotherhood; second, to safeguard the primacy of personal merit over race, creed, or class, third, to pursue the study of “the philosophies of the East;” and fourth,

[t]o oppose materialism and theological dogmatism in every possible way, by demonstrating the existence of *occult forces unknown to science*, in nature, and the presence of psychic and spiritual powers in man; trying, at the same time to enlarge the views of the Spiritualists by showing them that there are other, many other agencies at work in the production of phenomena besides the “Spirits” of the dead. (Blavatsky 1931 [1886], 562; emphasis added)

‘Occult forces’ were believed to provide a deeper explanation of spiritualism, thus holding out the promise of a scientific but non-materialistic theory that was broad enough to shed new light on mesmerism, hypnosis, and psychical phenomena.<sup>45</sup> Whereas the first-generation Theosophists insisted on proving the agency of a cosmic *fluidum*, Od, ether, and other physicalist cognates of “psychic and spiritual powers,” such notions had already been superseded by psychological explanations in the academic context (see, most poignantly, Braid 1846). Resisting the course of the scientific community, Theosophists held on to physicalist ether theories long after they went out of fashion.

When ‘ether’ was gradually replaced by ‘energy’ to denote subtle powers in early twentieth-century occult texts, their ductus was still heavily colored by Blavatsky’s work and drew from its ideological reservoir. At the helm of this conceptual shift in occult physicalism was Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949; née La Trobe-Bateman). She was born in Manchester, England, as the daughter of a wealthy civil engineer and raised a Christian. After evangelical work among British soldiers in India and a difficult marriage, Bailey stranded on the West Coast of the United States. In 1917, she joined the Pacific Grove Lodge of the Theosophical Society in California and soon after the Esoteric School of Theosophy headed by Besant. Five years later, she broke with the Theosophical Society and founded the Arcane School, a training institution that offered correspondence courses based on messages she claimed to have received from a Tibetan Master (Leland 2016, 213).

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45 That even traditional entheogenic healing ceremonies could be interpreted in terms of ‘subtle energies’ and their hidden, unspeakable qualities rather than ‘spirits’ is discussed by Wouter Hanegraaff in this volume. In contrast to physicalist models, Hanegraaff’s argument rests on the psychological study of altered states of consciousness.

In *The Consciousness of the Atom* (1922), one of her first books, Bailey argued for a cosmic evolution of consciousness. Rudimentary consciousness, she claimed, exists at the level of the atom and is the driving force behind the development toward higher forms of being. While Bailey still presupposed ‘ether’ as a primordial, intangible substance on which all matter rests, her idea of the fundamental building blocks of the universe put a far stronger emphasis on ‘intelligence’ and ‘energy’ (Bailey 1922, 19–24). In her view of the atom, physics converges with psychology. “If you take these different qualities of the atom—energy, intelligence, ability to select and reject, to attract and repulse, sensation, movement, and desire—you have something which is very much like the psychology of a human being, only within a more limited radius and of a more circumscribed degree. Have we not, therefore, really got back to what might be termed the ‘psyche of the atom?’” (23). This psycho-physical microscopic entity partakes in a macroscopic spiritual process as it forms the seed for the cosmic evolution toward “God consciousness,” which manifests “that great Life, that all-embracing, universal Mind, that vibrant centre of energy [...] Whom we call God, or Force, or the Logos, the Existence” (58, 33).

A central feature of Bailey’s writings was what Olav Hammer aptly called “terminological creolization” (2001, 270). Reminiscent of the style of *Isis Unveiled*, Bailey blended the languages of physics and religion. Following the footsteps of the Theosophists, she envisioned an integrative worldview that sought to overcome both scientific materialism and a naïve belief in supernatural interventions:

Where the orthodox Christian would say with reverence, God, the scientist, with equal reverence, would say, Energy; yet they would both mean the same. Where the idealistic teacher would speak of the ‘God within’ the human form, others with equal accuracy would speak of the ‘energising faculty’ of man, which drives him into activity of a physical, emotional, or mental nature. (Bailey 1922, 24)

Bailey thus lifted the notion of energy to the level of a divine entity that forms the root of material reality, psyche, and spirit, claiming their ultimate synthesis. Because she is dealing with energies, the “true esotericist” is closer to a “scientist” rather than a “mystic,” explained Bailey in her posthumously published book *Education in the New Age* (1954, 59). Esotericism is thus not only concerned with penetrating into secret realms in order to obtain hidden knowledge. It surpasses ordinary science due to the awareness of the true source and full hierarchy of energies that structure physical reality. Initiates would be endowed with superior insight into “the energy of life, the energies of the

soul, and the forces of the phenomenal world” and know how to master them (ibid.).

The Baileyan estotericist is engaged in co-creation, thus contributing to the spiritual evolution of the cosmos. She holds the key to shape the various levels of the external world because she is supposedly aware of the vitalizing essence behind all physical reality, that is, the “*one life*” from which “divine energy” flows into all things (Bailey 1954, 18, 65; emphasis in the original). The macrocosmic evolution of the divine is mirrored by the evolution of human consciousness through the physical body at the microcosmic level (Bailey 1922, 4). Aiding the evolution of humankind, the esoteric disciple is supposed to put her knowledge about the “nature, control and direction of energy” into the service of others (Bailey 1949, 127).

Having attributed a quasi-divine quality to energy, Bailey offered an application of her concept of energy in her posthumously published book *Esoteric Healing* (1953). Here, she laid out an early formulation of the basic principles that would also form an integral part of leading schools of energy healing including Therapeutic Touch, Brennan Healing Science, Choa Kok Sui’s Pranic Healing, and post-1980 forms of Reiki that integrated the *cakras* into its healing ritual:<sup>46</sup> (1) everything is composed of energy, from the atoms of physical reality to the subtle bodies that structure the human self (Bailey 1953, 35–36); (2) physical and psychological functions correspond to a system of “seven major centres of force” located in the “etheric body” (45, 144–99);<sup>47</sup> (3) healing is achieved by restoring the unimpeded “flow” of energy, which the esoteric healer achieves by directing a “stream of energy” to the center associated with a patient’s disease (101, 205); (4) “energy ever follows thought and goes where the thought is focussed” (101). The healer is thus instructed to imagine the pouring out of energy and visualize the patient receiving it (104–105), serving as a “pure channel” (677).

Similar to the *fluidum*, the occult ether, and New Thought vibrations, Bailey’s notion of energy was not inanimate but responsive to attention, thought, and intention. The energetic turn in her cosmology and anthropology effectively recast occult etherology and translated it into a program for training what could be termed ‘energy workers.’ Bailey thus functioned as a hinge joint between nineteenth-century occultism and contemporary energy healing (cf. Zoehrer 2025).

46 For a comparative analysis of the term ‘energy’ in Reiki and Therapeutic Touch, see Justin Stein’s contribution in this volume.

47 *Esoteric Healing* features the most elaborate exposition of Bailey’s highly influential *cakra*-system (Leland 2016, 222).

## 8 Discussion: Characteristic Aspects of Occult-Physicalist Agents

Above historical outline presented five major conceptions of an occult power that were framed in physicalist terms and seeded the notion of subtle energies. Based on this exposition, the following eight characteristic aspects may be distilled.

First, *universalism*. The various ideas of a subtle force-substrate share the assertion of an agency that operates on physical, biological, and mental levels. Extrapolating the key property of physical energy—the ability to convert into various forms—subtle agents are imagined as universal mediums of transformation. In contrast to mainline physics, their semantic spectrum stretches from the material to the impalpable (i.e., the mental, interpersonal, and divine). Belief in an ethereal medium works as a heuristic to conceptually bridge perceived gaps between bodily and spiritual dimensions of human experience. Furthermore, as the contributions in this volume will elaborate, subtle energies operate as a universal currency, bridging distinct domains. They enable connections such as the transmission of ideas from antiquity to modernity, syntheses of “Eastern” spirituality with “Western” science, the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, the transmutation of the sexual drive into mystical experience, and the amplification of bodily vitality into collective power.

Second, *claims of objectivity*. Presuming a quasi-physical nature allows the conception of occult powers as something objective and hence malleable. Reflecting the shifting state of the art in the field of physics, the imponderable *fluidum*, Odic emanations, etheric vibrations, and the wave function of subatomic physics subsequently added to the ideological matrix from which the notion of subtle energy emerged. Whereas the character of these concepts historically moved from intuition (*Anschauung*) to abstraction, they unite around the idea of an invisible influence that directly affects immanent, physical reality. A postulated fine-material substance reinforces the claim that a certain ritual or treatment is effective—be it for the purpose of healing, spiritual self-refinement, or contacting higher entities.<sup>48</sup> The notion allows practitioners to explain (or rather imagine) the ‘mechanics’ underlying the psychosomatic chain of body, subconscious mind, and consciousness.<sup>49</sup>

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48 The German term *feinstoffliche Energie* (literally: fine-material energy) more obviously underscores the imagination of subtle energy as ethereal ‘stuff’ (cf. Koch and Binder 2013, 21).

49 Despite claims of objectivity and the construction of scientific frameworks, many practitioners would still concede that the concept “has eluded science in respect to its detection, measurement and theoretical understanding” (Alegretti 2020, 124).

Third, *implicit metaphors*. A widespread tendency among occult and holistic authors has been to take up qualitative, metaphorical descriptions of abstract physical concepts (e.g., magnetism, ether, energy, or quantum entanglements), and then move into speculative realms where such descriptions are literally identified with a universal life principle or extrapolated to denote mystical states (Hammer 2001, 239, 269; cf. Aspren 2011, 133). Of particular influence were the fluidal, quasi-hydraulic descriptions prevalent in mesmerism that still reverberate in the field of energy healing when practitioners describe the healing process by means of vivid and intuitive images such as “letting the energy flow,” “transmitting energy,” or “balancing energies” (Werthmüller 2005, 34). By contrast, in modern physics, energy is not treated as a tangible substance and thus does not ‘flow’ in the conventional material sense.<sup>50</sup> Implicit metaphorical language is common among practitioners because it effectively translates abstract, distant concepts into ones that are familiar, embodied, and grounded in lived experience (cf. van Rijn in this volume).<sup>51</sup>

Fourth, *vitalism*. A defining feature of occult physicalism is its opposition to a materialist narrative of life and the universe. The formal definition of energy by Helmholtz intended to disprove the existence of a life force beyond physical principles. Nonetheless, *fluidum*, *Od*, ether, the vibrations of New Thought,

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50 The problem of postulating ‘flows’ of subtle energies, which suggests a dynamic involving etheric substances, was already highlighted by Fritjof Capra (b. 1939), the Austrian-American physicist, author, and reluctant figurehead of the New Age wave of the 1980s. In *The Turning Point* (1982), Capra regarded quasi-physical terms that are typically used in the context of energy healing—such as fluctuation, rhythm, vibration, or resonance—as “metaphors describing the dynamic patterns of self-organization” (Capra 1988 [1982], 340). He argued that these metaphors would describe the principal features of complex dynamic systems—in this case living organisms—without necessarily referring to measurable physical parameters. Similarly, Capra rationalizes the notion of *qi*, which he understands to denote not a subtle substance but the principle of vital flow itself, that is, the circulation of fluids within the body or the continual exchanges between an organism and its environment (*ibid.*, 314). However, Capra’s rational position remains a minority view within the holistic milieu.

Even within the framework of physics, associating energy with fluidal metaphors are not too far-fetched. So-called conserved quantities—including energy, linear momentum, angular momentum, and electric charge—can be conceptualized as immaterial substances to some degree. In this sense, energy transformations are often metaphorically described in terms of ‘flow’—that is, transfer—of the *properties* from one form (or physical system) to another, without denoting the literal movement of a material substance (cf. de Bianchi 2020b, 239).

51 Although metaphors are a typical element in the genre of occult physicalism, it must not be overlooked that progress in science itself is often driven by the use of metaphors and similes that only retrospectively were identified as such. A prime example is the now redundant hypothesis of ether that has led to the discovery of the laws of electromagnetism.

and the notion energy itself were repeatedly associated with vitalist semantics. Occult authors—both Western and Asian—adhering to vitalist ideas would seek additional support for their stance in pre-scientific, non-European physiological and medical discourses (see next chapter). Vitalistic agencies are integral to contemporary holistic practices, where ‘subtle energy’ and ‘life energy’ are often used interchangeably (cf. Werthmüller 2005, 35).

Fifth, *consciousness*. Physics proper is restricted to the study of inanimate matter and its motion through time and space. On a surface level, the strong association between energy and consciousness in alternative religion thus appears somewhat paradoxical. But a closer examination of how physical phenomena and theories are described in the source material reveals an underlying anthropomorphic style of messaging. Anthropomorphic imagery attracts lay readers more than purely technical explanations, which is why it is found so common in popular literature on physics (Leane 2007, 104). What Edward Slingerland observed for adherents of naturalistic physicalism applies even more so to proponents of occult physicalism: “It is clear that human beings, no matter how professionally or intellectually committed they are to physicalism, feel a constant compulsion to project agency onto the inanimate” (Slingerland 2008, 283). Subtle energies are a striking example for how the language of physics is used to convey an inherently anthropocentric worldview that particularly stresses the power of the mind.<sup>52</sup>

Sixth, *divine qualities*. While insinuating the claim of physical materiality, the deeper semantics of occult powers may invoke divine qualities. Lévi’s ‘astral light,’ Blavatsky’s ‘Fohat,’ Evans’ ‘primal force,’ and Bailey’s ‘Energy’ explicitly featured the property of an all-pervading and life-giving entity. As Albanese observed for the New Age movement, “[l]ike all of American metaphysical religion [...], it discovered that the no-longer-secret name of God was Energy” (2007, 495). The latent ‘vertical’ dimension is additionally underscored in the modern yogic discourse on subtle energies and energy healing modalities such as Reiki or Pranic Healing (Stein 2019; Zoehrer 2020; 2021; cf. next chapter). However, divinity remains only an optional semantic layer that cannot be generalized for all concepts of subtle energy.

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52 Echoes of Esalen’s discourse of energy and human potential reverberate in contemporary fringe research on consciousness. Nanci Trivellato, for example, defines “Energetic fluidity” as “an intrinsic aspect of each individual, varying according to one’s evolutionary level” and malleable “at the command of the consciousness” (2020, 62). In the same vein, energy work amounts to a form of self-therapy that is aimed at “unblocking” stagnant energies and increasing “energetic fluidity” in order to optimize individual performance. As in mesmeric and New Thought texts, fluidal metaphors are used to connect consciousness and energy (ibid., 85–86; cf. de Bianchi 2020a, 6).

Seventh, *subtle technologies*. Metaphors of energy, when embodied and enacted, have manifested in rituals, aesthetics, stories, and machines. Conceptions of occult powers have resulted in a plethora of applications that aim to channel their transformative effect. The means for accessing, expressing, and/or utilizing what has been perceived as a superfine agency encompass *inter alia* (1) mind-body practices as ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault); (2) auto-suggestion and positive thinking; (3) entheogenic rituals (cf. Hanegraaff in this volume); (4) energy healing; (5) *fengshuí* and comparable forms of living space arrangement; (6) aesthetical forms, i.e., music, visual arts, and dance; (7) science-fiction and *anime*; and (7) device-based activities including radiesthesia, biofeedback, and bioresonance treatment. Whereas the notion of subtle energy remains contested, epistemic congruence with mainline science has been much less relevant to practitioners than the experiential and practical dimension.

Eighth, *the ambivalent role of scientific authority*. Scientific theories have continuously served as an authoritative reference point for notions of hidden powers, presenting them in a widely accepted language and thus endowing them with an aura of credibility. Notably, Mesmer argued for his iatrophysical treatment in accordance with the state of physics of his time. Influential proponents of spiritualism who argued for an ethereal agency looked back on outstanding scientific careers (e.g., Reichenbach, Crookes, and Lodge). The inversion of scientific naturalism seemed a feasible way to rationalize the belief in the world of spirits, occult forces, and the power of the mind. However, whereas some mesmerists, spiritualists, occultists, and New Thinkers sought confirmation for their worldview in science, others still regarded ancient wisdom teachings as superior sources of knowledge (e.g., Du Potet, Lévi, Blavatsky, and Evans).

Against the backdrop of the rise of physics as the paragon of exact science and objectivity, the retreat of *Naturphilosophie* from academic discourse, and academic psychology still in its formation stage, the central function of subtle agencies was to bridge the physical and subjective realms of reality via one unifying substrate. “*Naturphilosophie* has lost its reputation” (*die Naturphilosophie hat ihr Ansehen verloren*), as Fechner pointedly formulated it (1851, iii). How a credible outlook could be preserved that approached the ensouled side of nature at the same level of methodological rigor as science was a lingering question. Mesmer presented the iatrophysics of *fluidum* as an enlightened explanation to refute the belief in spiritual entities underlying exorcist healings. However, already latent in Mesmer’s physicalist system was the role of will power in the mesmerist, which was magnified in Puysegur’s school. Among early nineteenth-century mesmerists in France, *énergie* meant

mental energy and constituted a key component in effectively magnetizing subjects. The French psychological turn set the stage for hypnotherapy and thus the complete psychologization of mesmerism under Braid. In contrast to this development, some apologists of mesmerism attempted to preserve its physicalist framework. Newnham reinterpreted the *fluidum* as the transformative, vital principle of nature and christened it 'energia.' In a similar vein but with the authority of an experimental scientist, Reichenbach postulated that his *Od* would constitute a cosmic force that is the root of all physical, chemical, biological, and mesmeric phenomena. The popular reception of Reichenbach's extensive series of experiments with 'sensitives' and his natural explanation for spirit manifestations fueled public interest in spiritualism. Building on nineteenth-century enthusiasm for mesmerism, *Od*, and séances, the Theosophical Society was founded with the purpose to investigate occult forces yet to be recognized by science as well as their effects in nature and the human psyche. The Theosophical endeavor inspired a host of other occult authors and groups to spread the belief in some form of ethereal or energetic substrate in making the case for the power of the mind over material reality. Well into the twentieth century, physical science still set the standard of proof required for the public acknowledgment of hypothetical agents. Thus, Tiller, the aforementioned physicist and figurehead of 'New Age science,' claimed to investigate subtle energies in a manner that would "lay the foundations for 'Subjective Science' on an equal footing with our present 'Objective Science'" (1977, front matter).

Although proven untenable by the scientific community, speculations around *fluidum*, *Od*, ether, mind vibrations, and subtle energy inspired the imagination of magnetic healers, spiritualists, psychics, occultists, and contemporary holistic practitioners alike. They recycled refuted theories as misjudged discoveries that held out the promise to usher in a new era of scientific and spiritual progress once their truth had been widely recognized. Occult anticipations of the imminent scientific proof of nature's finer forces sparked off a topos that could be called 'futuristic retro-science.' It underscored the dilemma of a 'discovery' that supposedly stood on the verge of a paradigm shift, whereas its ultimate scientific breakthrough was constantly delayed due to its subtlety. Hence the ambivalent role of science in the discourse of occult physicalism: whereas the social prestige of science and the technology it produced were undisputed, science was not 'advanced' enough to recognize the significance of a cosmic, subtle agent.

Interest in hidden powers of nature was immensely driven by ideological motives. The rise of empirical science from the eighteenth century onward went hand in hand with efforts to prove the limitations of a materialist vision

of the world. The quest for a single, all-encompassing force-substrate could be viewed as part of the reaction against the perceived disintegration of modern society, the differentiation between nature and mind (or spirit), science and religion, and the divergence of academic disciplines. Evidence of a divine or universal agency would preserve the *one* ultimate reality at the root of *all* physical, biological, psychological, and alleged occult phenomena (cf. Hanegraaff 2006, 885–86). The postulation of such a vitalistic and intelligent cosmic power formed the basis for occult ‘theories of everything,’ that is, claims of a unified realm behind the phenomenal world of matter and mind (*unus mundus*) that is accessible to the adept (see Zoehrer 2025; cf. Tiller 1979). This pursuit of scientific and metaphysical knowledge as an integrated undertaking reinforces the affinity of occultism to *Naturphilosophie*, although most occult authors were far from developing a rigorous philosophical system.

## 9 Concluding Remarks

What distinguishes subtle energies as ‘subtle’ is that they are neither measurable nor verifiable through the established means of physics. However, the clear-cut demarcation between physics and non-physics is already the distilled and sanitized result from a centuries long process of boundary work. As the above sketch has attempted to show, the discourse on imponderable forces, powers, and energy was complex and involved physicians, physiologists, physicists, as well as scientific laypersons. Ideas of hidden, subtle powers (and corresponding substrates) were much less an afterthought to physics or its deficient imitation; rather, they developed in close contact with scientific discourse and often as an integral part thereof. Nonetheless, the framework of the reductionist, quantitative approach of physics was ultimately unsuitable for facilitating concepts of quasi-material agencies that were deemed outside the scope of systematic and exact experimental research.

From a religious studies perspective, the conception of occult powers must be viewed with regard to their experiential and performative implications. Their semantic vagueness was a feature, not a bug. The term’s lack of precision increased its degree of suggestive potential. What subtle energies and their preceding models insinuate is both an ontological and an applicative universality: there is some kind of agency perfusing the cosmos that operates on material, vital, mental, and/or divine levels; and this all-encompassing agency is in principle accessible to humans (that is, the initiate). Its accessibility is underscored by emphasizing analogies that are closer to embodied and lived experience (e.g., self-healing potential or the mind-body relationship) rather

than formulaic physical theories. Imaginations of a universal force-substrate thus may be understood to represent the extension of the human mind and body. The ontological premise of a psycho-physical continuum expands and potentiates the human self. Such an extended self-image suggests a path of empowerment that grants the adept or practitioner methods of harnessing a powerful cosmic medium. The one who knows how to tap into this medium is assured to attain self-transformation, healing, and direct control over physical reality.

In the cultural context of late modernity, scientific discourses on hidden powers inherent in nature have functioned as a counter-narrative to positivistic naturalism. After the loss of an inherently teleological universe, humans can only be described as biological machines. The quest for a single, unifying cosmic principle could be interpreted as a reaction to the differentiation of the sciences, reflected in the fragmented conceptions of the modern self and hence his sense of estrangement. Paradoxically, the paradigm for late modern occult forces is Mesmer's *fluidum*, the linchpin of a decidedly physicalist, mechanistic worldview. Mesmer's—*avant la lettre*—'holistic' narrative deemed two principles sufficient to lay the basis for science, medicine, religion, and a utopian vision of a harmonious society: matter and its fluidal motion (Wolfart 1814). Although the psychological dimension in animal magnetism was already made explicit in Puységur's school, occultists repeatedly fell back to physicalist formulations of a hidden, cosmic power.

'Energy' has become such a persistent notion in twentieth-century holistic contexts because its implicit semantic range has always pointed beyond the physical level. Trending ideas in physics—be it string theory, dark matter, or the Higgs-Boson (the 'God particle' that supposedly keeps the universe together)—have met with a much less enthusiastic reception. A likely reason is that their meanings are too far from the human experience of feeling energetic.<sup>53</sup> They simply lack the anthropomorphic character of 'energy';

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53 Even where such contemporary theories are employed for religious-therapeutic purposes, they are often still subsumed under 'subtle energy' as the overarching category (e.g., Kronn and Kamp 2022; Strashun 2023). Among holistic practitioners, a serious rival to the concept of 'subtle energies' is that of the 'field.' Field is a shorthand for a conglomerate of various terms borrowed from physics, for example, 'energy field,' 'zero point field,' or 'field of quantum fluctuation' (McTaggart 2008 [2001]). The term has moreover been applied to describe holistic anthropologies, e.g., the 'human biofield' (Brennan 1988), as well as parapsychological phenomena via the 'morphic field'—a hypothetical medium discussed by the English biologist Rupert Sheldrake (b. 1942) (cf. Hanegraaff 1998, 73–74; Aspren 2014, 65). Sheldrake derived his notion from theories of morphogenetic fields that were first introduced in embryological research during the 1910s, while additional

which would render them valuable for non-scientific applications. Another possible reason for the cultural inertia of 'energy' is that the term has come to be conjoined with Asian theories of subtle physiology. This opened the way for interpretations of subtle energy to transcended Western physicalist paradigms and reinforced a transcultural discursive stream that continues to mesmerize a global audience.<sup>54</sup>

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influences from Henri Bergson's (1859–1941) *élan vital*, C. G. Jung's (1875–1961) 'collective unconscious,' and the Theosophical 'Akashic records' are likely. Holistic fields share with comparable ideas of subtle energy the semantics of a vivid psycho-physical continuum but draw from the conceptual metaphor of 'order' rather than 'flow.'

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# Historical Roots of ‘Subtle Energies’: Occult Orientalism

*Dominic Zoehrer*

Prana is not exactly breath. It is the name for the energy that is in the universe.

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA (1863–1902)<sup>1</sup>



## 1 Introduction: from Projections of a ‘Mystic East’ to Entangled History

When occultists, yoga instructors, and holistic healers speak of ‘energies’ they frequently resort to an alleged ancient knowledge of the East. Their sympathetic view of the Orient serves as the canvas on which their own predefined ideas of a cultural ‘other’ are projected. Already in antiquity, an ancient wisdom narrative that praised a tradition transmitted from India via Chaldea and Egypt to Greece was a common topos, later revived in the Renaissance with the belief in a *philosophia perennis* (Strube 2023a). In the nineteenth century, German Romantic historiographers associated ‘Oriental’ doctrines with contemporary theories of mesmerism, somnambulism, clairvoyance, magic, and contemplation (Baier 2009, 200–243). The occult orientalism propagated by New Thought authors and Theosophists reified earlier Romantic and American Transcendentalist imaginations of a superior wisdom of the East (Christy 1932; Jackson 1975; Versluis 1993). Such enchanted visions of South and East Asia were additionally fueled by the academic construction of ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Buddhism’ in the nineteenth century, leading to the propagation of a ‘mystic East’ that harbors profound spiritual teachings allegedly absent in the ‘materialistic West’ (cf. Jackson 1981; King 2005; Partridge 2019, 22–25).

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1 Vivekananda 1899 (1896), 132.

‘Orientalism’ initially described the assumption of a supposedly superior European cultural identity juxtaposed to an Oriental ‘other’ (Said 1978). Surpassing colonial and post-colonial identity politics, the term has advanced to encompass a far more complex process of exchange and amalgamation. Karl Baier (2016) demonstrated these nuances of orientalism in the case of the early Theosophical reception of *cakra* theories.<sup>2</sup> Following the argument put forth by the anthropologist Gerd Baumann (1953–2014), Baier questioned the interpretation of orientalism as a binary opposition between East and West. He pointed out that Helena P. Blavatsky’s (1831–1891) and her co-Theosophists did not simply promote a romanticized, ‘positive’ orientalism but rather held the view of a technically and socially advanced West, while conceptualizing the East as a repository of wisdom that mirrors the spiritual deficits of the West. Departing from this partially ‘negative,’ partially ‘positive’ orientalist vision, the early Theosophists ultimately opened a transcultural conversation that transformed the notion of *cakras* from an element of South Asian traditions to an iconic feature of global popular culture (ibid.). The Theosophical Society was thus a key player in a broader discourse of what is here referred to as ‘occult orientalism’—a discourse in which both ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ actors participated.

Baier’s application of a refined model of orientalism to the Theosophical context integrates two distinct scholarly perspectives (Cantú 2021). The first view focuses on Euro-American conceptions of a spiritually advanced Asia that criticized Western culture while clothing preconceived ideas in the garb of Eastern wisdom (see Rudbøg and Sand 2019). This gaze upon the Orient as the wellspring of wisdom has more to do with imagined identities than actual references to Asian thought. The second view recognizes that simple demarcations between historical and imagined traditions of the East are complicated by the fact that both Euro-American *and* Asian authors engaged in constructing the Orient. It turns the attention to protagonists of diverse cultural backgrounds and their collaboration and competition which ensued in global, transcultural entanglements (e.g., see Krämer and Strube 2020; Strube 2022). Both approaches—examining visions of the spiritual supremacy of the ‘East’ and the hybrids emerging from the encounter between ‘East’ and ‘West’—shine a light on how ‘subtle energies’ (a theme closely related to but not identical with subtle bodies including *cakra* conceptions) have been conceptualized in the alternative religious milieu.

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2 *Cakras* (Sanskrit, literally: wheel or circle) denote subtle force centers visualized on the human body, typically along its central axis.

The blurring of the lines between ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ thought has contributed to a thrust of hybridized ideas and practices that led to the formation of a global ‘esoteric’ current (Asprem and Strube 2021). Exemplifying this process for the South Asian context, Julian Strube (2021) has argued that an ‘entangled historical exchange’ in the late nineteenth century gave rise to a distinctively transcultural brand of occultism. This process was accelerated by Orientalist Studies, comparative studies of philology and religion, and European colonialism on the one hand, and Indian reformers and intellectuals, as well as the multinational Theosophical Society on the other hand.

Western imaginations of a mystic East naturally led to the interest in China—next to India another candidate for the cradle of *philosophia perennis*, i.e., the belief in an eternal, universal truth constituting the core of the world’s philosophical and religious teachings. Only recently has scholarship extended the investigation of the emergence of esotericism (including occultism) as a transcultural network of movements to include China (Pokorny and Winter 2024a). Compared to China, Korea, and Vietnam, research on ‘occult East Asia’ has been mostly conducted in relation to Japan, where esoteric themes from Euro-American authors were welcomed, creatively integrated with local traditions, and exported back to the West (e.g., Gaitanidis and Stein 2019; Yoshinaga 2021).

The complexity of the East-West encounters sketched above must be kept in mind when exploring conceptions of subtle energy attributed to Asian origins. A historical examination of how South and East Asian notions of hidden forces entered a global occult discourse does not allow for their clichéd characterization as pristine ‘Eastern’ wisdom teachings or their distorted ‘Western’ appropriations. This chapter outlines how three of the most salient orientalist types of an ethereal power—*kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qì/ki*—have been translated as ‘energy.’ These cases will illustrate how occult orientalism has influenced the idea of subtle energies, and how this idea is interlocked with reactions to the globalization of Western-style science.

## 2 *Kuṇḍalinī*: from ‘Electricity Personified’ to ‘Evolutionary Energy’

*Kuṇḍalinī* (literally: the coiled one) plays a central role in various psychophysical techniques that were first conceived in South Asian traditions of yoga and tantra from the eighth century onward. It is the name of a subtle entity generally believed to lie dormant in the *mūlādhāra*, the lowest *cakra* of the body located at the base of the spine. The practitioner’s aim in awakening and

cultivating *kuṇḍalinī* by the appropriate means is twofold: to realize transmutative, divine enjoyment (*bhoga*) and attain spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) (White 1997, 134, 208, 219–20).

In the *fin-de-siècle*, *kuṇḍalinī*-based practices attracted the attention of both Indian and Western Theosophists as a key to unlocking superhuman abilities (*siddhis*). Blavatsky's last major book, *The Voice of Silence* (1889), described *kuṇḍalinī* as “the ‘fiery power,’” “the ‘Serpentine,’” and “one of the mystic ‘Yogi powers’” (76). She warned her readers of the potentially lethal nature of this “electro-spiritual force, a creative power which when aroused into action can as easily kill as it can create” (78).<sup>3</sup> While associations with ‘force,’ ‘fire,’ or ‘electricity’ dominate in Blavatsky's accounts, her description of *kuṇḍalinī* as a latent power transcending the biological framework of the human self and hovering between the material and mental levels of reality already covers central features of what later occult and yogic authors would identify as ‘energy.’

The conception of *kuṇḍalinī* as a natural force belonging to the sphere of physics was suggested decades before in a series of articles titled “The Dream of Ravan: A Mystery” and published in the *Dublin University Magazine* between 1853 and 1854. According to Baier, this is “one of the earliest, if not the first, English texts to refer to *kuṇḍalinī*,” whereas the term is mentioned only once in a short footnote to a translated citation of the *Jñāneśvarī* (1290), a tantric commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* written in the Marathi language (Baier 2016, 327; cf. Cox 2022, 77–81). The section passionately described the blissful, rejuvenating, and thaumaturgical condition attainable by a yogi when rousing the “serpentine Power.” In addition to its snake- and goddess-like features, the author noted that the “extraordinary Power” of *kuṇḍalinī* might be imagined to be “electricity personified” (N. A. 1854, 463).

In the January 1880 issue of *The Theosophist*, a European Theosophist by the pseudonym “Truth seeker” quoted from “The Dream of Ravan” and thus “unintentionally triggered a pro-tantric shift” in the Theosophical Society (Baier 2016, 327). The Bengali Theosophist and tantra apologist Baradā Kānta Majumdār

3 For the ambivalent stance of the early Theosophical Society toward tantra, see Baier 2016. An early Theosophical adaptation of tantric techniques for raising *kuṇḍalinī* based on a septenary system of correspondences between elements, principles, colors, states of consciousness, etc. was practiced in Blavatsky's Inner Group (est. 1890) (Leland 2016, 117–27). Charles Leadbeater (1847–1934) refers to Blavatsky in *The Inner Life* (1922), where he provides a short exposition of the dangers and utility of arousing the *kuṇḍalinī* (Leadbeater 1922, 298–309). George S. Arundale (1878–1945), president of the Theosophical Society Adyar between 1934 and 1945, offered a less dramatic introduction to the mysteries of *kuṇḍalinī* in his book *Kundalini: An Occult Experience* (1938).

further developed the interpretation of *kuṇḍalinī* as a fundamental physical principle. In his first contribution to *The Theosophist* in April 1880, Majumdār identified her as “the grand pristine force which underlies organic and inorganic matter. Modern science also teaches us that heat, light, electricity, magnetism, &c., are but the modification of one great force” (Majumdār 1880, 173, quoted in Baier 2016, 331).

In contrast to the physicalist notions of *fluidum*, *Od*, or ether discussed in the preceding chapter, claims to scientific legitimacy of *kuṇḍalinī* drew not only from physical but also to a large extent from psychological theories. With its decidedly psychological bent, *kuṇḍalinī* advanced to become a key term in the Euro-American religious-therapeutic milieu of the twentieth century, most notably in the so-called Human Potential Movement and the field of Neo-Tantra, both emerging in the 1960s (Kripal 2007; Urban 2022), and transpersonal psychology which peaked during the 1980s (Grof and Grof 1986; Sanella 1987; Hofmann 2013). This development resulted in a semantic shift of this ambiguous Sanskrit term toward what Dimitry Okropiridze called an “amalgamation of South Asian religion with metaphysical psychology” (2017, 122). The transcultural transfer of *kuṇḍalinī* was not merely a unilateral process of ‘Western’ translation, appropriation, and reinterpretation. Rather, it meant the formation of a hybrid idea that involved the contributions of South Asian yogis, including Swami Vivekananda and Gopi Krishna (1903–1984), as well as European authors such as the British lawyer and Orientalist Sir John George Woodroffe (1865–1936) and the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) (*ibid.*, 133).

Besides other common descriptors, such as ‘serpent,’ ‘Shakti [*śakti*],’ ‘power,’ and ‘force,’ the term ‘energy’ can be traced to English-language material on *kuṇḍalinī* written by Woodroffe with the support of a large network of fellow Tantrikas (Strube 2022, 220–26). In their eponymous book first published in 1918, they rendered *kuṇḍalinī* as ‘Serpent Power’ while also denoting her as “the Divine Cosmic Energy in bodies” (Avalon 1924 [1918], 1). The idea of a god-like energy likewise applies to the notion of ‘Prāna’ (breath), a form of ‘Vāyu’ (wind) that courses through the body as the “manifestation, self-begotten, the subtle, invisible, all-pervading, divine energy of eternal life,” derived from the female deity of *śakti* (*ibid.*, 76, 78). Thus, both *kuṇḍalinī* and *prāṇa* were translated as ‘energy,’ presumably first in the Bengali tantric/Theosophical context and subsequently as a firm practice among twentieth-century authors.<sup>4</sup>

4 The third edition of Woodroffe’s *Shakti and Shakta* (1929; first published in 1918) mentions ‘energy’ forty-one times. For the amalgamation of Shakta philosophy, Western science, and occultism in advocating for a ‘Religion of Power,’ see Strube 2022, 233–37.

In a seminar held at the Psychological Club in Zurich in 1932, Jung discussed *kuṇḍalinī* as a symbol of self-transformation. He also associated *kuṇḍalinī* with energy by characterizing the *mūlādhāra*, the ‘root cakra’ located in the perineum where the “sleeping beauty” supposedly rests, as “psychical energy, or the libido” (Shamdasani 1996, 23).<sup>5</sup> Among the attendees of Jung’s lectures on *kuṇḍalinī* was the scholar of religion Frederic Spiegelberg (1897–1994) (ibid., xxxvii), who participated in Jung’s Eranos symposia and taught Asian religions at Stanford University between 1941 and 1962. Almost four decades after Jung’s seminar, Spiegelberg contributed the introduction to the 1970 edition of the influential autobiography *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* (1971 [1967]) by Gopi Krishna.

The title of Krishna’s book brings to the fore the identification of *kuṇḍalinī* with ‘energy.’ Spiegelberg’s introduction gave Krishna the stage to present himself as an original Indian yogi unadulterated by Western thought. Elaborating on the problem of intercultural translation, he remarked that Krishna was “uneducated in Yoga, who yet through intense labour and persistent enthusiasm, succeeds in achieving, if not Samadhi, yet some very high state in Yoga perfection” (Spiegelberg 1970, 6). Due to the lack of a corresponding vocabulary in Western languages, he opined that the yogic “realm of inner body feelings” had never been fully translated (8). Spiegelberg portrayed Krishna, who lived most of his life in Kashmir and reportedly had his first *kuṇḍalinī* awakening at the age of thirty-four, as a self-taught yogi-experimenter who struggled to render his mystical experience understandable to Western readers. However, as Okropiridze (2017, 135–37) aptly observed, Krishna’s account heavily engaged in the syntax of positive orientalism and scientized language in a manner that clearly bears the imprint of Theosophy, Woodroffe, and Jung. Furthermore, Krishna’s autobiographical account was interspersed with commentaries by James Hillman (1926–2011), a Jungian therapist, that underscore Krishna’s acquaintance with Jungian thought while omitting traditional tantric sources.

Following his autobiography, Krishna published *Biologische Basis religiöser Erfahrung* (1971), which was introduced by a critical but largely favorable thirty-nine-page-long commentary by the German physicist and philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker (1912–2007), a student of Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976).<sup>6</sup> Notably, Weizsäcker avoided the term ‘energy’ in relation to *kuṇḍalinī*, which he defined as “evolutive potency” (*evolutive Potenz*; Krishna

5 For Jung’s notes from the four seminar sessions in the original German, see Jung 1998 (1932).

6 Literally: *The Biological Basis of Religious Experience*. The English version of the book was published under the title *The Biological Basis of Religion and Genius* (1972) in Ruth Nanda Anshen’s (1900–2003) series *Religious Perspectives*.

and Weizsäcker 1971, 26). In Krishna's chapters, the term 'force' (*Kraft*) predominates, whereas 'energy' appears only specified as 'life energy' (*Lebensenergie*) or 'psychic energy' (*psychische Energie*). Apparently, the dialogue between the yogi and the physicist led to a sharpening of notions. However, Weizsäcker's insistence on preserving exact physical definitions could not stem the tide of the discursive current on energy that had captured the psychological and religious-therapeutic fields.

It is significant that Krishna's writings were primarily aimed at an American audience that was already deeply immersed in the theme of energy, which by this point had acquired depth-psychological and erotico-mystical connotations. In 1962, Michael Murphy (b. 1930) and Richard Price (1930–1985)—who had both studied under Spiegelberg (Kripal 2007, 73)—founded the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, the Mecca of the Human Potential Movement and nodal point of the American counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. The central theme that sparked Esalen's program was the pursuit of unlocking and exploring the evolutionary 'Energy' that the founders believed to be latent in the human species (*ibid.*, 93). The chance to release their potential energies was promised to the participants of Esalen's series of lectures, workshops, and group therapies. These events aimed to increase a sense of "vitality" and "fulfillment" on the bodily, sexual, emotional, social, and spiritual levels (Leland 2016, 317). With a countercultural target audience hungry for self-realization, the Institute served as a major platform for authors who transmitted their own ideas of *kuṇḍalinī*-qua-energy to American seekers including the Gestalt therapist Claudio Naranjo (1932–2019), comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), breath workers Christina<sup>7</sup> (1941–2014) and Stanislav Grof (b. 1931), and psychiatrist Lee Sannella (1916–2010) (cf. White 1979; Thaler 2024).

Apart from Krishna, other notable Indian disseminators of *kuṇḍalinī*-based forms of yoga included the founder of Sahaja Yoga (est. 1970) Shri Mātājī Nirmalā Devī<sup>8</sup> (1923–2011), the founder of ЗНО (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization; est. 1969) Yogi Bhajan<sup>9</sup> (1929–2004), Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh<sup>10</sup> aka

7 Christina Grof had been a student of Campbell at Sarah Lawrence College, through whom she first encountered tantric themes. In 1973, she received an initiation by *śaktipāta*, the transmission of the goddess Śakti's cosmic powers, from Swami Muktananda (1908–1982), the school founder of Siddha Yoga (see Kripal 2007, 261–63). Tova Olsson's contribution in this volume further elaborates on Muktananda's lineage and influence. Keith Cantú's chapter explores the roots of the *śaktipāta* employed by the Tamil author Sri Sabhapati Swami (c.1828–1923/4).

8 B. Nirmalā Srivastava.

9 B. Harbhajan Singh Khalsa.

10 B. Chandra Mohan Jain.

“Osho” (1931–1990), and Amrit Desai (b. 1932).<sup>11</sup> These movement founders succeeded in making *kuṇḍalinī* a household name among American and European seekers during the latter third of the twentieth century.

The major spokespersons of *kuṇḍalinī* weaved together three distinct strands: (1) the accounts of autobiographical or other first-hand experiences to support the veracity of the transformative effects of a *kuṇḍalinī* awakening; (2) a tendency toward a scientized framing of yoga and tantra either in terms of physics, physiology, and evolutionary biology or psychology; and (3) the orientalist construction of the ‘East,’ particularly India, as the home of profound spiritual teachings lacking in the rational and materialist ‘West’—a dichotomy that in effect fueled an intense exchange between Euro-American and South-Asian authors, and resulted in hybrid conceptualizations of *kuṇḍalinī* (cf. De Michelis 2004; Madsen 2014; Okropiridze 2017; Strube 2022). Renderings of *kuṇḍalinī* into English—including ‘energy’—were more than unilateral translations of a simple term. In brief, rising from a fusion of the genre of spiritual biographies, Western scientific thought, and orientalist expectations of a sublime and ancient yogic path, *kuṇḍalinī*-as-energy evolved to become a globally recognized topos.

### 3 *Prāṇa*: from ‘Breath’ to ‘Cosmic Life Energy’

The Sanskrit term *prāṇa* literally means “breath.” Already in Vedic texts, *prāṇa* was used as a metaphor for vitality. In the discourses of the *Upaniṣads*, yoga, and South Asian medicine (*āyurveda*), *prāṇa* covered a wide semantic spectrum ranging from the cosmic vital principle and various physiological functions to the eternal, individual self (*ātman*) and the supreme being (*brahman*) (Johnson 2009, 241). Although the notion was part of the Vedic oral tradition at least from the eighth or seventh century BCE onward, it was not until the early nineteenth century that *prāṇa* caught the attention of European authors. Romantic philosophers and occultists speculated about the functional similarity of *prāṇa* and the mesmeric *fluidum*, a parallel that was first perceived by the French orientalist Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) in his Latin translation of the *Upaniṣads*, the *Oupnek’hat* (1801/1802) (Winter 2005; Baier 2009, 203–5). However, a number of other terms also served as candidates for postulating semantic correspondences, reflective of the dominant

11 Hugh Urban’s chapter in this volume illuminates the transformations of *kuṇḍalinī* in the sphere of Neo-Tantra, focusing on Rajneesh’s interpretation of *kuṇḍalinī* as sexual energy.

physical or physiological theories of the day. These included, among others, “life force,” “nerve spirit,” or “ether” (Windischmann 1832, 1347–48).

‘Energy’ was a rather late addition to the semantic reservoir of *prāṇa*, but, as in the cases of *kuṇḍalinī* and *qì*, became a preferred translation in the twentieth-century holistic milieu. The diffusion of the notion of energy beyond the realm of physics in the latter half of the nineteenth century correlated with what William Thomson (1824–1907; ennobled in 1882 as Baron Kelvin) coined as the “epoch of energy” (Smith 1998, 128). This phase in the history of science was unleashed by the conceptualization of energy championed primarily by German and British physicists. An early formulation of the principle of energy conservation was proposed in *Über die Erhaltung der Kraft* (1847), a seminal treatise of the physiologist and physicist Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894). Helmholtz’ work was enthusiastically perceived by Thomson and his Northern British circle as a major contribution to physical science from the early 1850s onward (Smith 1998, 127).<sup>12</sup>

Remarkably, von Helmholtz’s original research interest was not prompted by data derived from physical experiments but was motivated by physiological questions concerning the idea of ‘life force’ (*Lebenskraft*). Whereas his teacher, the physiologist and *Naturphilosoph* Johannes Müller (1801–1858), argued for the agency of a life force as the expression of purposive organization, von Helmholtz opposed this view and argued in favor of a new and rigorous theoretical foundation for physiological science. He found like-minded young allies in the Berlin-based Physical Society (*Physikalische Gesellschaft*)—established in 1845 by the physiologists Emil du Bois-Reymond (1818–1896) and Ernst Wilhelm von Brücke (1819–1892)—who sought to radically rid physiology of all remnants of life force and ‘spirit’ (*Geist*) in order to advance physiology along purely mechanistic lines (Smith 1998, 129–31).

Against this backdrop, it was a peculiar turn of events that ‘energy’—whose conservation von Helmholtz regarded as the proof *against* the hypothesis of a life force—was adopted by modern yogis in order to robe the notion of *prāṇa* in scientific garments. The English orientalist Horace H. Wilson (1786–1860), the first Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University (est. 1832), had still translated *prāṇa* as “air,” “breath,” “life,” “vitality,” and “power” (Wilson 1832, 586). However, by the early 1870s, meanings including “spirit,” “soul,” and “energy” were added to the list in the Sanskrit-English dictionary of Wilson’s successor Monier Monier-Williams (1819–1899) (Monier-Williams 1872, 654).

12 Von Helmholtz’s theory of vowel frequencies happened to be a crucial reference point for the occult breath therapist and opera singer Benno Max Leser-Lasario (see Magdalena Kraler’s contribution in this volume).

The Indian lexicographer Vaman Shivaram Apte (1858–1892) also translated *prāṇa* as “energy” (Apte 1890, 771).<sup>13</sup>

A vigorous early advocate of *prāṇa*-as-energy and corresponding cultivation techniques (*prāṇāyāma*) was the modern yoga pioneer Swami Vivekananda, a highly influential protagonist of both occult scientism and occult orientalism. Catering to his Western audience, Vivekananda presented an idealized form of yoga that *de facto* was far removed from ‘pure’ or ‘ancient’ South Asian traditions. Characteristic of the British-educated Bengali intelligentsia, his thought displayed the notable influence of English thinkers including David Hume (1711–1776) and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) as well as the syncretistic Hindu reform movement Brahma Samaj (est. 1828) (De Michelis 2004, 45–50). Vivekananda thus absorbed the scientific empiricism of modern European science while at the same time espousing the superiority of the Advaita Vedānta (non-duality, or the doctrine of absolute unity of *brahman* and *ātman*) over majority religions (Baier 2019, 245–55). He claimed to possess a higher knowledge that would allow him to tap into secret powers unknown to Western science, springing from timeless Hindu teachings and evidenced by direct experience. The structure of his narrative was clearly modeled after Theosophical and other occult templates but characterized by an explicit nationalist spin (*ibid.*, 248).

Vivekananda’s role model, the leader of the Brahma Samaj, and representative of Calcutta’s rising middle class, Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884) had conceptualized *prāṇa* as a divine, omnipotent “prime force” fully accessible to the “yogi scientist,” thus foreshadowing Vivekananda’s scientific program (quoted in Kraler 2022, 91–93). In his seminal book *Rāja Yoga* (1896), Vivekananda crafted the cosmological foundation for his technique of tapping into the powers of ‘Prana’ by synthesizing the mesmeric *fluidum*, occult interpretations of ether, force, and energy, and *Sāṃkhyan* metaphysics (Kraler 2022, 195–96). Believing “Prana” to infuse the mental and material levels of reality, he claimed that it was the

infinite, omnipresent manifesting power of this universe. [...] out of this Prana is evolved everything that we call energy, everything that we call force. It is the Prana that is manifesting as motion; it is the Prana that is manifesting as gravitation, as magnetism. It is the Prana that is manifesting as the actions of the body, as the nerve currents, as thought force. From thought, down to the lowest physical force, everything is but the

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13 Neither Monier-Williams nor Apte qualified energy as ‘subtle.’

manifestation of Prana. The sum-total of all force in the universe, mental or physical, when resolved back into its original state, is called Prana. (Vivekananda 1899 [1896], 30)

Keen to garner scientific backing for his theory of energy, Vivekananda succeeded in gaining the attention of Nikola Tesla (1856–1943). In a letter to the Sanskrit scholar and (by then former) Theosophist Edward T. Sturdy (1860–1957) dated February 13, 1896, he mentioned a brief encounter and conversation with the Serbian-American inventor and electrical engineer. He expressed his hopes that Tesla could “demonstrate mathematically that force and matter are reducible to potential energy” (Vivekananda 1989, Letter LVIII). Such a proof from an authority of Tesla’s stature was crucial to his project as it would have endowed him with a firm scientific foundation for dissolving his material dualism of ‘Prana’ and ‘Akasha’<sup>14</sup>—and their proposed physical equivalents of ‘force’/‘energy’ and ‘matter’—into his preferred Vedāntic monism, where the “Universal Mind, the Brahmā” corresponds to absolute reality (ibid.; cf. Pokazanyeva 2016, 339). Tesla’s equation never materialized and became redundant when Albert Einstein (1879–1955) proved the equivalence of mass and energy ( $E = mc^2$ ) in 1905—three years after Vivekananda’s death and thus without further consequences for his cosmology.

Nevertheless, the association of *prāṇa* with ‘magnetism,’ ‘life force,’ and ‘energy’ continued to be underscored in the occult arena by the prolific American author William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), who published a series of books under the pen name Yogi Ramacharaka. Following Vivekananda’s model, Atkinson conceived of *prāṇa* as a healing agent, a tool for self-development, and a means to attain psychic abilities (Zoehrer 2020; 2021; Kraler 2022, 294–98). Interpretations of *prāṇa* as ‘subtle force’ and ‘energy’ were further reinforced by leading yoga proselytizers of the twentieth century who pursued the strategy of combining Sanskrit and scientific terms, including Sri Yogendra (né Manibhai Haribhai Desai; 1897–1989), Paramahansa Yogananda (né Mukunda Lal Ghosh; 1893–1952), and Swami Sivananda (né Kuppaswami Iyer; 1887–1963).<sup>15</sup> Steeped in this scientific discourse of modern

14 In Vivekananda’s cosmogony, “Prana,” the source of all energy, is complemented by a second universal principle, that is, “Akasha” (from Sanskrit *ākāśa*: space, sky, or atmosphere), the primordial source of all matter. His choice of identifying *ākāśa* with ‘ether’ as an omnipresent magical substrate bears the mark of Theosophical influences, e.g., Blavatsky 1877 (cf. De Michelis 2004; Kraler 2022).

15 For an in-depth discussion of these personalities and their contribution to the development of breath cultivation techniques at the intersection of yoga, occultism, and hygienic culture, see Kraler 2022.

yoga, the aforementioned Gopi Krishna elaborated on the proposed connection between biology and the attainment of enlightenment. He construed 'Prana' as an "extremely fine biochemical essence of a highly delicate and volatile nature" stored in the brain and nervous system, or more exuberantly, as the "super-intelligent cosmic life energy" (Krishna 1970, 46–47).<sup>16</sup>

In a nutshell, and resembling the case of *kuṇḍalinī*, this rough sketch of the semantic evolution of *prāṇa* demonstrates the entanglement of both scientific and orientalist strands, chiefly spurred by the charismatic type of yogi scientists.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4 *Qi/Ki: from 'Steam of Boiling Rice' to 'Universe Energy'*

As indicated above, the orientalist variants of subtle energy emerged from appeals to non-Western traditional, pre-scientific forms of knowledge. References to culturally specific terms such as *mana*, *prāṇa*, and *qì* have been portrayed in the twentieth-century holistic milieu and alternative medicine as quasi-canonical synonyms of a universally acknowledged vitalistic agency (cf. Hammer 2001, 164–65). The universalism of subtle energies due to its

16 Krishna likened the relation of physical energy to the universe with 'Prana' to biological organisms: "In Yoga parlance Prana is life and life is Prana. Life and vitality, the sense used here, do not mean soul or the spark of the divine man. Prana is merely the life energy by which divinity brings to existence the organic kingdoms and acts on the organic structures, as it creates and acts on the universe by means of physical energy" (Krishna 1970, 109).

The metaphor of an architect working on matter to bring about the plethora of life indicates the teleological function of 'Prana': "Prana, starting with protoplasm and unicellular organisms, brings into existence the marvellous domain of life, endless in variety, exceedingly rich in shape and colour, creating classes, genera, species, subspecies, and groups, using the materials furnished by the physical world and the environment to create diversity, acting intelligently and purposefully with full knowledge of the laws and properties of matter as well as of the multitudinous organic creations it has to bring into being. While remaining constant and unaltered fundamentally, it enters into countless combinations, acting both as the architect and the object produced" (*ibid.*, 110).

Krishna thus regarded 'Prana' as a teleological principle that was ontologically distinct from inanimate matter. At the same time, he drew on physical traits such as "radiating," "moving," or "stuff": "Prana," he claimed, is "interwoven with our thoughts and actions, interpenetrating the atoms and molecules of matter, radiating with light, moving with wind and tide, marvellously subtle and agile, the stuff of our fancies and dreams, the life principle of creation, which is woven inextricably with the very texture of our being" (*ibid.*).

17 On the life and work of Dewanchand Varma (1872–c.1954), a yogi-scientist *par excellence*, see Léo Bernard's contribution to this volume.

quasi-physical quality is additionally emphasized by framing them as a phenomenon that is known under different names in a plethora of particular cultures. In the case of *qi* (Japanese variant: *ki*), the invocation of tradition ranges from long-standing philosophical, anthropological, and medical discourses (i.e., the Chinese notion of *qi* in the context of acupuncture) on the one hand to ‘imagined origins’ of practices that in fact emerged at much more recent dates (i.e., the transcultural development of *ki* as the occult power believed to be effective in Reiki) (Lüddeckens 2020).

The translation of *qi* as ‘(subtle) energy’ was no straightforward process. To begin with, *qi* designates a key term of East Asian thought. Its semantic levels embrace the natural element of air as well as more abstract metaphysical principles and moral qualities. Precursors of the character *qi* (氣) were possibly inscribed on oracle bones (Choe 1995, 41–54). Its logogram is a compound of two radicals, the phonetic *qǐ* (气, clouds) and the semantic *mǐ* (米, rice), hence signifying the ‘steam of boiling rice’ (Pokorny 2008, 44). The scholar Mòzǐ (fifth century BCE) used the character to describe breath, health, but also a form of deleterious vapor arising from dead bodies. Early Confucian philosophers offered diverse interpretations to capture the nature of *qi*. Mèngzǐ (fourth century BCE) regarded *qi* as a vital essence subject to the will, whereas Xúnzǐ (third century BCE) extended the locus of this essence to inanimate matter (ibid., 44–45). Around the third century BCE, the term entered the Chinese medical canon through the *Huángdì Nèijīng* (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor), where it conveyed the idea of a life-sustaining essence that manifests as breath, circulating bodily fluids, and mental activity (Zhang 1999, 76–77).

In debates with neo-Confucian scholar-officials during the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries suggested the semantic equivalence between *qi*, *aer* or *pneuma* (air), and *spiritus* (spirit) (Zhang 1999, 76). In the 1780s, the Beijing-based French Jesuit Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718–1793), a contemporary of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) and friend of the prince and scholar Hongwu (1743–1811), described Chinese folk healers through the lens of animal magnetism, describing them as “magnetizers” (Strube 2024, 24). Amiot reinterpreted the mesmeric *fluidum* and the restoration of its balance in terms of “activity in the Ki,” which he translated as “vital principle” (ibid., 23).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, *qi* belonged to a number of Chinese notions that were translated as ‘subtle energy.’ In 1856, the American missionary and sinologist Samuel Wells Williams (1812–1884) rendered “K’i” as “steam,” “breath,” “vital fluid,” “animal spirit” and “influence.” Meanwhile, “subtle energies” was one of the meanings he attributed to “Shin” (*shén* 神), the word for “deity,” “soul,” or “spirit” (Williams 1856, 81, 421). Two decades later, the German-born Protestant missionary-scholar Ernst Johann Eitel (1838–1908)

translated “K’i/Ch’i” as “breath,” “the principle of vitality,” and “physical energy.” He also interpreted two other terms as a form of energy, namely: “Tseng” (*jīng* 精), which signifies an element of Daoist-chemical physiology and means “essence of vitality” and “subtle energy” (Eitel 1877, 153, 797),<sup>18</sup> and “Ling” (*líng* 靈)—meaning deity, soul, and efficacious in modern usage—which Eitel translated as “spiritual energy” and “subtle breath” (369). Four years earlier, and in contrast to the above-mentioned dictionary entry, he had described “Hi” (*qì*), one of the core principles in the Chinese art of placement (*fēngshuǐ* 風水), as “vital breath or subtle energies” (Eitel 1873, 9).

The integration of the notion of *qì* into global occult thought occurred at a slower pace compared to *kuṇḍalinī* and *prāṇa*, before the term became a corner stone of various religious-therapeutic practices from the 1970s onward. An article entitled “Magnetism in Ancient China” that was published in *The Theosophist* of October 1879 interpreted *yīn* (陰) and *yáng* (陽) as the positive and negative poles of Reichenbach’s *Od* (Paladin 1879, 30), however, without any mention of *qì* as a healing agent. Blavatsky’s earliest comment on *qì* appears in a footnote to a discussion of a septenary anthropology supposedly contained in the ancient Zoroastrian scriptures. Citing from James Legge’s (1815–1897) recent translation of the *Yijing*, Blavatsky defined “Khi” as the sixth principle of the human self that signifies “breath” or “spirit.” It is “still material but purer than the zhiing [*jīng*] and is made of the finer and more active form of ether” (Blavatsky 1882, 22; cf. Legge 1882, 355).<sup>19</sup> The emphasis on the ethereal yet material and life-giving quality of *qì* was retained by the Japanese-American scholar of Buddhist thought and Theosophist Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō (1870–1966). In *A Brief History of Early Chinese Philosophy* (1914), Suzuki discerned between various semantics of *qì* including “subtle substance,” “universal energy,” psychical and life-animating agency, and “nervous system of the macrocosm” (Suzuki 1914, 22–24).<sup>20</sup>

Although Suzuki was widely read, the arguably foremost popularizers of the notion of *qì*/*ki* in the twentieth century were Traditional Chinese Medicine

18 The three notions of *jīng*, *qì*, and *shén*—all denoted as ‘subtle energy’—together constitute a triad known as the “Three Treasures” (*sānbǎo* 三寶). Since the thirteenth century, the Three Treasures have been a central element in the Daoist self-cultivation practice of “internal alchemy” (*nèidān shù* 內丹術) (Olson 1993). *Jīngqìshén* (精氣神) represents various levels of refinement and transmutation that is required for the Daoist practitioner to attain health and longevity (Despeux 2008).

19 The China-issue of *The Theosophist* (November 1942), edited by Arundale, identifies “chi’i” with “the life-breath (*prāṇa* or *jīva* [soul])” (N. A. 1942, 177).

20 Suzuki’s analogy between the nervous system and the macrocosm in explicating the nature of *qì* is reminiscent of Warren Felt Evans’ (1817–1889) generalization of “nervous energy” as the “universal, divine life-principle in nature” (see previous chapter).

(TCM), the *qigōng* movement, and Reiki (Unschuld 2018; Palmer 2007; Stein 2019).<sup>21</sup> In the 1970s, these currents aligned with Euro-American practices to form a globalized religious-therapeutic discourse on vital energies, which constitute a central axiom in the field of complementary and alternative medicine. In current histories of Chinese medicine, the ‘subtle’ or ‘finest’ material aspects of *qi* and its close association with the blood flow are still recognized. However, *qi* is now explained in terms of functions rather than of substance: its presumed effect lies in activating, warming, protecting, and transforming the body (e.g., see Ergil et al. 2011, 33–35).

The occult transformation of the idea and application of *qi/ki* in East Asia and beyond is most clearly exemplified by the genealogy of Reiki, a paragon of energy healing by means of the laying-on-of-hands. Reiki practitioners claim to transfer a power called *reiki* (literally: mysterious *ki* or atmosphere) that is capable of physical, mental, and spiritual healing. Introduced in 1922 by Usui Mikao (1865–1926), the conception of Reiki received enormous stimulus from the early twentieth-century import of American occultism into Japan, in particular the vitalist view of *prāṇa* and closely related mesmeric healing practices coined *inter alia* by Atkinson’s *The Science of Psychic Healing* (1906) (Stein 2019, 88–99). Since the 1970s, English-language texts interpret *reiki* as ‘universal life energy,’ a translation that was introduced by the Japanese-American Reiki proliferator Hawayo Takata (1900–1980) and reintroduced in Japan as ‘universe energy’ (*uchū enerugii* 宇宙エネルギー) in the 1980s (*ibid.*, 83).<sup>22</sup>

Justin Stein (2024) has outlined two distinct although not incompatible streams of translating *ki* into English: ‘*ki* as energy’ and ‘*ki* as mind.’ While the translations of *ki* in terms of energy (including vital force) became the dominant current by the 1970s, another way to render *ki* was in terms of ‘feelings,’ ‘mind,’ or ‘spirit’ (*ibid.*, 5). The latter was particularly endorsed by Tōhei Kōichi (1920–2011), a pioneering figure in the history of aikido (literally: the way of matching *ki*) who introduced the martial arts style to the United States from 1953 onward. Tōhei inherited the interpretation of *ki* as ‘mind’ and his focus on the mind’s power over the body from his teacher Nakamura Tempū (1876–1968). Nakamura was strongly impacted by New Thought teachings, specifically the books of Yogi Ramacharaka, which he had studied in the United States around 1910 (*ibid.*, 19). The path of aikido’s birth, development and overseas

21 For a filial ethnographical study of *qigōng* in the globalized context of the Chinese diaspora in New York, see Kin Cheung’s contribution in this volume.

22 Justin Stein argued that Takata began to “de-Japanize” Reiki by explaining it in terms of a divine origin in order to reach her American audiences in the postwar period (Stein 2019, 92–94). It is noteworthy that Atkinson had explicitly recognized a transcendent entity (i.e., ‘Infinite Being’ or ‘Infinite Mind’) as the source of the salutary “Power of the Universe” (Ramacharaka 1906, 189)—references that were dropped in early Reiki models.

export to American audiences thus ran parallel to that of Reiki. However, it also shows that despite drawing inspiration from the same Japanese-American occult discourse, ‘energy’ was not the only option for translating *ki*.

The American holistic milieu further merged orientalist with physicalist framings of subtle energy. This process is showcased by the journal *Subtle Energies*. Published by the Colorado-based International Society for the Study of Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine (ISSSEEM), the journal appeared tri-annually between 1990 and 2010.<sup>23</sup> According to its self-description, the journal was “designed to meet the needs of experimental scientists, other empirical researchers, clinicians, theoreticians, healers and involved laypersons who have scientific interest in consciousness, healing, and the dynamics of human potential” (ISSSEEM 2023). Such appeals to science notwithstanding, the true sources of knowledge about subtle, universal, and/or vital energies are to be found in the East. The following quotation from an issue of *Subtle Energies* in 2003 exemplifies the journal’s claim of an imminent synthesis of Western science and traditional Asian knowledge cultures:

While Western science and medicine is just discovering chakra centers and meridians, the interest and investigation into human energy fields around the body began over 5,000 years ago. [...] Spiritual traditions from India, for example, speak of a universal energy called Prana, which is defined as the basic source of all life. Prana is a part of a psycho-physical system, which consists of a dynamic network of subtle channels, ‘winds,’ inner air, or essences. The Chinese, since 3000 BC, have spoken of a vital energy, which they called Qi that is thought to be present in all matter. Attempts to manipulate this energy have been practiced by yogis for centuries. (Leigh et al. 2003, 79)

Portrayed as elements of ancient but superior bodies of knowledge, systems based on ‘Prana’ and ‘Qi’ are supposedly being rediscovered by the means of Western-style science and biomedicine. The future of science and medicine thus lies hidden in the past, waiting to be excavated through cutting-edge research. This passage illustrates how the contemporary holistic discourse on subtle energies, of which *qi* and *prāṇa* have been two outstanding prototypes,

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23 On the founders of the journal, see the previous chapter. A notable feature of *Subtle Energies* is the elaborate aesthetics of its cover pages. Its blend of religious motives, science imagery, and modern/psychedelic art could prove a worthwhile research subject in itself—especially if extended to the aesthetics of promotional materials and therapeutic spaces of energy healers.

continues a typically occult motif: an idealizing orientalism that goes hand in hand with the belief in scientific progress.

In short, the identification of *qi/ki* with energy illustrates once more the transcultural exchange of the occult orientalist type. Whereas early Theosophists showed only peripheral interest in *qi/ki*, the locus of its occult transformation was the reception of Atkinson's synthesis of yoga and mesmerism in pre-war Japan. From here the idea of *ki-as-energy* was imported to America (via Hawai'i) and globalized through the Reiki movement spearheaded by Takata.<sup>24</sup> Atkinson inspired the alternative rendering *ki-as-mind*, which, however, gave way to associations of *ki* with energy as a vital principle. This development occurred at the same time as the Western reception of *qi* in the field of alternative medicine. From the 1960s onward, *qi* was integrated via the meridian concept of TCM into modalities of energy healing, for example, Applied Kinesiology and its spin-off Touch for Health. A more systematic perusal of occult and holistic texts and movements might shed more light on Euro-American readings of *qi/ki* and their influence on contemporary healing systems, martial arts, and mind-body practices.

## 5 Discussion: Energy as a Product of Translation

Translation produces similarities between two languages while seeking to preserve the distinct original meaning of a word, text, and context. It is the attempt to solve the problem of cultural diversity by bridging difference and making the 'other' intelligible, at least approximately. Translation is necessarily achieved through a process of disembedding, reinterpreting, and integrating meanings into a transcultural discourse. This process is itself context-dependent and may obscure original meanings of a particular word while giving rise to new associations (Mikaelsson 2014). Translated notions may be generally understandable to cultural outsiders but always constitute re-conceptualizations of specific local semantics (cf. Casadio 2016, 37).

In the modern encounter between 'East and West,' the problem of translating profoundly different languages and writing systems has expanded and enriched vocabularies. This process has given rise to appropriations (and the resistance thereof), loanwords and neologisms, as well as new forms of cultural hybridity (Liu 1999a, 3–4). However, any examination of translanguing practice must take into account the particular socio-economic and political conditions

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24 Stein's contribution in this volume compares Reiki with Therapeutic Touch, another prominent school of energy healing with occult roots.

of translation and the targeted readership (Liu 1995, 2–10). East-West relations have been complicated by power asymmetries inherent in a colonial or hegemonial setting, leading to a politically charged tension between the ‘indigenous’ and the ‘global.’ This tension may be intensified, resolved, or reversed by acts of translations. Because of the power imbalance of the colonial and post-colonial eras, translations have been highly instrumental in the construction of a universalized, ecumenic modernity as the hallmark of globalization—although Western-dominated and thus contested (Liu 1999b, 34–37).

Against this backdrop, identifications of terms such as *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, or *qi/ki* with ‘energy’ reveals something about the cultural and political contexts that enabled such a translation. Alternative religious and medical notions of energy were neither fashioned in a one-sided process within indigenous traditions nor can they be considered purely Western projections of Eastern knowledge. They were instead the result of cross-cultural interpretations that have been informed by Oriental and religious studies, scientification, modernization, and anti-modernist responses. Thus, hypothetical identifications of Sanskrit, Chinese, or Japanese terms with ‘energy’ constitute less a discovery of exact equivalences than a conscious production of the interaction between Asian, European, and American protagonists from the late nineteenth century onward (cf. Strube 2022, 33).

Since translations of *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qi/ki* into the language of ‘energy’ did not occur in an ideology-free vacuum, it is essential to consider the religious, philosophical, and therapeutic interests that reverberate in such connotations. Contemporaneous thought influenced the efforts of philosophers, philologists, and proselytizers (in their Christian, occult, yogic, or therapeutic variant) to capture the essence of these terms by using prevalent Western conceptual categories. As in any translanguing practice, this process yielded a sequence of tentative translations, reflecting broader cultural trends.

Christian and scientific writings served European missionaries as important means in their pursuit for cultural supremacy. Likewise, their translation of authoritative native texts produced theological readings that reinterpreted or rather manipulated original semantics for evangelical purposes (Liu 1999b). Occultists—in particular in the Theosophical Society after its Indian turn—chose an inverse strategy: in their critique of Christian hegemony and mainline science, they appropriated local ideas and reintegrated them into their own ideological framework of perennial wisdom (Baier 2016). This pattern of synthesis and reinterpretation of non-European traditions was a central feature of late nineteenth and early twentieth century occult discourse that radiated into the postwar holistic milieu.

In the global discourse of occult orientalism, the recourse to ancient wisdom went hand in hand with a scientific dimension. Appeals to science reflected

the acceptance of the authority of Western-style science but not at the expense of 'higher' forms of knowledge. The fusion of 'energy' and orientalist references to tradition on the part of both Asian and Euro-American authors was thus colored by an ambivalent stance toward science and its ideological implications. *Kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qi/ki* encapsulate the themes of vitalistic agents, inherent healing powers, and/or transformative potentials, which oppose a reductionist, materialist point of view. The function of these terms ran parallel to the wider occult reaction to the socially superior role of science, its perceived deficiencies, and the worldwide power imbalances that were coupled with its meteoric rise in the late modern era. Anti-hegemonial agendas supported the topos of an ancient or revealed and hence superior knowledge. They embedded (supposedly) traditional anthropologies, cosmologies, and "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1988) into an alternative narrative. This strategy was especially adopted by occultists, the pioneers of modern yoga, and early advocates of energy healing (e.g., Pranic Healing and Reiki).

Under the particular historical condition of colonialism, modernization, and globalization, Eastern terms connoted with 'energy' acquired new meanings that must be sharply distinguished from earlier, pre-colonial contexts. Through their participation in a globalized discourse, *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qi/ki* came to constitute key terms in a distinctive conceptual web that involved imaginations of cosmic forces, vital agents, and occult skills. However, whereas the coinage of these terms as 'energy' was culturally and politically conditioned, this does not imply that the choice of this expression was necessarily arbitrary or externally imposed.

Three features of the notion of energy made it a likely choice for translating signifiers of a subtle agent. First, energy suggests the universal validity of a physical principle. The term 'energy' gained unparalleled traction in science and engineering from the 1850s onward. Matter and energy came to be regarded as the fundamental principles of physical reality. Recognizing and reacting to the political power of science, claims of hidden vital, healing, or self-transformative powers were reshaped in secular, physical terms. Associating ethereal, yet supposedly efficacious agents with 'energy' underscored their claimed objective nature and hence universal applicability.

Second, in its colloquial, non-physical sense, the term energy enabled the intelligibility of similar experiences across cultures. As shown in the previous chapter, energy emerged as a key theme in the Western alternative religious and therapeutic milieu in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Drawing from preceding mesmerist discourses, the semantics of energy covered a wide range—from nervous energy, life force, and the mind-over-matter principle to suggestive influence, universal mediums, and the qualities of a divine being. Next to its relevance as a scientific term, European languages retained

associations of ‘energy’ with subjective experiences described in vernacular language, e.g., vitality, vigor, and spirit. Thus, in the encounter with Asian theories of psychophysical practice and therapeutic interventions involving vital agents, ‘energy’ appeared to be a suitable expression. The term’s semantic flexibility not only suggested the possibility of comparison but also compatibility with Euro-American experiences.

Third, energy is analogous to renewal and transformative power. The ability of physical energy to manifest in various forms and shift from one form to another was reminiscent of the principle of transmutation in tantric and Daoist alchemy, whose practitioners aimed at the refinement of lower bodily fluids to attain higher mental or spiritual elixirs. The latter would allow practitioners not only greater mental control over themselves but also over their environment. Similarly, the term energy represented technological domination over the material dimension of life. Its presumed function as a transformative medium that is capable of communicating between the levels of inner/mental and external/material reality (including the human body) was already a recurrent theme in occult and New Thought texts (see previous chapter). This provided a template for translating Asian mind-body practices for secularized Western audiences. Furthermore, the transformative effect attributed to subtle energies was not reduced to the individual level but extended to social reform and nation-building. Modern yoga movements in India and *qigōng* movements in China have demonstrated how the belief in subtle energies could be channeled into collective efforts for political change (cf. De Michelis 2004; Baier 2019; Strube 2022; Palmer 2007; Ownby 2008; Penny 2012).

## 6 Concluding Remarks

Translations of *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qì/ki* as ‘energy’ exemplify the key dynamics that underlie occult orientalism. This chapter outlined how these terms were reinterpreted through yogis and energy healers, the late modern reaction to the hegemony of science, and (invented) Eastern traditions. In that process, ‘positive’ orientalist visions on the side of Western authors were outpaced by a translingual exchange that involved both Western and Asian protagonists. Among the ideological and social structures that prepared the religious-therapeutic discourse on energy were the Theosophical Society, the New Thought movement, the Bengali intelligentsia, strands of modern yoga, and the Japanese occult milieu around 1900. These networks prefigured the transcultural and ‘alternative’ character of the Human Potential Movement and the globalizing holistic milieu from the 1960s onward. In this light, the discourse

on energies shaped within the occult orientalist framework can be neither reduced to a unilateral Western projection nor postulated to be derived from unpolluted Asian traditions. Rather, it emerged from a vibrant exchange between Euro-American and Asian actors, and continues to be a hallmark of the contemporary culture of alternative spiritualities and holistic therapies.

A more systematic historical, philological, and comparative analysis would unearth how texts, practices, and movements surrounding subtle energies are related and how they still affect contemporary religious culture. Just as the term ‘supernatural powers’ has been a crucial guiding principle for defining and conceptualizing religion during the formation phase of religious studies (cf. Meylan 2017), much could be gained from applying ‘subtle energies’ as a *tertium comparationis*. As a comparative category, ‘subtle energies’ could be fruitfully employed for cross-culturally examining beliefs and practices centering on the mesmeric *fluidum*, life forces, ether, *Od*, *Orgone*, mind vibrations, *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, *qì/ki*, or *mana*. The term encompasses a range of agents that are imagined to endow practitioners or their targets with vitalizing, curative, and self-refining powers. To avoid the pitfalls of decontextualization and essentialism, ‘subtle energies’—used as a second-order category—should not be taken to signify a single, uniform concept but instead refers to highly heterogeneous discourses shaped by distinct cultural and historical backgrounds.

The above two-part exposition has shown that the notion of subtle energies has roots in two discernable strands here referred to as occult physicalism and occult orientalism. However, the fault line and cross connections between occult physicalism and occult orientalism only cover one aspect of a much wider mindscape. This vast discursive web also includes other areas in which subtle energies play (or have played) a key role, including physiological and vitalist theories, psychology, psychical research, body psychotherapy, martial arts, dance, music, visual arts, as well as fantasy literature and science fiction. A comprehensive review would cover these areas in more detail and thus reconstruct the development of what could be called a ‘globally entangled history of subtle energies’ (to adapt a phrase from Strube 2023b). In the absence of a single authoritative point of reference or a widely accepted emic definition, the concept of subtle energies inevitably remains conceptually fuzzy and dynamic. Yet it is precisely this semantic ambivalence and interpretational openness of ‘subtle energies’ that allows the notion to unfold its versatile performative potential.<sup>25</sup>

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**PART 2**

*Subtle Energies in Healing*





# Animal Magnetism's Conceptualization of Healing Energies: Comparing the Metaphors of Franz Anton Mesmer and Contemporary Practitioners

*Bastiaan van Rijn*

## 1 Introduction

Subtle energies are literally as well as figuratively hard to grasp as they are allegedly invisible, thus evading the other external senses. Therefore, different tools are necessary for the imagination to conceptualize what such energies are supposed to be like and how they are expected to act. The use of metaphors is one of the most important ways how practitioners answer these questions. By default, metaphors are good at translating the abstract into the familiar and the experience-far into the experience-near. A closer look at just how subtle energies are conceptualized through metaphors may therefore provide better insight into how practitioners think and work with such energies; in other words, how they transform something subtle into something tangible.

In this chapter, I will take up as case study the late eighteenth century healing practice known as animal magnetism and compare it to contemporary versions of the phenomenon—nowadays mostly referred to without the identifier 'animal.' By analyzing the metaphors used in both contexts by employing conceptual metaphor theory, I will show what remained the same in regard to the conceptualization of the active healing agent, what changed, and how contemporary magnetizers<sup>1</sup> differ from one another by comparing German-, French-, and Dutch-speaking practitioners. This comparison can only marginally include important contextual changes that influenced the practice of magnetism from the eighteenth century to the present. However, it allows for a level of theorizing on why certain things changed and others remained as they were. First, the consistency of metaphorical usage may have played a role in which features of magnetism survived the passage of time and which ones did not. Second, metaphors may have also played a role in how magnetic

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1 The words 'magnetizer' and 'practitioner' are used interchangeably in this chapter. However, it should be noted that contemporary practitioners rarely only practice magnetism; often, they identify themselves primarily as energy healers, naturopaths, or use other designators.

treatments were and are carried out. Third, conceptual metaphor theory can act as a bridge toward further implementation of cognitive theories. Of course, none of these points outweigh careful historical research. I therefore suggest that a combination of historical and cognitive—in this case conceptual metaphorical—analyses is a promising way forward in formulating interpretations on why practices—such as (animal) magnetism—grew over time as they did. The implications may be of use in researching similar phenomena that include conceptualizations of subtle energies as well.

In the next sections, a short overview of conceptual metaphor theory is given, specifically on the points that are relevant to the comparison and analysis. Thereafter, the metaphorical system of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815)—the originator of animal magnetism—will be examined, followed by a short postscript on animal magnetism in the nineteenth century. Subsequently, the metaphorical systems of contemporary German-, French-, and Dutch-speaking practitioners are analyzed and compared to both Mesmer and each other based on a corpus of thirty-six websites. Finally, the benefits of using conceptual metaphor theory in cases such as magnetism are presented in more detail as supported by the empirical findings.

## 2 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual metaphor theory is a cognitive linguistic way of investigating the manner in which humans fundamentally think. It is based on the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson and their book *Metaphors We Live By* (2003 [1980])—with the theory being significantly further expanded by them and others ever since.<sup>2</sup> The main claim of conceptual metaphor theory is that metaphors are much more than merely stylistic elements used in language. Instead, they are concepts that structure the way we see and experience the world at a basic level of our thought. A detailed description of the theory is beyond the scope of this chapter. Yet, three points of interest for the upcoming analysis are in order.

First, metaphors consist of two parts: the ‘target domain,’ which is the part of a metaphor that one wants to understand, and the ‘source domain,’ from which elements are taken and projected onto the target domain. Target domains are often either abstract or outside the reach of direct perception or experience, and therefore in need of elaboration by elements from source

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of some of the work that followed *Metaphors We Live By*, see Lakoff and Johnson 2003 (1980), 243–76; Evans and Green 2006, 322–25.

domains (Grady 1997, 26–28). Because the source domain is used to structure thinking on the target domain, the source domain can (to varying degrees) influence the way one thinks about the target domain. Lakoff and Johnson use the metaphor *TIME IS MONEY*<sup>3</sup> to show how the concept of money can influence the way time is perceived: when time is construed as a scarce and valuable commodity—such as money—then ideas that time can be wasted or that one can put a price on one's time (e.g., salary) will become prevalent in a given society. In the following, the word 'metaphor' will refer to linguistic expressions that hint toward a source domain, whereas 'concept' will refer to words that are part of the target domain. Lastly, 'terms' will refer to both metaphors and concepts.

A second point of interest is the systematicity of metaphors. Multiple expressions about a target domain can all point to a foundational metaphorical system that is used to understand that domain. An example of this offered by Lakoff and Johnson is the *THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS* system, which contains many familiar sayings, namely, that theories have certain 'foundations and frameworks,' need more 'support,' 'stand or fall' with certain 'solid' arguments, and so forth (Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980], 52–55; Johnson 1987, 105–6). These metaphorical systems, too, Lakoff and Johnson argue, structure the way we think about issues such as, in this case, scientific theories. Moreover, there should be a high degree of consistency within such systems (Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980], 41–45). To follow the same example, theories should be demolished or strengthened, rather than drowned or cured.

The third and last point of importance is the role of embodiment within conceptual metaphor theory. It has already been pointed out that source domains are often closer to perception or personal experience than target domains, which is why they can help in structuring target domains in the first place. The role of perception and experience is fundamentally connected to humanity's (mostly) shared embodied nature: the fact that we live our lives having the bodies we have makes certain ways of thinking almost inevitable. In his book *The Body in the Mind*, Johnson shows how terms such as *INSIDE* and *OUTSIDE*, *UP* and *DOWN*, and many more basic aspects of our daily embodied existence are essential to the way we speak and, more importantly, the way we think (1987, 112–38). For the present analysis, embodiment as such will be less important than the more general idea behind this concept, that is, that the closer source domains are to daily experience, the easier they will be to think with. At the same time, culture plays as big a role as embodiment and

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3 Small caps are often used within conceptual metaphor theory literature to refer to the unspoken conceptualizations behind linguistic expressions.

cognition do, and Lakoff and Johnson admit that it is impossible to disentangle one from the others (2003 [1980], chap. 4).

These three elements within conceptual metaphor theory are of importance for the upcoming analysis of animal magnetism. First, metaphors are not only necessary to make abstract concepts easier to think with, but they can also influence how we think about these abstract ideas. Second, metaphorical systems can be identified from various expressions or thoughts that use the same source domain for the same target domain. Third, the closer a source domain is to daily experience, the easier it will be to work with. Therefore, the use of conceptual metaphor theory should not be taken as an indication that the ideas of practitioners (such as magnetizers) about fluids and energies are only figurative. On the contrary, metaphors can be (and are) used in a literal way, even if elements are taken from source domains.<sup>4</sup> Conceptual metaphor theory lends itself well to analyses of how complicated ideas are made accessible, such as in the case of Mesmer's animal magnetism.

### 3 Conceptual Metaphors in Mesmer's Animal Magnetism

It was in 1775 that Mesmer first wrote about his new healing method of animal magnetism (1778a [1775]; 1778b [1775]). Starting from his dissertation in 1766, Mesmer believed that a subtle fluid—a weightless and invisible substance more rarefied than air, ether, or any other substance—pervaded the universe and influenced the health of humans. This fluid had certain similarities to mineral magnetism, yet was present in living beings as well, which is why Mesmer termed it animal magnetism.<sup>5</sup> He believed proper communication and distribution of the animal magnetic fluid through such means as hand gestures, eye contact, and music could cure most types of illnesses<sup>6</sup> by activating the healing process within humans.

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4 It could be asked why the term 'analogy' is not used instead of metaphor. The reason is that there is a calculated intentionality to analogies that implies strict borders between which elements are taken over and which are not. Instead, one of the reasons metaphors, as conceptualized here, are so interesting is exactly because they can influence thoughts in subtle and unintentional ways as well.

5 In Mesmer's dissertation, the designation "animal gravity" was used (1766, 33), which is why I place the start of animal magnetism in 1775.

6 Mesmer believed there was only one type of illness and one type of cure (Caullet de Veumorel 1785, 100) but he nonetheless did consider certain types of medicine to be helpful in specific situations (101–2).

Originally, Mesmer was situated in Vienna, where he had obtained his doctorate and was working as a physician. However, after numerous scandals involving him and his animal magnetic treatment, he relocated to Paris in 1778. It was there that Mesmer further developed his thoughts on the treatment and started training others (Mesmer 1779; 1781; 1798–1799; Caillet de Veumorel 1785), until two commissions set up by King Louis XVI in 1784 declared animal magnetism non-existent, and its results as the outcome of the imagination ([Bailley] 1784; cf. Riskin 2002, chap. 6). From then on, Mesmer traveled around and eventually relocated to Switzerland, continuing to write on his healing practice until the year before his death in 1815 in the German town of Meersburg (Mesmer 1814).<sup>7</sup>

Animal magnetism as a theory and medical practice underwent half a decade of changes by Mesmer, that is, from his dissertation in 1766 to his final work in 1814. Yet, throughout this period, Mesmer stuck to certain interrelated metaphors to explain how animal magnetism supposedly worked. As will become clear, many of these metaphors are combined together into Mesmer's metaphorical system, summarizing thereby his view on the treatment of animal magnetism, i.e., that HEALTH IS THE HARMONIZED MOVEMENT OF A WATER-LIKE SUBSTANCE IN OUR BODIES.

In 1775, Mesmer wrote the foundation of his animal magnetic theory and practice in several German letters (1778a [1775]; 1778b [1775]).<sup>8</sup> Therein, health is described as a "harmony of the nerves" (*Harmonie der Nerven*), whereas a disharmony of the nerves leads to illness (Mesmer 1778b [1775], 24). Harmony, in turn, is the result of the equal "distribution and dispensation" (*Austheilung und Dispensation*), that is, the correct movement of the nervous fluid. This movement is a natural "ebb and flow" (*Ebbe und Fluth*; *ibid.*). When the natural harmony of the ebb and flow of the nervous fluid is "confused" (*verwirrt*) or even completely "hindered" (*gehindert*), meaning, when there is no longer a correct movement of this fluid, then the practice of animal magnetism can help (Mesmer 1778b [1775], 24; 1778a [1775], 68). Through hand movements, eye contact, magnetized water, or other means, the practitioner can provide the patient with the animal magnetic fluid, which causes a "uniform current" (*gleichförmigen Strom*). The latter creates an artificial ebb and flow in the body

7 The facts of Mesmer's life are captured in his many biographies (e.g., see Pattie 1994; Florey 1995).

8 The direct context of Mesmer's 1775 letters is the dispute between him and his former friend, the astronomer Maximilian Hell (1720–1792). Hell believed in the healing properties of magnets and let Mesmer test this out for him. Mesmer, instead, claimed that magnets were unnecessary and postulated his theory of animal magnetism. It is in this context that the change from animal gravity to animal magnetism should be seen (see n. 5 above).

of the patient which restores harmony within the nervous system, especially as the fluid streams to the necessary, obstructed spots (Mesmer 1778a [1775], 68).

In Mesmer's later writings, several changes occur. Most importantly, from his French writings in Paris onward, Mesmer introduced the idea of the magnetic "crisis" (*crise*).<sup>9</sup> This is a symptomatic stage every patient has to undergo in order to reestablish health. Metaphorically, it builds on the aforementioned obstructions in the flow of the animal magnetic fluid and not the nervous fluid.<sup>10</sup> An increase in intensity of the fluid should lead to an overcoming of obstacles—a breaking through of the "resistance" (*résistance*)—in order to restore harmony (Mesmer 1798–1799, 34–35). The effort involved in overcoming the obstacles is what leads patients to having symptoms, which are in themselves therefore a direct and necessary consequence of becoming healthy.

The magnetic fluid's circulation, through ebb, flood, and currents, points to a metaphorical system which takes fluid mechanics (or, more precisely, water mechanics) as source domain, in order to better understand the workings of what Mesmer deemed to be the most subtle of fluids: animal magnetism. With the crisis, this hydraulic metaphorical system is expanded to include ideas of the building up and eventual breaking down of resistance. The water-based metaphorical system is furthermore combined with the metaphor that health is harmony. The result is the relatively consistent HEALTH IS THE HARMONIZED MOVEMENT OF A WATER-LIKE SUBSTANCE IN OUR BODIES metaphorical system of animal magnetism. This system should be seen against the background of Mesmer's iatrophysical worldview: he saw the body more or less as mechanical and tried to apply physics to medicine (Baier 2019; for iatrophysics in general, see Eckart 2015). The water mechanical metaphors are therefore squarely rooted in a materialistic perspective of the body: the animal magnetic fluid acts on nerves, muscle fibers, and organs.

Although the interrelation of harmony, water mechanics, and resistance seems to point to an internally coherent metaphorical system, Mesmer throughout the years also included many elements based on other source domains. In the eighteenth century, many natural phenomena were conceptualized as

9 It is likely that Mesmer included the idea of the crisis—or at least emphasized it much more—after his indirect encounter with the exorcist Johann Joseph Gaßner (1727–1779), who included similar physiological processes in his exorcisms (Baier 2015).

10 Whereas the early German letters of Mesmer are mostly focused on the effect of animal magnetism on the nervous fluid, later works instead conceptualize the effect of animal magnetism mostly on the organs through muscle fibers (e.g., Mesmer 1798–1799, 31). What remained the same is that the currents of animal magnetism should restore harmony.

subtle fluids, such as electricity, ether, and mineral magnetism. As the most rarefied of these fluids, Mesmer believed animal magnetism was analogous to many of them. Therefore, from an early point onward, Mesmer theorized the existence of animal magnetic poles in the human body (analogous to mineral magnetic ones), which affected how one should practice the healing method (e.g., Caullet de Veaumorel 1785, 39). Another example is found in Mesmer's final work, *Mesmerismus*, in which animal magnetism is actively compared to various properties of fire, such as "ignition" (*Entflammung*; e.g., Mesmer 1814, 110–11). A last example is the antimagnetic property. In Mesmer's early writings, he theorized that some people do not have animal magnetic qualities but rather a substance that could be regarded as the exact opposite of animal magnetism (Mesmer 1779, 78–79).

In the vast majority of Mesmer's texts, however, a hard core of metaphors that fit the HEALTH IS THE HARMONIZED MOVEMENT OF A WATER-LIKE SUBSTANCE IN OUR BODIES system is found. Controlling the invisible currents of the animal magnetic fluid was also the aim of Mesmer's treatment, whereas the crises were unmistakable due to the outward symptoms they induced (e.g., coughing, fainting, or even convulsions). Therefore, there was a strong metonymical interconnection between the main metaphorical system Mesmer propagated, the practice of magnetizing, and the response of patients to the treatment. It was also this core metaphorical system that was internally consistent and—through every person's thorough acquaintance with water (e.g., through drinking, bathing, rain)—experience-near to Mesmer's readership as well.

As the next section will deal with contemporary magnetism, the following postscript on Mesmer's animal magnetism summarizes the changes that happened to the healing practice in the nineteenth century. In 1784, a student of Mesmer, Amand Marc Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825; henceforth Puységur), discovered that he did not induce violent crises but rather sleepwalking-like states in his patients. The phenomenon was called magnetic somnambulism, and magnetic somnambulists were believed to gain extraordinary abilities such as clairvoyance, thought reading, extra-sensory perception, the power to diagnose and prescribe for illnesses, and more. In addition, Puységur emphasized the power of the will at the expense of the magnetic fluid (Gauld 1992, chap. 2; Crabtree 1993, chap. 3). Animal magnetizers from 1784 onward increasingly started to focus on somnambulism and its extraordinary abilities—both in France and wherever else animal magnetism was exported to. Many new metaphorical systems got added to Mesmer's

original harmony and hydraulics focused one, with some mixing well with it<sup>11</sup> and others replacing the former.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, it was the success of magnetic somnambulism that would ultimately see animal magnetism return to its root concept of a circulatory fluid that promotes harmony. The medical interest in somnambulism eventually divorced it from its magnetic context and somnambulism was turned into hypnotism—while spiritual interest in the phenomenon led to Spiritualism, Christian Science, and New Thought. In both cases, animal magnetism was slowly phased out of the theoretical background. These developments left animal magnetism more or less stripped of somnambulism. Over time, the practice outlived the professional interest in it and became more integrated into what is today known as the alternative or complementary medicine milieu. Therein, animal magnetism survived and transformed—yet, as will be shown below, while many things changed, some remained the same.

#### 4 Conceptual Metaphors in Contemporary Magnetism

Healing through magnetism is still being practiced today, although the identifier ‘animal’ has been abandoned.<sup>13</sup> The mark Mesmer left on his practice is distinct, but much has changed as well over the centuries. An analysis of the metaphors used by practitioners on their websites will point out exactly what remained of the eighteenth-century iatrophysical treatment of Mesmer and how it developed ever since. Several methodological points will be raised before the results of the analysis are discussed. First, the selection of websites was based on two criteria: that the name of the practice referred to magnetism in some way, and that it consisted of the laying-on-of-hands or was done at a distance.<sup>14</sup> Second, to allow for national and linguistic differences in

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11 Two examples of theoretical expansions that follow from a water-based metaphorical system but were nonetheless never proposed by Mesmer are the following: first, the magnetic fluid became to be seen by some as contaminable (like water) and practitioners started shaking their fingers during treatments to shake off the contaminated fluid; second, as an extension of the previous point, magnetizers could now accidentally impart their diseases on their patients through the fluid or vice versa (Deleuze 1825, 53–54). These two examples again show the interconnectedness of metaphorical system and practice.

12 There are many works that point out the conceptualizations of animal magnetism in various thinkers and/or national contexts. For a few examples, see Baier 2019; 2020; Winter 1999; Vijselaar 2001; Gauld 1992; Crabtree 1993.

13 In German, the adjective *Heil* (healing) is often prefixed to *Magnetismus* instead.

14 The ‘laying-on-of-hands’ criterion was designed to exclude therapies that use actual magnets for healing. I deemed this to be a historically different phenomenon, from which

conceptualization, three languages were chosen for the comparison, namely, French, German, and Dutch. The corpus of each language consisted of twelve websites, covering a total of six countries (Austria, France, Germany, Liechtenstein, the Netherlands, and Switzerland). Third, the thirty-six websites were coded using the program Atlas.ti, resulting in 993 quotations and 212 unique codes. From these codes, patterns were sought to find similarities and differences between the various languages and the work of Mesmer.<sup>15</sup>

Compared to Mesmer's terminology, the most consistent change found in all three languages is the removal of 'fluids' in favor of 'energies.' Contemporary magnetism is conceptualized as energy by all websites within the current corpus, and it is furthermore also the most frequently used term in all three languages (253 times). In this sense, magnetic healing has followed the wider trend of emphasizing energies within the holistic milieu—as evidenced from the chapters in this volume. However, although subtle energies have replaced subtle fluids, harmony and water mechanical metaphors are still highly important to contemporary magnetism. In the German sources, "harmony" (*Harmonie*) is the third most used term in the informational texts, with "flow/current" (*Fluss, Strom*) being the fifth—both are present on eight out of the twelve websites. In the Dutch sources, harmony is instead replaced by "balance" (*balans, evenwicht*), being the third most used term found on eleven out of the twelve websites. Furthermore, in the Dutch sources, "blockades" (*blokkades*; found on ten websites) and "flow/current" (*stroom*; found on nine websites) are the second and fifth most used term, respectively. The French sources are slightly different in this respect. "Balance" (*équilibre*; second most used, found on eight websites) and "harmony" (*harmonie*; third most used, found on six websites) are both widely used metaphors. "Blockades" (*bloccages*) is the fourth most used term in the French sources, found on eight websites. However, unlike the Dutch and German, the French corpus does not talk about flows/currents but instead uses varied metaphors such as "circulation" (*circulation*) and "transmission" (*transmettre*).

Despite minor differences, all three language samples show a heavy reliance on either harmony or balance, and a hydraulics-supported system of

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animal magnetizers early on differentiated themselves even if there was the occasional overlap (see n. 8 above).

15 Two methodological limitations deserve to be pointed out here. First, informational texts on websites naturally imply a simplification of the method as the practitioners themselves understand it; there is therefore an asymmetry in the comparison between Mesmer's *oeuvre* and contemporary online summaries. Second, the use of online resources leads to a selection bias: traditional healers that do not advertise on the internet are subsequently not represented in the current analysis.

blockades, flows, circulations, and more. These are often then further personalized by the specific practitioners, who either continue parts of the hydraulics system—such as by introducing more types of good and bad energies, cleansing, and so forth—or add entirely new metaphors and metaphorical subsystems, such as cleaning (e.g., Kreft n.d.; Sellie n.d.) or the ‘inner doctor’ (e.g., Wiesenhöfer n.d.; Bünter-Larsen n.d.).<sup>16</sup> However, just like in the case of Mesmer, the addition of supplementary metaphors does not take away from the main focus on harmony (or balance) supported by the water-like qualities of the healing energies. This means that healing through magnetism is still predominantly conceptualized as dependent on THE HARMONIZED MOVEMENT OF A WATER-LIKE SUBSTANCE IN OUR BODIES.

Yet none of the contemporary practitioners share Mesmer’s iatrophysical worldview. Therefore, although the metaphors are still seemingly compatible, they carry a big difference in meaning. The old hydraulic and harmonic metaphors of Mesmer were purely physical, playing out within the body: harmony was the result of the correct flow of fluids that made one’s organs function as they should. Current day magnetizers, on the contrary, see in their magnetic energies bridges between the body and the mind or soul—or even between the several subtle bodies.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, disturbed harmony or balance is often found between these various layers: many websites seek the source of disturbance in unpleasant memories or unprocessed emotions (e.g., Koolen n.d.; Nonciaux n.d.). Although this comes as no surprise when compared to other, psychologized contemporary forms of energy healing, it is an entirely different understanding than the one Mesmer had. Hence, although the source domain of magnetism’s metaphorical system remained largely the same, the target domain changed drastically.<sup>18</sup> The change in meaning, however, is hidden precisely by the continuation of the harmony-*cum*-hydraulics system that is used to talk about the treatment.

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16 As Dominic Zoehrer pointed out to me, the ‘inner doctor’ metaphor goes back to the texts of Paracelsus (1493–1541). In this case, the magnetizers who utilize it are taking it over from Johanna Arnold (who is introduced below).

17 The Dutch sources are more explicit about this connection (mentioned on eleven websites), compared to the German (six websites) and French (five websites). However, it is common in every language sample that the physiological treatment of (indirect) touch central to magnetism is said to be able to cure emotional, physical, and psychosomatic problems.

18 An exception is the loss of Mesmer’s ebb and flood metaphor. This could be because such a metaphor was rooted more in Mesmer’s dissertation rather than in his later conceptualization of circulation, where ebb and flood shared a hydraulic origin but do not truly fit in the same manner as flows and currents.

Next to differences between the contemporary magnetic practitioners and Mesmer, there is also a substantial variation among the three language groups under consideration. As shown above, most of the widely used metaphors in each country related to harmony, balance, and hydraulics. The German corpus is an outlier in that there are two additional metaphors that are often found as well, namely, “order” (*Ordnung*; second most used, found on eight websites) and “(electro)magnetic fields” (*[Elektro-]Magnetische Feldern*; fourth most used, found on seven websites)—metaphors that are virtually absent in the Dutch and French sources.<sup>19</sup> The reason for the prevalence of these metaphors in the German sample is the apparent influence of contemporary magnetizer Johanna Arnold due to her *Heilmagnetische Ordnungstherapie*® (healing-magnetic order-therapy; henceforth HMO; Arnold n.d.-a; cf. Arnold 2021 [2006]).<sup>20</sup> Arnold’s website has a list of ninety-seven practitioners that follow her method, making her view on the treatment a considerable force within German magnetism.<sup>21</sup>

TABLE 3.1 The most prevalent terms used within the various language samples<sup>a</sup>

German (12 sites; 269 quotes)	Dutch (12 sites; 455 quotes)	French (12 sites; 296 quotes)
1. Energy (12; 53)	1. Energy (12; 115)	1. Energy (12; 85)
2. Order (8; 29)	2. Balance (11; 37)	2. Balance (8; 15)
3. Harmony (8; 26)	3. Blockades (10; 38)	3. Blockades (8; 11)
4. Flow/Current (8; 14) and (Electro)magnetic fields (7; 22)	4. Flow/Current (9; 15)	4. Harmony (6; 14)

a The order of terms is based primarily on the number of websites in which the concept or metaphor appeared. This is to adjust for outliers who could skew the total number of a single concept by mentioning it excessively. The exception is ‘(electro-)magnetic fields’ in the German sample, which shares a place with ‘Flow/Current’ due to the high quantity.

19 There is only one mention of ‘electro-magnetic fields’ in the Dutch and none in the French sample; order is found in neither Dutch nor French sources.

20 Arnold’s book *Mit deinen Händen heilen* (2021; originally published in 2006) is not being considered here to keep the comparisons of contemporary magnetism at the same level (i.e., short informational texts on websites).

21 Out of the twelve German websites, nine of the practitioners are HMO trained. It took more effort to find several sources not connected to Arnold.

While Arnold's system is self-consciously based on Mesmer, she deviates from him by introducing a metaphorical system next to harmony and hydraulics: that of magnetic order. She states that the flow of energy in a body is necessary for health. But it is not the magnetizer's job to restore the flow or remove blockades directly. Instead, taking her cue from electromagnetic theories unknown in Mesmer's time, Arnold argues that only bodies with ordered magnetic fields can receive the universal energy. Thus, disease as a disruption of harmony (to recall her much-used equation) is nothing else than disorder—while health equals harmony equals order. Therefore, the magnetizers' job is to use the magnetic field between their hands to order the patient's magnetic field, who can once again have access to the universal energy after successful treatments, thereby allowing the body to heal.

Arnold therefore introduces an extension of the metaphorical system of magnetism in the German language. Health is still *THE HARMONIZED MOVEMENT OF A WATER-LIKE SUBSTANCE IN OUR BODIES*, but now this harmony can only be achieved through *MAGNETIC ORDER*. The practice is still taking place through (indirect) hand contact in largely the same manner as before, but the postulated active agency behind it is different. Magnetizers no longer communicate and distribute energy following hydraulic metaphors. Instead, they create a magnetic field between the hands that can be used to order the magnetic field of the patient in the way a magnet can order iron filings. Compared to Mesmer's animal magnetism, there is now a different target (i.e., energies instead of fluids) *and* an extra source domain (i.e., magnetic fields). This adjustment of the metaphorical system allows Arnold to introduce once more magnetic poles in the human body (e.g., Kolbeck n.d.; Siegel n.d.)—an element that was present in Mesmer's system but was dropped by others after him (although not immediately), and indeed does not appear in any of the contemporary French or Dutch sources either.

Arnold's HMO is construed top-down. The result is a high consistency also in the use of her metaphors on the websites of the practitioners trained in this tradition. A second consequence is the relative strict boundaries of magnetism in Germany; it is seen as its own (Western) method. Arnold writes about other healing methods that they are all based on magnetism. However, such methods confuse magnetism's principles and mystify it with initiations (n.d.-b)—a sentiment that she shares with many earlier Romantic thinkers (cf. Hanegraaff 2012, 260–77).<sup>22</sup> It is therefore rare to find references to Eastern(-inspired) concepts such as auras, *cakras*, *qi*, or *prāṇa*.

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22 It must be noted that Arnold incorporates concepts such as “chakras” (2021, 78), and “yin and yang” (113) more readily in her book. However, they are used to explain magnetism, with the priority firmly resting on the latter.

When compared to the Dutch and French sources, the German differences are striking. Neither of the former two has any similar consistent adaptations to the core metaphorical system that was already present in Mesmer's work. This might very well be due to the lack of a unifying figure in both cases, as opposed to the German sample. The result is a bottom-up approach wherein many idiosyncratic explanations and minor metaphors coexist. Another consequence is the lack of boundary work between magnetism and other practices, which results in a much more deliberately syncretic mixture of the practice with concepts such as mediumship or the subtle body, including auras and *cakras*. It is clear why such terms are integrated easily within Dutch and French magnetism: they are in themselves abstract and often explained through the same kind of hydraulics metaphors of flows and blockades as magnetism. Another difference between German websites versus Dutch and French ones is that while Arnold and her HMO practitioners stress the capacities of everyone to learn the practice, the Dutch (and to a lesser extent the French) sources often focus on the idea that magnetic healing is a paranormal gift of the few (seven Dutch, five French, and one German websites mention this). An explanation for this exceeds the scope of this chapter, but I hypothesize that magnetism in the Dutch and French speaking countries has become more related to the paranormal milieu (which also includes clairvoyants; a famous Dutch case of a paranormal magnetizer was Gerard Croiset [1909–1980]), whereas German magnetism might be tied more to the naturopathic scene (*Naturheilkunde*)—for which, depending on the country, many different schools as well as official examinations exist.

To conclude, contemporary magnetism still carries the metaphorical system that Mesmer originally used to conceptualize his treatment. Health is in all countries still equated with harmony, or the closely related idea of balance, and the magnetic agent is still supposed to flow through the body unhindered in order to reach that harmony. However, the continuation of these metaphors covers a large change that swept magnetism along with it. As part of the holistic milieu, magnetism in the twenty-first century has no use for iatrophysical frameworks that posit the body as a machine. Instead, the target domain of fluids was replaced by energies—and the harmony is no longer a material one but instead covers body, soul, and/or spirit. Furthermore, different groups of contemporary practitioners place different emphases as they shift and tweak the core Mesmerian metaphorical system. Thus, German-speaking magnetizers include a magnetic order as prerequisite for the ability to receive universal energy, whereas French and Dutch magnetizers idiosyncratically propose explanations and metaphors. Even legitimization strategies differ: German practitioners talk about a scientific and teachable method, whereas Dutch ones characterize their healing abilities as (paranormal) gifts. Historical

contingencies played an important role in the development of (animal) magnetism, yet I argue that the power of metaphors should not be underestimated.

## 5 Discussion

Lakoff and Johnson write that “the intuitive appeal of a scientific theory has to do with how well its metaphors fit one’s experience” (2003 [1980], 19). For popular practices, such as complementary healing treatments like (animal) magnetism, this may be even more important due to a competitive spiritual market. The comparisons made between Mesmer and contemporary magnetizers in this chapter are preliminary. Nevertheless, I would like to conclude by arguing for the value of conceptual metaphor theory as an additional means of interpreting the history of magnetism—and, by extension, similar practices containing subtle energies. Further research will have to confirm or reject the utility of the proposal.

First, Lakoff and Johnson note the importance of internal consistency within metaphorical systems. By bracketing all contextual factors, it would be expected that theorization on practices such as magnetism would tend toward a consolidation of the metaphors that fit well, whereas those that do not, should fall away. I have argued that HEALTH IS THE HARMONIZED MOVEMENT OF A WATER-LIKE SUBSTANCE IN OUR BODIES has been the core metaphorical system of magnetism since Mesmer’s time. His inclusion of the antimagnetic property, magnetic poles, and analogies to fire could in this regard be seen as inconsistent additions that had, already from the beginning, little chance of surviving in the long run.<sup>23</sup> The consistency between harmony and water mechanics, though, would make for an intuitive understanding that others could easily adopt. This interpretation fits the current comparison’s outcome well. However, contextual factors *do* play a role and can outweigh the intuitive wish for consistency. For example, strong leaders like Puységur or Arnold included metaphors that only tenuously fit the core metaphorical system.

Second, on the basis of the case study at hand, I believe that the main method of a complementary healing practice must fit metonymically to its metaphorical system. In the case of magnetism, there has been a strong metonymic

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23 Even Mesmer’s crisis—while intuitively linked to hydraulics through the metaphor of resistance—was only loosely connected to the main metaphorical system. It was perhaps partly for that reason easy to replace with somnambulism when new magnetizers found the symptomatic outbreaks that resulted from crises distasteful.

connection between the passing motions of the hands and the idea of redirecting currents of vital fluids or energies from the beginning.<sup>24</sup> Arnold's HMO—which practices the same method of magnetic passes—has a strong metonymic connection to her theory as well. There, the hands no longer directly influence currents of energy but rather form a small magnetic field that should order the magnetic field of the patient through close proximity, just like magnets can order attractable materials. Furthermore, the combination of metaphorical system and metonymic actions is able to lead to innovations that build intuitively on both. Many contemporary magnetizers still shake off their hands after making passes to get rid of contaminated energy (see n. 11 above)—this is simply an extension of the metaphorical system of hydraulics that water can be contaminated. Consequently, metonymic passing motions should direct the polluted energy out of the patient, resulting in the notion of 'contaminated fingertips' and the corresponding need to shake off bad energy or fluid.<sup>25</sup>

Third, taking the metaphorical system and the actual healing actions of magnetism together explains for a large part why one can even speak of a continuation between Mesmer's animal magnetism and contemporary magnetism—and why, in my opinion, it is unnecessary to talk of animal magnetisms in the plural. It was shown that the theoretical underpinnings of Mesmer on why illness occurs and how animal magnetism helps (i.e., iatrophysics) are totally incompatible with contemporary holistic ideas of illness and the curative effects of subtle energies, at least as seen in the sample used here. Yet the continuous use of the same metaphorical system, combined with the same basic practice of acting on patients, connects contemporary practitioners directly to the original founder of animal magnetism. If theory alone would be the measure, one could only point to superficial analogies (rooted in the metaphorical systems) and conclude that contemporary magnetizers misconstrue Mesmer and early animal magnetism when they posit themselves in the same historical line. However, the different theories are conceptualized in the same metaphors, which therefore allow for a continuation of the similar methods in treatment. In this sense, even if target domains change drastically,

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24 The metonymic connection present in magnetic passes might also partly explain why in-person healings still seem to be the preference, despite the widespread belief that magnetic treatments can be done at a distance.

25 I believe that the metonymical link between metaphorical systems and practical methods of healing can fruitfully be combined with Karl Baier's (2020) ideas on 'therapeutic mediologies.'

source domains can continue to speak to (and be appropriated toward new ends by) new audiences precisely because they are so experience-near.

Fourth, I believe conceptual metaphor theory is a stepping stone to incorporate more cognitive theories that might help explain the success or failure of parts of magnetism (and consequently other subtle energies-based practices). As already stated above, metaphorical systems need to be intuitive. Nonetheless, a hydraulics-based metaphorical system cannot truly be said to be intuitive when the fluid or energy in question can be manipulated through indirect touch, or when it can pass through solid objects such as the body of a patient. Instead, it could be argued that these counterintuitive aspects of the magnetic fluid/energy help in making the practice memorable. This follows Pascal Boyer's theory that religious concepts are minimally counterintuitive in their breaches of ontological categories (2001, chap. 2).<sup>26</sup> The magnetic fluid/energy in this sense acts much like water, but has the physically counterintuitive aspects of being (strategically) manipulatable indirectly, having the ability to pass through solid matter to some extent as well as being a powerful curative force. That the fluid/energy acts like water makes it intuitive to think with, while its counterintuitive properties make it memorable—and strategically useful—to humans. Conceptual metaphor theory's attention to both contextual and (embodied) cognitive factors makes it suitable to play a mediating role between cognitive theories such as Boyer's and cultural-historical approaches.

Summing up, I believe conceptual metaphor theory has the potential to assist in understanding the history of concepts such as magnetism and other subtle energies, including the practices based on them.<sup>27</sup> Metaphors have a strong influence on how we conceptualize the world, and this is especially important when dealing with intangible forces that allegedly have potent healing properties. Yet caution is necessary. Historical contingencies, unexpected discoveries, or influential institutions and persons are the first level on which our interpretations should rest. Cognitive effects can then, in a second step, contribute to strengthen or adjust where necessary. Future investigations into magnetism, at any rate, would benefit much from more fine-grained historical research complemented by and compared to equally exhaustive metaphorical

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26 For Boyer, ontological categories include humans, animals, natural objects, and more. Breaches occur when the standard inferences of a certain ontological category are defied, for example, when natural objects are attributed psychological processes such as thoughts or emotions.

27 Conceptual Blending Theory, as formulated by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2002), may be a valuable addition as well, as it is able to incorporate especially the creative outcomes of metaphorical thinking (i.e., so-called *blends*).

analyses to construct interpretations on why the practice developed the way it did. From there, comparisons between different curative subtle energies can be made to theorize bigger developments within the complementary health-care milieu and on the analytical concept of 'subtle energies' as a whole.

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# Dewanchand Varma and Pranothrapy: Healing and Subtle Energies in the French Interwar Period

*Léo Bernard*

## 1 Introduction

The life of Dewanchand Varma (1872–c.1954), also known as Varma Yogi, straddled many boundaries. He was a Hindu who had settled in Paris and created his own hygienic and therapeutic doctrine that he declared was inspired by ancient yogis as well as by the latest discoveries of science. He was initially rather welcomed by the Parisian intelligentsia, but ultimately incurred the wrath of the doctors' unions and was eventually exiled to England. Before his death, however, he succeeded to exert considerable influence on some notable alternative therapists of the second half of the twentieth century. Varma's medical ideas and practices circulated throughout France, England, the United States, India, and probably many more countries. Moreover, Varma's therapeutic system not only crossed national borders but also questioned the dividing line between center and periphery. He desperately sought recognition from the political, scientific, and medical authorities and was helped in this endeavor by several French physicians and lawyers. His system also obscured the rigid boundary between charlatanism and genuine belief in one's own therapeutic abilities. Finally, the boundaries between science, medicine, and religion are likewise extremely blurred in the case of Varma, given that he perceived physical and nervous education as a prerequisite for spiritual awakening. The article addresses all these issues, but the main purpose of this study is to demonstrate how Varma Yogi and his works form part of the French cultural and medical context of his time, focusing on the general topic of subtle energies which is of primary importance in Varma's therapeutic system. In order to be as concise as possible, the text is divided into two main parts, starting with the first rigorously researched biobibliographical outline of Varma's life and works. In the second part, divided into three sub-sections, I focus on different dimensions of his medical system, each linked to an aspect of the contemporaneous medical holism: 1) his method of physical, nervous, and mental education in relation to medical naturism; 2) pranothrapy with reflexotherapy; and 3) the various devices he employed, in light of the study of radiation.

## 2 Dewanchand Varma in a Few Pages

It is an understatement to say that Varma is not well known to historians. As far as we know, there has not yet been any academic work on him. The first French historians of yoga have noticed his existence but did not dig deeper as they recognized that there was not much information readily available about him (e.g., Ceccomori 2001, 65). A view on Varma's work was offered by Phil Young, a promoter of polarity therapy, an alternative therapeutic technique created by the Austrian-American manual therapist and naturopath Randolph Stone (1890–1981) who partially drew on Varma. Young dedicated both a book and a website to pranotherapy.<sup>1</sup> Although his work must be acknowledged and be thanked for his undertaking, his study leaves several gaps due to a lack of direct access to French sources. Even though there is still a lot of information missing, the various Varma files kept in the *Archives Nationales* have helped us in obtaining more details on the unusual itinerary of this figure.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1 *The Immigrant Lapidary*

According to these archival files, Varma was born on November 13, 1872, in Amritsar, Punjab, home of the Harmandir Sahib, the 'Golden Temple,' the most sacred site of Sikhism. Otherwise, there is almost no information available in France about Varma's life in India, i.e., between 1872 and 1905, the year he arrived in France. However, the general report of the nineteenth anniversary of the Theosophical Society mentions that a certain "Dewand Chand Varma" was the secretary of the branch located in Gujranwalla, a Punjab city located about 100 km from Amritsar (Theosophical Society 1895, 75). Many first names had been given by Westerners to Varma: Dewanchand, Dewanchaud Hairan, Haravani, Dewan C. Chand, Dewanchant, Devan, and even John. Indeed, one Varma file in the French National Archives concerns a "John Varma," who is presented as a pearl trader and Indian revolutionary who was born in Calcutta in 1869, arrived in France in 1905, and was promptly placed under police surveillance. It is not clear if our subject was this John Varma, who supposedly was visited by many fellow countrymen as well as by the Russian anarchist Nicolas Safranski—an activist who taught Hemchandra Das Kanungo (1871–1951), a member of Aurobindo Ghose's (1872–1950) anti-British organization Anushilan

1 See Young 2011; website URL: <https://www.pranotherapy.com/> (accessed: April 15, 2025).

2 Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine. Files: 19940495/4-216-Varma, Devan; 19940482/66-6603-Varma, John; 19940482/66-6604-Varma, Dewanchant.

Samiti (est. 1902), how to make bombs.<sup>3</sup> However, his physical description matches the pictures we have of Varma and, more importantly, the same file contains press cuttings of a court case that took place during the 1910s and involved accusations of fraud against him. There are also some sheets indicating that a Hindu revolutionary answering to the name of “Warma” was posing as a masseur in the thermal town of Vichy in August of 1916. Moreover, the file entitled “Dewanchant Varma” also contains a 1916 sheet that indicates that Varma, “a fine pearl broker,” was on “the list of Hindus under surveillance because of their Anglophobic sentiments.”<sup>4</sup> Whatever the case, we can solidly establish that Varma first distinguished himself in France as a lapidary.

In October 1913, Varma was in the news for a case of pearl forgery which prefigured his future career as a therapist. He claimed to be the inventor of a personal and secret process—one of his partners even declared that it was an electric process—for refining pearls without the use of any chemicals. His endeavors to this end led to legal proceedings whereby he was accused of having an American pearl smuggled into France and having a famous lapidary, David Charles Altschüller (1871–1918), sell it for a high price as an Indian pearl (N. N. 1913a). In his defence, Varma claimed to have a special gift and great expertise acquired through thirty years of experience, including an apprenticeship with a great Hindu lapidary who used only natural treatments. He saw no harm in embellishing these pearls and declared that he was not interested in money. Such claims did not prevent him, however, from being charged with fraud and being sentenced, five years later, to six months of prison and a fine of 5,000 francs. (The substance of the accusation being that Varma had put some chemical products on the pearl to make it look like a very valuable one; see N. N. 1918.) Although his reputation as a lapidary was thereafter seriously damaged, Varma had already begun a career transition process from 1913 onward.

## 2.2 *Varma Yogi*

While being interviewed by a journalist about the famous pearl, Varma confided that he had another project in mind, “a moral work of great magnitude” (*une œuvre morale de grande envergure*; N. N. 1913b, 1). He was at the time

3 For more information on Safranski and Bengali revolutionary terrorism, see Ferragu 2014; Heehs 1994.

4 Archives nationales. Original quote: “courtier en perles fines, figurant sur la liste des Indous tenus en observation en raison de leurs sentiments anglophobes.”

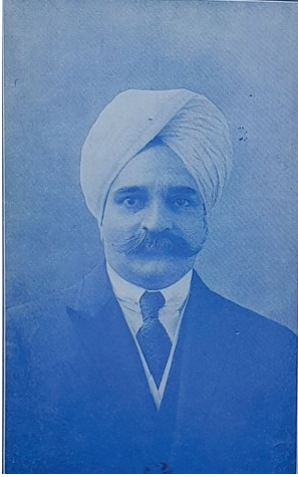


FIGURE 4.1  
Picture of Varma wearing a *dastār*, on the front page of  
*La Vraie Vie. L'Éducation des forces nerveuses d'après la  
méthode des Yogis des Indes* (1922)

writing a book, “a manual of physical and moral culture” that would reveal “the procedures used by the Hindu Yoghis to develop the will in man” (*ibid.*, 1).<sup>5</sup> He even asked Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919) for funds to establish a “school of moral energy” and had already created “a strange device whose imposition on the head is intended to cause the concentration of all the mental forces of a subject” (*ibid.*, 1).<sup>6</sup> World War I, during which one of his sons died while fighting in the French Foreign Legion, delayed his project, but the first volume of the book, entitled *La Vraie Vie. L'éducation physique par la méthode des Yogis des Indes*, was finally published in 1920. The second volume, *La Vraie Vie. L'Éducation des forces nerveuses d'après la méthode des Yogis des Indes* (1922), quickly followed, while the third and last volume, on mental education, never saw the light of day. Varma really began to make a name for himself as a yogi and therapist in 1923. A short journal article was dedicated to him, which contains the claim that he was initiated and instructed by Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) and Rama Tirtha (1873–1906), well-known figures of Hinduism in Western countries, and was able to cure all diseases thanks to “a proper massage that allows for ‘relocation’” (*un massage approprié qui permet la ‘délocalisation’*; Boucard 1923, 1)—as a result, according to the reporter, his waiting room would be crowded.

5 “J’y révèle les procédés employés par les Yoghis hindous pour développer en l’homme la volonté; ce livre sera publié incessamment; ce sera un manuel de culture physique et morale.”

6 “un appareil bizarre, dont l’imposition sur la tête est destinée à provoquer la concentration de toutes les forces mentales d’un sujet.”

In addition, the first issues of the periodical *La Vraie Vie* (1923–1926) were published monthly, providing thereby a great deal of information for historians. The chief editor was a certain Victor Gendre, who also published regularly in the journal for a while.<sup>7</sup> The topics of the articles, which were often unsigned, or else contain only initials,<sup>8</sup> were rather eclectic: the magazine included articles on prayer, sexual education, national politics, the karmic debt, as well as “Hindu tales” in serial form and readers’ letters. We learn therein, for example, that a French priest, Father Charles Flaus (1876–1943), owed his “resurrection” to Varma’s method. Various forms of yoga were also depicted as methods for improving concentration and personal development.

The year 1923 also marked the creation of L’Union pour la Vraie Vie (The Union for the Real Life), an association whose goal was the regeneration of the human being through physical, nervous, and mental education. A training school was then set up to teach the exercises presented in Varma’s books, as well as other moves. Varma was at the time well integrated within the French neo-spiritualist milieu. He actively participated in the Alliance Spiritualiste Universelle, a society founded by the countess Marthe-Elza Prozor (1855–1931), a devoted Theosophist, where he gave several lectures. He also took part in the first International Spiritualist Congress of Brussels (in 1924), an ecumenical gathering in which he presided over the first commission. Victor Gendre was the rapporteur of this commission, while count Maurice Eduardovich Prozor (1848–1928) took care of the second, and the famous painter Jean Delville (1867–1953), a Theosophist too, oversaw the third. An artistic and fashionable reception honoring Indian culture was also organized by *La Vraie Vie* in the same year.

### 2.3 *Pranotherapy and the League of Health*

Several changes occurred two years later, in 1926, as the journal now officially promoted pranotherapy (*la prânothérapie*), “a new system of natural treatment, thanks to which many diseases, previously considered to be resistant to any medication, have been cured” (N. N. 1926, 9).<sup>9</sup> This technique invented by Varma, which he had clearly been practicing for several years, purportedly

7 Little is known about this man, except that he defended Varma in court in 1929, in his capacity as a lawyer. He may have been of Monegasque nationality, born in 1896 and died in 1966, but I have been unable to authenticate this.

8 For his part, Varma initially used the name “Professeur D. Varma (yogi),” and “Professeur Varma Yogi” when he presented himself as the founding director of the journal.

9 “un nouveau système de traitement naturel, grâce auquel de nombreuses maladies, réputées jusqu’alors rebelles à toute médication, ont été guéries.”



FIGURE 4.2  
Picture of the Institut Pranothérapique de  
Paris reproduced in *Pour Mieux Vivre* (no. 14,  
October 1927)

healed people through manual manipulations that directly affected the flow of 'prana' (or life force). The tone of the magazine also changed, since it was now about saving humanity through a better knowledge of oneself. The reforming dimension of Varma's work was expressed in the new title of his periodical *Pour Mieux Vivre* (1926–1936). His fundraising call finally paid off as he managed to open an institute for physical, nervous, and mental rehabilitation in January 1927 in the prestigious sixteenth district of Paris, which he later named Institut Pranothérapique de Paris (Paris Institute of Pranothérapie). This success drew the attention of the doctors' unions, and he was sentenced for the first time, in February 1927, for the illegal practice of medicine. The press articles reporting on his trial make clear how interested many doctors were in Varma's healing gift.

The massages he practiced for healing purposes without any medical doctor's prescription in Paris as well as in coastal cities frequented by the high society, such as Cannes and Deauville, were the main source of contention. His titles of 'Yogi' and 'Professor,' as well as his knowledge about 'yoga' were also disputed in view of his former job as a lapidary (N. N. 1927, 1). Finally, his high income, estimated at 500,000 francs per year, the equivalent of about 325,000 euros today, prompted the doctors' unions to demand a fine of 25,000 francs. His actual fine was much smaller eventually, as several physicians and public figures defended him in court. Among them, Léon Mac-Auliffe (1876–1935) and

Alfred Thooris (1876–1956), two well-known physicians deeply involved in medical holism and the study of human morphological types. According to them, Varma was a “massage virtuoso”; Thooris tried to massage like him but could not. Varma proposed to teach his art to doctors. His Institute of Pranothrapy was free of charge for them, as indicated on the first page of the English version of his journal, *The Fount of Life*, published from August 1927 to June 1928. This journal testifies to the international audience of Varma’s medical system and included ads placed in *The New York Herald*. The support of several doctors, specified in the advertisements of the Institute, was all the more underscored as one of them, André Jubelin (1897–1985), published a medical column in each issue of Varma’s journal agreeing with Varma’s pranic theory, and started to sign articles under his real name. Another major stage was reached with the establishment of the Ligue de la Santé (League of Health) in 1928.

The purpose of this society was to spread the principles of health education. This meant Varma’s teachings, including his theories on “prana,” whose proper flow in the body was purported to be the key to health, as well as related practices. This medical perspective was shared by two other physicians who were on the League’s steering committee and participated at the opening ceremony of the society on June 23, 1928: the homeopath Albert Mouézy-Eon (1886–1976), close to spiritualist circles, and Edouard Tison (1842–1932), a former chief physician of the Saint-Joseph Hospital in Paris who was deeply interested in psychical research. Both delivered speeches at the ceremony, which was attended by the Maharaja of Kapurthala, Jagatjit Singh (1872–1949), and the élite of the Parisian society.<sup>10</sup> It must be noted that Hindu artistic performances and a large buffet were also offered to the public, with an estimated 500 guests. Beyond the social niceties, medical ambitions were also present as Tison outlined plans to form a medical group toward the foundation of a School of Pranothrapy directed by Varma. The League of Health, whose official organ was *Pour Mieux Vivre*, appears to have been quite successful as it claimed 800 members in 1930. Even senior government officials reportedly came to the Institute of Pranothrapy to attend the demonstrations of physical exercises and visit the research laboratory on ‘prana.’ At that time, Varma had

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10 Krishna Raja Wadiyar IV (1884–1940), the Maharaja of Mysore, would also have attended the party, but unlike Jagatjit Singh, who was presented as a long-time friend of Varma, he does not appear in the photos of the event. Wadiyar was a great patron and Hindu art lover, and is notable for having patronized Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989), also known as ‘the father of modern yoga.’



FIGURE 4.3 Picture of Varma, the Maharaja of Kapurthala, and the audience at the opening ceremony of the League of Health, published in *Pour Mieux Vivre* (nos. 23–24–25, July–August–September 1928)

published a book in French, entitled *La Clef de la santé* (1928), and its English translation *Key of Health*.

#### 2.4 *Decline during the 1930s and an Unknown Demise*

Things became more complicated during the 1930s, even though another center opened on the French Riviera and the journal was still published until 1936, with an announced print run of 10,000 copies at the turn of 1933/34. One could blame the unfavorable economic climate but, more importantly, Varma was again convicted of illegal practice of medicine in June 1932, leading to one month of imprisonment and a fine of 100 francs, and again in December 1933, resulting in six months of imprisonment and a fine of 1,000 francs. Another book, *La Pranothérapie*, was published in 1931, as well as the expanded reprint of *L'Éducation des forces nerveuses*, but his French medical supporters seemed to have abandoned him. A complaint of fraud filed in 1937 by a former deputy, adding to tax arrears of 180,000 francs, led Varma to be finally expelled from the country in April 1938, despite having already arrived in London. There, thanks

to the support of the British Health Freedom Society, he continued to promote his medical system until at least 1946, at which point he disappears from the radar for a while.<sup>11</sup> However, he was to be found again in 1954, this time in India. In that year, the French naturist magazine *Vivre en Harmonie* published an article by Léon Bensimon (1910–1991) recounting his stay in a Gandhian ashram for naturist cures, some thirty kilometres from Pune. Bensimon details the treatments offered at the ashram, in particular “massages, frictions and vibratory vocal exercises that decongest the muscular and nervous organs and relax the tense mind” (Bensimon 1954, 16).<sup>12</sup> He added in brackets: “For this last cure, called the ‘Nad’ in Hindu, Professor Varma, who was famous in Paris from 1910 to 1930, is the great specialist. He also has fairly good fingers which sense the pain in the body and practice medical massage” (ibid.).<sup>13</sup> Although Bensimon portrays a man who is still alert despite his age—“At the moment, he has lost his eyesight but is still a jolly good fellow despite being 80 years old and never misses his morning exercise class and his singing exercises before bedtime” (ibid.)<sup>14</sup>—Varma was approaching the end of his life, the exact date of which is not known. In any case, the influence of his work can still be seen to this day in several alternative therapies. In addition to Randolph Stone and his polarity therapy, Varma’s teachings on soft manipulations were incorporated into “neuromuscular technique” (Young 2011), a system of manual therapy created during the 1960s by Boris Chaitow (1907–1995) and the osteopath and naturopath Stanley Lief (1892–1963), who founded the British College of Naturopathy in 1936. His influence on Ida Rolf (1896–1979) has also been suggested by Rolwing specialists (see Szaja Gottlieb 2019, 28).

### 3 Varma’s Medical System and Practices

After this brief biobibliographical sketch, in this section I proceed to engage with Varma’s writings on subtle energies. From the perspective of the history of

11 Online: <https://www.pranotherapy.com/index.php/varma/newspaper-articles/illustrated-magazine-article-1946> (accessed: October 31, 2024).

12 “massages, frictions, exercices vocaux vibratoires décongestionnant les organes musculaires, nerveux, et détendant le mental crispé.”

13 “(pour cette dernière cure, appelé en hindou le ‘Nad’ le professeur Varma qui eut son temps de célébrité à Paris, de 1910 à 1930, est le grand spécialiste. Il a aussi d’assez bons doigts qui sentent le mal dans le corps et pratique le massage médical).”

14 “En ce moment, il a perdu la vue mais reste quand même gaillard malgré ses 80 ans et ne manque jamais son heure de culture physique matinale et ses exercices de chant avant de se coucher.”

ideas, the question of influences is typically the first to be asked. Who inspired Varma? Where did his knowledge come from? Given that the author almost never cited his sources, there is no easy answer. However, a few avenues can be explored. Vivekananda's famous *Raja Yoga* (1896), considered to be the keystone of modern yoga, is almost certainly a text that Varma, an English reader, must have read at some point. Vivekananda's influence becomes particularly clear when Varma explores the conception of 'prana,' with himself attesting to this influence. *The Hindu-Yogi Science of Breath* (1903) and other books written by Yogi Ramacharaka (pseudonym of William Walker Atkinson; 1862–1932), who promoted 'Pranic Healing,' also share many commonalities with Varma's work and the emphasis he put on breathing and prana. The links between these writings and earlier ones on animal magnetism are plentiful, and have already been discussed (see Zoehrer 2020), but it is not my purpose here to discuss Varma and pranotherapy from a diachronic perspective. Moreover, not being a yoga scholar or an Indologist, I do not wish to study his relationships with various Hindu teachings on yoga and prana neither. Rather, my approach is synchronic. I argue that Varma's theories and practices take on a new light by studying them within the French medical and cultural context of the interwar period, which saw the rise of medical holism, a medical movement that includes different therapeutic approaches which attach great importance to the realm of the psychological and physiological as well as the patient's living environment.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.1 *Physical, Nervous, and Mental Education in Light of the French Life Reform Movement*

One prominent current within medical holism was medical naturism, which can be conceptualized as the medical dimension of the naturist movement. The latter advocated the reform of lifestyles through a return to nature and was developed in France at the turn of the twentieth century in the wake of the earlier Swiss and German *Lebensreform*.<sup>16</sup> In the medical field, this radical criticism of society was accompanied by specific dietary, hygienic, athletic, and psychological recommendations, as well as therapeutic techniques involving natural agents such as water, air, and light. 'Living and healing in accordance with the laws of nature' became the central mantra of this movement,

15 My doctoral thesis focused on the relations between esoteric currents and medical holism in France during the interwar period. I discovered Varma in the course of my research but, as he was not a medical doctor who graduated from the faculty, I did not spend much time on this case study (see Bernard 2024). On medical holism, see Weisz and Lawrence 1998.

16 On the French life-reform movement, see, for example, Baubérot 2004.

and it was added to a deeply vitalist vision of medicine. Indeed, Paul Carton (1875–1947), Marius Albert Dumesnil (1883–1971), Marcel Viard (1884–1979), Gaston (1887–1971) and André Durville (1896–1979), to mention the most renowned French naturist doctors of the interwar period, shared the same understanding of medical naturism, i.e., consisting in taking care of nurturing one's vital force. This nutrition is not only digestive but also cutaneous (i.e., via the skin) and respiratory. Natural food, sunlight, and air are all seen as capable of increasing the capacity of the vital force to heal because they themselves are made up of vital energy. As Paul Carton has put it,

[the vital force] is only one of the modalities of the universal Energy and is spread everywhere in nature, more or less highly differentiated according to the environments and the beings where it is found. It is drawn from the air we breathe as well as from the natural foods we eat. (Carton 1924 [1920], 35)<sup>17</sup>

Such a perspective clearly owes much to esoteric currents and animal magnetism. The Durville brothers were indeed the sons of the most famous French magnetizer of the *Belle Époque*, Hector Durville (1849–1923). But more importantly for my present purpose, such a perspective was explicitly shared by Varma. His journal quoted the text “On the Sources of Vitality in Nature” written by Carton and published in *L'Éducation physique*, an important periodical directed by Georges Hébert (1875–1957), a friend of Carton and promoter of the much-followed method of ‘natural’ physical education (N. N. 1924b). Accordingly, his will to re-educate modern human beings simultaneously on the physical, nervous, and mental levels was also shared by French naturist doctors, who were deeply interested in *New Thought*. However, they paid little attention to proper breathing during the 1920s, unlike Varma, who made it the basis of his method, following the general trend of modern yoga, which can be defined as “a spiritualized practice of breathing movement” according to Anya P. Foxen (2020, 11).

In the first pages of *L'Éducation physique par la méthode des yogis des Indes*, Varma asserts that “modern life breeds disease, weakness, ugliness through deformity,” but he says nothing about subtle energies (*la vie moderne engendre*

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17 “Elle n'est qu'une des modalités de l'Énergie universelle et se trouve épandue partout dans la nature, plus ou moins hautement différenciée selon les milieux et les êtres où on la rencontre. On la puise aussi bien dans l'air qu'on respire que dans les aliments naturels qu'on absorbe.”

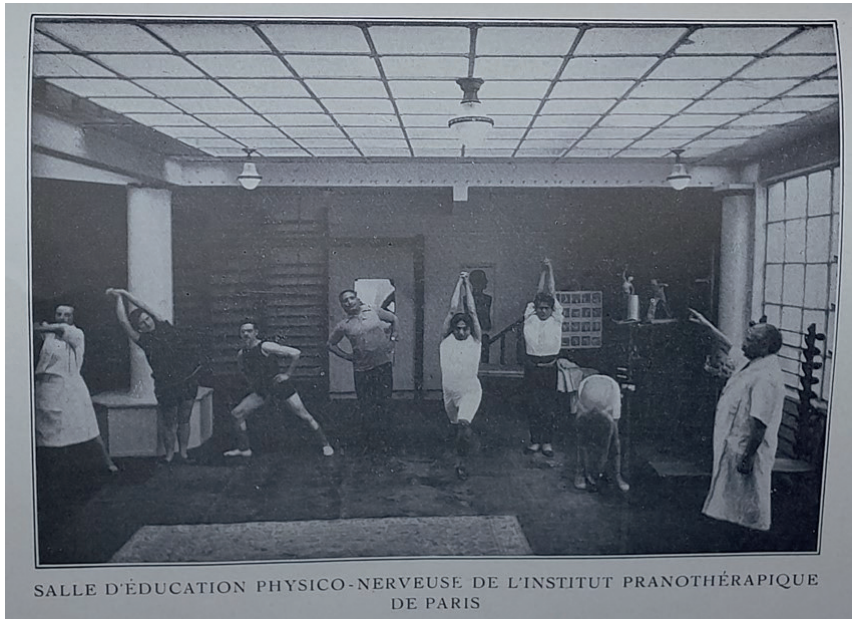


FIGURE 4.4 Picture of the physical and neurological education room at the institute, reproduced in *Pour Mieux Vivre* (no. 14, October 1927)

*la maladie, la faiblesse, la laideur par la difformité*; Varma 1920, 7). The work, which detailed several practical physical and respiratory exercises and gave numerous hygienic recommendations, limited itself to materialistic concerns and was conceived as a first step or introduction to a wider field. *L'Éducation des forces nerveuses d'après la méthode des yogis des Indes* is not so narrow in scope: while it details some exercises, the book is less practice-oriented and provides a first outline of Varma's medical and physiological doctrine. According to him, there are three interrelated forces at work in the human being: physical, nervous, and intellectual. The nervous force, which is the main focus of the book, is composed of the "nervous fluid" and the nerves in which it circulates. Varma compared it to electricity and argued that, like electricity, the nervous/vital force can be better received and domesticated, especially by learning how to breathe or cultivate more healthy patterns of thinking in a well-maintained and harmonious body. In *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France*, Joan Tumblety argues that Varma's doctrine—"which addressed employees too afraid of their bosses to ask for a raise"—represented "perhaps the most extreme assault on the medical mainstream that focused its attention on

modern men's struggle with their masculine selves" (Tumblety 2012, 42).<sup>18</sup> For a French audience initiated into the world of medical naturism, however, there is nothing really new in Varma's writings, the exception to this being the emphasis he placed on breathing and on India as a source of wisdom, which echoes the work of Yogi Ramacharaka, for whom "Man's only physical salvation" was to "get back to Nature" (Yogi Ramacharaka 1903, 15). Carton, to name just one source, maintained at the same time "that the coordinated play of material, vital and spiritual forces creates in each of us a personal defence power that is both preserving and healing" (Carton 1924, 22),<sup>19</sup> as well as "the existence in man and outside man of imponderable, vital or magnetic forces, analogous to electricity" (Carton 1935, 13).<sup>20</sup> In fact, Varma's first writings were well embedded in the broader movement of medical naturism but they brought an "orientalist" touch, later emphasized with his intensive use of the concepts of 'prana' and 'yoga,' which was then highly fashionable as evidenced by the rise of the 'fakiric medias' and the popularity of several yogi and fakir figures of the time (see Hopkins-Loféron 2019).<sup>21</sup> This originality may have had an impact on medical naturism because some naturist authors incorporated respiratory techniques and the concept of 'prana' in their writings during the 1930s, as illustrated by Jacques Demarquette (1888–1969) and his articles on "Spiritual Breathing Gymnastics" (Demarquette 1937). It is however difficult to gauge precisely the influence of Varma in this area: he is almost never mentioned by anyone, and there are others French occultist and magnetic authors widely read by naturist authors who also published on the topic at the turn of the twentieth century, figures who Varma had probably read himself.<sup>22</sup> Anyway, a direct impact can be attested through Marie-Charlotte Soize, an opera singer and singing teacher who published advertisements in *Pour Mieux Vivre* that praised her singing, breathing, and gymnastics courses, elaborated "according

18 While reading it for another purpose, I was surprised to see Varma briefly mentioned in this important book.

19 "le jeu coordonné des forces matérielles, vitales et spirituelles crée en chacun de nous une puissance de défense personnelle qui se montre à la fois préservatrice et curatrice."

20 "l'existence dans l'homme et hors de l'homme de forces impondérables, vitales ou magnétiques, analogues à l'électricité."

21 On the "innovative contributions of native South Asians who adapted their teachings to fit new audiences," see Cantú 2020.

22 See Bosc 1905 (1898); Arnulphy 1910 (1907). While Ernest Bosc (1837–1913) relied on a work by an Indian theosophist named Rama Prasad, entitled *The Science of Breath & the Philosophy of the Tatwas* (1890), the book of Victor Arnulphy (1854–1917) was inspired by the work of Yogi Ramacharaka, as noted by Albert Louis Caillet (1869–1922), a friend of Carton who had also published on the subject in *Traitement mental et culture spirituelle* (1912).

to the method of the Yogis of India” and given free of charge, every Sunday, at the Institute of Pranotherapy in 1930 and 1931. Soize later published a book on rhythmic breathing (*L'Art du chant par la respiration rythmée*; 1932) and an article in *Calme et Santé*, a journal directed by Marcel Viard (see Soize 1937). After World War II, she published a book entitled *La Respiration rythmée, méthode inspirée de la science des anciens Hindous* (1953), in which one reads that she gave courses in public educational institutions.<sup>23</sup> The influence and originality of Varma are much easier to ascertain when we turn to his system of pranotherapy, which was also part of a larger medical context.

### 3.2 *Pranotherapy and Reflexotherapy*

Varma and his followers have given various definitions of pranotherapy. It is “a therapeutic system which by utilizing the natural mechanical laws of the body tends to re-establish the circulation of the vital fluid known as Prana” (N. N. 1928a, 12); but also “a method of curing diseases by direct action on the pranic vibrations,” and “a new science,” “based upon the normal distribution of vibrations throughout the body” (N. N. 1928b, 17). In fact, it tended to include the physical, nervous, and mental education already mentioned, which could be called “Pranotherapeutic Hygiene,” the methods available for locating invisible pranic lesions or bad pranic flow, i.e., “Pranotherapeutic Diagnostic,” and the therapeutic manual massages that Varma would have applied masterfully. I will first focus on the latter dimension, the curative one, before dealing with the diagnostic instruments he developed.

Pranotherapy was first presented to Varma's readers in January 1926 and only then designated “a direct manual action on the muscles and nerves” that acts on the ‘prana’ or healing vital force (*L'action manuelle sur les muscles et sur les nerfs*; N. N. 1926, 9). This therapeutic method was depicted as a technique of reconstruction, of “replacement” of “the sculpting of human flesh” (*sculpture de chair humaine*; Varma 1926, 27). Firstly, “with his fingers and nothing but his fingers, the practitioner grasps the tissue and kneads it gently or strongly, depending on the case” (ibid.).<sup>24</sup> The goal is to restore the muscles to their normal place and shape. This first step can be enough to free the flow of prana; yet, the practitioner must begin “the infinitely delicate work of bringing back the normal vibratory intensity in the nerve or nerve group that has just left his

23 Even in the books of Marie-Charlotte Soize, however, Varma is never mentioned. All that is mentioned are “the Hindu and Japanese empiricists” (*des empiriques hindous et japonais*) that she would have met thanks to Mac-Auliffe (Soize 1953, 5).

24 “Avec ses doigts et rien d'autre que ses doigts, le praticien saisit le tissu et le pétrit doucement ou fortement, selon les cas.”

defective position" (28).<sup>25</sup> According to Varma, "there is no more kneading or crushing here, but an impression of rapid or slow oscillations, depending on the case" (*ibid.*).<sup>26</sup> Some nerves are difficult to access without surgical tools, but fortunately "every nerve group or nerve is subject to a distribution center or plexus which is susceptible to manual work on the surface of the body" (*ibid.*).<sup>27</sup> By using this method, which, as one reads, requires long experience and a great sensitivity of touch, Varma claimed to have cured no less than hundreds of sick people, half of whom were supposedly incurable.

Thus, the links between pranotherapy and reflexotherapy appear to be obvious, and they explain in part the support of some doctors for Varma's method. The Polish-Peruvian physician Hélian Jaworski (1880–1955) was the one who introduced the term "*réflexothérapie*" into the French-speaking world, where it found a receptive audience. In 1910, he wrote a book in which he described several techniques that, according to him, were guided by the same physiological principle. This principle is quite simple: induced peripheral irritation could have a positive impact on the central nervous system, either by removing a pathological cause of irritation or by provoking useful reflex phenomena. Jaworski speaks of "spinal reflexotherapy" in reference to a technique called *Spondylotherapy* (1910), theorized by the American physician Albert Abrams (1863–1924). This technique is based on the excitation of the functional centers of the spinal cord, which is considered to be a second brain, connecting various organs of the body to precisely defined vertebrae. In that perspective, the artificial stimulation of these vertebrae acts on the corresponding centers and organs and provides relief to the patient.

A similar principle was promoted by the French doctor Pierre Bonnier (1861–1918) at the beginning of the twentieth century. In his view, the physiological balance is regulated by centers located in the *medulla oblongata*, the link between the brainstem and the spinal cord, which are connected to specific points in the nasal mucosa. Bonnier then carefully mapped all these naso-bulbar correspondences that supposedly allow the treatment of a wide range of ailments, and he called his therapeutic method "centrotherapy." "Nasal

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25 "le travail infiniment délicat qui consiste à ramener l'intensité vibratoire normale dans le nerf ou le groupe nerveux qui vient de quitter la position défectueuse où l'avait amené un accident musculaire."

26 "Il n'y a plus ici malaxation ou écrasement, mais impression d'oscillations rapides ou lentes, selon le cas."

27 "tout groupe nerveux ou tout nerf est soumis à un centre distributeur ou plexus qui, lui, est susceptible d'être atteint par le travail manuel agissant à la surface du corps."

reflexotherapy”—the term coined by Jaworski—was also practiced by other therapists with some variations, and it became very popular during the inter-war period, just like acupuncture, which was ‘reintroduced’ during the 1930s in France by George Soulié de Morant (1878–1955) and several homeopaths, who perceived acupuncture as a form of reflexotherapy.<sup>28</sup>

The above-mentioned Albert Mouézy-Eon was a homeopath deeply interested in reflexotherapy, a set of therapeutic methods whose founding principles also attracted many holist and naturist physicians, especially the Durvilles. This is because its belief in the healing nervous system could easily be superimposed on vitalist and magnetic conceptions of subtle energies, as illustrated by the case of pranotherapy.<sup>29</sup> Mouézy-Eon’s articles in Varma’s periodicals are particularly instructive in this regard. The homeopath started his speech at the opening ceremony of the League of Health by asserting that “Professor Varma’s therapeutic ideas [...] are similar to certain disciplines that are currently emerging in the medical world,” and he explicitly mentioned reflexotherapy. After referring to the work of Bonnier and Abrams, he noted that “there is a growing realization of the importance of the infinitesimal excitants for the maintenance of life, and particularly of radiation or vibration” (N. N. 1928c, 7).<sup>30</sup> However, Mouézy-Eon confined himself to a materialistic level and refrained from mentioning ‘prana.’ Yet, the article entitled “The Ultra-Penetrating Rays and Hindu Metaphysics” that he had published a month earlier in *Pour Mieux Vivre*—and which was republished in *The Fount of Life*—was slightly different. Therein, evoking the latest work in quantum physics, he declared that “the physical Universe is tending to become more and more subtle to us, so that a parallel can be now established between the vision of modern scientists and the cosmology of Hindu philosophy” (Mouézy-Eon 1928a, 13). For him, there is no doubt that “the modern scientific spirit is tending toward the notion of a cosmic fluid, creative and unifying.” In short, the discoveries surrounding “the living electron” reactivated the old vitalist theories, which is why he asserted that “there is a curious parallel between this, the latest of scientific discoveries, and the vitalizing power of the pranic vibrations, which according to the Hindu theory maintain the life and strength in our tissues” (14). According to him, the latest discoveries in physics should be taken into account by modern

28 On acupuncture and reflexotherapy, see Bernard 2024.

29 On the topic of the similarities between vitalism, naturism, and reflexotherapy, it is worth mentioning Louis Guillaume Rancoule (1866–1946), a photographer and hygienist, to whom references were made in *Pour Mieux Vivre*.

30 “les idées thérapeutiques du Professeur Varma [...] s'apparentent à certaines disciplines qui naissent actuellement à la vie médicale.”

therapists, in accordance with the law of correspondences between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between Man and the Universe: “The organism that can maintain or re-acquire normal relations with the vibrations of the Universe will be healthy” (Mouzey-Eon 1928b, 6).<sup>31</sup>

Mouézy-Eon’s writings illustrate the inclusion of Varma’s medical system within larger cosmological and anthropological perspectives, deeply infused by esoteric currents that were widely shared among contemporaneous proponents of medical holism: ‘prana’ is not only at work in human beings but also present everywhere in the Universe. It is not only “an order of vibrations infinitely more subtle than all those registered by modern science” (N. N. 1928a, 12), but the “primary energy,” the “primary vibration” that “penetrates everything” and which is “at work in everything that moves” (Varma 1931, 7–8).<sup>32</sup> This inclusion is not surprising, as Varma was also familiar with these perspectives and actors. We already saw that Varma was an active member of the Alliance Spiritualiste Universelle. On January 16, 1924, he participated at a conference on the theme of “What survives death?”, along with Jaworski—a psychiatrist, spiritualist and former follower of Mesmer—whose talk was summarized at length in *La Vraie Vie*. The answers they gave to this question were largely similar: one asserted that the psychic mind ends up being slowly absorbed by the “Universal Spirit,” the other that the disappearance of desire would plunge us definitively into “the calm of Nirvana,” within the “Great One” (N. N. 1924a, 17–19).

Moreover, the influence of reflexotherapy on pranotherapy, or at least the inclusion of this latter therapeutic method within this larger medical context, was well recognized by Varma. It was indeed stated in *The Fount of Life* that “methods such as Reflexotherapy, Spondylotherapy, Chiropractic, the Electronic reactions of Abrams have all been the forerunners of Pranotherapy” (N. N. 1928a, 12). Chiropractic was not commonly practiced in France at the time, but one of its few promoters, an American called Hippolyte L. Hardy (c.1856–1942),<sup>33</sup> was a friend of Varma. Additionally, the emphasis placed on the spine by chiropractors can also be found in pranotherapy as “it is through the spine that the distribution of the pranic current in the body takes place” (Varma 1927, 26).<sup>34</sup> This emphasis on the spine, considered to be the “tree of

31 “Sera sain l’organisme qui saura conserver ou ré-acquérir des rapports normaux avec les vibrations de l’Univers.”

32 “la vibration primordiale [...] source même de toute énergie dans l’Univers [...] pénètre tout, est ici à l’œuvre dans tout ce qui se meut.”

33 See Hardy 1927. On the history of chiropractic, see Folk 2017.

34 “C’est par la colonne vertébrale que s’opère la répartition du courant prânique dans l’organisme.”

life,” certainly also owes much to Abrams, whose work was nominally discussed in *La Vraie Vie*, but his influence was not limited to this particular aspect.

### 3.3 *The Science of Radiation and Vibration*

In Abrams’ spondylotherapy, the artificial stimulation of the vertebrae can be produced in different ways: manually, of course, but also through the use of different devices allowing the percussion of the vertebrae, or by the usage of electricity and more precisely by the application of a sinusoidal current striking the vertebrae according to an oscillating rhythm. In pranotherapy, the stimulation of the vertebrae can only be manual, and the use of electricity is not advised, but Varma’s theoretical and practical conceptions owe much to Abrams’ later work. Although the concept of energy was absent from his book on spondylotherapy, it pervades the work entitled *New Concepts in Diagnosis and Treatment* (1916). According to Abrams, “the movement of the universe are the manifestations of a single agent which is called ENERGY” (1916, 233). To give a short summary of his theory, radiations produced by electrons are everything and even diseases produce radiations that have a “vibratory frequency.” On these principles, deeply influenced by animal magnetism and occultist theories, he developed a curious method of remote diagnosis, which must also be understood within the broader scientific and technical historical context of wireless transmission that had opened a large ‘field of possibilities.’ A sample of the patient’s blood was connected to an electrical device of his own making, the ‘dynamizer,’ which was itself connected to the body of a human subject, who was not the patient but who, standing on a slab and facing West, served as a resonator, since human reflexes were said to surpass in sensitivity any measuring device. Abrams then stroked various precise spots on the subject’s abdomen and made a diagnosis based on the sound produced by the percussion. For example, in the case of congenital syphilis, whose vibratory frequency would be fifty-seven according to his own experience, Abrams set the dynamizer to that number and diagnosed syphilis in case of a positive reaction to the percussion.<sup>35</sup> This method was outlined and supported with enthusiasm in *La Vraie Vie*: “for us, as for Abrams, each disease is characterized by particular vibrations, perfectly capable of impressing an electrical apparatus

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35 This section about Abrams is taken from Bernard 2024.

and consequently susceptible of being measured" (N. N. 1923, 440).<sup>36</sup> To illustrate the point further by referring to the example of Varma himself, it was even maintained in the journal that "a human being can, without the help of any device, diagnose a disease by contact with the vibrations it emits" (ibid.)<sup>37</sup> but Varma would eventually develop his own devices.

In both diagnosis and treatment, Varma called mostly upon the touch, experience, and personal knowledge of the pranotherapist, acquired through an intensive and ascetic—almost religious—practice that included self-observation of one's body. At the same time, however, he was also developing diagnostic devices in the laboratory of his Institute of Pranotherapy. Intending, like so many others, to reconcile religion and science, East and West, he cultivated his image as a Hindu scientist, symbolized by the title with which he liked to adorn himself: 'Professor D. Varma Yogi.' The scientist aspect of his persona was symbolized by the white coat that we see him wearing on some photographs, in the vocabulary he employed, and in the various devices he invented. There is not much information about the latter, except for a few pictures and brief descriptions which offer no explanation of how they functioned. However, they still deserve mention, because they are illustrative of an era and of a will to apprehend, almost to grasp, subtle energies.

According to Varma, diseases are first and foremost caused by imbalances and poor circulation of pranic vibrations in the human body. It is therefore essential to locate any shortage or inequality in the distribution, and the Pranometer was one of the instruments most frequently used for this purpose at the Institute in 1927. It supposedly allowed the practitioner to diagnose the exact situation concerning the nervous current in the body. The Thermovibrometer, or Electrical Thermometer, served a similar function by checking the vibratory currents that generate heat in the body. Later, in 1936, Varma also developed the Pranograph, which could photograph the frequency of the vibratory currents circulating in the body (N. N. 1936, 3). The 'Pranic' was different, as it was not used for diagnostic purposes. It was designed to capture and reflect the cosmic energy in the atmosphere. This device, resembling an antique radio and presented in a nice box, did not consume electricity or energy and its duration was thus "unlimited." Of course, this type of device

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36 "pour nous, comme pour Abrams, chaque maladie est caractérisée par des vibrations particulières, parfaitement capables d'impressionner un appareil électrique et par conséquent susceptibles d'être mesurées."

37 "Un être humain peut, sans le secours d'aucun appareil diagnostiquer une maladie par le contact avec les vibrations qu'elle dégage. C'est le cas de notre directeur le professeur Varma, par exemple."

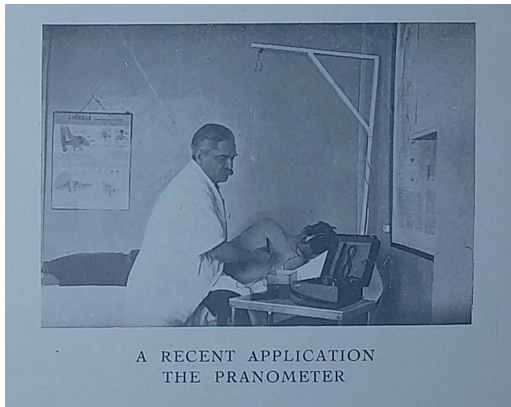


FIGURE 4.5  
Varma and his Pranometer,  
illustration found in *The Fount of  
Life* (no. 2, September 1927)

could be perceived as concrete proof of quackery—as illustrated by Abrams—when it comes to opening it and discovering what constitutes the so-called “appropriate system” and the “ad hoc device”: it is perhaps one of these objects which provoked the accusations against and helped secure Varma’s conviction for fraud. Nevertheless, such objects are also part of a larger cultural, scientific, and medical context. Devices such as these, from which, according to the material turn, history can be written (see Mukerji 2015), indeed very often oscillate between providing examples of charlatanism and genuine research on the science of radiation and vibration.

Apart from Abrams, whose influence was more or less recognized even if Varma was careful to distance himself from him on several points, our yogi scientist once referred to his “close friend,” the radiesthesist Henri Mager (1859–?), and his student, Jacqueline Chantereine, who also managed to verify and prove scientifically “the Universal Law of Vibrations” in “our laboratories.”<sup>38</sup> The latter co-wrote a book with the physician and freemason Camille Savoie (1869–1951). Entitled *Ondes et radiations humaines* (1933), it is indicative of the research located at the margins of science and medicine and deeply infused by esoteric currents, carried out at the time by a whole network of researchers. The journal *La Côte d’Azur médicale*, directed by the doctor Jules Regnault (1873–1962), was at the center of this network in France. Regnault was one of the main promoters of Abrams’ theories and he advocated the application of his electronic theory in medicine: “everything is only vibrations, vibrations of energy centres

38 It is unclear whether the two men shared the same laboratory and conducted their research together or not.



FIGURE 4.6 Vama and his Thermovibrometer, illustration in *La Pranothérapie* (1931)

that, for lack of a better term, we call electrons” (Regnault 1922, 6).<sup>39</sup> Dowsing, psychical research, astrology, and reflexotherapy—which can of course also be practiced without any interest in the study of human radiations—were then perceived as proper topics of inquiry for the electronic theory in *La Côte d’Azur médicale*. This and other related cosmological and anthropological theories gave support to these particular practices. To conclude on this topic, it is worth mentioning Georges Lakhovsky (1873–1942), who was another striking figure

39 “tout n’est que vibrations, vibrations de centres d’énergie que, faute de mieux, on appelle des électrons.”

of these fringe but intensive research projects on radiation and vibration. Similar to Varma, he was an amateur who developed various medical devices supported by a large-scale cosmological theory related to ontological monism, the theory of “Universion” (see Lakhovsky 1927). Not only did Lakhovsky use some of these devices for therapeutic purposes but he also took advantage of his wealth as well as the intellectual and cultural climate conducive to such ‘innovations’ to promote them in high-profile social and medical circles.

#### 4 Conclusion

Varma provides an excellent case study that illustrates the historical value of studying medical margins. His work sheds a new light on many theories and practices that were also representative of an era, namely, the medical holism of the 1920s and 1930s. Of course, this study has not exhausted all the research that could be undertaken on Varma, and in particular the strong political dimension of his publications. It has, however, guided us toward an appreciation of the importance of concepts relating to variations of subtle energies within the French context. In addition, it has enlightened us on the different ways these conceptions were applied in the medical field, whether by naturalist and hygienic recommendations, therapeutic massages or by laboratory research and the construction of technical devices. Beyond theories on subtle energies, most often superimposed on discoveries made within the fields of physics and biology, there is tangible concreteness in the various practices and objects permeated by such ideas, as the case of Varma has demonstrated. This invites us to approach the theme of subtle energies through methodologies inspired by Science and Technology Studies (STS), focusing on the material dimension.

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## Universalizing ‘Energy’ in Reiki and Therapeutic Touch: from Occult(ed) Roots to Medicalized Fruits

*Justin B. Stein*

The field of energy healing is among the most visible manifestations of subtle energies in the contemporary world. Humans have engaged in healing rituals involving techniques such as laying-on-of-hands and visualization to heal by channeling subtle substances since ancient times. Nevertheless, modern scientific paradigms have afforded people new conceptual frameworks to understand these substances, from Mesmerists’ magnetic fluids to contemporary quantum mechanics. Energy healers commonly posit that their practices draw on a universal human capacity to manipulate subtle energies that has existed throughout time and across cultures, equating contemporary practices with ancient ones and domestic practices with foreign ones. The universalism that underlies this equation is a master metaphor that effaces historical and cultural difference, as well as the translation work that makes discursive and somatic practices intelligible to new communities. Such universalist claims are based on the presumed universality of ‘energy,’ which draws on discourses of the physical and life sciences, including concepts of mass-energy equivalence, electrical circuits, electromagnetic fields, bioelectricity, biophotonics, and quantum mechanics.

In this chapter, I will first examine the twentieth-century roots of Reiki (in varied practices, including Japanese esoteric Buddhism, Mesmerism, and New Thought) and Therapeutic Touch (TT) (in Theosophy and Christian healing) to elucidate how these therapies bear modern values as well as aspects of premodern spiritual therapies. I will then consider how these practices underwent further adaptations in the late twentieth century as part of their medicalization and how promoters’ efforts to spread their therapeutic benefits (‘fruits’) have sometimes involved de-emphasizing aspects of their spiritual lineages (‘roots’). Genealogies of these two well-known energy therapies help substantiate how ‘energy’ has been made universal in particular (but interrelated) ways that reflect particular (but interrelated) modern values, including scientism, religious liberalism, economic neoliberalism, and ‘spirituality.’

## 1 What Is Reiki?

The practices that today are called Reiki exhibit considerable diversity, largely due to the dozens of lineages that formed in the 1980s and 1990s following the death of the woman who brought Reiki to the United States, the Hawai'i-born Japanese American Hawayo Takata (1900–1980). In recent decades, the term ‘Reiki’ has become a widespread shorthand for different healing modalities employing ‘energy’ and/or intention, some of which only loosely resemble what I describe below. However, forms of what I call Reiki *sensu stricto* share certain attributes that can be traced back to its Japanese founder, Usui Mikao (1865–1926), who had started teaching this therapy under the name Usui Reiki Ryōhō (Usui Reiki Therapy) by 1922.<sup>1</sup>

The various practices of Reiki are taught in a graduated system, most often in three or four levels, but sometimes up to seven or more levels. Advancement to each level is marked by an empowerment or initiation ritual which authorizes the student to perform specific practices. At the beginning level, students learn to use their hands on themselves and others to channel a force called *reiki* thought to enact healing (broadly conceived) and spiritual development. Their hands are typically laid gently on the body, although older methods also employ more vigorous forms of touch (resembling massage), and some practitioners prefer to hold their hands an inch or two above the recipients' bodies. Students can perform these techniques immediately after empowerment/initiation, but one's abilities are thought to improve with practice, which “broadens” one's channel to more efficiently convey *reiki* from its source, typically defined as “the universe” (Stein 2019).

At the next level(s), advanced students learn (three or more) symbols thought to enhance treatment in various ways. One symbol is said to strengthen treatments by focusing *reiki* on particular spots, a second symbol is used to treat mental and emotional problems (including addictions and bad habits), and a third one is used in ‘distance treatments’ of recipients who are not present (or to ‘send *reiki*’ to situations so as to try and effect a beneficial outcome). These symbols can be either traced with the hand or visualized, and each is typically accompanied by a short incantation. They are often considered sacred and not shared with the uninitiated, although they widely appear in print and on the internet. The final level(s) of initiation involves becoming a teacher of

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1 Please note that the name of Usui and other Japanese figures follow the Japanese convention of having their family names first, followed by the given name. Hawayo Takata, as a Japanese American, follows Western naming conventions (given name first, followed by the family name). This subsection is adapted from Stein 2023, 13–15.

Reiki, called a *shihan* or a Reiki Master, and one learns how to empower or initiate others.<sup>2</sup>

Reiki practitioners tend to consider themselves as part of an initiation lineage that extends back to the founder, and many Reiki Masters give their students a lineage chart that names each of the initiating Masters in a chain linking them back to Usui. Some practitioners study in more than one Reiki style and their charts show themselves at the intersection of several different lineages, each of which extends back to the founder. During Reiki instruction, the story of Usui's discovery of the practice is often told, and the student undergoing initiation relives Usui's experience of receiving the practice.

One last common practice is the use of five principles to guide the practitioners' moral and spiritual development, believed to be related to their ability to effectively practice Reiki. These principles are known in Japanese as Reiki's "doctrine" (*kyōgi*) or "the five precepts" (*gokai*); in English they are called the "Reiki ideals" or "Reiki principles." There are multiple versions of these principles, but in general they state an intention to, 'just for today,' not anger or worry, while cultivating gratitude, diligence (or professional integrity), and kindness.

## 2 Influences on Reiki

Many Reiki practices resemble those of other therapies in early twentieth-century Japan, especially its metaphysics of a cosmic force that can heal physical and mental disease, its use of hands-on healing, and its use of positive affirmations (the Reiki principles). This type of therapy was commonly known in Usui's time as *reijutsu* (wondrous techniques) or *seishin ryōhō* (which we might translate as 'psycho-spiritual therapies,' although in postwar Japan the same term came to be used for clinical psychotherapy). The *reijutsu* and *seishin ryōhō* that developed from the 1910s to the 1930s were heirs to periods of intense interest in spiritualism around the turn of the twentieth century and hypnotism in the 1900s. Like the main figures in those earlier movements, the creators of *reijutsu* and *seishin ryōhō* combined elements of native traditions with elements translated from Western practices. For example, discursive and bodily practices from Mesmerism were reinterpreted in terms of *ki* (Chinese: *qi*)—the invisible force at the heart of East Asian medicine—and combined with breathing practices and meditation techniques to strengthen the *ki* of the lower abdomen (*hara* or *tanden*). These new practices updated

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2 In some lineages, the instructor training is separated into several stages. For example, in Jikiden Reiki, the *shihan-kaku* (assistant teacher) level authorizes someone to teach only the first degree (*shoden*).

early modern self-cultivation practices of “nourishing life” (*yōjō*), often combined with elements of contemporary science (describing *ki* in terms of particle physics or electromagnetic radiation) and incorporated elements of the ‘mind cures’ developed in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century U.S. (such as New Thought and Christian Science), which can be seen in the use of the Reiki principles as a kind of daily affirmation (Hirano 2015; Kurita et al. 2019; Wu 2012).

The most distinctive practices of Usui Reiki Ryōhō resemble practices of Japanese Buddhism, particularly esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō*), suggesting that Usui was either himself initiated in esoteric Buddhist practices or studied some other system(s) that was/were deeply influenced by esoteric Buddhism. The empowerment/initiation practice (called *reiju* in Japanese) was likely developed from the esoteric Buddhist practice of *kanjō* (Skt. *abhiṣekha*) and the use of the symbols resembles elements of the esoteric Buddhist practice of *kaji* (Skt. *adhiṣṭhāna*). The second symbol is derived from a Sanskrit symbol that represents Buddhist figures (either Amitābha or Avalokiteśvara), and the third symbol also has a Buddhist referent (Stein 2023, 65–69). The ‘secret transmission’ method of limiting practical knowledge to initiates and the fictive kinship relationships of master and disciple (extending back to the early patriarchs) is common in many Japanese arts (especially performing and martial arts), but this is also a legacy of esoteric Buddhism (Morinaga 2005).

### 3 From Usui Reiki Ryōhō to Reiki

I have told this story in more detail elsewhere (Stein 2017; 2019; 2023), but this subsection briefly addresses how, between the 1930s and the 1990s, Usui Reiki Ryōhō went from being practiced by several thousand people in the Japanese Empire to become the most visible energy therapy in the world, practiced in over a hundred nations by estimated millions of practitioners under the name Reiki. From opening his first Tokyo training center (*dōjō*) in April 1922 to his death in April 1926, Usui Mikao is said to have trained about two thousand students, and he trained at least twenty of those students to become instructors themselves (Okada 1927; Petter 2012, 73). Although the organization that Usui founded still exists in Japan today, the lineages that have spread around the world chiefly pass through one of Usui’s disciples who founded his own organization: Hayashi Chūjirō (1880–1940), a retired naval officer who reportedly had medical training.<sup>3</sup> It was Hayashi who taught Usui Reiki Ryōhō to Hawayo

3 For discussion of the evidence for and against Hayashi’s medical training, see Stein 2023, 235 n. 153.

Takata, the aforementioned Japanese American who taught and adapted these practices under the name Reiki, first within the Japanese American community of Hawai‘i in the years spanning World War II and then, increasingly, for White students on the North American mainland up until her death in 1980. The students whom Takata trained as Masters went on to teach thousands of others in the decades that followed and the practice continued to evolve as it spread around the globe.

Early sources on how Usui Reiki Ryōhō was practiced in 1920s Japan are limited, but Usui’s most substantial surviving text—the *Public Explanation of Instruction* (*Kōkai denju setsumei*)—suggests that *reiki* is a mysterious force that comes from “the universe” (*uchū*) and underlies the “wondrous ability” (*reinō*) to heal disease. All living things possess this ability, which Usui said is “given by Heaven” (*ten’yo*) and called “Heaven’s blessing” (*tenkei*). As humans are “the most spiritually developed of all creatures” (*banbutsu no reichō*), our abilities exceed those of plants and animals. Reiki Therapy has the capacity to heal both physical and psychological illness, being chiefly a physical treatment that operates through practitioners emitting *ki* and light from their bodies—especially their eyes, mouths, and hands—although Usui admits it has a spiritual (*shinrei-teki*) dimension as well. Usui suggested *reiki* operates via universal principles and that future generations will be able to explain it scientifically (Usui 1928).

At some point between 1922, when Usui published *Public Explanation*, and December 1935, when Takata began her training under Hayashi, *reiki* began to be understood in terms of ‘energy.’ Takata’s notes from her first day of training make use of the term “Leiki Energy,” and in a diary entry from April 1936, when Hayashi told her she could undergo the training to become a Reiki instructor, we read: “Mr. Hayashi has granted to bestow upon me [...] the utmost secret in the Energy Science.”<sup>4</sup> This discourse of energetics appears to have been one of several adaptations that Hayashi made after opening his organization in 1927, but it was by no means unusual for the time. As mentioned above, many contemporaneous vitalistic therapies in Japan described their healing powers in terms of electric currents or radiating electromagnetic waves or particles.<sup>5</sup>

4 As the Japanese “r” is somewhat in-between the English “r” and “l,” Takata and other Japanese Americans sometimes Romanized as “Leiki” in the 1930s and 1940s. Takata’s class notes and diary are found in boxes 5 and 7, Hawayo Takata Papers, Special Collections, University of California, Santa Barbara. See also Stein 2019, 90.

5 For other adaptations Hayashi appears to have made between 1927 and 1935, see Stein 2023, 74–76. For examples of claims by contemporary Japanese therapists that their practices employed ‘energies,’ including electromagnetic radiation, the ‘animal electricity’ of John Bovee Dods (1795–1872), the odic force of Carl Reichenbach (1788–1869), and the “human

Takata began teaching Usui Reiki Ryōhō—which she also called Usui-shiki Ryōhō (Usui-style Therapy) or simply Reiki—upon her return to Hawai‘i in 1936 and made further adaptations for her clients and students, who were predominantly first- and second-generation Japanese Americans. In the postwar decades, Takata increasingly treated and taught White Americans, and she further adapted Reiki to translate its practices for people who neither spoke Japanese nor were socialized with Japanese values. Among these adaptations was the teaching that *reiki* literally means ‘universal life energy’ (or ‘universal life-force energy’), a translation that combined two meanings of universal. In one sense, the ‘energy’ of *reiki* can be considered ‘universal’ as it comes ‘from the universe,’ so it pervades space and time. In another, related sense, the practice of Reiki is ‘universal’ in that all people, irrespective of culture, are considered capable of learning and practicing Reiki. The universalist language Takata used was also infused with the hegemonic Christianity of the United States. In a 1948 essay, she called *reiki* “One Supreme Being—the Absolute Infinite—a Dynamic Force that governs the world and universe,” and by the late 1970s she called it “God power” (Stein 2023, 160–61). The incongruity between Takata’s universalist claims and Reiki’s culturally specific techniques (particularly the symbols, which utilize Sanskrit and Japanese scripts, but also the monistic monotheism characteristic of metaphysical Christianity) are common in the broader field of energy healing.

Following Takata’s death in 1980, a succession debate led to the formation of two rival organizations in the early 1980s: The Reiki Alliance, which recognized Phyllis Lei Furumoto (1948–2019), Takata’s granddaughter, and the American-International Reiki Association (later The Radiance Technique International Association), founded by another of Takata’s Master-level students, Barbara Weber Ray (1941–2020). Each of these organizations aspired to preserve the practice as Takata had taught it, although they also added elements intended to systematize Takata’s teachings. Meanwhile, many other lineages developed that further adapted Reiki, adding elements like the chakra system, the use of crystals, and teachings about spirit guides and the ‘higher self.’ In the 1990s, some Reiki practitioners became interested in ‘traditional Japanese Reiki’ and formed new lineages that attempted to recover Reiki practice prior to Takata’s adaptations for her American students. One key difference between Takata-lineage Reiki and these ‘traditional’ lineages is that teachers of the former only perform the initiation ceremonies (sometimes called attunements) when students advance to the next level of training, whereas teachers of the

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radioactivity” (*jintai hōshanō*) of Matsumoto Chiwaki (1872–1942), see Okumura 2021; Hirano 2015, 71; Wu 2012, 148; Yoshinaga 2015, 86.

latter perform this ceremony (called *reiju* and considered a kind of empowerment) at regular '*reiju* meetings' (*reijukai*) with their students.

As stated earlier, despite the many Reiki 'styles' today, most agree that the practice of Reiki channels a form of energy known as *reiki* that is present in all living things. The capacity to channel this energy is universal, but receiving the Reiki initiations/empowerments awakens one's latent abilities, which are strengthened through practice. Many practitioners emphasize that they are not healers, but rather that they surrender to an external authority or agent (the *reiki* energy) during the treatment that is responsible for any beneficial effects.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, some practitioners deny the existence of (or at least refrain from appealing to) *reiki* energy, rather emphasizing Reiki as a spiritual practice that helps activate the recipients' capacity for self-healing, and asserting that the force that underlies Reiki is "much subtler than [...] bioenergies," not directed by practitioners, as opposed to practices like Therapeutic Touch, described below (Miles 2006, 9–10; Osborn 2019).

#### 4 What Is Therapeutic Touch?

Therapeutic Touch is an energy healing practice that was collaboratively developed in 1972 by Dolores Krieger (1921–2019), a registered nurse and professor of nursing science at New York University (NYU), and Dora Kunz (1904–1999), a lifelong Theosophist (and president of the Theosophical Society in America from 1975 to 1987) who was recognized as a gifted clairvoyant and healer from an early age.<sup>7</sup> As Krieger's intention in developing this modality was to train nurses and nursing students in energy healing, TT is disproportionately practiced by nurses. Estimates by Krieger and the Therapeutic Touch International Association (TTIA) suggest that roughly half of the 100,000 people who have trained in TT are healthcare professionals (Stein 2022, 235). This association of TT with nursing has also led to its ample representation in medical research on energy healing: in a 2010 review of randomized clinical trials on "biofield therapies," TT was far and away the most studied modality, with twenty-seven studies that met the review's criteria compared to only ten for Reiki (Jain and Mills 2010).

6 Ethnographic research suggests that Reiki practitioners have both 'vertical' experiences of *reiki* energy as a vehicle linking them to transcendence and 'horizontal' ones, in which the energy is experienced as an immanent, everyday agent with which they interact. See Beeler 2017, 466–67, 475; Beeler and Jonker 2020, 154, 189, 198–99.

7 This section is adapted from Stein 2022, 234–35.

Throughout its fifty-year-long history, TT training has remained relatively centralized, with TTIA (and its sister organization, Nurse Healers Professional Associates) regulating the curriculum, certifying practitioners and teachers, and offering a mentorship program. As a result, TT is a more standardized practice than Reiki, so it is easier to outline its basic practice without overgeneralizing. The healer first ‘centers’ herself, assuming an erect posture, breathing naturally, cultivating awareness of her own and others’ energies, and setting a compassionate intention for the treatment.<sup>8</sup> The healer is to maintain this centered state throughout the treatment, which “enables her to access her own inner self during the TT interaction” (Kunz and Krieger 2004, 2–3). Next, she assesses the energy field of the healee by moving her hands a few inches above the body and paying attention to any perceived changes in temperature or sensations of tingling, pulsing, pressure, etc. Third, she ‘unruffles’ the healee’s field by passing her hands over the body, generally downward from the head to the feet. Fourth, based on her observations during the assessment, the healer uses intention to direct some of her own vital energy into the healee and modulate the vital energy’s flow within the healee’s body so as to try and make their energy field symmetrical and balanced. During this process, the healer can choose to touch the healee’s body, but this can also be done without physical contact. The healer conducts periodic reassessments and, when she considers the healee’s field to have sufficiently harmonized, she concludes the treatment (Krieger 1979; Kunz and Krieger 2004, 2–3).

As in Reiki, one learns the basic treatment in an introductory seminar, and more esoteric subjects (such as the chakra system and TT’s ‘transpersonal’ aspects) in intermediate and advanced seminars. The basic TT treatment is thought to primarily work through *prana* (understood as vital force) flowing from the vital-energy field of the healer to that of the healee. The vital-energy field is considered just one of several dimensions of the human energy field, along with the psychodynamic field, the conceptual field, “and what might be called a spiritual level of consciousness,” also understood as the inner self, said to be “the individual’s link with the universal base of consciousness itself” (Krieger 2002, 18–20, 103–5). This universal consciousness, also called “the universal healing field,” is characterized by order and compassion, and “people in various religions call it ‘God’ or ‘the healing spirit’”; when the TT therapist centers herself at the beginning of the treatment, she is thought to be connecting with this universal source of healing (Kunz and Krieger 2004, 27–28). As with

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8 Note that TT uses the language of ‘healer’ and ‘healee’ which Reiki practitioners often avoid in order to emphasize that it is not they who heal, but the *reiki* energy.

Takata's explanation of Reiki as "God power," the source of TT's healing energy is associated with a universalized divinity.

## 5 From Theosophical Healing to Therapeutic Touch

TT is based on the experiences and practices of Dora Kunz, and as such it is described in terms of her Theosophical worldview. Kunz was born Theodora Sophia van Gelder on a Javanese sugar plantation in the Dutch East Indies.<sup>9</sup> Her parents both served as Theosophical Lodge presidents: her father of the Surabaya Lodge and her mother of the Malang Lodge, whose meetings were held in their home during Theodora's youth. Theodora's mother taught her to meditate daily from an early age and introduced her to the Theosophical Masters, disembodied enlightened beings with whom she learned to connect psychically. As a child, Theodora began to experience and communicate psychically with non-human entities. From around the age of seven or eight, she began to regularly attend Theosophical Society meetings and learned to classify these spirits within 'the angelic kingdom,' which she divided into classes including fairies, angels, and devas.

Among the frequent Theosophical guests to her home was the English Theosophist Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934), living in India at the time and engaged in providing spiritual training to children that he considered to be gifted.<sup>10</sup> He first met Theodora on his first trip to Java in 1911, when she was seven years old, and on his second trip three years later, he learned of her clairvoyance. (Incidentally, at this time he gave her the nickname Dora that she would use for the rest of her life.) In 1916, at the age of twelve, Leadbeater invited Dora to attend a small school he was starting in Sydney, Australia. She became the school's first female student and Leadbeater's personal physician, Dr Mary Rocke, became her guardian. Leadbeater encouraged Dora and her classmates to develop their clairvoyant abilities while developing the sacraments for a new religious movement called the Liberal Catholic Church, while Dr. Rocke trained Dora in basic nursing, anatomy, and physiology.

In her young adulthood, Dora taught meditation and clairvoyance in Sydney, developed her skills as a medical clairvoyant (although she avoided the term), wrote for the journal *Theosophy in Australia*, and published a

9 This section is based on the account in van Gelder and Chesley 2015.

10 It must be mentioned that accusations of sexual misconduct—specifically regarding his teaching masturbation to male students, possibly as a practice of sexual magic—followed Leadbeater throughout this period. See Tillett 1982, esp. 279–84.

pamphlet on angels. Partly influenced by Fritz Kunz (1888–1972), another of Leadbeater’s protégés whom she would marry in 1927, Dora adopted more scientific and psychological terms to describe her clairvoyant visions. “Dora began to describe the physical body as a ‘nexus’ in energetic fields of greater and lesser density” (van Gelder and Chesley 2015, 64). These ‘fields’ were adaptations of Theosophical ideas, with Dora’s “astral field” or “emotional field” being equivalent to Theosophy’s “astral plane,” and her “vital field” or “etheric field” being equivalent to Theosophy’s “etheric body” (ibid., 111–12). Following an equestrian accident, Dora suffered headaches and Fritz encouraged her to join him in Los Angeles, where he had found a blind osteopath whom he thought could help her. She arrived in 1925 and was cured by the osteopath’s hands-on healing: “He told me that he could see energy fields and he could feel with his hands. Through his fingers he could feel and ‘see,’ with his mind’s eye, an energy field which was not in order” (ibid., 70). This experience helped influence Kunz’s later development of TT.

Equally important, though, were Kunz’s decades of experience of perceiving auras, chakras, and karma—foundational teachings of Theosophy that go back to Blavatsky and were further developed by Leadbeater. In the 1930s, Kunz began providing aura readings, which included information about people’s health (understood psychosomatically as habit patterns) and karma (ibid., 107–11, 105–51). She frequently lectured—which served as the basis for her pamphlets like *The Conscious Use of the Aura* and *Clairvoyance: Its Value and Limitations*—teaching people to calm their emotions, which would enlarge their aura, make it more consistent, and improve their ability to “send love” to others (101–5). By 1955, she came to describe this latter form of distance healing as “sending energy towards the person” (176). It is unclear when Kunz began to see chakras, but she was certainly familiar with them due to her Theosophical training, especially under Leadbeater—who had been writing and lecturing extensively about them for over three decades before publishing his 1927 classic *The Chakras*<sup>11</sup>—and Kunz described seeing the chakras of humans and animals by the 1950s (186–89).

In the decades around World War II, Kunz worked with physicians like the allergist Otelia Bengtsson (from the 1930s), as well as the neuropsychiatrist Shafica Karagulla and the psychiatrist Robert Laidlaw (both from the 1950s), which deepened her interest in the medical potential of clairvoyance and energy healing. Bengtsson introduced Kunz to diagnostic and research protocols, and Karagulla made Kunz one of her primary research subjects in her

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11 For Leadbeater’s publications on the *cakras* from the 1890s to 1910s, see Leland 2016, chap. 12.

investigation of the connection between endocrine function and clairvoyant perceptions of chakras (van Gelder and Chesley 2015, 98–101, 105, 186–91). In 1954 and 1955, Bengtsson brought Kunz to the Wainwright House in Rye, NY (quite close to the Kunzes' home in Port Chester), for a series of seminars on spiritual healing organized by Laidlaw that were pivotal in Kunz's eventual development of TT. The seminar transcripts (quoted in part above) demonstrate her growing interest in 'sending energy' to others for healing.

While at Wainwright House, Kunz also became close with two lay Christian healers who influenced her path to developing TT: Ambrose Worrall, an American who also participated in the 1954–1955 seminars, and Oskar Estebany, a Hungarian whom she met there a decade later. Kirsten van Gelder and Frank Chesley write: "Though Worrall was a deeply religious man, his ability to analyze and then clearly describe his healing approach without reference to Christianity was instructive to Dora" (2015, 160). Moreover, although most spiritual healers at Wainwright House (and elsewhere) believed that healing was a gift from God that could not be taught, Kunz considered the fact that Ambrose Worrall gave his wife Olga instruction in "how to use [her gift] intelligently without emotion and how to keep it under control" to be formative in her eventual development of seminars to teach others to develop their healing abilities (*ibid.*, 169).

Starting in the summer of 1966, Kunz and Bengtsson began experimenting on Estebany's healing abilities, using members of the New York Theosophical Society (NYTS) as subjects and Pumpkin Hollow Farm (a Theosophical retreat center in Craryville, NY, that Dora and Fritz had founded in 1936) as the setting. Their research assistant was Dolores Krieger, a student of Fritz's who was a registered nurse and was finishing her PhD in nursing. Following one of these research sessions in the late 1960s, Kunz "selected members of the NYTS to meet on alternate Saturdays to learn and practice an approach to healing that gradually became a technique called Therapeutic Touch" (van Gelder and Chesley 2015, 195).

Following Fritz's death in 1972, Dora held the first of what became an annual Invitational Healers' Workshop at Pumpkin Hollow.<sup>12</sup> Many healthcare professionals attended these workshops, and Krieger quickly went from being a student at the first workshop to acting as a co-facilitator with Kunz, as she "was able to 'translate' Dora's clairvoyant and telepathic abilities to health care professionals" (van Gelder and Chesley 2015, 205). Krieger named "an aspect of

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12 A few years later, Dora also began holding annual workshops at Indralaya, another Theosophical retreat center on Orcas Island, off the coast of Washington state, which she and Fritz first visited in 1927.

[Dora's] healing approach" Therapeutic Touch, "launched this healing modality into the nursing profession," and "became the 'face' of Therapeutic Touch among healthcare professionals" (*ibid.*, 205, 226). In 1973, Krieger introduced a new course into NYU's nursing school entitled "Frontiers in Nursing," which taught TT, and by the end of the decade TT became part of the formal NYU nursing curriculum. The latter was based on a theory called "the Science of Unitary Human Beings" by Martha E. Rogers, another NYU nursing professor. Like Kunz's scientific spin on Theosophical anthropology, Rogers taught that "human beings are energy fields that are interdependent with [their] environment" (*ibid.*, 206–7). This consonance between Kunz's worldview, scientific concepts, and nursing theories underlaid Kunz's "[insistence] that neither Therapeutic Touch nor her own healing were functions of the Theosophical Society" (*ibid.*, 213). Despite her assertions, TT (especially at the higher levels) contains many teachings about human health and the spiritual world that accord with Theosophical teachings, including the chakra system, the understanding that humans exist at the intersection of multiple 'fields' (a scientization of Blavatsky's teaching of 'planes'), and a hierarchy of spiritual beings in the angelic kingdom.<sup>13</sup> Kunz herself recognized that TT helped spread Theosophical ideas such as karma within the nursing profession (*ibid.*, 263).

## 6 Medicalization and Universalization of 'Energy Medicine' in the Late Twentieth Century

Since the late eighteenth century, Mesmerists and vitalist physicians understood health and healing as drawing on electrical and magnetic 'fluids,' and subsequent generations of health reformers theorized disparate practices of traditional and unorthodox medicine (including spiritual healing) in terms of a newly universalized 'energy.' For example, Sylvester Graham (1794–1851), a Presbyterian minister, promoted temperance, vegetarianism, and sexual abstinence in energetic terms starting in the 1830s. Graham drew on Isaac Newton's (1642–1726) speculation that light and matter could convert into each other, and Michael Faraday's (1791–1867) recent demonstrations of the relationship between electricity and magnetism, to posit that the vital force that governed human health could be related to other forms of energy—such as light, heat,

13 Kunz and Krieger (2004, 217) say that "belief in angelic presence is not a part of the teachings of Therapeutic Touch," but they devote space in several of their books on TT to the role of angels and other non-human intelligences.

electricity, and magnetism—which all stem from “the almighty and creative Energy,” that is, God (Graham 1849 [1839], 10, 15, 83).

The current wave of this trend is related to an upwelling of interest in ‘energy medicine’ in the late twentieth century United States, tied to the 1970s ‘acupuncture boom’ and parapsychological studies that suggested the existence of a human energetic system currently unknown to medical science, but with potential to complement—even surpass—the ‘physiochemical model’ of the human body. For example, in March 1981, the homeopathist Dana Ullman organized a weekend conference titled “Conceptualizing Energy Medicine: An Emerging Model of Healing” at the School of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley. Speakers used the idea of “an energy system within the human body” to link the mechanisms underlying therapies as disparate as acupuncture, biofeedback, color therapy, homeopathy, microcurrent stimulation, Reichian therapy, TT, and yoga.<sup>14</sup> That such diverse therapies can all be interpreted as forms of ‘energy medicine,’ and that this label allowed such unorthodox therapies to be discussed at a public university, gives some sense of energy’s potential to universalize and medicalize varied practices.

This language of ‘energy medicine’ gained momentum with support from the U.S. government. In 1991, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) opened its Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM), renamed National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) in 1998, and then National Center of Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) in 2014. Shortly after the NCCAM rebrand (accompanied by an over tenfold expansion of the Center’s budget from 1997 to 2003), the Center established an influential five-fold typology for CAM modalities: *alternative medical systems* or *whole medical systems* like Ayurveda or Chinese medicine; *mind-body medicine*, including psychotherapy, meditation, and breathing exercises; *biologically based therapies*, such as supplements and diets; *manipulative therapies*, such as chiropractic, osteopathic manipulation, and massage; and *energy medicine* or *energy therapies*, including “biofield therapies” such as Reiki and TT, as well as “bioelectromagnetic-based therapies” like the use of magnets or electrical currents (Fuller and Stein 2014, 168; NCCAM 2002). While NCCIH no longer uses these terms and is less celebratory of Reiki and TT than it was two decades ago, Reiki and TT practitioners continue to use the NCCAM categories to describe their practices to potential clients or in biomedical settings, such as hospitals.

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14 “Conceptualizing Energy Medicine: An Emerging Model of Healing” conference program, University of California, Berkeley, University Extension and the School of Public Health, March 28–29, 1981.

The language of ‘universal life energy’ (Reiki) or ‘universal healing field’ (TT) is designed to be inclusive of people from any (or no) religious tradition, but the assumption that such an all-inclusive practice could even exist is also predicated on a modern liberal sensibility. Takata and Kunz oscillated between invoking this universalizing language and more religious language that would appeal to people from particular (often metaphysical Christian) traditions. Takata, for example, told people that “Reiki is God power” and sometimes used “Reiki” and “God” in interchangeable ways. For example, in one of her autobiographical audio recordings, she said: “If you have the will to get well and [...] accept Reiki, accept God, nothing is impossible, for God is the greatest healer” (Takata 1981, tape 15, p. 5). Kunz also said that religious people would consider God to be the source of TT’s healing energy, and in a posthumously released book on TT’s “spiritual dimension,” spoke at length regarding the roles of angels and karma in the healing process (Kunz and Krieger 2004, 225–27). Thus, although the language of energy and fields have helped promoters of spiritual therapies universalize, secularize, and medicalize religious and spiritual concepts, there is also a tendency to code-switch based on one’s audience. As van Gelder and Chesley write of Kunz, “[w]hen teaching people who were not united by a shared religion, Dora avoided religious terms such as the ‘invocation’ of angels and resulting ‘blessings’ and ‘miracles.’ Instead, she encouraged students to be centered in the ‘subtler consciousness of the Higher Self’ with ‘reverence for life’ so that they, too, could act as instruments of what she called ‘healing energy’” (2015, 48). This ‘spiritual but not religious’ language, where energy is a stand-in for a liberal interpretation of God, is designed to have broad appeal but also carries particular theological commitments.

The rhetoric of ‘energy’ also takes on new meanings with the rise of new forms of scientific, medical, and consumerist imaginaries in late modernity. As Ruth Barcan argues, the underlying ontology of “energetic” dimensions of the self draws on aspects of premodern practices but becomes “newly plausible” due to varied factors, including: “the postmodern emphasis on the multifaceted and fluid nature of identity”; the ways that technologies extend embodiment beyond the boundaries of our physical bodies; and the rise of holistic sciences including quantum physics, psychoneuroimmunology, and epigenetics. Most importantly, perhaps, is that the concept of ‘energy’ serves as a means to fulfill our modern desire to transcend differences of time (between modernity and premodern tradition) and culture (between ‘East’ and ‘West,’ Self and Other), and thereby overcome divides between nature and technology, spirituality and medicine, all in ways “compatible with the hedonism of consumerism” (Barcan 2013, 228–35). Practitioners and promoters of modern spiritual therapies, of course, often theorize money as a form of spiritual energy

(Aldred 2002), and Reiki practitioners in particular have spiritualized payments for treatments or training as part of an “exchange of energies” essential for ensuring the client or student’s gratitude (Stein 2023, 190–91). The emphasis on an individual’s spiritual responsibility for their own suffering, often seen in this field, has also been tied to a neoliberal capitalist framework (Carrette and King 2005, 79–83). Thus, for practitioners and clients in late modernity, ‘energy’ is a particularly potent metaphor that can reinforce dominant paradigms like scientism, liberalism, and neoliberalism, while simultaneously giving the sense that one is participating in a countercultural practice.

## 7 Concluding Remarks

Throughout the lectures that became his 1902 classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*, the psychologist (and psychical researcher) William James (1842–1910) repeatedly drew on a metaphor adapted from the Sermon on the Mount, writing “by their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots.” Jesus spoke of distinguishing true prophets from false ones, but James held up this “empiricist criterion” as not only how to discern divine messages from demonic impersonations, but also what value religion holds for humanity more generally, especially New Thought, which he called “the religion of healthy-mindedness” or “the Mind-cure movement.” He argued that this movement is the American people’s sole “decidedly original contribution” to world philosophy, and its connection with “concrete therapeutics” made sense due to Americans’ “extremely practical turn of character.” He concluded that, despite “much recalcitrancy and protesting,” the medical and religious establishments in the United States would grow to appreciate the positive potential of New Thought’s teachings and practices for both bodies and souls (James 2002 [1902], 21, 78–80).<sup>15</sup>

A century after James, therapies bearing the influences of American metaphysical religion have gained some access to sites of biomedical practice in the United States. This is despite the continued recalcitrancy of some medical scientists and other skeptics, who refuse to acknowledge the possibility of clinical efficacy until the ‘energy’ that allegedly underlies these practices is scientifically verifiable, and the protests of some religionists and skeptics, who both argue that Reiki and TT’s ‘occult’ dimensions (tied to their respective influences from Japanese Buddhism and Theosophy) make them incompatible

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15 See also James’ discussion of the values of Christian conversion and of “saintliness” based on their practical benefits (James 2002 [1902], Lectures x–xv).

with commitments to Christianity or secularity (Stein 2022). Practitioners often respond, like James, by directing the public's focus toward the useful fruits of their practice, not the occult(ed) roots, i.e., saying that their therapeutic efficacy makes them valuable, irrespective of their origins. These arguments often appeal to the universality of the healing energy they ostensibly employ, connecting it to scientific concepts like mass-energy equivalence ('everything is energy') or quantum entanglement.

Here, we can make another connection with James' writings. In *Varieties*, James employs the language of energetics, identifying, for example, the "real self" as "the centre of personal energies," (James 2002 [1902], 161–62). However, he rejected the kind of energetic monism common among energy healers, clarifying elsewhere (including in his 1907 essay, "The Energies of Men") that "energy" in the human sciences referred to "several heterogeneous elementary things" which are distinct from the concept of energy in the physical sciences (Franzese 2008, 163, 168–69; James 1907, 331). While we, in the human sciences, can leave the questions of these practices' clinical efficacy to biomedical researchers and the biophysics of 'spiritual energy' to physical scientists, it is up to us to chart the varied uses of 'energy' in contemporary culture, including how people understand their health and healing, their social relationships, and their connection with their environment.

## Abbreviations

CAM	Complementary and Alternative Medicine
NCCAM	National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine
NCCIH	National Center of Complementary and Integrative Health
NIH	National Institutes of Health
NYTS	New York Theosophical Society
NYU	New York University
OAM	Office of Alternative Medicine
TT	Therapeutic Touch
TTIA	Therapeutic Touch International Association

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# Healing with *Qì* via *Qìgōng*, Acupuncture, and *Fēngshuǐ*: Code-Switching and the Case of a Chinese American Healer

*Kin Cheung*

## 1 Introduction

In October 2018, a Chinese American healer, Cheung Seng Kan<sup>1</sup> (Zhāng Chénggēn 張成根; b. 1955), led a *qìgōng* (氣功) workshop near Drake University in Iowa. He taught twenty people *Zhìnéng* (智能) *Qìgōng*, a form of ‘wisdom healing’ *qìgōng* for seventy-five minutes, and then offered four individual sessions of private healing of ailments ranging from knee pain, anxiety, and stress to neck issues, migraines, and back soreness. Participants reported sensations of warmth, coolness, relaxation, and a “feeling as if it was the best massage [they] have ever gotten.”<sup>2</sup>

The modern global discourse on *qì* and healing involves techniques that manipulate and improve the flow or balance of *qì* (氣; psychophysical energy) within the individual. These practices include, *inter alia*, *qìgōng*, Daoist visualization exercises, acupuncture, and acupressure. Proponents of such techniques claim that scientific verification proves their efficacy, whereas detractors argue that science clearly shows such practices are no better than placebos. Science is thus seen as a rhetorical tool for both legitimation and delegitimization. Some scholars point out that the heated debates in *qì* discourses are negotiations of power between the state and popular movements (Palmer 2007; Chen 2003; Xu 1999). Others paint these discourses in terms of different epistemic realms, that is, discursive rational understanding versus lived psychosomatic knowledge (Hsu 1999; Yuasa 1993).

This chapter turns to a case study of a healer who employs *qì* in order to demonstrate how it is conceptualized and implemented at the concrete level of lived religious healing communities. This community of Chinese Americans

1 This is the legal English spelling of his name Romanized from the Hong Kong Government Cantonese system. Cheung mainly speaks Cantonese and occasionally uses Mandarin. At the first mention of East Asian names, I place the family name first.

2 I documented participants’ reports since I was the interpreter for the workshop.

illustrates hybridity in their oscillation between inconsistent, incompatible, or incommensurable paradigms of *qi* and mainstream biomedicine. I use sociolinguistic theoretical insight from the phenomenon of code-switching to argue for a more nuanced view of the appeal to science for legitimizing healing with *qi*.

Cheung has been the center of an immigrant community of healing in the New York City area with over four dozen of his relatives, friends, students, and patients since 2012. *Qigōng*, in which *qi* is exchanged among practitioners and with the environment, is only one of many techniques in his healing repertoire. He also employs, among other things, electronic acupuncture machines, acupressure, and moxibustion to regulate and manipulate the flow of *qi* within a person; and (typically not mentioned alongside the above) *fēngshuǐ* to affect the flow of *qi* in living spaces through object placement. To be sure, there is a vast literature on *fēngshuǐ*, including research in landscaping, architectural design, interior design, environmental psychology, divination, and more (Bruun 2008). Research on *fēngshuǐ* in medical anthropology examines the impact of *fēngshuǐ* in explanations of illness rather than healing *per se* (Yeo et al. 2005). The architect and researcher of *fēngshuǐ* Špela Kryžanowski reviewed studies of *fēngshuǐ* effectiveness and found that the majority fell into three groups: 1) environmental psychology and sustainability; 2) field experiments in real or virtual environments; and 3) living quality evaluations. However, “one of the fundamental concepts of *fēngshuǐ*, namely the concept of life energy *qi*, remains poorly researched” (Kryžanowski 2021, 61). This is especially the case for anglophone biomedical studies as indicated by a search for the terms acupuncture, *tàijí*, and *qigōng* on PubMed, which yields 48,507, 4,857, and 3,533 results, respectively, while a search for *fēngshuǐ* yields thirty-nine results.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the type of scientific research conducted on *fēngshuǐ* for healing is not accepted by the dominant medical paradigm advanced by modern state governments, i.e., biomedicine.

Although biomedicine is a globalized medical discourse—a hegemonic one supported and maintained by modern states—ethnicity and race factor into the equation as variables that reveal how people and their medicines are classified hierarchically (Tilley 2021, 14–16). The medical anthropologist Vincanne Adams shows how randomized controlled trials, the ‘gold standard’ in biomedical research, are used to reinforce biomedical hegemony by pre-defining disease, presenting a value-free interpretation of data (that assumes

3 Search conducted on May 5, 2025, using the terms ‘feng-shui,’ ‘fengshui,’ and ‘feng shui.’ Results by year for *fēngshuǐ* are nearly flat, while the results for ‘acupuncture,’ ‘tai-chi,’ and ‘qi-gong’ show exponential increase over time.

biomedical values are neutral and objective) and setting “itself in opposition to the ‘spiritual’ or ‘religious’” (2002, 680). Adams argues that “randomized controlled crimes” are used in legal battles against practices by Tibetan healers and to outlaw certain Tibetan medicine that competes with biomedicine (661). In other words, Adams’ provocative use of the term *crime* points out that courts (using “expert” testimony) uphold biomedical dominance by ruling on what type of medical “evidence” *counts* in “evidence-based medicine” (672). Thus, the paucity of randomized control trials on the use of *fēngshuǐ* to heal specific medical conditions means that scientific “evidence” for healing with *qì* through *fēngshuǐ* will not convince those within the biomedical paradigm.

Cheung uses a language of science to explain the efficacy of *fēngshuǐ* principles. Beyond merely wielding science rhetorically, Cheung exemplifies the style of discourse of working-class immigrants who find themselves on unstable ground between cultural assumptions from China and the U.S. on mind-body practices and healing. The sections below begin with an overview of global discourses on healing with *qì*. Next, I explain how Cheung and his community communicate *qì* in a way that complicates dominant discourses. Then, I employ code-switching as a theoretical framework to analyze the unstable ground this healing community occupies and illustrate what this means for studying subtle energy. The practice of code-switching reveals that codes such as languages—including medical languages—can be used in their plurality within one conversational episode (typically, one sentence). A speaker, such as Cheung, alternates codes because multiple medical languages, and thus medical paradigms, are needed to communicate their experience. With code-switching there is no one code or medical paradigm elevated hierarchically as more ‘true,’ ‘real,’ or ‘better’ able to capture reality. This suggests that the study of *qì* and subtle energy in general could move beyond the ‘medical bilingualism’ model (addressed in detail later) which assumes that medical or bodily languages can be neatly translated. This is typically a one-directional translation from subaltern languages into the dominant biomedical one, thus preserving the latter’s higher status.

Before providing an overview of global discourses on *qì*, I will comment on my methodology for this chapter. A keen reader may have noticed that the central figure of my research community and I share a surname and wonder about our relationship or if it is a coincidence given that Cheung (張) is among the top five most common Chinese surnames. It may interest readers that Cheung happens to be my father. Elsewhere, I have written on the methodological difficulties and opportunities in writing about a family member, proposing the category of “filial ethnography” as a subset of autoethnography distinct from other types of intimate ethnography (Cheung 2023). Autoethnography

takes the self as a beginning point, but is different from autobiography or other forms of life writing in that it provides critical analysis of larger cultural assumptions, norms, and expressions. The cultural anthropologist Alexandra Coțofană writes:

[A]utoethnography prefers the discomfort of revealed intimacy to the falsehood of objectivity. Assumptions of neutrality and objectivity are rooted in the colonial origins of ethnographic methods and have become increasingly problematic in the social sciences and humanities, as more and more researchers acknowledge the need to think with the researcher's positionality. (Coțofană 2023, 4)

In other words, both the perspective and blind spot of the researcher are made transparent throughout the analysis. The scholar of multicultural education Gresilda Tilley-Lubbs explains that critical autoethnography is a method that “combines ethnography, autobiography, and critical pedagogy,” and is invaluable for writing about marginalized communities as it forces the researcher to confront their own position of power so as to prevent further oppression of vulnerable populations often perpetuated through scholarship via objectification using the academic gaze (2016, 3). As a subset of these methods, filial ethnography begins with the parental figure and makes clear that the researcher—in this case, myself—is intimately implicated in and contributes to the subject's worldview. In contrast to participant observation by an ethnographer writing about a community they may be studying for years, a filial ethnographer affords the long-term perspective of how the subject has changed over decades while having access to private disclosures normally hidden to interlocutors outside the family. Pertaining to the latter, I see how Cheung conceals from his students and patients his personal struggles with various health issues in order to uphold his reputation as a potent healer. The main blind spot would be my interaction with Cheung's healing community as they are aware of not only my relationship to him but also my position as a university professor and scholar of religion (see Cheung 2023, 33–39).

Studying family members or local communities, in which one is a part of or raised within, is not uncommon in religious studies (Yoo and Joshi 2020; Ng 2012; Narayan 2012; Alpert and Levitt 2009).<sup>4</sup> Although I have a privileged emic vantage point in describing Cheung's life, especially how he has changed

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4 “[T]here is no neutral study of religion. The myth of neutrality enshrined in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship and found in public/private debates makes things that might be questioned appear normal and serves to hide bias” (Minister and Bloesch 2023, 7). On

over time, I am also aware of the need to remain reflexive and transparent in my choices to translate his words and analyze him and his community in their cultural context—like any responsible ethnographic work.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Global Discourses of Healing with Qì: Science, Power, and Epistemic Realms

Qì, conventionally spelled *qi* or *chi*, has been translated as soul, “[p]neuma, *ki*, *prana*, air, breath, vital energy, energy, magnetism” (Stanley-Baker 2022, 23), a psychophysical energy phenomenon, bio-energy, subtle energy, physical force, ether, and more (Yuasa 1993). Translating *qì* has always been political (Zhang 1999). It is a key term at the very base of Chinese philosophical-religious traditions, physical and moral self-cultivation or mind-body practices (e.g., martial arts, meditation, etc.), medicine, and the design of landscapes, buildings, and tombs. *Qì* plays a crucial role in Chinese philosophy (ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, ethics) and ritual practice, as well as in linguistics (*qì* as grammar), fine arts, literature, and politics (Stanley-Baker 2022; Yuasa 1993). In other words, *qì* cannot be reduced to a single semantic dimension.

Thus, *qì* is more encompassing than Western notions of vital energy. In terms of healing, it is mainly theorized in two domains: the flow of *qì* as a vital force that is “circulated throughout the body via a network of conduits that run alongside the blood vessels,” also known as meridians, and the Daoist cosmological perspective on cultivating *qì* in order to achieve their soteriological aim of immortality or transcendence (Tavor 2017, 35). These theories are in conversation. The foundational text for Chinese medicine is the *Huángdì Nèijīng* (黃帝內經; *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor*; c. third century BCE), which explains that disease, aging, and death are a result of the natural dissipation of *qì*. Confucians and Daoists developed divergent responses to this natural aging process (Tavor 2017). In contrast to the Confucians who espoused a system of rituals to honor the wisdom and experience that comes with age, the Daoists devised elaborate ritual, dietary, and meditative regimens to stop and reverse aging (Kohn 2013). The comparative philosopher of religion and the body Yuasa Yasuo (1993) argues that Daoists went beyond concerns for health

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how the academic study of religion ‘manufactures’ distance, see Driscoll and Miller 2018; on the impact that scholars of Buddhist Studies have on their objects of study, see Mitchell 2023.

5 For examples of the translation choices I make, reflexive questions I ask, and my position of *strong* agnosticism on his healing efficacy, see Cheung 2023.

by aiming toward the ‘supernormal,’ or superhealth—such as longevity and immortality.

Given that disease is thought to be caused by imbalance due to stagnation or obstruction of *qi* flow, health is achieved through means that restore the balance in the flow of *qi*. The discourse on healing with *qi* has focused on Chinese medical arts such as acupuncture and *qigōng*. By Chinese medical arts I refer here to the entire history of healing practices used by Chinese populations around the world in order to distinguish this rich and diverse category from a narrower term that was popularized in the mid-twentieth century. The term ‘Traditional Chinese Medicine’ (TCM) was invented in the 1950s Communist China in order to (among other things) raise the global profile of Chinese medicine and export it (Levinovitz 2013; Taylor 2004). The change in framing of TCM matters. For instance, the World Health Organization notes TCM had “migrated into Western countries, first as ‘unconventional medicine,’ next as ‘alternative medicine,’ and then as ‘complementary/alternative medicine,’ moving toward the category of ‘integrative medicine’” (Barnes 2013, 284). The inadequacy of *alternative* prompted the two later frames. A historical approach recognizes the *divergence* of Chinese medical arts from their counterpart—called mainstream, biomedicine, western, or allopathic medicine by various parties (Kuriyama 1999).<sup>6</sup>

The neologism *qigōng* designated the practice or cultivation of *qi*. The compound is created from the first word literally meaning breath or air and the second, work or skill. *Qigōng* emerged at the same time as the creation of TCM and underwent a rollercoaster ride of support and denouncement from the Chinese government in alternating decades (Ownby 2008, 18). After the 1950s promotion by government officials “as part of a nationalistic reaction to the perceived threat of Western medicine to traditional medical practices and practitioners,” their attitude took a sharp turn and *qigōng* was officially deemed “feudal superstition” during the mid-1960s as part of the Cultural Revolution, only to see the practice return in urban parks with *qigōng* masters during the mid-1970s, leading to the “*qigōng* fever” (氣功熱; *qigōngrè*) of the 1980s that “involv[ed] as many as 200 million practitioners, who elevated some charismatic *qigōng* masters to the equivalent of rock star status” (Ownby 2013, 264–65). However, in the 1990s, “some authorities began to question at least

6 For more on the problem with the term ‘evidence-based’ medicine and how that at once assumes and actively constructs *one* acceptable ‘real’ medicine by *a priori* exclusion of (measurement of) data—as not suitable evidence—that does not already accord with *the* existent paradigm of mainstream medicine, especially in relation to *qi* and *qigōng*, see Cheung 2022, 145–49. See also Cheung forthcoming.

the excesses and abuses of certain masters,” culminating in the 1999 clash between the *qìgōng*-adjacent movement Falun Gong (法輪功) or Falun Dafa (法輪大法; est. 1992) and government forces (ibid., 266). “Beginning in 2000, *qìgōng* disappeared from China for several years, but it is currently resurfacing under the title ‘medical *qìgōng*,’ to distinguish itself clearly from Falun Gong” (ibid.). I call Falun Gong *qìgōng* adjacent because its

origins are as elusive as its basic character. We know that Li Hongzhi founded his cultivation system in 1992, and that Falun Gong began as a form of *qìgōng*. But since the origins and ultimate nature of *qìgōng* are poorly understood as well, the connection between Falun Gong and *qìgōng* (a connection in any case disputed both by Falun Gong and by other schools of *qìgōng*) provides little enlightenment. (Ownby 2008, 4)

Although a discussion of Falun Gong is outside the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that the global discourse on Falun Gong adds the dimension of human rights afforded to persecuted religious minorities to the broader context of *qì*-based practices (Ownby 2003).<sup>7</sup>

Returning to the more general practice of *qìgōng*, global discourses began with debates over categorization and *qìgōng*'s relationship with science, secularity, and religion. The sociologist of religion David Palmer writes:

Treating *qìgōng* as a religious phenomenon would be strongly disputed by most *qìgōng* groups. Indeed, although *qìgōng* freely draws from the symbolic trove of Chinese religion, *qìgōng* discourse asserts its scientific and moral superiority over religion. Likewise, orthodox Buddhist

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<sup>7</sup> Scholars of religion prefer the label religious minority or the current convention, i.e., new religious movement (NRM), over the stigmatized ‘cult’ used by the Chinese Communist Party when characterizing Falun Gong. In the study of NRMs, a field dominated by sociologists, the historian of Falun Gong and *qìgōng* David Ownby states: “As to the endless debates within this field concerning the relative importance of religious freedom versus the need to protect the weak and vulnerable from manipulative charlatans masquerading as prophets and seers, my personal inclination would be to define *legally* what behaviors might be beyond the pale instead of attempting to draw up a definitive list of ‘cult characteristics’ that allows for the interdiction of all such groups (which simply drives them underground)” (2008, vii; emphasis in the original). For a perspective on the usefulness of the popular usage of ‘cult,’ see Lifton 2019. For yet another sustained argument on categorizing Falun Gong as religion, see Penny 2012. My goal here is not to convince readers of the usefulness of this classification. Rather, I wish to draw attention to a hermeneutic of suspicion that asks *who* categorizes Falun Gong or *qìgōng* as religion or non-religion (attending to adjectives such as superstitious or scientific) and what is to be gained from such a choice.

and Taoist institutions generally do not recognise *qigong* as religion. Although several state agencies were involved in shaping and supervising the *qigong* sector, the Religious Affairs Bureau was never one of them. And yet, when Falungong began to draw widespread public attention, it was obvious that, in spite of the master's denials, there was *something* religious about the movement, the faith of its adherents and its collective behaviour. Despite its origins in a secularising project, *qigong* had become increasingly religious with the passage of time.

Owing to conventional definitions of 'religion' used by scholars and officials in China and abroad, the religious aspect of *qigong* largely escaped their attention until the Falungong confrontation. (Palmer 2007, 23; emphasis in the original)

The discourse on science and religion in China can be better understood against the backdrop of the early twentieth century Republican Era modernization movements of religious leaders, including the Buddhist monk Tàixū 太虛 (1890–1947)<sup>8</sup> who argued for the compatibility between science and Buddhism, in contrast to the religiosity of Christianity (Hammerstrom 2015, 97–100; McMahan 2008, 75–76). In other words, science was wielded as rhetorical support or criticism of specific practices—whether by stressing the (in)compatibility with science or by providing scientific experimental verification or falsification ('debunking').

This appeal to science continues today. Proponents of *qigōng* cite scientific studies as definitive proof of the efficacy of *qigōng* to heal, and thus the logical conclusion of the ontological existence of *qì*. Detractors cite other scientific studies as evidence that *qigōng* is an ineffective treatment and point out the faith or belief aspect of *qì* in order to dismiss *qigōng* as no better than placebo. The dismissal as mere placebo is launched against a related Chinese medical practice that assumes the flow of *qì* along channels in the body: acupuncture. I have argued elsewhere that the move to *discount as placebo* ignores the very fact that placebo effects—plural and diverse—point to the fault lines in mainstream medicine and thereby warrant further investigation on the complex nature of the relationship between the psychological and physiological (Cheung 2022, 147–51; Cheung forthcoming). This is to say that this type of dismissal of acupuncture and *qì* ignores the definition of the latter as

8 Due to his founding of *Rénjiān Fójiào* (人間佛教; "Engaged Buddhism" or "Humanistic Buddhism"), with successors who were international celebrities such as Thích Nhất Hạnh, "Taixu was the most important Chinese monk of the first half of the twentieth century, perhaps of that entire century" (Hammerstrom 2015, 15).

a psychophysical energy phenomenon that connects the mental and physical while simultaneously acknowledging and trivializing the healing effects of acupuncture. Since the debate has no end in sight, it seems that data from scientific studies alone are not enough to convince either defenders or detractors of *qìgōng*, acupuncture, or *qì* to change their positions.

In analyzing the discourses of *qìgōng*, the scholar of comparative literature Xu Jian examined statements regarding the healing power of belief by the medical doctor and researcher Herbert Benson (1935–2022) with those regarding the role of the body in belief and knowledge by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) on the connection between the mental and physical. For Xu, the two perspectives indicate the “intimate and mutually affecting relationship between belief and the body. Not only does belief produce effects on the body, but the body, by practicing what is asked by belief, forms and strengthens that belief” (1999, 984). Xu also points out another key discourse regarding *qìgōng* which centers on negotiations of power between the state and popular movements (963–64).<sup>9</sup> He describes how the initial construction of a *qìgōng* discourse began with claims regarding the inexplicable healing of *qìgōng* and was followed by a counter discourse that “strives to demystify many of its phenomena and to situate it strictly in the knowledges of modern science” (963). Xu argues both discourses respond to Chinese modernity and the difficulty of navigating socialist modernity and cultivation of individual bodies (985).

To put Xu’s analysis in broader terms, I will use the term ‘epistemic realms discourse.’ The choice here delineates discursive rational understanding from lived psychosomatic knowledge. For instance, the anthropologist Elisabeth Hsu separates verbal reasoning from non-verbal knowing in her ethnography of a *qìgōng* healer in Kūnmíng, China. In the context of her participant experience of learning from teachers of *qìgōng* and Chinese medical arts, Hsu distinguishes among the following forms of knowing: secret, personal, standardized, and non-verbal (Hsu 1999, 225–31). She reminds readers that *qìgōng* masters and Chinese medical doctors understand and employ *qì* in different ways (235).

Another example that emphasizes epistemic realms is shown by Yuasa’s position that *qì* “cannot be properly accommodated within the dualistic paradigm of thinking” that splits the mind from the body, since any attempt “merely through intellectual abstraction” is insufficient to fully grasp *qì* due to an epistemological gap (Yuasa 1993, xii). Rather, in referring to how it circulates in the body and provides the basis for acupuncture, he argues that *qì* requires

9 For an argument for how *qìgōng* is a body politic that engages with and transforms state power, see Chen 2003.

“the observation of empirical phenomena detectable both experientially and experimentally in and around the human body” (ibid.). This discursive move is what Xu considers part of psychosomatic discourses that “represent a form of practical knowledge ‘lived’ by the body” (Xu 1999, 964). In other words, one must practice *qìgōng* to understand *qìgōng*.<sup>10</sup> Yuasa also employs the common step of bringing up scientific evidence to validate the efficacy of acupuncture and ‘Eastern medicine’ that is predicated on the flow of *qì*. This means that the global scientific and epistemic realms discourses of *qì* do not stay neatly separate. They are often used together.

The case study at the heart of this chapter adds complexity to the three dominant discourses of healing with *qì* and *qìgōng*. The prominent discourses of wielding science to (de)legitimize, power negotiations, and epistemic realms are not the only ways to communicate *qì*. I argue that Cheung and his healing community display hybridity in their oscillation between inconsistent, incompatible, or incommensurable paradigms of *qì* and mainstream biomedicine. The language of science for self-understanding and explaining to others who belong to this group demonstrates multiple, yet unstable, worldviews both within the individual and among members of this Chinese American community.

### 3 Cheung’s Community as Case Study

The aforementioned *qìgōng* workshop that Cheung led in 2018 was preceded by my lecture introducing him and his healing as a form of ‘natural miracle’ on the evening prior at Drake University (Cheung 2022). My presentation was part of *The Comparison Project* at Drake University, which sponsors a lecture series on the philosophy of religion, with “Miracles” being the theme for 2017–2019. The approximately fifty audience members—which included the local population from Des Moines, Iowa, not necessarily only Drake students or faculty—who attended the lecture were presumably interested in philosophy of religion, miracles, or religious healing. During the discussion time, an audience member asked about the success rate of his healing. One person

10 This does not imply everyone who practices will be convinced of the ontological reality of *qì*. In describing his incredulity despite his experience, Ownby writes: “I learned long ago that perfectly normal people can hold seemingly strange beliefs, and thus had little trouble with Falun Gong computer scientists who also believe in demonic possession. [...] I have attempted (less frequently) to do Falun Gong physical exercises, but found that while the abstract idea of meditation might be alluring, the concrete practice can be deadly dull” (2008, vi).

asked if he performs *qìgōng* surgery. Another wondered if he had any issue reconciling various, perhaps opposing, explanations for disease, which seem to include mainstream biomedical, Buddhist or karmic, and Chinese astrological or popular religious etiologies.

These questions demonstrate a range of audience interests and reflect global discourses on *qì* and *qìgōng*. The first question shows curiosity about healing efficacy, which is the major draw of *qìgōng*. Asking about the rate seeks a numerical answer indicating attention toward empirical measurement and verification. When I asked the second audience member to clarify what they meant by “*qìgōng* surgery,” they said something to the effect of how it is the ability to perform surgery solely by manipulating *qì* without external instruments or tools. The juxtaposition of these two words imputes the medical legitimacy of the latter onto the former. Finally, the third question suggests the speaker herself has discomfort in holding inconsistent, incompatible, or incommensurable medical paradigms at the same time. I will address this discomfort in more detail in a later section. Cheung gave treatment to one audience member after the presentation (Figure 6.1). Twenty of the fifty audience members



FIGURE 6.1 Cheung (right) using *qìgōng* to heal an audience member after the author's presentation

PHOTO TAKEN BY THE AUTHOR ON OCTOBER 25, 2018

showed up to the *qìgōng* workshop the day after the introductory lecture. At both events, audience members verbally communicated with Cheung through me as I acted as interpreter.

Cheung became a community healer in 2012 when he extended his healing community beyond his relatives to neighbors living near him in Brooklyn, New York. His practice of *qìgōng* in a local park attracted his first student, who has since been his most ardent supporter by referring other students (that is, those interested in learning healing practices themselves) and patients (that is, those mainly interested in getting treatment) to Cheung. He recounts his healing successes to include curing a golf-ball sized cancerous tumor, a balance and memory disorder that baffled medical doctors, jaw dislocation, chronic back pain, neck pain due to whiplash, and more.

Although his main healing method is *qìgōng*, he also employs an eclectic mix of acupuncture, acupressure, moxibustion (from mugwort gathered at local parks), cupping, self-made herbal liniment, Reiki, and Buddhist chants and spells. His healing community in the New York City metropolitan area comprises approximately four dozen, which includes relatives, friends, students, and patients. The majority are Chinese American as he does not speak English. What started out as practicing and talking about *qìgōng* at the park, led to lessons and treatments in his home, patients' homes, or a hospital. Healing is mainly in-person, but can also be conducted over the phone as he has used *qìgōng*, distance Reiki, and Buddhist chants on patients as far as Hong Kong. In 2022, he began teaching *qìgōng* to his friends in mainland China over the messaging application WeChat. He does not charge payment for treatments, but his patients understand—or are told through their social network who referred them to Cheung—the Chinese custom of gifting cash in red envelopes. Typically, a patient would gift him \$20 USD or more for a session that usually ranges from one to two hours. Students and friends also gift red envelopes and may spend half or the entire day learning and practicing *qìgōng* as well as chatting over meals (Figure 6.2). In their casual conversation, Cheung would also speak about karmic causes of disease. This is an example of how religion spreads through healing (Cheung 2024).

Cheung learned self-cultivation healing practices from four main Chinese or Chinese American teachers.<sup>11</sup> He learned *bāguàzhǎng* (八卦掌) and *yáng* style (楊氏) *tàijíquán* (太極拳) at a young age in Guǎngzhōu and he was taught to create his own healing liniments. In his thirties, Cheung learned Chinese medical arts—including how to administer acupuncture using electronic

11 For details on these teachers, see Cheung 2024.



FIGURE 6.2 Cheung (right) teaching *qìgōng* to his students at his New Jersey home  
PHOTO TAKEN BY THE AUTHOR ON OCTOBER 16, 2022

acupuncture machines—from his co-worker in a New York City garment factory who was a former Chinese medical doctor. In his forties, Cheung learned *qìgōng* from a relative. The last main teacher is another garment factory co-worker who taught him Buddhist medical arts from the Shaolin Monastery, including esoteric herbal formulas.

Finally, Cheung is an autodidact who continuously reads *fēngshuǐ* almanacs printed in Hong Kong (cf. Chui 2014; Figure 6.3), listens and calls in to *fēngshuǐ* radio programs based in New York City's Chinatown, watches cable television programs from China on Chinese medical arts that cover *qì*, and views internet videos from Sinophone teachers around the globe on online video-sharing platforms such as YouTube or TuDou to learn Buddhist chants, *chán* (Japanese: Zen 禪) *tàijí*, *qìgōng*, and more.<sup>12</sup> He is not concerned with finding one all-encompassing worldview of health, disease, and mind-body that fully and consistently explains his healing practices. Instead, he is constantly

12 For more on resources for Sinophone autodidactic healers, see Cheung 2024.



FIGURE 6.3 *Fēngshuǐ* almanacs for 2022, the year of the Water Tiger, displayed next to food, electronics, and kitchenware in a storefront in Manhattan's Chinatown  
PHOTO TAKEN BY THE AUTHOR ON DECEMBER 7, 2021

adding new tools and techniques to his tool belt or healing repertoire for pragmatic purposes: to heal himself and his community.

Although *fēngshuǐ*, in comparison to acupuncture, *tàijí*, and *qìgōng*, has been neglected by the 'gold standard' of biomedical research (that is, double-blind randomized controlled trials), it is a popular avenue for healing with *qì*. Cheung consumes a range of media on *fēngshuǐ* and, in a way, acts as a curator, of sorts, in order to recommend to his community one expert—Peter So Man-fung—whom he deems most knowledgeable and effective for providing specific ways to prevent disease or improve health. Every lunar new year, he rearranges the placement of his bed and places around his home small objects that constitute the five phases *wǔ xíng* (五行) in order to direct *qì* for healing. For instance, he places dried gourds and Buddhist talismans around the home after calculating the 'dead' *sǐ* (死) corner(s) that change(s) every lunar year as apotropaic devices to ward off disease. He also calculates with *fēngshuǐ* formulas that take into account the cardinal directions of where the main door of a home faces—measured by a compass to the exact level of degrees in order to assess if the persons living there would be compatible with the house in the

Chinese astrological sense. An example of this is attention to the placement of the bathroom, which if built along the central axes of the house would lead to occupants increasing likelihood and severity of disease. He is also attentive to the relative position of other houses and natural elements such as location of trees, proximity to bodies of water, and mountains. In this way, the position of objects, furniture, architecture, and nature not only explain disease but may be manipulated in order to promote health.

In explaining his *fēngshuǐ* recommendations to his community, Cheung uses the language of science but does not explicitly mention *qì*. For instance, after speaking with his student who spent time in her son's apartment, he explains why her health declined while living there. The apartment has a bedroom facing the kitchen, which is unfortunate. He says *fēngshuǐ* principles are based on science. Cooking in the kitchen creates exhaust chemicals and pollutants that could irritate people, thus when the poor-quality air flows into the bedroom, occupants breathe in everything during their sleep. Although, in this instance, his student was not actually sleeping in the bedroom but rather in the living room. Nevertheless, his student did not care to point this out to him as a contradiction to his *fēngshuǐ* etiology. What she cared about was recommendations that included, for example, the placement of plants, which are at once one of the five phases (of *qì*, as this is understood, the term *qì* is not mentioned explicitly) that need to be balanced and—in the language of biochemistry—absorbers of carbon dioxide and other pollutants in the atmosphere.

Cheung here is not simply referring to science as in the typical discourse of *qì* and *qìgōng* that takes on scientific rationale and evidence to justify the practice of manipulating *qì* flow for health. Instead, this is a key example of how he “oscillates,” a term used by the historian of medicine Helen Tilley. She explains how oscillation between worldviews that undergird medicine may on the surface seem contradictory and problematic but, upon further examination, constitutes the more accurate description of how people actually function than some romanticized notion of consistency in worldview. This is to say, many people occupy unstable ground between inconsistent ontological-epistemological foundations of health and disease. Tilley writes:

One could call this a Janus-faced dynamic, but it seems more apt to label it a form of polyglot therapeutics. The truth of the matter is that “traditional medicine” sparks the most controversy when its advocates insist on the idea that people can occupy different “conceptual realities” and bodily “modes of existence” at one and the same time. Ironically, this is exactly what so many people—including scientific experts—do all the time. (Tilley 2020, 22)

In other words, Cheung and his community are not merely employing scientific terms to explain *fēngshuǐ* rhetorically, that is, as a discursive move to legitimize or lend credibility to such practices. The theoretical contribution of Tilley's "polyglot therapeutics" is that it emphasizes how, like multilingual speakers who transition seamlessly among oral or written languages, people fluent in multiple medical languages transition among them without any need to elevate any one of them as more 'real,' 'true,' or 'better' description of their bodies or understanding of health and disease.

Similarly, the historian of medicine Martha E. Hanson uses the term "medical bilingualism" in the context of explaining the co-winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, Tú Yōuyōu (屠呦呦; b. 1930), and her fluency in Chinese medical arts and biomedicine (Hanson 2015; 2010). However, Hanson's usage could lead the reader to assume the ability to translate,<sup>13</sup> whereas Tilley's "oscillate" better captures the issue when medical languages are difficult (if not in certain instances) or almost impossible to translate. Hence, the words and concepts are left in their original language (Cheung 2022, 143). Pushing these linguistic metaphors further, I extend the theoretical insights of Tilley's "oscillate" and "polyglot therapeutics" by engaging with theoretical work on code-switching, specifically its role among Asian Americans for identity formation.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4 Code-Switching on Mind-Body and Health

Research on code-switching began in the mid-twentieth century as a direction of inquiry out of linguistic curiosity.<sup>15</sup> It has revealed important insights on

13 To be sure, Hanson recognizes that "[t]he two systems of medicine are often mutually incommensurable, so you have to know a lot more than just an extra language to be able to blend them together in a meaningful way" (Gara 2016).

14 Tilley mentions "code-switch" briefly in her work ("medical experts could code-switch, or move linguistically, between therapeutic cultures"), but does not develop it the way she develops "polyglot therapeutics" or "oscillate." (Tilley 2021, 15). On how a twentieth century physician-researcher in China used code-switching to validate vernacular descriptions of anatomy, see Li forthcoming. For a constructive approach toward understanding and working with Asian medicine that begins from the assumption of oscillation, see Salguero 2020 and his argument for a 'metamodern' approach.

15 Although the term 'code-switching' was first used in the 1950s, the phenomenon itself is at least centuries old, attested in manuscripts from the Middle Ages that code-switched between Latin and vernaculars. Not all instances of code-switching are linguistic curiosities, especially to code-switchers, as this practice points to the basic use of language to seek the best word available in any language. This phenomenon also questions the neat

social meanings in expression, understanding, communication, and (group) identity formation beyond interesting, often spontaneous, grammatical or syntactic gymnastics in multiple languages. Code-switching is the alternating use of ‘codes’ within one conversational episode.<sup>16</sup> Codes are not limited to discrete languages, but span the range of any marked change in speech, including dialects, accents, vernacular, register, (grammatical) levels of formality, etc.<sup>17</sup> Speakers do so consciously, in systematic and meaningful manners, as well as unconsciously, unintentionally and at times unaware of their switches.

Intentions fall between a desire to assimilate to a dominant culture and accommodate others with limited ability in another language. The linguist Peter Auer explains:

In this way, language choice is a tool of power-wielding not so much because it borrows its status from large-scale societal inequality, but rather because it symbolically expresses convergence with and divergence from the other’s code. (Auer 1998, 236)

Specifically for Asian Americans, code-switching due to assimilation is situated in a long history of how Asian Americans are “racially-triangulated” in relationship to Black and White populations (Kim 1999). The political scientist Claire Jean Kim showed how Asian Americans are racialized as hardworking immigrants in a way that pits minorities against minorities—blaming Black people for systemic racism and casting Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners (*ibid.*).<sup>18</sup> Therefore, Asian Americans often code-switch to blend in during conversation as they are hyper aware of how speech affects being accepted or rejected by others. “By constantly adjusting their behaviors they regulated

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boundaries among individual languages and shows how language is often not singularly contained but is rather porous and fluid.

16 The term has more recently gained the meaning of switching code among different social contexts, not just in one conversational episode but in various different episodes in daily life—for instance, using one register when speaking to one’s supervisor in the office and another during happy hour with colleagues at the bar.

17 The line between language and dialects is often drawn just as politically as it is linguistically, since mutual intelligibility is not a reliable demarcation as some distinct languages are more (asymmetrically) mutually intelligible (e.g. Spanish and Portuguese) than other distinct dialects that are mutually unintelligible (e.g. Cantonese and Shanghainese).

18 The term ‘Asian American’ was coined in the 1970s in order to form political solidarity to unite a very diverse group as dominant American culture lump Asian Americans together as the same racial other. To be sure, Chinese Americans is a diverse group with varying education levels and socioeconomic positions depending on the place of origin and the period they themselves or their ancestors immigrated to the Americas.

their external identity, trying to influence the way others viewed them and the way others perceived their racial group” (Newton et al. 2014, 168).<sup>19</sup> In other words, contrary to Auer’s point on language choice showing the power of the speaker, Asian American language choice shows the power of the audience when Asian Americans are trying *not* to stand out.

The linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists Kira Hall and Chad Nilep summarize the theoretical work on code-switching in four phases that attend to: “local speech community identities”; “nation-state identities”; “multicultural and interethnic identities”; and “hybrid identities” (Hall and Nilep 2015, 598). The fourth and most recent stage emphasizes the impact of accelerated globalization. Their definition of hybrid identities is “the image or self-image of people at national and linguistic margins” (611). However, my use of hybrid identity to describe Cheung and his community follows the comparative theologian Michelle Voss Roberts, who defines the hybrid as at once double and partial (2010): “The hybrid is double in their two (or more) epistemological-ontological realities, yet is partial in their failure to be ‘at home’ in any one reality” (Cheung 2023, 22). Asian Americans who straddle two worlds are hybrid in this sense.

Hybridity is unstable, pointing not only to back and forth oscillation but to liminality as well—occupying the position of a (shifting) threshold or boundary between worldviews. Code-switching is used for both identity performance and formation, both personal and in-group. Asian Americans, as (not fully) Asian and (not fully) American, experience dual or multiple identities, or double consciousness. Although Cheung is monoglot, he still code-switches. For Cheung and his community, the code flips between *qi/gōng* and mainstream biomedical paradigms of health. Examples include discussions on topics ranging from treatments for seasonal allergies to depression and anxiety. These ailments are instances of conditions familiar in both the biomedical and Chinese medical contexts. The code-switching takes the form of talking about pollen, antihistamine, and *qi* depletion or blockage (in the case of allergies), or dopamine imbalance and *qi* stagnation (in the case of depression). Cheung’s appeal to science also functions as a marker of modernity and education, although he only completed elementary school. This use of the language of science is not unlike global discourses. However, in code-switching, there is no one ‘true’

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19 An Asian American student states: “Because I’m surrounded by another culture (dominant culture), I’m not a resident of that culture (dominant culture) and I don’t think about that often ... it’s more of like an internal conscious light switch” (Newton et al. 2014, 169; elision in the original). For a variety of ways Asian American students employ code-switching, see Newton et al. 2014.

stance or 'real' code over and above false or rhetorical speech. This complicates both the scientific and the epistemic realms discourses of *qìgōng*.

To be sure, global discourses on *qì*, *qìgōng*, and *fēngshuǐ* can be separated and analyzed discretely despite being related and influencing each other. My argument is that the multifaceted social implications of code-switching provide insight on Cheung as a *qìgōng* healer and how he uses the language of science to understand and communicate the way *fēngshuǐ* regulates *qì* and healing. It complicates and moves beyond dominant *qìgōng* discourses of mere rhetorical use of scientific terms, power negotiations, or disparate epistemic realms. Each of the dominant discourses bifurcates opposite poles (scientifically legitimate versus illegitimate, state versus popular movement, or rational understanding versus psychosomatic knowledge) with a spectrum of various positions along two ends that agents push or pull toward. Cheung's code-switching is not a tug of war. Rather, his polyglot therapeutics occupies unstable ground between the worldviews of *qì* and biomedicine. Instead of taking *qì* and biomedicine as two ends that pull on him for epistemic-ontological loyalty, he collapses the poles and imbricates them together in speech acts using both codes without ranking either as higher. Nonetheless, this does not mean that Cheung stands at the spectrum's midpoint. Rather, his code-switching occupies the (changing) boundaries between these two worldviews.

*Qì* serves as Cheung's foundation for explaining how *qìgōng* and *fēngshuǐ* affect mind-body and stimulate healing. He learned Reiki from one of his Chinese American students. The community overall speaks of and understands the *ki* (氣) in Reiki (靈氣) as basically the same thing as the *qì* (气 in simplified Chinese; 氣 in traditional Chinese) in *qìgōng*, as both have the same written character (variant) in Japanese and Chinese. More importantly, they are not writing or using text, but rather use the single term in Cantonese which is pronounced *hei*. Is this mere conflation? Would Reiki practitioners characterize their practice as *qìgōng*? Would Japanese or Japanese Americans differ from Reiki practitioners of other ethnicities or nationalities on this choice? Would other *qìgōng* practitioners characterize their practice as Reiki? These questions may be fruitful lines of research by providing insight to both Cheung's healing community and other practitioners of *qìgōng* and Reiki.

Discourses that circulate among the educated élite seem concerned with consistency, while Cheung and his community move freely between inconsistent ones. Debates and conflicts at the theoretical abstract level are irrelevant for some communities on the ground.<sup>20</sup> The medical humanities scholar

20 To be sure, scholars of medicine have noticed and written on the different concerns of theory and practice. I am grateful to Michael Stanley-Baker for his comments and insights

Michael Stanley-Baker refers to the “common anxiety or disconcertment” over *qi* as an “epistemological itch” (2022, 37), which is not actually a desire to search for stable ontological-epistemological grounding, but rather “the recognition that one single episteme is insufficient to capture our polyglot experience” (personal communication with Michael Stanley-Baker; January 28, 2023). As the primary investigator for the Polyglot Asian Medicines project,<sup>21</sup> he has in mind Tilley’s point on the lived experience of occupying multiple contrary worldviews. This contrasts with how *élite* and intellectual discourses create their own problem that they need to solve: the want for consistency. To play off of Stanley-Baker’s epistemological itch, I call the yearning for stability and unity an itch for coherence, which is not observable among Cheung and his community. As a member of Cheung’s healing community, and as a 1.5 generation Asian American U.S.-trained academic, I did have this itch for decades, but not any more (I write about my *strong* agnosticism in Cheung 2023). Maybe the coherence itch is a minor inconvenience compared to the pain or ailments Cheung and his community are seeking relief from. Or perhaps, the itch only surfaces and bothers those who are already in good health.

Stanley-Baker states: “The very slipperiness of *qi* is thus both its undoing and also its power” (2022, 39). In terms of past or recent Chinese government crackdown on *qìgōng*, Cheung and his Chinese American community face little consequences of the undoing of *qi*. The power in *qi* being difficult to grasp should remind readers of the various ways it is translated into English, including vital energy. In other words, *qi* is alive and it moves as immigrant communities move, and changes, as easily and interestingly as code-switching mid-sentence.

## 5 Conclusion

This chapter began with an overview of global discourses on *qi* and healing, especially regarding *qìgōng* and *fēngshuǐ*. The empirical contribution of the case study on Cheung and his healing community is an instance of employing the language of science that complicates dominant global discourses. Rather than appealing to science rhetorically, Cheung fluidly shifts among the many medical languages he is familiar with, of which biomedicine is merely one and of no higher rank than others. I argue that sociolinguistic theories

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that inform this paragraph. On Chinese medical doctors pressured by institutional demands for demonstrating theoretical knowledge above their primary concern for practical results, see Wang and Farquhar 2009.

21 <http://www.polyglotasianmedicine.com> (accessed: January 31, 2023).

of code-switching provide a better understanding of how people and communities hold, reconcile, or merely tolerate multiple contradictory views of mind-body and healing. Code-switching in its spectrum of nuances—from identity performance and formation, dual or multiple identities, hybridity, liminality, and instability to accommodation and assimilation—allows for a more accurate representation of the messiness of lived experience. Despite large areas of overlap, *qì* has a range of functions that differ from other types of subtle energy. Nevertheless, the globalized discourse of Chinese medical arts conflates them and *qì* is often translated directly as subtle energy. The implications of this case study illustrates how the study of the globalization of subtle energy and therapeutics may benefit from engaging with theory from sociolinguistics, Asian American studies, and migration studies.

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## Subtle Energies in Ayahuasca Healing

*Wouter J. Hanegraaff*

Like the earth of a hundred years ago, our mind still has its darkest Africas, its unmapped Borneos and Amazonian basins. In relation to the fauna of these regions we are not yet zoologists, we are mere naturalists and collectors of specimens.

ALDOUS HUXLEY (1894–1963)<sup>1</sup>



Ayahuasca is the Hispanicized spelling of a word in Quechua, the most widely spoken pre-Columbian language family of the Americas, especially Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Columbia. As *waska* means “rope,” “woody vine,” or “liana,” and *aya* means “spirit” or “soul” but also “corpse” or “dead body,” Quechuan *ayawaska* is often translated as “vine of the soul,” “spirit vine,” or “vine of the dead.”<sup>2</sup> It refers to a specific type of liana that is very common in the rainforest, the *Banisteriopsis caapi*, and more specifically to a psychoactive brew that is widely used by indigenous peoples in the Amazon region. The brew known as *ayahuasca* is made by combining the *Banisteriopsis* vine with admixture plants such as *Psychotria viridis* or *Mimosa hostilis* that contain a potent psychoactive agent known as dimethyltryptamine (DMT).<sup>3</sup>

Ayahuasca was originally used by indigenous tribes throughout the Amazon region as a means to gain access to the invisible world of spirits and gods for purposes of collective or individual healing. From the first decades of the

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1 Huxley 2004, 83.

2 But note that Luis Eduardo Luna’s standard work lists no fewer than forty-two indigenous names used by seventy-two Indian tribes that use(d) the brew (Luna 1986, 167–73; cf. Beyer 2009, 210–11). On the contested history of ayahuasca use in the Amazon, see Brabec de Mori 2011, 23–47.

3 The *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine contains so-called Monoamine oxidase (MAO) inhibitors that prevent the DMT from being neutralized by MAO enzymes that are present in the stomach. For the chemical, pharmacological, and neurological dimensions of ayahuasca and its therapeutic effects, see Domínguez-Clavé et al. 2016; Bois-Mariage 2002.

twentieth century on, new syncretic churches such as the Brazilian Santo Daime and the União do Vegetal were created, combining elements of indigenous religions, Catholicism, Afro-Brazilian spiritualities, and esoteric traditions of European origin (notably Kardecist spiritualism and Rosicrucianism),<sup>4</sup> while using ayahuasca as their sacrament. After World War II, as ethnopharmacologists began writing about ayahuasca, famous authors such as William Burroughs (1914–1997) traveled to the Amazon to find the brew (also known as Yage; see Burroughs and Ginsberg 2006), followed by generations of hippies such as Terence McKenna (1946–2000) and many others (e.g., see McKenna 1994; Harner 1973). Most notably over the past few decades, ayahuasca ceremonies have become extremely popular in spiritual milieus throughout the Western world, and there is now an extensive scholarly literature about the phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> There is broad agreement among practitioners and specialists that ayahuasca opens up experiential dimensions that are radically different from anything available to normal every-day consciousness and have a very strong potential for psychological healing and spiritual growth.

Ayahuasca in indigenous contexts and Western societies is almost always used in communal ceremonial contexts for purposes of spiritual and therapeutic healing.<sup>6</sup> The psychological and physical effects last several hours at least and can be utterly overwhelming; but if basic safety measures are respected, under the direction of experienced workshop leaders and with proper assistance, the ceremonial use of ayahuasca by healthy individuals is safe.<sup>7</sup> The brew has no addictive or otherwise harmful properties; on the contrary, its strong therapeutic potential, notably for treatment of addiction or depression, are by now very well attested—although inevitably controversial in Western

4 See Dawson 2007, 67–98. The founder of Santo Daime Mestre Raimundo Ireneu Serra (1890–1971) was affiliated with a “Círculo de Regeneração e Fé” (see Meyer 2014, 236–43), a Brazilian Kardecist society “Círculo Esotérico da Comunhão do Pensamento” (founded in São Paulo in 1909; see Dawson 2007, 34), and an unidentified Rosicrucian order (see Labate 2011, 75; perhaps affiliated to the “Fraternidade Rosacruciana São Paulo” founded by Lourival Camargo Pereira in 1929). The Spiritist background of the União do Vegetal is evident from its official full name: “Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal” (Beneficent Spiritist Center União do Vegetal).

5 See, e.g., Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill 2008; Labate and Jungaberle 2011; Labate and Cavnar 2014. For a useful bibliography up to 2008, see Labate et al. 2008. For a general introduction to ayahuasca practice, see Adelaars et al. 2016.

6 On the concept of ‘healing’ (rather than curing) as covering both spiritual and therapeutic concerns in ‘New Age’ contexts, see Hanegraaff 1996, 42–47.

7 See Domínguez-Clavé et al. 2016, 92; dos Santos 2013. The chief contraindications are antidepressants (Selective Serotonine Reuptake Inhibitors, or SSRIs) and preexisting psychiatric disorders.

societies, due to popular fears about ‘drugs’ and the fact that international law still fails to distinguish adequately between harmful substances and traditional plant medicines.<sup>8</sup>

## 1 Subtle Energies

In his standard work about the phenomenology of ayahuasca experience, based on extensive interviews and participant observation, the Israeli cognitive psychologist Benny Shanon notes that the term “energy” is “universally and spontaneously employed by drinkers of Ayahuasca to describe the special condition they experience” (2002, 333). Practitioners typically insist that while under the influence of the brew, they experience the presence and activity of subtle energies—not indirectly by their effects, but *directly*. In his effort to chart the phenomenology of ayahuasca experience, Shanon begins with this dimension of direct, unmediated experience:

First, there is the *overall atmosphere* that Ayahuasca generates. I am referring to effects that may be very subtle, and much less dramatic than some others—notably visual ones—for which the brew is famous. Yet, at the same time, these effects may be the most radical. Together, they amount to the definition of “another reality,” the primary characteristics of which are beauty, enchantment, deep meaningfulness, and sanctity. [...] It seems that the world is no longer the same. [...] The feeling is that things are not as they used to be and one has the sense of entering into another, heretofore unknown, reality. (Shanon 2002, 49, 59; emphasis in the original)

Ayahuasca drinkers will typically describe this phenomenon by claiming that “the energy in the room changes.” Moreover, they frequently describe an awareness of subtle energies to which they were oblivious in their normal state, as shown by Shanon’s comprehensive analytical overview. Thus a *curandero* (healer) can treat his patients because the ayahuasca allows him to “be in touch with the good energies of nature and serve as a vehicle to pass them on to the patients” but also to suck out the “negative energies of disease” (Shanon 2002, 26); ayahuasca drinkers become aware that “the world,

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<sup>8</sup> For the basic patterns of prejudice that are at work here, see Hanegraaff 2013, 393–95. For therapeutic effects of ayahuasca in treatment of addiction and clinical depression, see Giovannetti et al. 2020; van Oorsouw et al. 2022.

this world in which one has lived for so long, is governed by invisible forces, energies, or beings” (60); they feel that a “powerful energy [...], a tremendous force permeates and animates everything around” (61), and typically identify it as “the force that sustains all Creation [...], the source of all wisdom and knowledge, and the ultimate fountain of health and well-being [...], the energy that permeates the world, makes it ‘tick’ and enables it to continue” (61, 82, 150); more specifically, they may experience the energies of animals (for instance, jaguars or snakes) that appear to them in ayahuasca visions or perceive celestial entities “as beings made of exceedingly delicate white webs of energy” (122, 148); but so-called inanimate things, too, may “radiate energy and shine” (274); and last but not least, the spiritual hymns or other types of music that are an integral part of all ayahuasca ceremonies typically get described in terms of their energies. A particularly clear example is this evocative first-hand description by Shanon himself:

High above, in a superior realm, immersed in nebulous transparency, subtle energy was vibrating. It was fresh, delicate, pristine. Carried along the waves the energy was creating and in perfect tune to its movement and rhythm, a fair maiden (now as I am writing this, I think of the woman in Botticelli’s *Primavera*) was circling round and round. [...] It all exhibited perfect serenity, deep self-assurance, and gay benevolence. The fine waves of energy washed over the woman, and like pearls of sparkling dew they scintillated with mellow pastels of celestial light blue and faint pink and the whitish green of buds that are just about to bloom. Through her dance the energy magnified and relayed ahead further and further. Like rain, it showered down and watered all creation. As they passed, the undulations gained ever more substance and, lo and behold, turned into music. It was music so sublime that no mortal could hear. By now, I realized, they had well-defined shape and form, so that they were so less abstract than the primordial energy from which they had originated. (Shanon 2002, 153)<sup>9</sup>

So, what are those energies? What would be required for us to study them in an academic context? Is such a study possible at all—and if so, under what conditions?

9 This is in fact a description of synesthesia, a phenomenon that is frequently reported by ayahuasca drinkers. For further references to energy or energies, see Shanon 2002, 62–63, 101, 105, 119, 147, 155, 157, 159, 167, 173, 207, 214, 219–20, 280, 311. For Shanon’s own theoretical analysis of ‘energy’ in ayahuasca, see *ibid.*, 333–34, 354–56.

## 2 Entheogenic Spirituality

Ayahuasca ceremonies exemplify a specific type of religious or spiritual practice that is widely referred to as ‘shamanism’ by both practitioners and scholars. In some of my previous work, I have argued that this problematic Eliadian category<sup>10</sup> should better be replaced by the new coinage “entheogenic religion/spirituality.”<sup>11</sup> It is important to emphasize that while subtle or more radical alterations of consciousness may and in fact do occur in every conceivable religious or spiritual context (resulting, for instance, in visionary revelations, auditions, meditative states, possession, unitive experiences, and so on), this does not mean that they are necessarily seen as very important by practitioners and believers—in many traditions, “personal religious experience is essentially a bonus: an extra that might or might not be valued positively, but is not crucial to what these religions are considered to be all about” (Hanegraaff 2011, 95; cf. 94–98). By contrast, as entheogenic religion or spirituality is defined precisely by its deliberate focus on the induction of altered states for the purpose of gaining access to realities that are not otherwise available to human consciousness, experience deemed religious or spiritual is its *sine qua non*.<sup>12</sup> Please note that the methods of induction do not need to involve psychoactive substances (entheogenic *sensu stricto*) but may as well rely on other practices or techniques such as meditation, prayer, visualization exercises, sensory deprivation or overload, hyperconcentration, and so on (entheogenic *sensu lato*) (Hanegraaff 2013, 392–93).

If altered states are central to entheogenic spiritualities such as the ceremonial drinking of ayahuasca, this has far-reaching implications for basic scholarly method. As pointed out by Shanon,

there is no alternative to studying phenomenology from within. The experiences that Ayahuasca induces are extraordinary in the full sense

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10 The concept of shamanism as a universal category in comparative religion was introduced by Mircea Eliade (1989 [1964]). My basic argument aligns with that of Yulia Ustinova in her groundbreaking work on alterations of consciousness in ancient Greece: labeling people as shamans is “a simple way to call attention to their engagement in alterations of consciousness” (Ustinova 2018, 339).

11 For the basic argument, see Hanegraaff 2011. I introduced the term “entheogenic religion” in Hanegraaff 2013, 392–93; and “entheogenic religion” in Hanegraaff 2017, 131–133. For reasons explained in Hanegraaff 2020, today I tend to speak of ‘religion and spirituality’ rather than ‘religion’ alone.

12 I write “experience deemed religious or spiritual” in view of the well-known argument in Taves 2009.

of the term, and many are ineffable. There is no way to really appreciate what they are without experiencing them firsthand. After all, would anyone venture to study music without actually experiencing how music sounds? Moreover, for a serious study of the Ayahuasca experience a cursory, explorative exposure to the brew is not sufficient. The spectrum of phenomena pertaining to the Ayahuasca experience is extremely broad and there is simply no way these can be captured in a small number of probes. [...] In sum, then, any serious study of Ayahuasca requires not only firsthand experience, but also substantive, long-term familiarity—indeed, training. (Shanon 2002, 32)

In a previous discussion of this topic, I reached the same conclusion: the whole point about entheogenic religion or spirituality is that one simply cannot access the most crucial data by any other means than through direct experience.<sup>13</sup> Simply put: to find out what ayahuasca spirituality is all about, and minimize the risk of incorrect framing or other kinds of misinterpretation, one will have to drink ayahuasca—not just once or twice, as pointed out by Shanon, but repeatedly over a considerable period of time.<sup>14</sup>

### 3 Translating *Energeia*

We have seen that the empirical data, insofar as they are central to this volume and this chapter, are widely described by practitioners as subtle ‘energies.’ As indicated by Shanon, this terminology feels perfectly natural to them, and so they use it spontaneously as the best available way of describing key phenomena that are being experienced under the influence of ayahuasca. Technically (and the importance of this point will emerge from the following discussion), we are dealing here with a procedure of *translation* in the most literal etymological sense. For purposes of communication, something that is experienced directly as deeply meaningful in the ayahuasca state must be ‘carried across’ a gap or abyss (*trans-latus*, from Latin *transferre*; cf. German *übersetzen*, French *traduire*) toward the ‘normal’ state of sober consciousness—that is, toward a

13 See Hanegraaff 2011, 94–98. Note that this does *not* imply an acceptance of Rudolf Otto’s notorious ‘religionist’ argument in the third chapter of *Das Heilige* (1926, 94–95). Ironically, Otto *and* his critics share a perspective of ethnocentric universalism that I consider misguided (see Hanegraaff 2022, 4–5).

14 It is therefore relevant to mention that I have myself been drinking ayahuasca in a variety of ceremonial settings since 2004, for personal therapeutic reasons. While my experience is extensive, it therefore does not qualify as ‘participant research’ in a strict methodological sense, but it allows me to confirm the correctness of Shanon’s findings.

state in which the experience itself is *not* available.<sup>15</sup> While the semiotic referent (the experiential *x* referred to as ‘energy’) is not linguistic, it is language that serves as the vehicle of this transmission. As formulated in a famous statement by Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache* (“Being that can be understood is language”), which means in this particular case that the English word ‘energy’ re-presents (i.e., ‘renders present again,’ as a secondary reflection in our consciousness) an aspect of phenomenal reality *insofar as* it can be understood (Gadamer 1986, 478).<sup>16</sup>

The deeply perplexing and paradoxical relation between Being and Language is central to continental philosophy from Heidegger through Derrida, and we will of course not be able to resolve its many problems here.<sup>17</sup> Rather, I want to highlight an *additional* level of complexity that is specific to the case of entheogenic spiritualities, such as ayahuasca healing. In contrast to our normal communicative exchanges, here ‘translation’ must somehow accomplish the feat of ‘making sense’ by ‘carrying a meaning’ not just from signified (the experiential *x*) to signifier (‘energy’) within one and the same state of consciousness, but even across the abyss between two radically discontinuous states. In other words, the term *energy* is used as a signifier to evoke a signified that is experienced as being present in the ayahuasca state but is radically absent in our present state of consciousness, where (as we will see) the word typically means something else. But if it is true that none of its meanings in normal discourse can possibly capture what is actually meant, then why is this particular term (‘energy’) so widely felt to be appropriate at all?

If we consult the incredibly comprehensive standard *Greek-English Lexicon* by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott (a famous and unsurpassed monument of classical erudition, first published in 1843 and re-edited countless times), we discover that the word ἐνέργεια may be translated, in different contexts, as “activity,” “operation,” “efficacy,” “force,” “action,” or “actuality.” However, and strange as it might seem, Liddell and Scott did *not* use the English word ‘energy’ to translate ἐνέργεια even one single time (see Figure 7.1)!

15 For the centrality of translation to the study of ‘altered states of knowledge’ based on historical sources, see my extensive discussions in Hanegraaff 2022, 5, 12–15, 116, 135, 313–14, 344–45, 364–66.

16 Gadamer explicitly refutes the frequent misinterpretation according to which he meant that “everything is language” (references in Hanegraaff 2022, 1 n. 1).

17 For Heidegger and language, see Steiner 1989; Williams 2017. For the diverging approaches of Gadamer and Derrida, see Hanegraaff 2022, 342–51. In view of the following discussion, it is relevant to note that I ultimately side with Gadamer against Derrida concerning the possibility or impossibility of communication, translation, and understanding (ibid., 366).

Δ.44.23; ἀλειτουργία ἐνεργασμένοι τοῖς τόποις Plb.10.8.7. —εἶα, ἡ, activity, operation, opp. ἐξίς (disposition), Arist. EN1098<sup>b</sup>33, al.; ζῳίου Plb.1.4.7; ἡ χάρα καὶ ἡ εὐφροσύνη κατὰ κίνησιν ἐνεργεῖα βλέπονται Epicur. Fr. 2; opp. ἀογία, Hierocl. in CA19 p.461 M.; pl., παντοδαπὰ ἐ. Polystr. p.30 W.; ἐ. καὶ σπουδὴ PTeб.616 (ii A. D.); physiological function, Gal.6.21; performance, τῶν καθηκόντων Ph.1.91; activity, of drugs, Gal.6.467; force, of an engine, D.S.20.95 (but, mechanism, 'action', Hero Aut.1.7). b. workmanship, Aristeas 59. 2. esp. of divine or supernatural action, Ep. Eph.1.19, al., Aristeas 266; ἐ. θεοῦ Διὸς Βυζοκαίκης OGI262.4 (Syria, iii A. D.); magical operation, ἱερὰ ἐ. PMag.Par.1.159. 3. pl., ἐνεργεῖαι cosmic forces, Herm.ap.Stob.1.41.6. 4. Gramm., active force, opp. πάθος, D.T.637.29, A.D.Synt.9.9 (pl.), al.; ἐνεργεῖαι καὶ πάθη active and passive forms, Alex. Fig.2.14. 5. Rhet., vigour of style, Arist. Rh.1411<sup>b</sup>28. II. in the philos. of Arist., opp. δύναμις, actuality, Metaph.1048<sup>a</sup>26, al.; opp. ὕλη, ib.1043<sup>a</sup>20; ἡ ὡς ἐ. οὐσία, substance in the sense of actuality, ib.1042<sup>b</sup>10; opp. ἐντελέχεια, as actuality to full reality, ib.1050<sup>a</sup>22, 1047<sup>a</sup>30; ἐνεργεῖα actually, opp. δυνάμει, ib.1045<sup>b</sup>19, al., etc. —εἶς· ἡ εἰς γλουτοὺς κάθεσις τῶν χειρῶν,

FIGURE 7.1 Liddell and Scott 1996, 564

Please note that when Liddell and Scott translated *energeia* as “force,” they specified that it meant the “force of an engine” or as a “physiological function”; next to this, they also made reference to the idea of “divine or supernatural action” and of “magical operation”; and interestingly, they twice mentioned the “activity” or “efficacy” of drugs. But again: never, not even one single time, did *energeia* get translated as “energy.”

Why did they avoid that term? While this might seem like an extremely minor question, in fact it will allow us to discover a major communicative gap between modern and premodern conceptualizations that, as I will argue, is essential to understand what ‘subtle energies’ are all about. First published in 1843, Liddell and Scott’s standard work was created during the heyday of two traditions that played a dominant role in nineteenth-century intellectual culture: philhellenism and positivism. The former proclaimed the utter superiority of “Greek science and rationality” over the “primitive ‘magical’ superstitions” of the “barbarian Orient,”<sup>18</sup> while the latter believed that the exclusive source of reliable (‘positive’) knowledge consisted of sensory experience interpreted through reason and logic. I suggest that under the dominant impact of these cultural fashions,<sup>19</sup> Liddell and Scott were trying to avoid the idea

18 See Marchand 2003 and her full monograph *Down From Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970* (Marchand 1996). See also the discussion in Hanegraaff 2022, 16–19, 133–34, 360–62; Hanegraaff 2024.

19 I borrow the term from Eliade 1976.

that *one* and the same term ‘energy’ (as a direct translation of *energeia*) could cover everything ranging from the mechanical power of industrial engines, by way of more intangible powers such as electricity or magnetism, even to the creative power of the Christian God and the dubious operations of sorcerers or magicians as well. What must have troubled them most was the concept of an energy or of plural energies as *primal* or irreducible realities that could exist and be operative in the world in and by themselves, *independent* from any agents who wielded them, or of physical media through which their effects could be perceived.<sup>20</sup>

This peculiar modern tendency to avoid *energeia* as a primal reality *sui generis* could be illustrated by many examples from antiquity. To give just one instance here, Plotinus describes in a famous passage how he used to experience moments of spiritual ecstasy. He writes that he “woke up out of the body to himself,” “came to identity with the divine,” and found rest in “that supreme *energeia*.”<sup>21</sup> Here, too, we find that modern translators typically render *energeia* by such terms as “activity,” or “actuality” (Armstrong 1984, 397; MacKenna 1991, 334). Again, why do they not choose the simple solution and write that Plotinus felt united with the supreme *energy* of the divine? I suspect that perhaps on a largely subliminal level, they did not want God to be associated with such physical realities as magnetism or electricity, but also had problems with the suggestion of *direct unmediated experience*. In the wake of the Enlightenment and the positivist era, the assumption was that ‘energy’ must be understood in terms of instrumental causality, where you can experience for instance the mechanical *effects* of a steam engine (noise, shaking, tremors, and so on), an electrical charge, and so on. By contrast, if it is suggested that ‘energy’ is not just a metaphor for the effects of something material but refers to primal *sui generis* realities that can be experienced immediately (i.e., without mediation) as ‘mysterious, incalculable forces,’ our modern intellectual culture raises a red flag of warning: beware, you are entering the domain of *the occult!*

#### 4 Unspeakable and Hidden

This phenomenon of discursive exclusion and defensive posturing can be explained historically in terms of a basic process of identity politics in which

20 The same conclusion can be drawn from the still indispensable study by Julius Röhr (1923, notably 15–19), where ἐνέργεια is shown to mean either mechanical or “magical” effects (*Zauberwirkungen*).

21 Plotinus, *Enn.* IV.8.1.

those who embraced modern “science and rationality” came to define themselves against “magic and superstition” (Hanegraaff 2012, 77–191). The relevant terminology goes back to the Greek concept of *idiotētes arrētoi* (unspeakable qualities) and its closest Latin equivalent *qualitates occultae* (hidden qualities).<sup>22</sup>

First of all, the notion of quality (*idiotēs/qualitas*) must be correctly understood. Whereas ‘quantities’ can be measured and calculated, ‘qualities’ cannot. In technical philosophical terms, they belong to the category of *qualia* (see, e.g., Kind 1995; Tye 2021), which are in fact quite literally “unspeakable” (*arrētos*) because they can *only* be known by direct experience and not indirectly or in any other way. For instance, we know the quality of ‘redness’ not because somebody has first explained to us what it is and how we can recognize it, but only because we know from direct experience ‘what it is like’ to see red. My argument is that the same holds true for *energeia* according to its original meaning—one that had become marginal to scientific discourse by the nineteenth century but is crucial to understanding what happens under the influence of ayahuasca. *Energeiai* in this sense should not be understood as metaphors or as secondary effects of quantifiable material processes, but as irreducible *qualia*. Like the quality of redness, they are impervious to theoretical understanding or rational analysis and cannot be captured by discursive language. They can only be known empirically, by *immediate* direct experience of their presence in the here and now.

However, the “unspeakable” (*arrētos*) nature of *qualia* such as redness should not be confused with the “hiddenness” of *qualitates occultae*, which has a different meaning. In terms of late medieval scholastic philosophy, *manifest qualities* were those (such as colors, tastes, smells, sounds, or physical sensations) that could be observed directly. In other words, while such *qualia* as redness were “unspeakable,” they were precisely not “hidden”—on the contrary, they were manifest to normal sensory experience. By contrast, *occult qualities* such as magnetism, electricity, or the influences of the planets were defined by the fact that they could not be observed directly through the senses. You

22 See Hanegraaff 2012, 177–91; Röhr 1923, 96–133. The word ἰδιότης “bezeichnet ursprünglich nichts weiter als Eigentümlichkeit” (i.e., “peculiarity”, hence “quality”; Röhr 1923, 99), but could easily morph into “einer für unser Empfinden okkulten Kraftwirkung oder der Fähigkeit dazu” (100). In other words, Röhr deliberately evaded the question of its original meaning by imposing a modern understanding of “occult forces.” As for the common word ἄρρητος: already in antiquity, the “unspeakable” could mean either “das moralisch Verwerfliche, Abscheuliche, Widernatürliche” or “das Unerklärliche und Unnatürliche” (101).

knew they were there because you could observe their secondary *effects*, but you could never directly observe these qualities themselves.<sup>23</sup>

In terms of these central concepts of *idiotētes arrētoi* and *qualitates occultae*, it is clear that the ‘energies’ experienced under the influence of ayahuasca are “unspeakable” *qualia* like redness, but we can refer to them as “occult qualities” only from the external perspective of normal everyday consciousness. Outsiders in a sober state of mind will observe a wide variety of physical or emotional ayahuasca effects (for instance, vomiting, bodily movements, sobbing, groaning, and so on); and insiders will readily attribute these phenomena to the activity of healing energies whose presence they experience in the room and that are believed to be at work in the bodies of practitioners. These energies are hidden from the physical senses under sober conditions of consciousness, but become apparent or manifest in the altered states induced by ayahuasca.

How? Classical sources since Aristotle postulated the existence of *internal senses* equivalent to the external ones (Wolfson 1935), and it is clear that such faculties of inner perception were widely taken for granted in entheogenic spiritualities from late antiquity, such as Hermetism and Iamblichean Theurgy.<sup>24</sup> The ‘knowledge’ accessed by these senses was clearly not rational and could not be expressed in discursive language; but neither was it empirical knowledge in the narrow sense of experimental scientific procedures based on predictability, repetition, and testability by independent third parties. The very existence of internal senses could not be proven in any other way than by using them—that is, in the very act of observation itself. A person might claim to ‘see,’ ‘feel,’ or ‘hear’ an energy, but external third parties could never check such an observation independently—except, of course, by taking recourse to the very same internal senses whose existence must be proven in the first place. From this perfect circle of internal validation, no path could ever lead toward the external validation required by normative science.

It seems relevant to note that the very same problem haunted eighteenth-century controversies over Mesmerism. In two famous scientific reports published in 1784, the commissioners admitted that strange and wondrous phenomena had indeed been observed during Mesmer’s healing sessions,

23 For the relevant secondary literature, see Hanegraaff 2012, 179 n. 106.

24 For Hermetic spirituality and Iamblichean Theurgy as entheogenic *sensu lato*, see the overall argument in Hanegraaff 2022. For some evidence of entheogenics *sensu stricto* in the case of Iamblichus, see *ibid.*, 72 n. 104, 110; in fact, a few particular passages in Iamblichus, *Response to Porphyry* I 11–12 (see quotations with discussion in Hanegraaff 2022, 111–12; referring to Jamblique, *Réponse à Porphyre [De Mysteriis]* (Saffrey and Segonds 2018)) are eerily reminiscent of what happens in ayahuasca healing sessions.

and that his patients often seemed to get better. However, their true concern was not with empirical evidence but with the theoretical explanatory concept of an invisible and intangible ‘fluid.’ This mysterious healing energy was ‘hidden’ (occult) by definition and therefore radically beyond their reach; nevertheless, its very existence was excluded by them *a priori*, because it violated their theoretical core assumptions about how the world worked. As a result, the commissioners ended up attributing the phenomena to a different but hardly less mysterious cause, the powers of the human imagination.<sup>25</sup> The phenomenon of Mesmerism stands at the historical origin not just of modern ‘science/pseudo-science’ demarcations but also of the many spirit(ual)ist movements that flourished during the later nineteenth century—including those that became popular in Brazil and are central to the emergence of modern ayahuasca churches. In exploring subtle energies, we are therefore dealing with a continuity that leads from eighteenth-century Mesmeric practice to contemporary ayahuasca healing.

## 5 Radical Empiricism and State-Specific Knowledge

We can now return to the core theoretical and methodological challenge of studying subtle energies in the context of ayahuasca healing. If we hypothesize that ayahuasca drinkers are experiencing something real, what kind of ‘realities’ could we possibly be dealing with? Two conclusions have emerged from the preceding discussion. The first is that these energies must be understood as *qualia*, which means that they are literally *arrētos* (unspeakable) and can only ever be known empirically by direct individual experience in the here and now. The second is that they are ‘hidden’ (occult) to us under the normal conditions that are required for sober academic research and rational discussion, because it so happens that they reveal themselves to human consciousness only under specific altered conditions.

We should be clear about the fact that these conclusions violate the core assumptions on which modern science has been built. As defined by Max Weber (1864–1920) in his classic discussion of disenchantment, the project of *Wissenschaft* is supposed to be grounded precisely in

the knowledge, or faith [*das Wissen davon oder den Glauben daran*] that if only one *wished* to, one *could* always find out; hence, that as a matter

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<sup>25</sup> For the basic story of the 1784 reports, see Crabtree 1993, 23–29. On the imagination as an alternative ‘explanation,’ see Méheust 1999, 322–34.

of principle, there are no mysterious incalculable powers that play into it; but rather, that—in principle—one can *have power* over all things by means of *calculation*. (Weber 1994, 9; emphases in the original, my translation)<sup>26</sup>

The fatal problem with this philosophy of science is that it makes empirical experience subservient to belief or faith (*Glaube*) in a worldview based on nineteenth-century concepts of instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and to an ‘epistemic optimism’ about its limitless potential for understanding and explaining the world.<sup>27</sup> It states *a priori* that ‘realities’ beyond the reach of rational calculation cannot ever be experienced because they cannot exist—you may think you are experiencing ‘subtle energies,’ but in fact you are not, because they are not real. By definition, they can only be mental delusions. This perfectly tautological argument is grounded not in scientific evidence but in belief or conviction, and takes for granted that *qualia* are either non-existent or irrelevant to science. If we wish to make sense of ‘subtle energies’ as experiential data, we need to abandon this perspective as a dated ideological construct. My alternative would be a methodology (*not* a theory or philosophy!) of radical empiricism<sup>28</sup> that can be boiled down to simple piece of advice: rather than allowing any pre-conceived theory, philosophical worldview, or ideological conviction to place prior restrictions on your research, thus limiting the scope of what you could possibly discover, try to be as consistent as possible in putting *experience first*.

The empirical fact at the center of this chapter is that ayahuasca drinkers perceive something they refer to as ‘energies.’ To account for these experiences, one could think of three possible avenues of theoretical explanation. (1) A *skeptical* explanation would suggest that any such experience of a subtle energy must be just a hallucination in the brain, caused by the ayahuasca. There is no energy present at all—that just seems to be the case. (2) An alternative *physiological* explanation could be that ayahuasca sharpens or opens up the senses

26 For a longer discussion, see Hanegraaff 2012, 252–54.

27 On the ‘epistemic optimism’ (obviously implying faith or confidence rather than certainty) basic to Weberian science, see Aspren 2018, 32–34.

28 My understanding of radical empiricism is broadly congenial to that of William James (1842–1910) (see discussion in Lamberth 1999, 9–60 and esp. 10–17; Davis 2019, 18–22). Intimately connected with historicity (Hanegraaff forthcoming) and methodological agnosticism (Hanegraaff 2022, 4–5 with n. 7), a consistent methodology of radical empiricism must approach *all* theories or philosophical perspectives as provisory and hence hypothetical human constructs, which means that it cannot itself be grounded in any theory or philosophy of ‘empiricism.’

to energies—whatever they may be—that were actually already present in the room but normally stay below our threshold of awareness. (3) Finally, a *theurgical* explanation could claim that these energies were *not* already present but are somehow created or invoked by means of the ritual ingestion of ayahuasca in a communal setting, so that they exist in the room for the duration of the ceremony.<sup>29</sup> Can we *know* which one of these explanations is most likely to be true? The answer seems clear: we cannot. We can observe the phenomena but not their causes. Whether in a sober state or under the influence of ayahuasca, we may keep theorizing or philosophizing forever about the true nature of these phenomena or about the metaphysical implications if any theory about them were true; but in Max Weber’s terms, there is nothing here over which one could “have power by means of calculation.”

I have argued that this should not actually cause us any surprise. After all, we are surrounded in our daily lives by *qualia* that, exactly like ayahuasca energies, can never be known except by immediate experience in the here and now. However, unlike the experiential knowledge of ‘redness’ obtained by seeing something red, whatever knowledge we may have of ayahuasca energies can only be obtained in a special condition of altered consciousness. With reference to a series of insufficiently noted articles by the American psychologist Charles T. Tart (1937–2025; the original inventor of the ‘altered states of consciousness’ concept), I propose we refer to it as *state-specific knowledge*.<sup>30</sup> Using Tart’s own formulations here, different types of ayahuasca spirituality may be described in terms of “state-specific *technologies*, operated in the service of a priori belief systems”; and what I call radical empiricism in this field is defined by Tart, with extreme precision and a subtle touch of irony, as a scholar’s commitment “to reexamine constantly his own belief system and to question the ‘obvious,’ in spite of its intellectual or emotional appeal to him” (Tart 2000, 217–18; 1998, 111).

To be sure, Tart’s state-specific knowledge is a radical concept with radical implications. It basically explodes the claim of universal explicability by calculative reason on which modern science is built and replaces it by a radical empiricism of consciousness in which the bottom line of all knowledge is neither rational nor explanatory but experiential. Knowledge obtained by

29 In this third interpretation, ayahuasca ‘energies’ are equivalent to the ‘gods’ that were believed to appear in theurgical ceremonies as described by Iamblichus (see Hanegraaff 2022, 99–118; note that the terminology of divine ‘energy’ or ‘energies’ is ubiquitous in these contexts; see *ibid.*, Index under “Energy/Energies”).

30 See Tart 1972; 1998; 2000, 206–28; Tart 2011, ix–xx; and response to critics in Cowan et al. 1973. Cf. Hanegraaff 2022, 3 with n. 6. While adopting Tart’s concept of state-specific *knowledge*, I make no claims either way about his concept of state-specific *sciences*.

procedures of scientific rationality may be perfectly valid but still remains state-specific. Likewise, knowledge obtained by drinking ayahuasca may be perfectly valid too, but remains state-specific as well. *Pace* Weber's concept of disenchantment, there may be no such thing as a universal explanatory framework that can be extrapolated to cover all knowledge regardless of state—only different kinds of state-specific knowledge.<sup>31</sup> The relativism implied by such a concept of science does not imply skepticism or nihilism; but it does suggest that any criteria for distinguishing between truth and error or falsity must be state-specific themselves.

Radical empiricism thus rejects the totalizing claim of classic explanatory science. Its place is taken by a considerably more humble perspective that affords real knowledge and real progress in our understanding of reality, but without the regulative Weberian ideal of some utopian moment in the remote future when the human mind will finally be able to explain the whole of reality so that no 'mysterious incalculable forces' will remain.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

Can we learn what these ayahuasca 'energies' really are? Have we moved any closer to *understanding* (not to mention explaining) those phenomenal experiences described by Benny Shanon and confirmed by countless other drinkers of the Amazonian brew? The answer I believe must be negative. In his treatise about Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) entitled *Träume eines Geistersehers*, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) established his foundational concept of metaphysics as "a science of the *limits of human reason*" (1976 [1766]), 76–77; emphasis in the original) which excluded the scholar from answering questions that would require "data from another world than the one in which he finds himself" (Hanegraaff 2007, 100; for a discussion, cf. 87–101). In Kantian terminology, ayahuasca energies would belong to that category; and yet they would not be *noumena* but remain experiential *phenomena*, the true nature of which remains beyond our grasp. It is well known that Kant's philosophical successors in the lineage of German Idealism did not want to accept these strictures, as expressed perhaps most eloquently in Goethe's famous lines *Die Geisterwelt ist nicht verschlossen. Dein Sinn ist zu, dein Herz ist todt!* ("The world of spirits is not closed. It's your sense that is shut, it's your heart that is dead!") (Goethe 1986, vol. 1, 22). Ayahuasca drinkers will readily confirm from

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31 This concept is closely aligned with my new coinage "Altered States of Knowledge" (see subtitle of Hanegraaff 2022; cf. *ibid.*, 3 with n. 6, 9).

their own experience that, as the Amazonian brew ‘opens up the senses’ while also ‘opening the heart,’<sup>32</sup> it gives access to a living world of spiritual energies that is closed to us in our sober state. Nevertheless, we are still faced with the barrier of language, translation, and communication. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) famously stated that what cannot be spoken is still able to *show* itself; and again, ayahuasca drinkers will agree.<sup>33</sup> But because what shows itself is so impressive, they can perhaps be excused for finding it hard to abide by Wittgenstein’s famous conclusion (2011, 7), even though it ultimately cannot be avoided: *wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen* (“About that of which one cannot speak, one must be silent”).

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32 In his regard, too, there is a remarkable degree of convergence between ayahuasca spirituality and the Hermetic literature, which keeps calling attention not only to the “internal senses” but also to the central importance of “opening the heart” (Hanegraaff 2022, 13, 200 with n. 53–54).

33 Wittgenstein 2011, 6.522: “Es gibt allerdings Unausprechliches. Dies *zeigt* sich, es ist das Mystische” (emphasis in the original). Wittgenstein is strangely inconsistent here in suggesting that that which shows itself but cannot be spoken could nevertheless be *identified* as “the mystical.”

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# Gaia's Energy Flows: the Interplay of Eco-Spirituality and Terrestrial Energy Healing

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## 1 Introduction

Dating back to antiquity, the concept of subtle energies has been commonly associated with the human subtle body. This idea has often been accompanied by theories about subtle energies and centers.<sup>1</sup> Instead of exploring the intricate history of subtle energies and bodies in human history, this chapter will illustrate how theories about subtle centers and energies were applied to the Earth, thus moving the discussion beyond its anthropological scope.

Throughout the twentieth century and especially from the 1960s onward, there has been growing interest in concepts such as terrestrial energy currents and energetically charged places. These ideas have gained popularity among holistic and eco-spiritual groups.<sup>2</sup> Beliefs about the Earth as a conscious or divine being, and the anticipation of a new age, have contributed to the connection between subtle physiology and terrestrial energies. Throughout this chapter, I will discuss the expanding range of terrestrial energy theories, which include concepts such as energy grids, Earth chakras,<sup>3</sup> energy flows, and dragon lines. Moreover, in response to the ecological crisis, 'terrestrial energy healing' has become a significant practice among holistic and eco-spiritual healers. These 'terrestrial energy healers' aim to positively impact terrestrial subtle components in order to promote the well-being of the Earth and humanity. Consequently, this chapter suggests that the ideas of terrestrial physiology

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1 For a thorough genealogy of the subtle body, see Cox 2021.

2 Visionary artist Rowena P. Kryder's *Sacred Ground to Sacred Space* (1994) is an excellent example of a work addressing these popular topics. In her book, Kryder discusses what she calls 'visionary ecology' and 'environmental ritual and art.' Although published in the 1990s, the book further supports the thesis that eco-spiritual ideas have influenced holistic and eco-spiritual groups since their initial development.

3 This chapter addresses several South Asian concepts, such as *cakra* or *kuṇḍalinī*. However, I focus exclusively on their modern interpretations in this study, thereby refraining from using diacritics. For a thorough discussion of *cakra*, *kuṇḍalinī*, and other elements of the South Asian subtle body, see, e.g., Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 227–29.

and terrestrial energy healing occupy a significant intersection between eco-spirituality and the holistic community.

The category of eco-spirituality emerged in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on the theories of the Norwegian philosopher Arne D. E. Næss (1912–2009), an early environmentalist movement took shape in the 1970s. As part of his eco-centric philosophy of deep ecology, Næss emphasized the intrinsic value of nature and the urgent need for its protection in response to growing environmental degradation. Moreover, he identified a close link between spirituality and environmentalism (Næss 1989, 163). Although earlier theories anticipated deep ecology, the latter played an unparalleled role in shaping a cohesive understanding of the value and vulnerability of nature.<sup>5</sup> In this context, many alternative religious voices began incorporating religious environmentalism into their doctrines (Taylor 2005, xiv–xvii). Sometimes, this included eco-spiritual activism which encompasses actions beyond mere environmentally friendly behavior. The spectrum of eco-activism ranges from peaceful campaigns at sacred sites to militant activism of groups such as Earth First! and even eco-magic.<sup>6</sup> Another practice within eco-activism is terrestrial energy healing, which, as outlined below, blends eco-spiritual principles with holistic healing.

The concept of holistic healing must be understood within the broader context of the holistic milieu and the idea of holism. Liselotte Frisk and her colleagues describe the holistic milieu as such:

By ‘holistic milieu’ we mean the field of phenomena that are commonly denominated in the social scientific literature as ‘New Age’, ‘alternative spirituality’, ‘modern esotericism’ or ‘spiritual marketplace’. We prefer ‘holistic’ against the other terms, because today only few persons who practice alternative spiritual and therapeutic activities consider themselves as ‘New Agers’. (Frisk et al. 2014, 303)

According to this broad definition, ‘holistic milieu’ can be seen as an umbrella term for the alternative religious field that gained prominence in Europe and

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4 Scholars of religion and environmentalism have introduced many more categories to define this field, including eco-paganism, religious environmentalism, nature religion, and Earth mysticism. For clarity, in this chapter, I will apply ‘eco-spirituality’ as an umbrella term for this multifaceted field. For comprehensive overviews of eco-spirituality and related topics, see Tucker 2006; Sponsel 2017.

5 For a critical reading of deep ecology, see Garrard 2004.

6 The scope of this chapter allows us to address only a portion of the broad spectrum of eco-spiritual activism. For an introduction to eco-activism, see, e.g., Sponsel 2017.

the Anglo-American world during the twentieth century. My specific interest, however, concerns the application of holistic healing. Within this narrower scope, I define 'holistic' as pursuing psychosomatic and spiritual well-being. The holistic milieu thus intersects with a form of holistic 'wellbeing culture' that incorporates a therapeutic dimension.<sup>7</sup>

There are several areas of overlap between eco-spirituality and the holistic milieu, one of which is the concept of holistic well-being, which can extend to a terrestrial (or even cosmic) plane. For the purposes of this chapter, however, the most crucial connection between these distinctive fields lies in the notion of terrestrial energies and their manipulation. In his 2005 study *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Christopher Partridge discussed what he called 'Eco-Enchantment,' highlighting this very link between the holistic milieu and eco-spirituality:

It is perhaps worth emphasizing that, in common with the holistic milieu generally, Eco-Paganism<sup>8</sup> utilizes the concept of natural energies. From Reiki to 'raising the Dragon' and weaving spells, the aim to manipulate energy in order to maintain health, facilitate healing, and empower individuals. (Partridge 2005, 74)

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first addresses key concepts that are central to the topic: Earth chakras, Earth energies, and energy grids. I will define these terms and discuss their historical development. The second section focuses on what can be termed terrestrial energy healing. In the context of beliefs in a sentient Mother Earth, this section will examine eco-spiritual concerns and two distinct healing strategies that utilize subtle energies as curative forces for the planet and its inhabitants. The aim is to contribute to research on subtle energies and offer new insights into the relationship between eco-spirituality and the holistic milieu.

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7 For a discussion on the links of the holistic milieu and the wellbeing culture, see, e.g., Partridge 2005, 13–20.

8 As mentioned earlier, the term 'eco-paganism' can be subsumed under the designation of eco-spirituality. As Andy Letcher pointed out, eco-pagans—like other eco-spiritual groups—share the goal of promoting political and social change within the framework of religious environmentalism. Despite the label, affiliation or sympathy with contemporary paganism is of secondary importance. What sets eco-pagans apart is their distinctive means of action, such as the use of eco-magic. See Letcher 2005, 556–57.

## 2 Key Concepts: Earth Energy Lines and Earth Chakras

This section introduces some of the key concepts and figures central to the discourse. These include ideas of connecting trackways or ‘Earth energy lines,’ energetically charged locations known as ‘Earth chakras,’ and the belief in an all-encompassing energy system of the Earth referred to as ‘energy grids.’ Collectively, these elements, along with the belief in the Earth as a sentient being, can be described as terrestrial subtle physiology.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.1 *Energy Lines and Earth Energies*

An early pioneer who anticipated concepts of energy lines (and places) was the English businessman Alfred Watkins (1855–1935). In his seminal book *The Old Straight Track* (1925), he suggested that so-called ‘ley lines’ permeate the British landscape, creating a web of lines and significant intersection points across the English landscape.<sup>10</sup> In the preface, Watkins wondered “whether it is a humanly signed fact, an accidental coincidence, or a ‘mere’s nest,’ that mounds, moats, beacons, and mark stones fall into straight lines throughout Britain, with fragmentary evidence of trackways on the alignment” (1970 [1925], vi). While the concept of ley lines and the potential values of their intersection points gained popularity during Watkins’ lifetime—particularly among his entourage of ‘ley hunters’<sup>11</sup>—it faded into obscurity after his death.

However, in the 1960s, ley lines were revived and began to be seen as energetic pathways running through the British landscape and the entire world. Several innovative theories emerged, incorporating occult and unconventional elements into Watkins’ original concept. Amidst growing interest in extra-terrestrial life and flying saucers, the British author, pilot, and ‘ley hunter’ Anthony “Tony” Dunkin Wedd (1919–1980) proposed in his *Skyways and Landmarks* (1961) that Watkins’ trading tracks were actually flight paths for flying saucers. Additionally, Wedd suggested that extra-terrestrials might have

9 For a comprehensive introduction to terrestrial subtle physiology, see Ivakhiv 2001, 18–43.

10 Similar endeavors were carried out in Germany some decades after Watkins’ ‘discovery.’ *Völkisch* ley archaeologists Wilhelm Teudt (1860–1942) and Josef Heinsch (n.d.a.) proposed theories on holy lines (*heilige Linien*) and explored possibilities of astronomical references in German landscapes and sacred sites (see Sheeran 1990, 67–68). For an excellent overview of (British) alternative archaeology, see Stout 2006.

11 Among supporters of Watkins’ ley theory, the outdoor activity of ‘ley hunting’ was very popular—that is, collectively roaming through rural areas in search of undiscovered leys. To some extent, British hobby archaeologists continue the pastime of ley hunting to this day (see Stout 2006, 6–7).

targeted ancient sacred sites positioned along (straight) energy lines.<sup>12</sup> This was probably the first convergence of ley lines and subtle energy lines.

Although Wedd's ideas proved influential for ensuing theories on energy lines, his impact was limited. The English author John Michell (1934–2009), in contrast, significantly shaped the popular perception of telluric energy lines and energy centers.<sup>13</sup> In his seminal book *The View Over Atlantis* (1969), he wrote: "There are places all over the earth, spots associated with strong supernatural or spiritual manifestations, which have been spoken of as centres of terrestrial magnetic current" (1972 [1969], 166). Initially, his theories were limited to such energetically charged sacred places. Before long, however, he expanded this idea by proposing a theory about energy lines that connect these energetic places. The specific nature of the energy involved varied. In some cases, Michell's concept of energy was based on previous theories by figures such as the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) and his concept of Animal Magnetism, the German chemist Carl Ludwig von Reichenbach (1788–1896) and his Odic force, and the Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957) and his orgone energy (*ibid.*, 76–78). In other cases, Michell used the concept of energy as an inherent element of the Earth and its natural surroundings, dating back to ancient times. He depicted these 'archetypal' currents of terrestrial energies as "*Lung Mei* or dragon paths" (Michell 1967, 146; emphasis in the original). Drawing on dragon myths, he interpreted specific historical sites as "dragon sites" (1972 [1969], 64) and their associated earth energies as "dragon currents" (63). According to Michell, these terrestrial energy lines have their origins in Chinese geomancy. In *The View Over Atlantis*, he thoroughly outlined his terrestrial energy theory, asserting that it was recognized among Chinese geomancers "that certain powerful currents, lines of magnetism, run invisible over the whole surface of the earth" (60).<sup>14</sup> Michell's work was not limited to revitalizing ley lines and introducing them to a much larger audience. It also associated these straight lines with (energetic) dragon

12 Wedd supported his claims with ideas from earlier works, including the book *Flying Saucers and the Straight-Line Mystery* (1958) by the French ufologist Aimé Michel (1919–1992) and Buck Nelson's (n.d.a.) *My Trip to Mars, the Moon and Venus* (1956). Nelson was a self-proclaimed contactee of extra-terrestrials and wrote in his book: "The Space People tell me that the places where magnetic currents cross is comparable to a crossroads sign" (Nelson 1956, quoted in Heselton 1985). This sentence struck Wedd and inspired him to identify ley lines with energy lines (see Heselton 1985).

13 Michell thoroughly outlined this claim in *The View Over Atlantis*, but continued addressing the topic of ley lines and telluric energy lines throughout his writing career (Thaler 2023).

14 This might refer to what Dion Fortune called 'elemental force,' meaning an energy stream that runs "as a circuit of force round the earth" (Fortune and Knight 1998, 58).

forces or currents, thereby continuing the energizing of Watkins' straight lines (Thaler 2023).

## 2.2 *Energetic Places and Earth Chakras*

The concept of sacred places has been significant throughout history. Although they are often linked to religious monuments like churches, temples, and mosques, or locations of religious importance such as Jerusalem, Bodhgaya, and Stonehenge, there are multiple interpretations. As the energy discourse gained popularity in the twentieth century, sacred places started to be seen as energetically charged locations.<sup>15</sup> The Theosophical Society played a significant role in advancing such theories. George S. Arundale (1878–1945), Violet M. Firth, better known as Dion Fortune (1890–1946), and Kazimierz Chodkiewicz (1892–1980) are among the most essential theosophical pioneers in this regard. However, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) likewise had her share in this development.

In *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Blavatsky introduced the expression “rotating etheric<sup>16</sup> centres” (557). In theosophical parlance, the term ‘etheric center’ primarily refers to the centers of the human subtle body. However, Blavatsky also addressed ‘etheric centers of the universe,’ produced by a distinctive life force that she called *fohat* (ibid.).<sup>17</sup> This notwithstanding, most of Blavatsky’s successors focused on the idea of etheric or force centers in relation to the human subtle body.<sup>18</sup>

The English Indian Theosophist Arundale, on the contrary, sought to incorporate the terrestrial plane into this discussion, initiating the discourse on terrestrial or Earth chakras and energies, although he did not explicitly use these terms. During a lecture tour in Poland in 1932, Arundale introduced the concept of ‘energy places’ and used the city of Cracow as his main example: “There exists in Cracow a Spiritual Centre [...]. It is a kind of geyser from which flows incessantly streams of spiritual forces [...]. One feels there a very strong spiritual atmosphere, something like a whorl of invisible currents and a powerful

15 The energy discourse is an enormous and ever-growing field, which cannot be expounded fully in this chapter. For a discussion on the development of the energy discourse, see, e.g., Baier 2009; Zoehrer 2021.

16 Blavatsky uses the terms ‘etheric,’ ‘ethereal,’ and ‘aethereal’ interchangeably.

17 Blavatsky and other theosophists frequently used the term ‘fohat’ or ‘fohatic-power.’ In the *Theosophical Glossary* (1892), Blavatsky defined *fohat* as an “occult Tibetan term” which is “used to represent the active (male) potency of the Sakti [...], the ever-present electrical energy and ceaseless destructive and formative power” (120–21).

18 See, for instance, Annie Besant’s *Man and his Bodies* (1896) and Charles W. Leadbeater’s *The Chakras* (1927).

magnetic aura" (cited in Chodkiewicz 1966, 14). Arundale thus applied terms such as "geyser" and "whorl of invisible currents" to describe Cracow as an energetically charged place. In his 1938 publication *Kundalini: An Occult Experience*, he stressed this claim of 'energy centers' even more explicitly: "The earth has its centres—whirling wheels of fiery energy" (Arundale 1938, 14). Arundale likely referred in this quote to a terrestrial equivalent of chakras and perhaps hinting at kundalini.

Another important, if unknown, theosophical pioneer of correlating sacred places with energetic centers was the Polish theosophist Kaszimirz Chodkiewicz.<sup>19</sup> Following Arundale, in his 1966 book *The Cracow Occult Centre* he suggested that the Wawel castle of Cracow was indeed "a powerful centre of Spiritual Forces [...] Polish students of Occultism [...] always called it 'the Wawel Lotus', by analogy with the etheric centers of vital forces in the human etheric double" (Chodkiewicz 1966, 14).<sup>20</sup> Aside from Arundale, Chodkiewicz's views were influenced by the Polish theosophist and social activist Wanda Dynowska (1888–1971). According to Chodkiewicz, Dynowska witnessed the 'activation' of the Wawel Lotus in 1935 (*ibid.*, 15–16).

Moreover, in Dynowska's article "The Karma of Poland" (1942), she linked Apollonius of Tyana<sup>21</sup> to Cracow: "There exists in our land a spiritual and occult Centre, established by Apollonius of Tyana, founded not for Poland's sake but for the great part of the Continent of Europe" (Dynowska 1942, 411). Chodkiewicz revived these claims in his treatise and maintained that Apollonius of Tyana had buried a "powerful talisman" below Cracow (1966, 7). Dynowska and Chodkiewicz thus based their assertion of the Wawel Lotus on local lore, personal experience, and occult energy theories. To my knowledge, Chodkiewicz was the first person to describe the analogy of an 'energetically charged place' with a lotus and thus chakra in such a distinctive manner.

The term 'Earth chakra,' however, was introduced by a different figure on another continent. In 1967, just a year later, the US-American writer Robert Coon (n.d.a.) claimed to have discovered what he referred to as the "Planetary

19 For an introduction into Chodkiewicz, his theosophical background, and his perception of the Wawel castle as Earth chakra, see Hess 2019, 121–22.

20 Early theosophists coined the term 'etheric double' to describe a subtle counterpart of the physical body. The book *The Etheric Double* (1927) by Arthur E. Powell (1882–1969) comprehensively introduces the theosophical understanding of the etheric double.

21 Legends surrounding the Greek Neo-Pythagorean philosopher Apollonius of Tyana are prominent in Dynowska's and Chodkiewicz's reasoning. Both claim that he established various spiritual centers of force throughout Europe. See Chodkiewicz 1966, 1–6; Dynowska 1942, 411; Hess 2019, 121.

Earth Chakra Structure” (Coon 2009 [1967]).<sup>22</sup> Coon’s system consists of several “subtle organs” (3), such as seven Earth chakras, four elemental vortices,<sup>23</sup> two arteries of circulation, and thirteen primary sacred sites, among other elements. These are described as part of an interconnected energy grid. Accordingly, in his book *Earth Chakras*, Coon specified how subtle energies connected Earth chakras and sacred sites “in a straight line along what are termed dragon paths,<sup>24</sup> ley lines, or song lines” (ibid., 4). Moreover, he described how terrestrial energy lines corresponded to the human subtle body. In other words, Coon transformed Watkins’ ley lines and Michell’s dragon currents into ley arteries of the body of the Earth: “These connective pathways are analogous to the human circulatory, nervous, or acupuncture meridian systems. The great ley arteries of the Earth connect one continental Earth chakra to another” (ibid.). This quote perfectly shows how Coon believed that the Earth was a sentient being, and its body equipped with interconnected subtle components. Coon’s eclectic approach thus significantly contributed to the elaboration of terrestrial energy grid theories<sup>25</sup> and the belief in terrestrial subtle physiology.

### 2.3 *Terrestrial Subtle Physiology and Energy Grid Theories*

The Austrian mystic Jakob Lorber (1800–1846) was an early promoter of terrestrial physiology.<sup>26</sup> In 1840, he had his first experience of what he perceived as divine revelations. According to hagiographical accounts, an ‘inner voice,’ referred to as “Das lebendige Wort” (the vital word; Zluhan and Patenge, in Lorber 1922 [1846], v; my translation), revealed knowledge of the Earth and

22 Coon lived in Boulder, Colorado, while Chodkiewicz resided in Poland at that time. Thus, despite their similar theories, a link between the two is unlikely.

23 Vortices or vortexes have remained important concepts among alternative religious groups. In Southern California (e.g., Joshua Tree) or in Arizona (e.g., Sedona) vortexes belong to the essential spiritual vocabulary. The Institute of Mentalphysics in Joshua Tree, California, is a paramount example of the belief in vortexes. The institute even provides a map of its vortexes. For the Sedona-based believers in vortexes, see Susannah Crockford’s study on spirituality in Sedona (2021).

24 The term ‘dragon path’ can be traced back to Michell. Like Michell, Coon was also a member of Glastonbury’s alternative scene. Therefore, it is likely that Coon’s theory of terrestrial energy lines, linking the Earth chakras along dragon lines, was inspired by Michell’s notions on dragon currents.

25 For instance, by describing the English Glastonbury as the Earth’s heart chakra, Coon fostered the town’s self-image as a major hub of a global energy grid (see Bowman 2005).

26 I am indebted to Peter Mulacz for introducing me to Jakob Lorber. For a brief introduction to Lorber’s work and influences (i.e., Emanuel Swedenborg and Jakob Boehme), as well as the Lorber Society (*Lorber Gesellschaft*), see Mayer 2006, 699–701.

heaven to Lorber, designating him as “Geheimsschreiber des Herrn” (God’s scribe; *ibid.*; my translation). Armed with his quill, he began recording everything that the ‘inner voice’ revealed. In his book *Erde und Mond* (1846), he described the Earth as a living organism (Lorber 1922 [1846], 6).

Lorber structured the first part of the book like an anatomical study of the human body, detailing the supposed organs of the Earth and explaining their functions. For instance, he writes: “[T]his heart of the earth constitutes [...] a substantial force, which [...] affects the entire organism of the earth’s body” (1922 [1846], 6; my translation).<sup>27</sup> Additionally, he introduced a terrestrial variation of the humoral theory,<sup>28</sup> still widely accepted at the time, merging it with the belief in terrestrial ‘channels’: “As for the tangible (i.e., sentient) skin of the earth, it is crisscrossed by countless channels, and between these channels there are [...] containers for all kinds of fluids ascending from the inside of the earth” (55; my translation).<sup>29</sup> In a striking manner, Lorber outlined a terrestrial (subtle) physiology, foreshadowing later energy models of the twentieth century. His concept of the ‘sentient skin of the earth,’ permeated by channels, bears a resemblance to the earlier-mentioned ideas of terrestrial (energy) lines.

However, Lorber played a minor role among his successors. Instead, modern theories depicting the Earth as a living organism or divine sentient being dominated the discourse. These theories led to the belief that energy currents flow through the Earth’s ‘body.’ Assuming that the Earth’s ‘body’ encompasses all its landscapes, these currents may form an all-embracing telluric energy system known as ‘energy grids.’ Notable examples include Michael Behrend’s energy grid theory (1970s) and Tom Grave’s localized Gaia theory (1986), both of which suggest the global alignment of telluric energies in geometric patterns. William Becker and Bethe Hagens (1991) further developed this concept, introducing circular energy lines, or “rings of Gaia” (Becker and Hagens 1991; Ivakhiv 2005, 527–28). These theories link telluric energy patterns to the belief in a living, conscious Earth, thus aligning with the idea of terrestrial subtle physiology.

Through publications by Arundale, Coon, and Michell, the concepts of telluric energies and energetically charged places became central topics in holistic and eco-spiritual discourse. A recurring theme in this context is the use of telluric energies for healing.

27 “[D]ieses Herz der Erde ist [...] eine substanzielle Kraft, die [...] auf den ganzen andern Organismus des Erdkörpers seine Wirkung äußert.”

28 For an introduction to the medical system of humorism, see Conrad et al. 1995.

29 “Was die fühlbare (d.i. fühlende) Haut der Erde betrifft, so ist diese von zahllosen, kreuz und quer laufenden Kanälen durchzogen, und zwischen diesen Kanälen gibt es [...] Behälter für allerlei aus dem Innern der Erde aufsteigende Flüssigkeiten.”

### 3 Terrestrial Energy Healing

In the second half of the twentieth century, the image of the Earth as a mother or goddess experienced a revival, extending beyond contemporary Pagan groups.<sup>30</sup> The most popular narratives envisioned the Earth as the spiritual embodiment of the goddess Gaia or as a nourishing mother. Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (1948) and James Lovelock's *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979), commonly known as the Gaia Hypothesis, were both pivotal in shaping this narrative. While Graves re-introduced the concept of an ancient Mother Goddess or Mother Earth to modern audiences, Lovelock popularized it (Hutton 2000 [1991], 326–27).

Initially, Lovelock conducted scientific research for NASA in the 1960s, focusing on the potential for life on the planet Mars. When this proved unlikely, he turned his attention to the conditions of life on Earth. Collaborating with microbiologist Lynn Margulis (1938–2011), they developed a theory whose central idea was that the Earth functions as a single organism and a self-regulating system. Although Lovelock's initial approach was scientific, he became best known for advancing the belief that the Earth is a living organism, often imagined as Mother Earth or the goddess Gaia (Lovelock 1979).

The dual belief of the Earth as a sacred being and living organism akin to the human body has become widely accepted within the alternative religious spectrum. Gaia worship has become a fundamental aspect of eco-spiritual belief systems and—in response to ecological change and crisis—it was increasingly framed in terms of environmental protection. Narratives of a wounded or even dying Mother Earth, often linked with Gaia, have been further reinforced by concerns over environmental pollution and destruction. As outlined in the introduction, considering such eco-spiritual concerns, religious environmentalism and eco-spiritual activism have emerged as central goals for eco-spiritual groups. Consequently, these groups have taken numerous actions to protect Gaia's environment, hoping to restore her health. One such measure, relatively peaceful in nature, is terrestrial energy healing.

New Age visionary Martin Gray (n.d.a.) articulated his understanding of terrestrial energy healing with the following words:

I understood the power points on Mother Earth to be similar to the acupuncture points on the human body. The power points are precise

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30 Mother Earth imageries have already played a role in ancient cultures; for instance, within the Roman Empire or among South Asian religious groups (for a description of the latter, see White 2003, 70).

geographic locations where there is a unique energetic dynamic [...]. Humans may assist in the energy balancing and thereby the healing of Earth by visiting the power points. They may also benefit from the various Earth spirit energies emanating from those sites. (cited in Ivakhiv 2001, 22)

Gray's beliefs align with similar perspectives held by figures associated with eco-spirituality and the New Age movement (such as Coon). The quote has two main implications: (1) Terrestrial energy healing is rooted in the principles of human energy healing. In other words, many forms of terrestrial energy healing can be understood as extensions of holistic therapies that apply subtle energies to heal the human body. Remedies aimed at restoring the Earth's health often draw on these supposedly curative Earth energies. (2) Terrestrial energy healing involves a reciprocal relationship between the Earth and humanity. Eco-spiritual practitioners seek to enhance the well-being of Gaia's subtle body, her natural environments, her inhabitants, and her sacred sites. In turn, Gaia's well-being benefits humanity on both spiritual and environmental levels.

This chapter, therefore, proposes that the ultimate goal of terrestrial energy healing is to achieve the holistic health of both the Earth *and* its inhabitants. To illustrate this, I will examine two distinct examples of terrestrial energy healing that rely on subtle energies as carriers of healing: Coon's understanding of energy healing as sacred communication and Drunvalo Melchizedek's kundalini-based approach.

### 3.1 *Energy Healing as Sacred Communication*

Robert Coon is best known for his theories on Earth chakras and the interconnectedness of sacred places. He has authored six books on the subject and maintains a regularly updated webpage (earthchakras.org). Most of his theories stem from a decisive experience in Boulder, Colorado, in 1967, when Coon claimed to have received a revelation about the interconnectedness of the Earth's most sacred sites (Coon 2009 [1967], 290–91).<sup>31</sup> His system incorporates curative and protective strategies aimed at enhancing overall well-being. Along the lines of what he termed "sacred communication" (283),

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<sup>31</sup> In today's Boulder, Coon does not continue to play a role anymore. His books are not available in Boulder's Naropa University or in the local bookshops. This notwithstanding, alternative religious topics, which likely influenced Coon during the 1960s, are still prevalent in today's Boulder. Fergus Bordewich (1988) provides a great overview of Boulder's self-understanding as a spiritual hub.

Coon described energy healing as a reciprocal exchange between the Earth and individual energy healers. Earth chakras, according to Coon, play a fundamental role in this dynamic, as they hold the “greatest concentration of energy encoded with information” (2). This energetic information provides the instructions necessary for healing, such as the timing, location, and astrological alignment for energy work. This intrinsic information represents the foundation of Coon’s ‘sacred communication,’ underscoring the importance he attributed to Earth chakras.

However, according to Coon, Earth chakras are not only vessels of information. Specific ones also serve as channels for transmitting knowledge from the Earth to humanity. He particularly ascribed this function to the fifth Earth chakra, which he located in Egypt and Israel, encompassing the Great Pyramid, Mount Sinai, and Mount of Olives: “[Chakra Five] activates the ability to have direct communication with the Earth Spirit [...]. Dialogue between the host life form—the earth, and all dependent beings” (Coon 2009 [1967], 19). He thus suggested that energy healers could receive vital information by engaging in communication with the “Earth Spirit” (11).<sup>32</sup> Techniques such as meditation, visualization, and practicing the “art of listening” (ibid.) at the sacred sites of the fifth Earth chakra, where the “voice of the Earth is singing the gospel of life” (12), were key to fostering this communication. Coon elaborated on these techniques throughout his book, providing practical examples that exemplify his understanding of terrestrial energy healing as a form of ‘sacred communication.’ A notable example is the following description:

[Sit or] lay upon the earth, empty the mind, and inhale the energy and wisdom of the Earth Spirit directly into your seven chakras and all the atoms of your body. Breathe this way for at least five minutes. Have faith that the earth energies being absorbed contain encoded information that will be accurately deciphered by you, at the right time, and utilized in the work of healing. (Coon 2009 [1967], 282)

Coon posited that Mother Earth’s energies transmit the required information from her chakras to human chakras. Once this information is received, the healer may carry out the necessary energy work to ensure the Earth’s health. In a functioning system, Coon argued, ‘ley arteries’ (meaning terrestrial Earth energies) encircle the globe and link the Earth chakras, thereby facilitating the seamless transmission of information.

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32 The designation ‘Earth Spirit’ as an immanent mediator between Mother Earth and humanity underscores Coon’s belief in the Earth as a living and yet ‘unearthly’ being.

These subtle components, he claimed, are “vital to the health of the world” (Coon 2009 [1967], 3). However, environmental pollution, social crises, and ‘spiritual ignorance’ have compromised these chakras and their energy currents. That is why terrestrial energy healing must first and foremost focus on purifying and energizing these subtle components to restore the proper flow of information. The energy healer, in turn, receives the information from the Earth and applies it to maintain the planet’s health.

Coon provided a list of sixteen ‘open tasks’ for energy healers dedicated to contributing to the well-being of Mother Earth and her inhabitants. This list of “the most important Earth Chakra work to do from 2009 to 2027” (Coon 2009 [1967], 274) includes tasks such as “link Mecca with Mount Kilimanjaro now. This is essential for the vitalisation of the African continent” (275); and “devote activities to the unification of Korea. [...] Transfer currents and influences from Mt. Fuji and Okinawa. The resolution of this Earth Chakra is key to the future health of the Aquarian Aeon” (276). These examples perfectly show how Coon regarded subtle energies as self-evident agents of transformation and how ‘sacred communication’ between Earth and humanity was essential for improving mutual well-being.<sup>33</sup>

My second example of terrestrial energy healing focuses on a curative force resembling the energy concept of kundalini.<sup>34</sup> While Coon’s writings contain veiled references to kundalini,<sup>35</sup> another key figure, Drunvalo Melchizedek, provided a more explicit treatment of terrestrial kundalini energy. The US-American writer and self-proclaimed prophet devoted an entire book to this energy, which he called the ‘Serpent of Light.’

### 3.2 *Kundalini as a Curative Force for the Planet*

The timeless symbol of the serpent has meandered its way through countless myths and narratives across the world: the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl, known as the ‘precious’ or ‘plumed serpent’; Jörmungandr, the world serpent of Norse mythology; serpent-entwined rods or poles, such as the Rod of Asclepius from Greek mythology; or South Asian rituals associated with Nāgas, semi-divine

33 For a comprehensive description of the range of techniques in use, see Coon 2009 [1967], 260–87.

34 For a thorough introduction to kundalini’s transformation in the twentieth century, see Thaler 2024. See also Hugh Urban’s and Tova Olsson’s contributions to this volume.

35 The most evident references to kundalini in Coon’s writings include his description of the ‘feminine dragon path’ as Rainbow Serpent, and his claims of a constant flow of energy running through one of the ley arteries (Coon 2009 [1967], 17).

beings that are half-human and half-serpent.<sup>36</sup> Intriguingly, the serpent in these mythologies is often closely linked to the earth, either as a being emanating from it, belonging to the kin of Mother Earth, or identified with the landscape's physical features (Ogden 2013, 247).

In 2007, the writer Drunvalo Melchizedek (né Bernard Perona; b. 1941) added another narrative to the long list of serpent myths.<sup>37</sup> Based in Sedona, Arizona, the self-proclaimed “New Age Consciousness ‘celebrity’” (Melchizedek n.d.) is best known for his interpretations of sacred geometry, particularly the ‘Flower of Life’ and what he calls the ‘Mer-Ka-Ba,’ which refers to presumed energy fields surrounding the human body and the planet Earth (Melchizedek 2008 [2007], 12).

In his book *Serpent of Light: The Movement of the Earth's Kundalini and the Rise of the Female Light, 1949 to 2013* (2008 [2007]), Melchizedek merges the popular eschatological theory of 2012 as a turning point in human history with the concept of Mother Earth's kundalini.<sup>38</sup> Against the backdrop of millenarian and eco-spiritual beliefs, he interpreted kundalini as a transformative, ‘eco-conscious’ force. This consciousness pertains not only to kundalini but also to Mother Earth herself. Melchizedek stressed that, while the Earth Kundalini acts consciously, it is ultimately Mother Earth's will that determines its movements: “The Kundalini has two poles, and one is in the exact center of the Earth. The other is located on the surface somewhere [...] in the world. It is the consciousness of the Earth herself that decides where it is to be” (ibid., xii).

According to Melchizedek, every 13,000 years, the ‘Serpent of Light’—the Earth Kundalini—shifts its location, thereby altering the course of history as its current location defines the world's spiritual center. Originating from the legendary island of Atlantis, the ‘Serpent of Light’ first moved to Tibet. After

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36 Several studies examine the polyvalent symbol of the serpent in distinct cultural settings or in a comparative manner. Comprehensive examples include Mundkur 1983; Frenschkowski 2011; Charlesworth 2010.

37 The idea of an Earth Kundalini was not invented by Melchizedek. George Arundale wrote about the “Earth-Kundalini” (Arundale 1938, 53–62), the Swedish Goddess feminist Monica Sjöö (1938–2005) wrote about the “Kundalini energies of the [Glastonbury] Tor” (Sjöö 1980, 37), and the author Mary Scott dedicated two chapters of her book *Kundalini in the Physical World* (1983) to what she called “Kundalini as an Earth Force” (Scott 2006 [1983], 79–106). No information is available whether Melchizedek knew these earlier sources. In any case, he claimed clairvoyance as his central source of insight (Melchizedek 2008 [2007], 1–4).

38 The date December 21, 2012, has been frequently associated with eschatological theories based on interpretations of the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar, commonly simplified as Mayan calendar.

another 13,000 years, it relocated once again, this time to South America. According to Melchizedek, this most recent movement coincided with December 21, 2012, heralding the long-anticipated Aquarian Age: "At this moment in history, it will be the kundalini of the Earth that is [...] beginning a new vibration. This energy shift will affect every last person on earth" (2008 [2007], 12). Melchizedek thus believed that the Serpent's movement would lead to a global consciousness shift.

As previously outlined, Mother Earth is believed to guide the Earth Kundalini to its new destination. However, like Coon, Melchizedek emphasized that individual energy work is essential to assist and secure the Serpent's journey. Its sound movement relies on what Melchizedek called the "Unity Consciousness Grid" (2008 [2007], 33), an all-encompassing energetic field of the Earth that corresponds to his concept of the Mer-Ka-Ba. The Serpent can only move through a well-balanced energy field; energy healers are therefore tasked with ensuring a smooth flow of energy.

At times, 'energy blocks' complicate the Serpent's journey. Throughout his study, Melchizedek discusses various techniques for dissolving these energetic barriers: the individual or collective visualization of the Mer-Ka-Ba; burying crystals at sacred sites; or channeling information from angels. A notable example of a collective energy healing endeavor involves what Melchizedek describes as ceremonies performed by South and North American indigenous groups. The motif of superior knowledge attributed to 'traditional' or 'ancient' ethnic groups (in this case, primarily Mayan descendants) frequently appears in alternative religious literature, and Melchizedek is no exception. He claims these indigenous ceremonies aimed to maintain the 'Unity Consciousness Grid' and dissolve an energetic barrier along the Serpent's path at the Panama Canal. In his view, "over 500 tribes from both continents [i.e., North and South America] began to work together for one united purpose: to assist the Great White Serpent [i.e., the Serpent of Light] to pass the Panama Canal and complete its journey" (2008 [2007], 25). He continues by recounting his alleged invitation to take part in these indigenous ceremonies: "I was asked by the Maya to help [...], so I placed a living Mer-Ka-Ba field over the Panama Canal and went into deep meditation, using everything I knew to help move this Earth Kundalini over the canal" (*ibid.*).

In conclusion, Melchizedek's concept of terrestrial energy healing focuses on dissolving energy blocks and maintaining the energetic balance of Mother Earth's 'Unity Consciousness Grid' to support the Serpent of Light's journey. This process is believed to occur only every 13,000 years. However, Melchizedek emphasized the ongoing importance of sustaining the 'Unity Consciousness

Grid' as it allows humanity to ascend to higher realms of consciousness (2007, 38–39). He thus saw terrestrial energy healing as reciprocal: while it ensures the Earth's well-being, it also elevates human consciousness. However, Melchizedek's approach is primarily anthropocentric, focusing on spiritual crises rather than ecological ones. He believes that persistent terrestrial energy work will ultimately lead to a collective consciousness shift, resolving humanity's most pressing concerns.

#### 4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the vast field of terrestrial subtle physiology, offering an overview of this field of study, discussing the relationship between eco-spirituality and the holistic milieu, and presenting notable examples of terrestrial energy healing. Since the late nineteenth century, beliefs in Earth energies and energetically charged places have captivated many figures within the realm of alternative religion. Key figures such as George Arundale, Kazimierz Chodkiewicz, John Michell, and Robert Coon have been instrumental in shaping these ideas throughout the twentieth century. However, the genesis of these ideas can be traced back to mesmerism and the Theosophical Society, topics this chapter has only touched on briefly. Similarly, the potential influence of New Thought on terrestrial energy healers warrants further investigation. For instance, exploring therapeutic ideas and practices—such as 'positive affirmation' by Warren Felt Evans (1818–1889)—could enrich our understanding of contemporary terrestrial energy healing (Braden 1963, 118–22). Additionally, as climate change accelerates, new strategies for mitigating environmental degradation are likely to emerge. Further research should explore how climate change influences practices and beliefs related to terrestrial subtle physiology.

Despite these limitations, this chapter aimed at advancing our comprehension of modern interpretations and applications of terrestrial subtle energies. It demonstrated how the correlation between the human and the terrestrial 'body' has shaped attitudes toward the Earth, and inspired innovative therapeutic approaches. By focusing on Coon and Melchizedek, this chapter offered a glimpse into the multifaceted realm of terrestrial energy healing. Both figures regard the Earth as a sentient being and perceive a sense of crisis, yet their approaches to spiritual eco-activism differ. Together, they exemplify how terrestrial energy healing has evolved as a response to ecological, social, and spiritual crises at the intersection of eco-spirituality and the holistic milieu.

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**PART 3**

*Subtle Energies in Yoga, Tantra, and New Syntheses*





# From Blessing *Dīkṣā* to Mesmerism: Sabhapati Swami's Tamil 'Shaktipat'

*Keith Edward Cantú*

## 1 Introduction

The Tamil author Sri Sabhapati Swami (c.1828–1923/4) is probably best known for his meeting with the founders of the Theosophical Society as well as his lectures on a Vedāntic form of Śivarājayoga, or 'the royal yoga for Shiva,' which were first published in 1880 and led to a host of subsequent publications in English, Tamil, Hindustani, Bengali, and even Telugu (Cantú 2023a). However, much more difficult to deal with is his idiosyncratic use of the English word 'mesmerism' to translate the Sanskrit (Skt.) word *dīkṣā*, most often rendered as 'initiation' in English today without further evaluation. Although the two are connected, focusing on *dīkṣā* as mesmerism instead of Sabhapati's main topic of Śivarājayoga brings to light new information about his diagrams and instructions that are easy to overlook when only focusing on yogic or mantric aspects in his work (for the latter, see Cantú 2023b). This chapter treats the full scope of these aspects from Sabhapati's perspective, their visual depictions, as well as some indications of their significance in the obscure byways of the histories of subtle energies.

Mesmerism as a kind of 'harmonial religion,' loosely connected with spiritualism and animal magnetism, intersected with yogic teachings in a variety of ways. The idea has roots in the writings of the Swabian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) and his contemporary Carl August von Eschenmayer (1768–1852), was developed by the Boston spiritualist Allen Putnam (1802–1887), while it was connected with Swedenborgianism by Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910) as well as an entire host of other important figures (Albanese 2007, 205–20; Foxen 2017, 64–69; Zoehrer 2021, 86–88; Hanegraaff 2021). The French orientalist Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) had already made an association with one of Mesmer's theories, that of an etheric and magnetic *fluidum*, and *prāṇa* (vital breath) as early as 1801/1802 in his pioneering translation of material from the Upaniṣads (Zoehrer 2021, 88–92; cf. Winter 2005). However, mesmerism's intersection with yoga began after the

idea was given prominent importance within the Theosophical Society by the so-called ‘Founders,’ namely, Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) (Baier 2012; Zoehrer 2021, 92–94). Olcott had been a member of a Spiritualist circle in Amherst, Ohio, in which “some men in this circle were empowered to heal by the laying on of hands” (Baier 2012, 152), whereas Blavatsky had connections with mesmerists in Paris—as well as other influences—that led her to believe that mesmerism was “the key to the hidden world of occult experiences and powers” (ibid.). There is evidence that their interest, combined with those of many other Indian authors on mesmerism along with Spiritualism and animal magnetism, informed the writings of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) and later authors on yoga, such as Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) (Strube 2022, 96–98; De Michelis 2008, 114–16; Singleton 2010; Kraler 2021; Foxen 2017, 66–68).

While exchanges between Theosophy, mesmerism, spiritualism, and Indian yogis (Skt. *yogī*, from stem *yogin*) in the Bengali context has been well documented (Strube 2022, 96–104, 124–48), there were many earlier interactions that predated the 1882 trips of Blavatsky and Olcott to Calcutta (today Kolkata, West Bengal). One such exchange came from a Tamil context, that of our ‘Madras yogi’ Sabhapati, who met with Olcott and Blavatsky after lecturing in Lahore (today in Pakistan but then part of a united Punjab Province) (Cantú 2023a, 51–66; Baier 2009, 329–35). Around this time, Sabhapati also met his Bengali editor, Shrish Chandra Basu (aka Srish Chandra, S. C. Vasu; 1861–1918), who would later go on to join the Theosophical Society and publish translations of two important texts of *haṭhayoga*, the *Śiva Saṃhitā* and *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā*. Together they published Sabhapati’s lectures with some additional material, which was released as *Om, a Treatise on Vedantic Raja Yoga* (Swami 1880).

Although Sri Sabhapati Swami would be eventually sidelined from mainstream theosophical discourses, he continued to publish and attract students across South Asia, especially in Tamil Nadu and in the environs of Bombay (Mumbai). His work would also go on to inspire the ‘Magick’ of the British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and his religious philosophy Thelema, be the subject of a German translation by Franz Hartmann (1838–1912), and be picked up by the American spiritual entrepreneur William Estep for his ‘Super Mind Science’ publications (Cantú 2023a, 356–75; 2021). By the 1890s, it appears that Sabhapati had also parted ways with Shrish Chandra Basu, but continued to publish instructions in yoga and mantra with the help of new collaborators in Hindustani (an early source for both Hindi and Urdu) and Tamil until at least 1913 (Cantú 2023b). His student Om Prakash Swamigal (1872–1947) would also go on to join the Indian occult society Latent Light Culture, within which also circulated techniques linked to mesmerism and spiritualism (Cantú 2023a, 77–84; Bogdan 2013).

## 2 An Overview of *dīkṣā* Diagrams in Sabhapati's Literature

Śivarājayoga was the primary theme in Sabhapati's works, but he also covered a wide variety of other theoretical and practical topics that were part of this yoga but also (to some extent) extraneous. One was a practice to be performed between a guru and student, called 'Mesmerism' (originally capitalized). His instructions on this topic were absent in his earliest lectures and were first published in 1890 as two sets of eight kinds of 'Blessing Deetcha [*< dīkṣā*] or Mesmerism' (see Figures 1–2, analyzed in the next section). These included vividly-illustrated visual diagrams that depicted connections not only between physical body parts like 'head to feet' but also subtle connections from 'mind to mind,' 'generative fluid to generative fluid,' and filling up of the 'three nerves' (*iḍā, piṅgalā, suṣuṃṇā*) of yogic physiology. Similar diagrams with descriptions and captions in the Devanagari, Telugu/Tamil, and Tamil scripts were later published as well, the translation of which enables us to see what precisely were the Indic practices that Sabhapati interpreted as 'Mesmerism.' The practices are similar—and likely historically connected—to what is today more commonly known as 'shaktipat' (from Skt. *śaktipāta*), a 'descent of power' recognized in the Kashmiri Tantra of Abhinavagupta (Hedling 2022, 303 n. 41; Ferrario 2015), but seem to have been more widely known under the Tamil Maṅḍipravāla name *tīkṣai* (from Skt. *dīkṣā*) in the Śaiva circles Sabhapati moved within (cf. Cantú 2023a, 154–67).

The first phase of instructions, published in 1890, is found in the Second Book of Sabhapati's second work, entitled *The Cosmic Psychological Spiritual Philosophy and Science of Communion with and Absorption in the Infinite Spirit* (CPSPS; Yogiswer 1884; 1890). By the time of the book's publication, Sabhapati had also published a lavishly illustrated book in Tamil that does not focus on 'Mesmerism' but contained some theoretical points of interest to the cosmology of 'subtle energies' (Cuvāmikaḷ 1889).

Sabhapati's initial instructions were developed in his Hindustani publication *Rājayoga Brahmajñānānubhūti saṅgraha veda* (RYB; Svāmī 1892), published only two years later, which marks the beginning of a kind of a second phase. They were either the source of or copied from an extremely similar page with instructions in the Tamil and Telugu scripts instead of Devanagari, the one difference being the 'feet to feet' Mesmerism being replaced with the 'hand to hand' (or vice versa). This page has not been found in any published work. It formed parts of several standalone packets of diagrams that were located during fieldwork at Om Prakash Swamigal's hermitage in Ooty (Udhagamandalam). They were likely part of a Telugu work by Sabhapati that was registered with the Madras Record Office in the last quarter of 1890 (likely no longer extant).

The third and final phase of instructions was published under the title *Caṅkiraha vēta tiyānōpatēca smiruti* (MCVTS) in 1913. This Tamil work included eight additional diagrams on initiation (Tamil: *tikṣai*) that were spread out over five page-length illustrations, most of which have been analyzed and reproduced in the section below on ‘Mesmerisms’ in the vernacular. These newer diagrams included much additional instruction as well as one new large diagram in which Sabhapati Swami (as Guru Father Rishi) is depicted in the center ‘mesmerizing’ his male and female devotees remotely (see Figure 12).

### 3 ‘Mesmerism’ and the Ten Processes of Yoga

The first phase of Sabhapati’s instructions on Mesmerism included two sets of eight kinds of ‘blessing Deetchas or Mesmerisms,’ which are to be performed following a period of practice of ‘ten processes’ of yoga. The first set of Mesmerisms is presented in English as the “main and principles from which all other minor Mesmerisms are sprung” and are practiced “for the attainment of purification, Spiritual Psychic powers and the Infinite Spiritual State” (see Figure 9.1). Sabhapati in several works also used a modern form of a Tamil and Sanskrit hybrid language, called Maṇipravāla (Jewels and Coral), in which many Sanskrit words are rendered into Tamil to describe these ‘Deetchas.’ In this hybrid language they are framed as “the sequence of eight kinds of blessing initiations (*dikṣā*) that are for the obtaining (*prāpti*) of the purification of mind (*cittaśuddhi*) and purification of the self (*ātmaśuddhi*), attainment of powers (*śaktisiddhi*), and the gnosis of Brahman (*brahmajñāna*).”<sup>1</sup> Sabhapati’s translation (using his original and often idiosyncratic capitalization) of “Spiritual Psychic powers” for *śaktisiddhi* is notable as the term *śaktisiddhi* itself does not imply any ‘psychological’ or ‘mental’ power as it is connoted in the contemporary use of the adjective ‘psychic.’ Furthermore, it is not clear whether *śaktisiddhi* was only referring to *śakti* in the general sense as ‘power’ or the Śakti as the power of the Goddess (Devī)—in any event these are not mutually exclusive in Sabhapati’s cosmology.

The first eight kinds of ‘Mesmerisms’ are then outlined as follows along with their equivalent in Sanskrit/Tamil hybrid language, and their descriptions are taken from the captions of the diagram in Figure 9.1.

- 1) “The Mesmerism of feet to head *kurupātaṣiṣyaṣiracatiṭkṣā*,” which “removes all sorts of sinful thoughts words and deeds”

1 *cittacutti ātmacutti śaktticitti pīrammakñānaprāptiyartta aṣṭāvita thīṭkṣāyaṇukkīrahakramam.*

- 2) “The Mesmerism of **body to body** *kuruṣiṣya pañcēntirīya sprīṣatīṭkṣā*,” which “removes all sorts of gross functions and faculties of the body and also all the diseases”
- 3) “The Mesmerism of **males [sic] generative fluid to female generative fluid** *naranārivācītīṭkṣā*,” which “gives the power to bless the female with a child having Infinite Spiritual state, purification, all-holiness, all-divinity, all-spirituality and all Spiritual powers and enjoyments”
- 4) “The Mesmerism of **breath to breath** *kuruṣiṣya piraṇasvācatīṭkṣā*,” which “gives the power of absorption of the functions and faculties”
- 5) “The Mesmerism of **sound to sound** *kuruṣiṣya nātātīṭkṣā*,” which “gives power to attain different sorts of Infinite Spiritual Spirits’ natures and powers and to speak unknown languages”
- 6) “The Mesmerism of **mind to mind** *kuruṣiṣya piraṇavatīṭkṣā*,” which “gives the power to know the thoughts of others and of what is going on at any place and also gives purifications of the Mind and Soul”
- 7) “The Mesmerism of **Spiritual sight to Spiritual sight** *kuruṣiṣya kalātīṭkṣā*,” which “gives power to fascinate [sic] the mind and body of others”
- 8) “The Mesmerism of **Spirit to Spirit** *kuruṣiṣya piraṃma kṇānatiruṣṭītīṭkṣā*,” which “establishes the Infinite Spiritual State.”

After outlining the above eight kinds of mesmerism, Sabhapati offers a revealing paragraph that compares the “Hindus of India” and “Sidhi Yogees [*siddhi yogīs*] and Gnanees [*jñānīs*, ‘gnostics’] of India” on the one hand with “western scientists” on the other hand. The first important idea in this paragraph is a subtle distinction made between the Hindus and “Sidhi Yogees,” namely, the point that even though all Hindus are “blessed with these secret truths,” only the “Sidhi Yogees and Gnanees [... are] aware of these secrecies and they only know how to practice it for the good of their disciples” (Yogiswer 1890, 386). This seems to imply that the religion of the Hindus contains the secret truths, but that within this religion only the yogis and gnostics are aware of and can use this power.

A second important idea in this pre-Independence nationalistic paragraph is that it reveals Sabhapati’s opinion of the efforts of the “western scientists” who are “discharging their full energy” to understand the cause of this mesmeristic phenomena. Sabhapati offers a more nuanced view of his critique of these scientists’ materialism as well, noting that their “labour has after all convinced them that there are certain things beyond the elements (which they thought to be God) which are the cause to the elements” (Yogiswer 1890, 386–87). The mention of ‘elements’ here connects to Sabhapati’s critique in the same book of ‘the Atheism’, which for Sabhapati specifically refers to a theory that he perceived was spreading predominantly in urban areas. Therein,



the “religion of Hindus” and tends to de-emphasize India’s (and today’s wider South Asia’s) religious pluralism, he supports the notion that India “yields room to all the nations of the world to come and sway it and enjoy all the secrets, which are confined to it” (ibid.)—not just welcoming but outright encouraging foreign (such as theosophical) interest in and engagement with the yogis and gnostics.

After this brief nationalistic interlude, Sabhapati returns more directly to the topic of the eight types of Mesmerism and gives “practical Instructions,” but only for students who have adequately prepared themselves. It is here that one finds a connection of these techniques with his main instructions of yoga by noting that before practicing them it is necessary to “attain perfectly the Universal void clear clairvoyant [*sic*] Self Infinite Spiritual Visionary state *pirammakñānatiruşṭi* [= Skt. *brahmajñānadṛṣṭi*, (the sight of the gnosis of Brahman)], in your body in all the three nerves [...] through the practice of the ten processes of the Gnyan Yogue as explained before” (Yogiswer 1890, 387). In other words, to properly use the aforementioned techniques of Mesmerism in a practical way it is necessary to have obtained some experience in Sabhapati’s ten processes of yoga, which include the manipulation of pure *jñānakāśa* (gnostic ether) or *prāṇākāśa* (vital ether) through the three channels well known (*iḍā*, *piṅgalā*, *suṣumṇā*) in yogic literature (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 78). These ‘ten processes’ refer specifically to the ones outlined in the same book (Yogiswer 1890, 298–326), and are explained as being a commentary on Sabhapati’s “Diagram No. 5” (see Figure 9.2), which is important as an example of a diagram that was explicitly drawn for giving *pūjā* (religious rites) according to the table of the contents. It is a diagram of Sabhapati himself as attached to a Śivaliṅga, represented with subtle physiology and floating above the world. Sabhapati notes that those disciples “who are not personally initiated by Gnyana Guru Yogi Sabapathy Swamy must have his Photo as his presence and the following processes as he is personally initiating with full faith and piety” (ibid., 299). In other words, for Sabhapati, both ‘in-person’ and ‘remote’ forms of *dīkṣā* as initiation are possible, but he only appears to have attached the English label ‘Mesmerism’ to the former. He could have easily substituted ‘Mesmerism’ for initiation in his instructions on Diagram No. 5, but it was in this remote (or, dare I say ‘distance-learning’) context instead that he preferred the translation ‘initiation.’ A concrete example of Sabhapati initiating remotely in this mode is found in the hagiography of his student Om Prakash Swamigal (Cantú 2023a, 81–84).

Sabhapati’s instructions on the ten yogic processes are detailed and there is no space here to treat them in full. To some extent they mirror the soteriological ‘ten acts’ (*taca kāriyam*; Skt. *daśakārya*) that were elaborated in the



FIGURE 9.2 Diagram No. 5 in Sabhapati Swami's CPSPS, Second Book on *samādhi*, designed for meditation and *pūjā* in accordance with his ten processes of yoga in preparation for the practice of 'Mesmerism.' Restored in Adobe Photoshop.

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c. fourteenth-century work *Uṅṁaineriviḷakkam* and described in other Tamil Śaiva literature as well (Cantú 2023a, 183–84; Steinschneider 2017), although there are some departures from this scheme. What is important for the purposes of this chapter, however, is that these same processes, while considered a preliminary practice to the application of his eight types of ‘Mesmerism,’ are also initiatory processes in and of themselves and not entirely separate from his teachings on ‘Mesmerism.’ This is also clear from the opening of the instructions, entitled “Initiation to the disciples according to the numbers of the diagram No. 5” (emphasis added). As we have seen, Sabhapati’s translation of ‘Mesmerism’ for the Skt. *dīkṣā* (initiation) is somewhat idiosyncratic, and the word *dīkṣā* or its Tamil Maṅṅipravāla (i.e., Hybrid Sanskrit) equivalent is used in all his diagrams in Indic languages. In the context of the ten processes, however, initiation refers to a remote form of Mesmerism that is designed to be carried out through the student’s concentration on the image in Diagram No. 5.

Once a student of Sabhapati had obtained mastery in the ten processes and was duly initiated, s/he would have been perceived to be fit to engage his practical instructions on each of the eight aforementioned ‘Mesmerisms’ (see Figure 9.1). Some of these instructions are quite detailed, including which toes and fingers to use as well as how each of the nerves (Skt. *nāḍī*; Tamil: *vāci*) intersect and are to be used to ‘fill’ up the corresponding nerves of the other person. The main ‘subtle energy’ being exchanged in each mesmeric act is called the “Self Infinite Spiritual state” (Tamil: *pirammakñāṇatiruṣṭi*; Skt. *brahmajñānadṛṣṭi* [sight of the gnosis of Brahman]), the same compound Sabhapati uses when mandating that the student must first obtain mastery of the ten processes of yoga. While on the surface this may seem a rather obscure way to conceptualize subtle energy, it is intricately connected to the ten processes as well as his literature on the royal yoga for Śiva (Śivarājayoga). This ‘clairvoyant’ sight is a development out of the *samādhi* (composure) of Śivarājayoga that emerges when the student has canceled out his or her twelve kingdoms (*cakras* [wheels] or *kamalas* [lotuses]) and only perceives ‘pure ether’ (*śuddhākāśa*), which is distinct from the elemental *ākāśa* in the scheme of *tattvas* and also distinct from *ākāśa* as a subtle element (*tanmātra*) and linked to sense faculties (Cantú 2023a, 323–29).

While seven out of the eight ‘Mesmerisms’ are to be performed in the context of a guru-disciple relationship, the third or “Generative fluid to Generative fluid” Mesmerism does not mention the word ‘disciple’ and may also have indicated a more intimate relationship. The guru as mesmeriser in that case was to first fill the “three nerves in the body with the Self Infinite Spiritual state” as previously mentioned. From there, the guru is instructed to “Mesmerise from your kundali” (*kuṇḍalī*, ring; for Sabhapati, the *mūlādhāra* or organ of

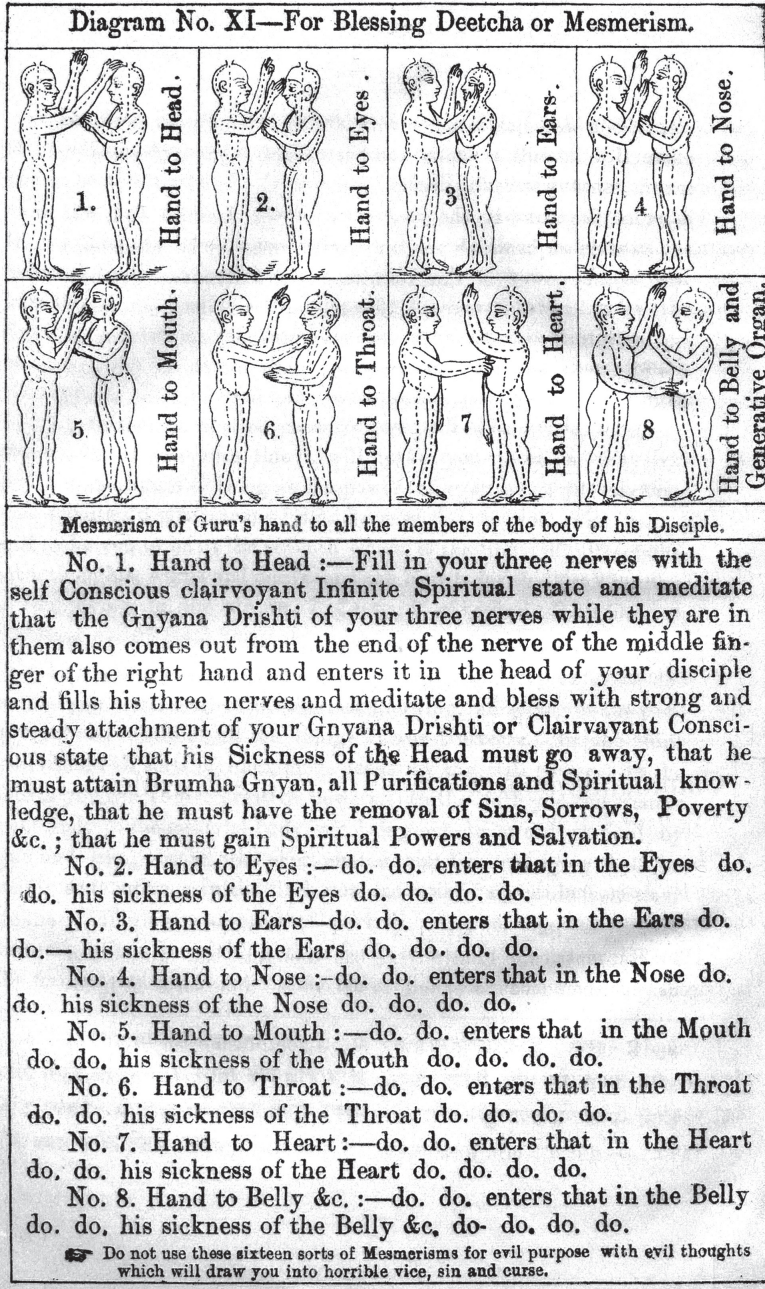


FIGURE 9.3 Sabhapati's second set of 'Eight Mesmerisms' that use the middle finger of the right hand as applied to various parts of the disciple's body  
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throwing urine) so as to bless the “generative fluid of the womb” to be created with “beautiful appearance, richness, learning, good thoughts, good words, good deeds, benevolence, miraculous psychic powers, purity, holiness, sacredness, divinity, spirituality and salvation” (Yogiswer 1890, 388).

Sabhapati next gives a brief discourse on ‘Psychic Powers’ (Skt. *siddhi*) followed directly by his second set of Eight Mesmerisms that each describe the placement of the guru’s hands onto a different part of the student’s body. These are unfortunately not expanded upon in the main text but only in an elongated box appended to an image of each Mesmerism entitled “Diagram XI—for Blessing Deetcha or Mesmerism” (see Figure 9.3). The Eight Mesmerisms in this second set are “Hand to Head,” “Hand to Eyes,” “Hand to Ears,” “Hand to Nose,” “Hand to Mouth,” “Hand to Throat,” “Hand to Heart,” and “Hand to Belly and Generative Organ.” The instructions for “Hand to Head” are given in full, which as before requires the student to have practiced the ten processes of yoga so as to be able to fill his or her “three nerves with the self Conscious clairvoyant Infinite Spiritual state.” Following this, the guru is to meditate upon the “Gnyana Drishti” (Skt. *jñānadṛṣṭi*, sight of gnosis) coming out of the three nerves to the “middle finger of the right hand” and entering the disciple’s head so that “his Sickness of the Head must go away, that he must attain Brumha Gnyan [*brahmajñāna*], all Purifications and Spiritual knowledge,” and obtain other beneficial effects. The diagram indicates that this process is to be applied in the same way to the other parts of the body as depicted, with the sight of gnosis entering each respective part. At the bottom of the diagram is a warning that using these “sixteen sorts of Mesmerisms [i.e., this and the previous set of eight] for evil purpose with evil thoughts” will draw one “into horrible vice, sin and curse,” indicating that Sabhapati perceived the risks of gurus who would manipulate these techniques to cause harm.

#### 4 ‘Mesmerism’ in the Vernacular: Hindustani/Tamil/Telugu

Sabhapati’s work *CPSPS* does not contain any further instructions on Mesmerism, which was written in English, albeit with reference to Sanskrit terms in the Tamil and Devanagari scripts. Yet, as previously mentioned, similar diagrams to Figures 9.1 and 9.3 are also found in Sabhapati’s vernacular works in Hindustani and Tamil scripts, as well as in (apparently) unpublished Telugu and Tamil diagrams bound together in a packet with a string. Understanding the Indic terms that Sabhapati used in these diagrams allows for a greater understanding of the concept of *dīkṣā* that he translated into English as ‘Mesmerism.’

Although Sabhapati's first diagrams were published in 1890, the second phase of diagrams begins with the publication in 1892 of Sabhapati's Marathi-inflected Hindustani work RYB (see Figure 9.4). They include the following ten *dīkṣās* given in the Devanagari script only, a description of which is located in the seventh chapter:

1. *karmaśuddhi aṅgaliṅgan dīkṣā*: “initiation through embracing that is the purification of action”
2. *śarīraśuddhi bhogadīkṣā*: “initiation through enjoyment that is the purification of the body”
3. *svāsa vāsaśuddhi svāsa dīkṣā*: “initiation through breath that is the purification of breath and fragrance”
4. *śravaṇaśuddhi vākśuddhi nādaśabda dīkṣā*: “initiation through sound and words that is the purification of hearing and purification of speech”
5. *āvāraṇ śuddhi tatvalaya siddhi jñānaphalita pāda dīkṣā*: “initiation through the feet resulting in gnosis, power, and the dissolution of principles, and the purification of the veils”
6. *manolaya mano dīkṣā*: “initiation through the heart/mind that is the dissolution of heart/mind”
7. *sarvayogānubhava siddhi netradṛṣṭi dīkṣā*: “initiation through eyesight of the powers and experience of all yogas [or absolute yoga, i.e., *samādhi*]”
8. *brahmajñānānubhavasiddhi jñānadīkṣā*: “initiation through gnosis of the powers and the experience of the gnosis of Brahman”
9. *jñānodayasiddhi sparśa dīkṣā*: “initiation through touch of the powers of emerging gnosis”
10. *jñānapraṭiṣṭha siddhi śīradīkṣā*: “initiation through the head of the powers and establishing of gnosis.”

Many of these initiations match those given in the first sets of eight ‘Mesmerisms’ (Figures 9.1 and 9.3) that were published two years earlier. For example, the first seven in this list match the first seven in the first set, with one change being the “Feet to Head” position having been changed from number one to number five. The eighth initiation in the Hindustani set matches the “Mesmerism of Spirit to Spirit” in the English set, except the individuals are in an alternate seated position with their feet touching. The ninth initiation seems to match the first ‘Mesmerism’ of “Hand to Head” in the second English set (see Figure 9.3), although in the Hindustani diagram the guru is seated rather than standing. Only the tenth initiation, *śīradīkṣā*, which is to be performed from head to head, is unique to this set.

Additional context for these Mesmerisms is provided in RYB, which refers to them as “initiations of gnosis which are [like] sidelong glances of mercy” (Hindi

सप्तम अध्याय विवरण - गिन्ती ( ६ ) नक्षत्रा.

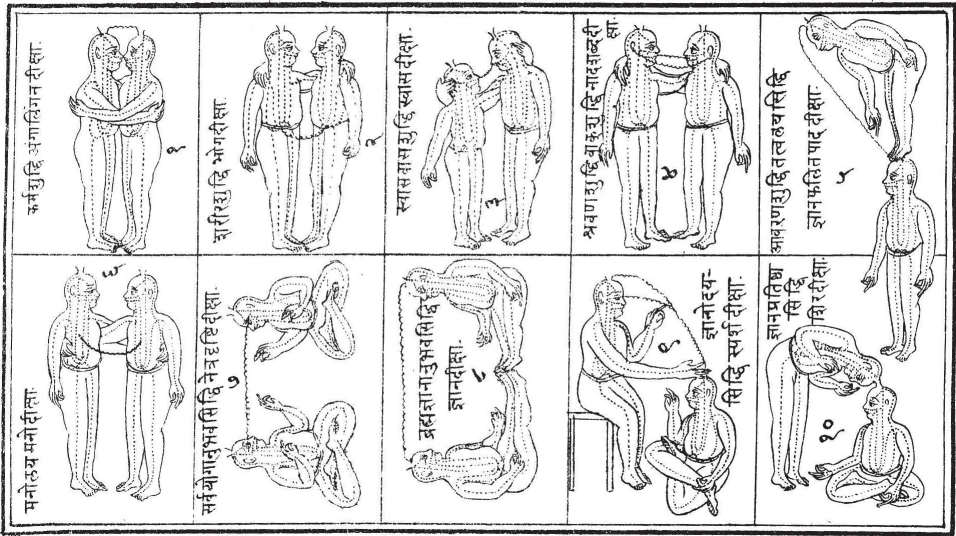


FIGURE 9.4 “A description of the seventh chapter (*saptam adhyāy vivaraṇ*)—Diagram No. 6 (*gintī 6 naksā*),” Sabhapati’s diagram on *dikṣā* in RYB (1892)

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[Hi.]: *kṛpākātākṣa jñānadikṣā*). The theory of subtle energy behind them is the same as in Sabhapati’s work in English, although the active ‘substance’ is shortened to *brahmajñāna* (gnosis of Brahman). Just as before, one is instructed to first practice Sabhapati’s techniques of yoga and experience the isolation of gnosis (Hi. *jñānkā kaivalya*) before being able to be a conduit for this *jñāna*. Sabhapati makes it clear that the “initiation of gnosis is carried out from the pervading gnosis of the mind in the cervice of Brahman [*brahmarandhra*] into the three channels [*trināḍī*] of the student” (Hi. *brahmarandhra manojnān vyāpakṣe śiṣyake śarīrkī trināḍīmeṇ jo jñānkā dikṣā karnā hoy*) (Svāmī 1892, 120). Furthermore, one learns that this is to be practiced between guru and student for half an hour (Hi. *ardh ghaṇṭā*) each day (*dararoj*) (ibid.).

These same initiations were either copied from or were the source of an undated packet of diagrams in the Tamil and Telugu languages that survives in Om Prakash Swamigal’s hermitage in the Kandal area of the hill station Udhagamandalam, nicknamed ‘Snooty Ooty’ by the British who made their summer capital there to escape the Madras heat. The fact that this diagram refers explicitly to chapter and diagram numbers is evidence that it belonged



FIGURE 9.5 *ēlāvatu atatiyāvivara* (8-*vatu*) *paṭam* “Eighth diagram of the seventh chapter,” depicting *dikṣās* similar to those in RYB but in the Tamil and Telugu scripts, likely from Sabhapati’s lost Telugu work

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to a book, very likely Sabhapati’s lost Telugu work that was published in the last quarter of 1890 according to its registration with the Madras Record Office—and thus may predate RYB, being the source for its diagrams. The other diagrams in this packet are very similar to RYB, indicating that the book likely contained similar information and chapters.

The ten Mesmerisms in this diagram are as follows (according to Tamil transliteration):

1. *karmacutti ānkālīnkaṇa tīkṣai*: “initiation through embracing that is the purification of action”
2. *carīracuttiyōka tīkṣai sparicatīkṣai kuṇṭali tīkṣai*: “initiation of *kuṇḍalī*, initiation of touch, and initiation of the body’s purification”
3. *cuvācāvācicutti cuvāsatīkṣai*: “initiation through breath and the channels of breath”

4. *ciravaṇamananayaruḷvākkucutti karṇanātavākkucutta tīkṣai*: “initiation of the purity of ear, sound, and mouth and the purification of hearing, reflecting, and pure speech”
5. *taca āvaraṇacutti tattuvalayacitti kñāṇa palita pāta tīkṣai*: “through the feet resulting in gnosis that is the power of the dissolution of the principles and the purification of the ten veils”
6. *maṇōcuttilayamāṇasa maṇōtīkṣai*: “mental initiation through the heart/mind that is the dissolution and purity of the heart/mind”
7. *carvayōkāṇupava cittiviyātinivartti tirīṣṭi tīkṣai*: “initiation through sight that is the removal of all disease and the power of the experience of all yogas [or absolute yoga, i.e., *samādhi*]”
8. *pirammakñāṇāṇupava cittikñāṇa tīkṣai*: “initiation through gnosis for the experience of the gnosis of Brahman”
9. *kñāṇōtayacitti sparica tīkṣai*: “initiation through touch for the power of emerging gnosis”
10. *kñāṇappirataṣṭā citti ciratīkṣai*: “initiation through the head for the power of the establishment of gnosis.”

A comparison of these initiations with the set of initiations in RYB, including the images used for each one, confirms that they are directly correlated and that they also partake in the development of Sabhapati’s techniques of ‘Mesmerism’ that were first published in 1890. The extra details in this Tamil/Telugu diagram’s descriptions along with the indication in its title of a specific diagram and chapter corroborate the idea that it was the source of the Hindustani diagram published in 1892 in RYB and not vice versa.

## 5 ‘Mesmerism’ in the Vernacular, Part Two: Tamil

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Sabhapati’s final publication MCVTS, a large and significant work almost entirely written in Tamil, included at least eight additional diagrams on ‘Mesmerism’ split between five full-page illustrations. Over five pages of detailed instructions are also provided for these diagrams, also written entirely in Tamil. Just as with Sabhapati’s instructions in previous publications, experience in yoga is required (especially Śivarājayoga). The section opens with the following quote (MCVTS, 48):

Listen, O students, being in the steadfast composure of yoga of the gnosis of Brahman [*pirammakñāṇa niṣṭai camāṭiyōkam*] you should meditate day after day with the below sequential meditations of initiation

[*tīkṣākkiramattiyāṇaika*]. By means of these meditations you will be fixated in the experience of the gnosis of Brahman.<sup>2</sup>

A notable feature of the instruction in MCVTS is that it explicitly links the processes of ‘initiation’ (Tam. *tīkṣā*; Skt. *dīkṣā*) with meditation (Tam. *tiyāṇam*; Skt. *dhyāna*). In other words, these ‘initiations’ are not just a social rite of passage or formal entrance into a group but have a practical function in terms of yoga, as well in that they allow one to remain continually fixated in the experience (Tam. *aṇupavam*; Skt. *anubhava*) of the gnosis of Brahman.

Sabhapati’s instructions in MCVTS on each diagram are significantly more expanded, and each part of the diagram is clearly numbered to indicate what is being referred to in the text’s instructions. For example, the beginning of the instructions for the first image of initiation in the Eighth Diagram (i.e., the right side of Figure 9.7) read as follows, with boldface added to numbers for clarity:

Listen, O students! [The number] **5** being the guru and **4** being yourself are to be in a state of sitting opposite one another. Along the path to **9** the fontanelle [Skt. *Brahmarandhra*] of the guru, **5** the body of the guru is to be filled with **1** the unfragmented ether of the gnosis of Brahman [Skt. *akhaṇḍabrahmajñānākāśa*] in the channels called **6** the *cuḷimuṇā* channel [Skt. *susumnā*], **7** the channel of the back [Tam. *mutukunāṭi*], and **8** the channel of the legs [Tam. *kālkaḷ nāṭikaḷ*]. The ether of the gnostic sight [*drṣṭi*] of Brahman, being [now] within the channels of the guru’s body, is to come from the guru’s feet up to the edge of the *kuṇḍali* [Skt. *kuṇṭhalipirantiram*], and along the path of the **6**, **7**, **8** channels. Becoming mixed with the **1** unfragmented [gnosis of Brahman] yet again, going along the path to the student’s fontanelle, should go via his **6**, **7**, **8** channels up to his feet. Then it is to enter again into the guru’s feet, and via the path of the **6**, **7**, **8** channels into the [guru’s] fontanelle. This is to be cultivated [Skt. *bhāvanā*] as whirling about from the guru’s body into his body, all while being filled with meditation [*dhyāna*] on the ether of gnosis with the goal being the bliss of the awakening of dissolution [Skt. *Layabodhānanda*].<sup>3</sup>

2 *keṇmiṇ ciṣyarkaḷē pirammakñāṇa niṣṭai camātiyōkattilirukum niṅkaḷ kiḷvarun tīkṣākkiramattiyāṇaikaḷai yellāntiṇantiṇantiyāṇikka vēṇṭum attiyāṇaikaḷāluṅkaḷukkuḷ pirammakñāṇāṇupavam stāpaṇamākum.*

3 *kēluṅciṣyarkaḷē, 5-kuruvum 4 nīrum etiretirāka uṭkārntiruppatāka pāvittu 1 akaṇṭappiram-makñāṇākācamāṇatu 9 kuruppirammāntira valiyāy 5 kurucarirattil 6 cuḷimuṇāṇāṭi 7*

The instructions continue with certain mantras to be used at various points, including identifying oneself with the guru and Brahman (Tam. *kuruppiram-maivāham*; Skt. *gurubrahmaivāham*) in the initiation. The instructions also make it clear that the initiation is a practice (Tam. *cāṭanai*; Skt. *sādhanā*) connected with Sabhapati's wider cosmology of 'inherent forms' (*svarūpas*) (Cantú 2023a, 302–13)

The other diagrams for initiation in MCVTS present their instructions in a similar way as modified according to the position, with some additional variations for new types of *dīkṣā* not present in Sabhapati's earlier literature. For example, the fourth diagram for *dīkṣā* (see the right side of Figure 9.7) is to be practiced alone without a partner and involves mesmerizing specific parts and apertures (Tam. *rantiram*; Skt. *randhra*) of the body through the meditative cultivation of the gnosis of Brahman in its unfragmented form (Tam. *akaṇṭākāra pīrammkñāṇa pāvaṇai*; Skt. *akhaṇḍākāra brahmajñāna bhāvanā*) until oneself is completely identified with this same unfragmented and all-pervading gnosis. The fifth diagram for *dīkṣā* (see the left side of Figure 9.8) presents a similar practice to the fourth diagram for mesmerizing specific parts and apertures but between a guru and student.

The sixth and seventh diagrams for *dīkṣā* (see the right side of Figure 9.8 and Figure 9.11) are notable in that they expand the notion of *dīkṣā* to remote or distance contexts in which the guru and student are not physically present in the same room or area. As for the sixth diagram (Figure 9.8), the meditator is instructed to perceive his or her unity with all living things as part of ether in its unfragmented shape, including gods, humans, deer, fish, birds, insects (Tam. *tēvar, maṇuṣar, mirukam, maccam, pakṣi, pūccikaḷ*), somewhat reminiscent of some Jain attitudes about the interconnectedness of nature. A similar diagram had been published in CPSPS (see Figure 9.9) and was also in the packet of Telugu/Tamil diagrams (see Figure 9.10). However, in those previous contexts, this was not explicitly framed as a kind of Mesmerism or *dīkṣā*. As a result, the instructions in MCVTS informs us that certain practices could often merge into one another, and that for Sabhapati the lines between practices of yoga,

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*mutukunāṭi 8 kālkaḷ nāṭikaḷil rompiyiruppatāy pāvittu avvaṇṭap pīrammakñāṇākacameḷ kuru carīrattil viyāpittatupōḷ, kuruciṣyar carīrapīrammattīḷkalakkum vaḷavāy, 10 ciṣyar pīrammarantira vaḷiyāy, 4 ciṣyar carīrattil, 6 kaḷimuṇai nāṭi, 7 mutukunāṭi, 8 kālkaḷiṇ nāṭikaḷil rompiyiruppatāy pāvittu, kuru carīranāṭikkullirukkum pīrammakñāṇatiruṣṭiyākacamāṇatu kurupātattiliruntu kuṇṭalipīrantiram varaiyilum, 6, 7, 8 nāṭikaḷ vaḷiyāy vantu 1 akaṇṭattil kalantu piṇṇuṇ ciṣyar pīrammarantira vaḷiyāy 6, 7, 8 avar nāṭikaḷ vaḷiyāy avar pātam varaiyilumpōy, piṇṇum kurupātattil nuḷaintu avar 6, 7, 8 nāṭikaḷil vaḷiyāy pīrammarantirattil layapō:tā:ṇanta lakṣya kñāṇākācattiyāṇamayamākiyatē kurucarīrattiliruntu taṇ carīrattil cuḷaṇṭrukkōṭirukkum pāvaṇaiyōṭu.*

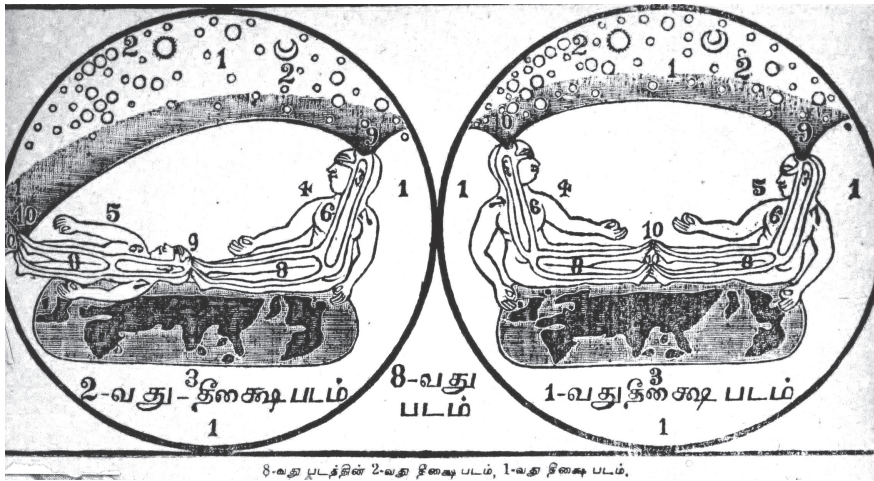


FIGURE 9.6 The Eighth Diagram in MCVTS, containing the first and second diagrams for *tikṣai* (*dīkṣā*), translated as ‘Mesmerism’ in Sabhapati’s English work  
 SCAN FROM SARASWATHI MAHAL LIBRARY IN THANJAVUR, COURTESY OF SIDDHANAI OF THE TAMIL DIGITAL LIBRARY (OUT OF COPYRIGHT); FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE WWW.YOGADIAGRAMS.COM

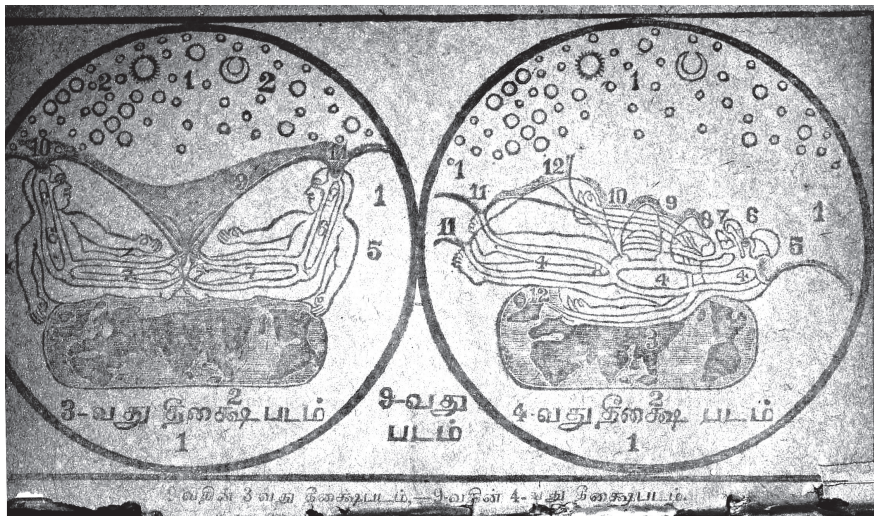


FIGURE 9.7 The Ninth Diagram in MCVTS, containing the third and fourth diagrams for *tikṣai* (*dīkṣā*), translated as “Mesmerism” in Sabhapati’s English work  
 RESTORED FROM A SCAN FROM THE ADYAR LIBRARY AND RESEARCH CENTRE (OUT OF COPYRIGHT); FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE WWW.YOGADIAGRAMS.COM

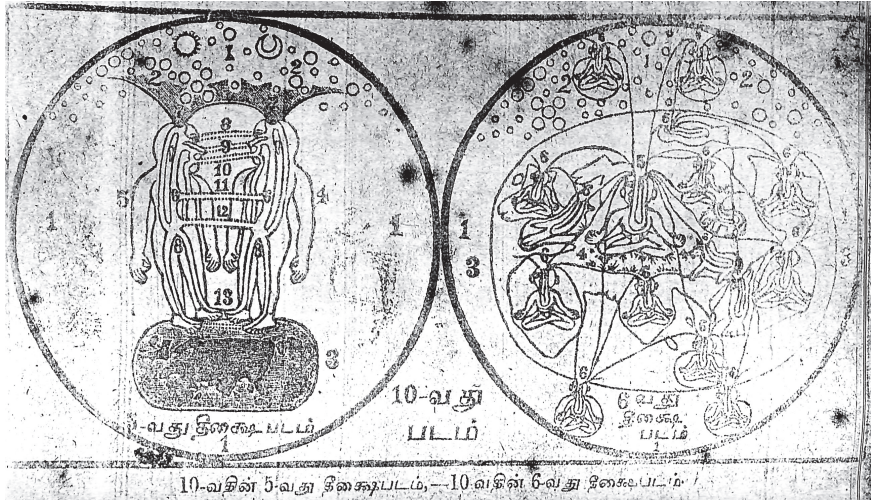


FIGURE 9.8 The Tenth Diagram in MCVTS, containing the fifth and sixth diagrams for *tikṣai* (*dīkṣā*), translated as “Mesmerism” in Sabhapati’s English work RESTORED FROM A SCAN FROM THE ADYAR LIBRARY AND RESEARCH CENTRE (OUT OF COPYRIGHT); FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE [WWW.YOGADIAGRAMS.COM](http://WWW.YOGADIAGRAMS.COM)

meditation, and Mesmerism could at times be very fluid. At the same time, *dīkṣā* in almost every context does imply a kind of connection taking place either with another being (or entity) or with the infinite and unfragmented ether. For example, the seventh diagram for *dīkṣā*, or the Eleventh Diagram of MCVTS as a whole (see Figure 9.11), is a striking visual depiction of an “instruction on meditating on the blessing of *dīkṣā* by the guru for all the students at one time” (Tam. *carva ciṣyarkaḷukku ēkakāla tikṣānukkīraha tiyāna upatēcam*). This implies that the subtle energy of *brahmajñāna*, once cultivated, could be projected outward to all those with whom the guru had a mesmeric connection.

Finally, sometimes *dīkṣā* can even be the negation of such connections, as with Sabhapati’s instructions on the initiation of the yoga of “not this” (Tam. *nayiti yōkam*; Skt. *neti yoga*) (see the left side of Figure 9.12). This yoga is framed in Sabhapati’s instructions as the “meditation having the goal of becoming absorbed in one’s own Brahman by the nasal medicine of absolute ‘not this’” (Skt. *neti*) (*carva nayiti naciya tanmaya cuvappiramma lakṣiyattiyānam*). As some of Sabhapati’s other meditations, this is considered a meditation that is also a *tikṣā* (*tikṣātiyānam*). The reference to *neti* (Tam. *nayiti*, *na + iti*) seems to derive from the reference in the Upanishads to *neti neti* (not this, not that) or the idea of constantly negating various aspects of reality until only the nature

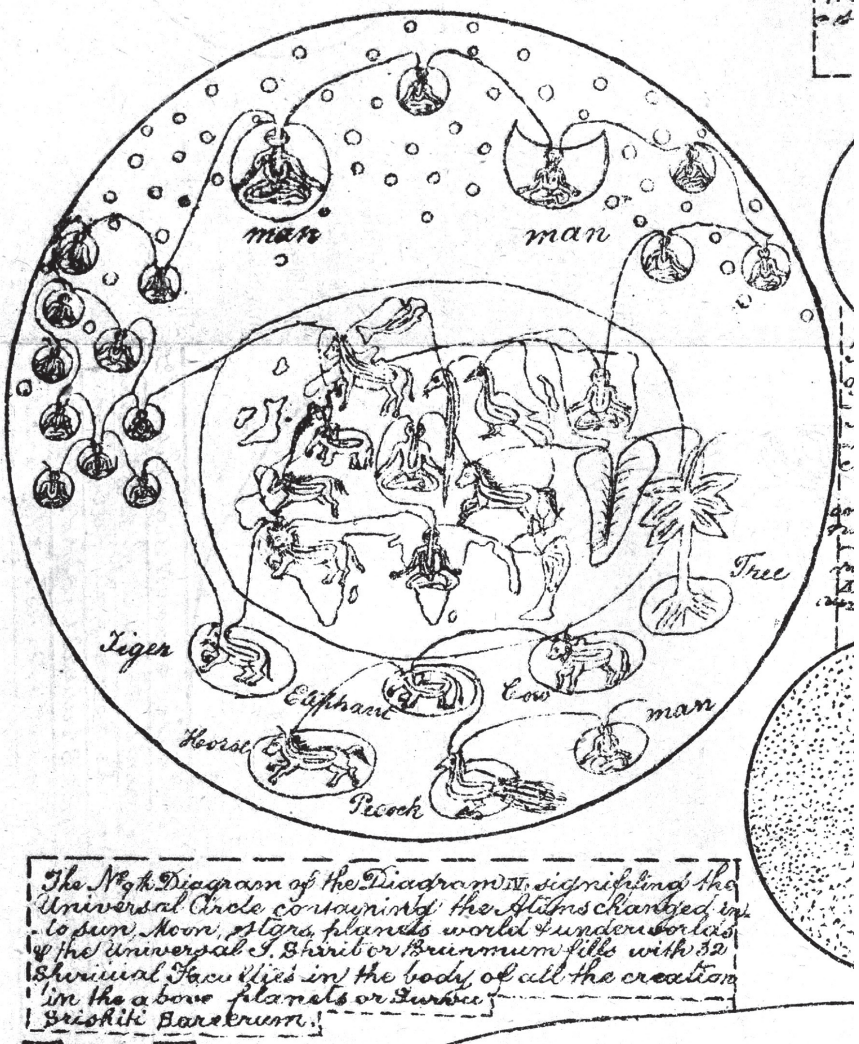


FIGURE 9.9 A part of the Fourth Diagram of the Second Book of CSPS, showing the “Universal Circle” of the “Atoms” as changed into the sun moon, stars, planets and “all the creation”

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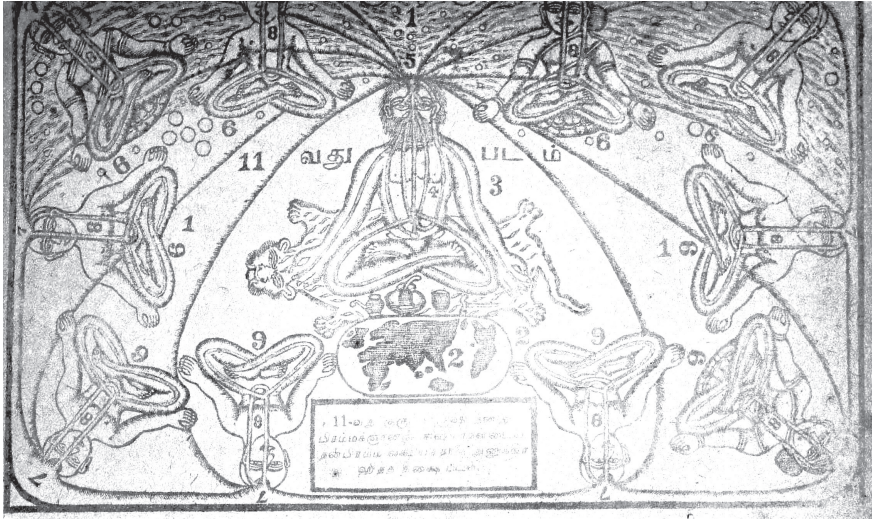


FIGURE 9.11 The Eleventh Diagram in MCVTS, containing an example of *tikṣai* (*dīkṣā*) as performed remotely by Sabhapati Swami—as Guru Father Rishi in the center of the diagram—on his male and female students at various distances from him  
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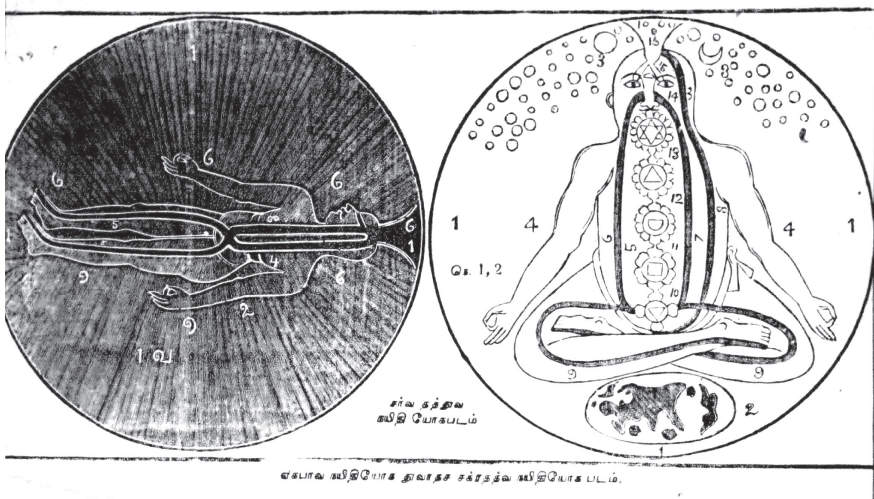


FIGURE 9.12 A diagram of the “not this” (*neti*) yoga of the twelve *cakra* principles and the “not this” yoga of a unified state (*ekapāva nayitīyōka tuvātaca cakratatva nayitīyōka paṭam*), found in MCVTS and described in terms of *tikṣā* (Skt. *dīkṣā*)  
RESTORED FROM A SCAN FROM SARASWATHI MAHAL LIBRARY (OUT OF COPYRIGHT); FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE WWW.YOGADIAGRAMS.COM

supreme beings” (Cuvāmikaḷ 1913, 53).<sup>4</sup> This last *dīkṣā* is clearly designed to be an alternative form of Śivarājayoga with its gradual negation of the principles (*tattvas*) of the self, and the connection is made clear with the diagram of the twelve *cakras* and principles being next to this initiation on the same diagram (see the right side of Figure 9.12).

## 6 Sabhapati’s Subtle Energies and Global Mesmerism

It should be clear now that what Sabhapati Swami translated as “Mesmerism” was in fact a blessing *dīkṣā* or “initiation,” but the energies behind it indicate that there was much more to this initiation than mere acceptance into a religious group or movement. Instead, Sabhapati’s works exemplify a vibrant movement in Tamil contexts that used and still uses the medium of touch as well as meditative manipulation of ‘gnostic’ subtle energies to create meaningful social connections between people—and even a social system of religious practice based on it (cf. Baier 2012, 157). This practice was not limited to Tamil Nadu but was and remains present to greater or lesser extent across South Asia—with ‘shaktipāt’ (*śaktipāta*) being the most well-known example—wherever certain embodied connections between gurus and teachers were present. (And when understood more broadly, it also includes the practice of yogis entering other people’s bodies [White 2009, 122–67].)

However, Sabhapati’s main contribution to our understanding of *dīkṣā* is not just its social function but rather the detailed explanations of the nature of subtle energy involved in his many texts in English, Tamil, Hindustani, Bengali, and Telugu. While one of the most prominent names for this energy is *brahmajñāna* (gnosis of Brahman)—the connotations of which go back millennia to the Upaniṣads—most of his works are also dedicated to explaining this gnosis in the context of compounds like *śuddhākāśa* (pure ether) or *prāṇākāśa* (ether of the vital breath). As a result, a careful study of Sabhapati’s teachings on *dīkṣā* reveals both its practical side and much about the practice’s theoretical foundations.

Although the Indic roots of Sabhapati’s teachings on subtle energy are clear, the interest among Helena Blavatsky, Henry Olcott, and numerous South Asian members of the Theosophical Society—as well as possibly readers familiar with spiritualism—likely prompted Sabhapati to explore the theoretical

4 *akaṇṭattil cūrya, cantira naṣṭattira navakkiraha lōkaṅkaḷillai, yatukaḷilciruṣṭikaḷumillai, pūlōkamillai yatīṅ cīruṣṭikaḷumillai, tāṅnumillai, taṅ carīra tattuvaṅkaḷumillai, paṅcakiruttiyamillai, navacaitanyamillai, jakajaṭajīvaparamillai.*

dimensions of this topic deeper. It appears that he was also actively developing *dikṣā* into a practice for his advanced students who were seeking instruction to become gurus themselves, and this also led to more detailed explanations than the ones found in extant texts on *dikṣā*. Some of the ideas encountered during his childhood education at Free Church Mission School may have also reinforced this interest in theories of subtle energy from an early age, especially considering the importance given to the laying-on-of-hands and apostolic succession in Christian contexts.

Only focusing on these international dimensions of Mesmerism, however, would obscure the fact that Sabhapati very likely learned many of these techniques directly from his first guru Chidambara Periya Swamigal, whose spiritual career predates the advent of the Theosophical Society, or from other gurus and yogis on his travels between north and south India. Similar techniques are even taught today on Chidambara Periya Swamigal's YouTube channel,<sup>5</sup> and the current banner even depicts the guru Selvamani Aiya, whom I met in 2019, giving a blessing similar to the "Hand to Head" mode that we have seen in Sabhapati's diagram (see Figure 9.13; cf. Figure 9.3). These connections certainly affirm the importance of a 'connected'- or 'global'-histories approach, as has been suggested in various ways by Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2005), David Gordon White (2021), and Julian Strube (2022). Such approaches enable a fuller appreciation of how the history of mesmerism in its various historical contexts, including within the Theosophical Society and spiritualism, intersected with already extant currents of blessing *dikṣā* or 'shaktipat' in South Asian yogic and Tantric milieus, mesmerizing and initiating each other along the way.



FIGURE 9.13 A public YouTube banner (<https://www.youtube.com/@Velacherymahan> [accessed: April 13, 2023]) for Sabhapati's first guru Chidambara Periya Swamigal's tumulus (jeeva samadhi), now a temple called Velachery Mahan, advertising instruction in "Dhiksha" (*dikṣā*)

5 <https://www.youtube.com/@Velacherymahan> (accessed: April 13, 2023).

## Abbreviations

CPSPS	<i>The Cosmic Psychological Spiritual Philosophy and Science of Communion with and Absorption in the Infinite Spirit</i> (Yogiswer 1890)
MCVTS	<i>Caṅkiraha vēta tiyāṅōpatēca smiruti</i> (Cuvāmikaḷ 1913)
RYB	<i>Rājayoga Brahmajñānānubhūti saṅgraha veda</i> (Svāmī 1892)

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*and Absorption in the Infinite Spirit, or Vedhantha Siva Raja Yoga Samadhi Brumha Gnyana Anubuthi, First Book.* Madras: The Hindu Press.

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## The Paths of the Serpent: *Kuṇḍalinī* as Subtle Energy, from Tantra to Neo-Tantra

*Hugh B. Urban*

South Asian yogic and Tantric<sup>1</sup> traditions developed a number of different concepts relating generally to the idea of ‘subtle energy.’ These include the notion of *prāṇa* (breath or vital energy), *śakti* (power or energy), the *sūkṣma śarīra* or *liṅga śarīra* (subtle body), the *cakras* (wheels of energy), *nāḍīs* (veins of the subtle organism), among various others (Samuel and Johnston 2013). Most of these have also been adopted by modern popular audiences in North America, Europe, and England—often undergoing profound transformation in the process. This chapter focuses specifically on one of the more important concepts of subtle energy known in Tantric yogic literature as *kuṇḍalī* or *kuṇḍalinī*, retracing its complex ‘journey to the West.’ Typically imagined in the form of a coiled serpent lying at the base of the spine, the term has appeared in Tantric literature since at least the sixth to eighth century CE, where it is a key element in the awakening and transformation of subtle energies through the techniques of Tantric yoga (Silburn 1988; White 2002; Flood 2006; Hatley 2022). At the same time, however, *kuṇḍalinī* has also been a key element in the transmission and transformation of South Asian practices in a modern European and North American context, where they have been reinterpreted through the lenses of Orientalist scholarship, post-Freudian psychoanalysis, and New Age spirituality (Jung 1999; Clow 2001; Judith 2014; Howe 2016).

After briefly tracing the genealogy of *kuṇḍalinī* in South Asia, I examine its complex re-imagining in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As we see in the work of authors such as Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), the subtle energy of *kuṇḍalinī* was frequently read through a psychological lens, as a kind of psychic energy or drive toward individuation (Jung 1999). At the same time, as we

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1 The category of Tantra is notoriously messy and has been defined in many ways by modern scholars. For the sake of this chapter, I find David Gordon White’s definition useful: “Tantra is that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy ... in creative and emancipatory ways” (White 2000, 9). For other definitions, see Brooks 1998; Padoux 2017; Urban 2023.

see in the works of occult authors such as Dion Fortune (née Violet Mary Firth; 1890–1946), *kuṇḍalinī* was often read through a more explicitly Freudian lens as a form of *sexual* energy that could be sublimated and transformed through esoteric practice (Fortune 2000; Fortune and Knight 1998). This sexual interpretation of *kuṇḍalinī* became increasingly widespread during the 1960s and 1970s, in the wake of the counterculture movement and sexual revolution.

One of the most important figures in the reimagining of *kuṇḍalinī* and of Tantra more generally was the controversial Indian guru, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (aka Osho-Rajneesh; 1931–1990). While more traditional forms of Tantra described *kuṇḍalinī* as the divine energy of the goddess (*śakti*) that is inherent in both the cosmos and the physical body, Rajneesh defined it primarily as *sexual* energy (and in turn defined Tantra as a kind of ‘spiritual sexology’; see Urban 2016; Rajneesh 1974; 1976; Osho 2011). At the same time, Rajneesh combined *kuṇḍalinī* with ideas drawn from post-Freudian psychology, particularly with Wilhelm Reich’s (1897–1957) notion of ‘orgone energy’ and new therapies practiced at the Esalen Institute in California (see Urban 2016; Rajneesh 1977; Osho 1987). In Rajneesh’s re-interpretation, this is now primarily a matter of the awakening and transformation of sexual energy using new techniques such as ‘shivering *kuṇḍalinī*.’ While this does have some continuities with older South Tantric traditions, it is clearly rearticulated for a Western audience and for an age of sexual liberation and countercultural revolution. This re-imagining of *kuṇḍalinī* as not just ‘subtle energy’ but as ‘sexual energy’ informs most popular and New Age understandings of Tantra and *kuṇḍalinī* yoga today.

## 1 Rings of Power: *Kuṇḍalī* and *Kuṇḍalinī* as Subtle Energy in South Asian Tantra

The precise origins of *kuṇḍalinī* in South Asian Tantric literature are a bit unclear. As Shaman Hatley suggests, the earliest references seem to lie in Tantric literature from the sixth to eighth centuries, such as the *Sārdhatriśatikālottara Tantra*, which speaks of a “primordial coil” (*ādyā kuṇḍalinī*) within the heart in the shape of a bud (Hatley 2022, 822–23).<sup>2</sup> One of the earliest references to an internal, subtle energy imagined specifically in the form of a ‘serpent’ appears in the *Tantrasadbhāva Tantra*, which dates to roughly the eighth century.

2 Some have suggested that an early predecessor of *kuṇḍalinī* may be the goddess Kubjikā, the ‘crooked one,’ who is a key figure in the development of Kaula Tantra (Flood 2006, 160; Dyczkowski 1987, 65).

Called in this text *kuṇḍalī* or “she who is ring shaped,” this power or energy (*śakti*) is said to be “sleeping as if made senseless by poison” until she is awakened and uncoiled:

This energy is called supreme, subtle, transcending all norm or practice. Enclosing within herself the heart, her aspect is that of a snake lying in deep sleeping. Sleeping there, O Illustrious Goddess, she is not conscious of anything, O Umā [...]. When she is awakened, she becomes straight. (Padoux 2002, 128–29; see White 2002, 230)

Later texts such as the *Śāradātilaka Tantra* (eleventh century) describe this energy in more detail, as a supreme power (*paraśakti*) that has both macrocosmic and microcosmic aspects. It is at once the divine energy that pervades the entire universe and the internal presence of that energy within the body of each living being, resting in the serpentine form of the “coiled one” (*kuṇḍalinī*) in the lowest energy center (the *mūlādhāra* or “root”) at the base of the spine:

This supreme energy [...] is the omnipresent consciousness assuming the form of the universe. One with Śiva, beyond space and time, she is present in her pristine purity within all beings [...]. Especially present in the heart of *yoginīs*, she is also present eternally in the entire universe, where she lies coiled up inside the *mūlādhāra* of all living creatures, dazzling like a flash of lightning. Folded upon herself, this Goddess is Kuṇḍalinī, the Coiled One, serpent-like, holding within herself all the gods, all the *mantras*, all the *tattvas* [...]. [S]he is the creative energy immanent to the universe. (Padoux 2002, 132; Avalon 1985, 43–45)

Here we should note that some Tantric texts do link *kuṇḍalinī*, at least indirectly, to sexuality. According to the prolific Kashmir Śaivite philosopher Abhinavagupta (c.950–1050), *kuṇḍalinī* is connected to what he calls *kaulikī śakti*. This is the supreme energy of the goddess that is intimately bound to Lord Śiva and radiates throughout both the cosmos and the whole network of the human body, including the generative organs. As Gavin Flood explains, “Abhinavagupta identifies this goddess with the power that brings into manifestation the body, breath, and experiences of pleasure and pain [...]. This is also the power within the body and the power of sexuality as the source of reproduction” (2006, 161; see Muller-Ortega 1988, 60; Singh 1989, 62).<sup>3</sup> Even

3 “On the plane of Śakti, she is the innermost core of the entire sensory and nervous system [...] and on the plane of *nara* she is the female and male generative organ (*jananasthāna-karṇika-līṅgātṃā*)” (Singh 1989, 62).

here, however, sexuality is only *one* aspect of the microcosmic dimension of *kuṇḍalinī*—which is itself only the human reflection of the macrocosmic power of the goddess that generates and pervades the entire universe.<sup>4</sup>

However, for most Western readers, probably the best-known description of *kuṇḍalinī* comes from a fairly late text called the *Ṣat-cakra-nirṇaya* (Investigation of the Six Cakras). Originally composed in the sixteenth century, the text was translated into English in 1918 by Arthur Avalon (a pseudonym used by the British High Court Judge Sir John Woodroffe [1865–1936], and the Indian authors who assisted him).<sup>5</sup> Republished many times over the last century, Avalon's text has become probably the best-known account of *kuṇḍalinī* to this day. Here, the subtle energy is described as sleeping at the base of the spine, coiled around an internal *liṅga*:

Over [the *liṅga*] shines the sleeping Kuṇḍalinī, fine as the fibre of a lotus stalk. She is the world-bewilderer, gently covering the mouth of the Brahma-dvāra [the head of the *liṅga*] by her own. Like the spiral of a conch-shell, her shining snake-like form goes three and a half times round Śiva, and her lustre is that of a flash of young strong lightning. (Avalon 1973, 346)

Avalon's translation also includes the most well-known account of the *cakras* (energy centers) that are believed to lie along the axis of the spine from the base to the crown of the head. In earlier yogic and Tantric literature, we find various lists with a wide array of different numbers and locations of the *cakras*, ranging from four to five to eleven to twenty-four or more.<sup>6</sup> However, Avalon's text presents the more common list of six lower *cakras* with the seventh, thousand petalled lotus at the crown of the head. Since the publication of the *Serpent Power* in 1918, this has become the most common description of the *cakras* used by most popular texts in both English and South Asian languages. As

4 In some traditions, we should note, the awakening of *kuṇḍalinī* is also connected to esoteric sexual practices. As Lilian Silburn explains, authors such as Abhinavagupta saw the pleasure of sexual union as a reflection of and a possible "spring-board" to the supreme bliss of divine union. Sexual union can be a tool to arouse *kuṇḍalinī* and transmute worldly enjoyment into the ultimate pleasure that is identity with the divine consciousness (1988, 138; see Gnoli 1999, 29.96–166; Muller-Ortega 1988, 53; Gupta et al. 1979, 183).

5 On Woodroffe's life, work, and complex relation to the identity of 'Arthur Avalon,' see Urban 2003, 134–64; Taylor 2001; Strube 2022.

6 For example, early Śaivasiddhānta sources list five energy centers called sites (*sthānas*) or knots (*granthis*). The *Kaulajñāna Nirṇaya* lists a total of eleven wheels of energy (*cakras*). Probably the oldest list of seven *sthānas* is from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (see White 2002, 223–24; Bagchi 1934, 17.2–4; Goswami and Sastri 1971, 2.2.19–21).

the text explains, the *kuṇḍalinī* energy is first awakened and then led upward through the central channel of the body, where it progressively pierces each of the lower *cakras* and finally arrives at the *sahasrāra*, the thousand petalled lotus at the crown of the head, which is the abode of Lord Śiva and has the nature of pure bliss, knowledge, and spiritual liberation (Avalon 1973, 450).

## 2 The Serpent Slithers West: *Kuṇḍalinī* in Modern European and British Literature

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the figure of *kuṇḍalinī* and the yogic system of *cakras* began to enter widely into European, British, and North American literature. One important figure in the modern genealogy of *kuṇḍalinī* worth mentioning here is Carl Gustav Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and student of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). In addition to his psychoanalytic reading of *kuṇḍalinī*, Jung would also become one of the most important influences on the later New Age movement, whose work is still widely read today (see Tacey 2001; Hanegraaff 1997, 496–514; Hammer 2000, 68–70). Jung developed an interest in Indian thought during the 1930s and traveled to India in 1937. For Jung, India was of interest not simply because of its long history of religious speculation, but also because it occupied an important place in his own cartography of the psyche. Indeed, it represented an ancient repository of symbols lodged deep in the recesses of our collective unconscious. In his words, India itself is a “dreamlike world,” based primarily on “psychic reality” as the main condition of existence.<sup>7</sup>

In 1932, Jung held a seminar on *kuṇḍalinī* in Zurich, which was subsequently published as *The Psychology of Kuṇḍalinī Yoga*. For his understanding of *kuṇḍalinī*, Jung relied heavily on Avalon’s *The Serpent Power*, along with the work of the German Indologist, Jakob Wilhelm Hauer (1881–1962). In Jung’s interpretation, *kuṇḍalinī* and the *cakras* are re-worked into a new sort of cartography of the psyche, mapped onto his own understanding of psychic energies and unconscious archetypes. Indeed, Jung saw *kuṇḍalinī* yoga as a kind of ancient and Eastern counterpart to his own idea of the process of ‘individuation.’ Awakening *kuṇḍalinī* and ascending the *cakras*, in his reading, mirrors

7 As he put it in 1930, “[w]e have conquered the East politically. Do you know what happened when Rome subjugated the near East politically? The spirit of the East entered Rome. Mithras became the Roman military god [...]. Would it be unthinkable that the same thing happened today [...]? Our unconscious is crammed with Eastern symbolism. The spirit of the East is really *ante portas*” (quoted in Shamdasani 1999, xvii).

the psychological process by which the personal and collective unconscious are brought into consciousness and integrated into the whole, individuated personality (1999, 3–70).

Yet Jung was somewhat ambivalent about what exactly he understood *kuṇḍalinī* to be in terms of his own larger psychological system. In some places, he described *kuṇḍalinī* as a kind of internal drive, impulse, or urge toward self-transformation (1999, 21); and elsewhere he identified it specifically with his concept of the *anima*, the ‘inner woman,’ or archetype of the feminine that lies within the male psyche (the counterpart to the *animus* or archetype of the masculine within the female psyche). Indeed, at one point he simply asserted that “anima is the *kuṇḍalinī*” (22).

Interestingly enough, while offering a psychological reading of *kuṇḍalinī* and the *cakras*, Jung ultimately rejected the idea that either *kuṇḍalinī* or the *mūlādhāra cakra* are associated primarily with sexuality. He did suggest that the *mūlādhāra* is connected to the *libido*, which he defines very broadly as “psychic energy” and which he believed is symbolized by the elephant that is imagined within this *cakra* (23, 51).<sup>8</sup> But he rejected the idea that it can be reduced simply to sex: “You think of it as the region having to do with sexuality and all sorts of unsavory things. But that is not *mūlādhāra*; *mūlādhāra* is something quite different” (13). Professor Hauer, on whom his interpretation relied heavily, was even more explicit in his rejection of the equation of *kuṇḍalinī* with sexual energy: “*kuṇḍalinī* as understood here is not in any way an erotic power of man, but a kind of woman power, which is nothing but pure knowledge; there is in woman power a certain power of knowledge, which has nothing to do with the erotic” (quoted in Jung 1999, 20 n. 37). As we will see below, however, virtually all popular views of *kuṇḍalinī* today ignore Jung and Hauer on this point, by associating *kuṇḍalinī* primarily with sex and sexual energy.

At the same time that it entered into psychoanalytic literature, *kuṇḍalinī* also began to be widely discussed in occult and esoteric texts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, it is discussed frequently in the works of Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891) and others in the Theosophical Society (Blavatsky 1980, 621; Leadbeater 2013; Hammer 2000, 185).<sup>9</sup> It also becomes an important theme in writings of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), arguably the most important figure in the modern revival of magic

8 Jung’s concept of *libido* includes the totality of psychic energy and is not limited to sexual desire: “All psychological phenomena can be considered as manifestations of energy [...]his energy is conceived as desire. I call it *libido* [...] which is by no means only sexual” (Jung 1985, 247; cf. Jung 1977, 132–42).

9 We should note that neither Blavatsky nor Leadbeater link *kuṇḍalinī* with sexuality.

and occultism, as well as an early British practitioner of yoga. Crowley basically identifies *kuṇḍalinī* with an innate kind of ‘magical force’ or power, which is in turn the presence of the Godhead within the individual practitioner and thereby the source of all magical action.<sup>10</sup>

However, one of the first Western authors to begin identifying *kuṇḍalinī* specifically with sexual energy was the British occultist Dion Fortune. Throughout her work, Fortune tried to establish correspondences between the *cakra* system from Indian yoga and the Tree of Life or system of the ten *sephiroth* from Jewish Kabbalah (Fortune 2000; Fortune and Knight 1998, 73; Djurdjevic 2014, 84). She thus connected the *mūlādhāra cakra* with the *sephira Yesod*,<sup>11</sup> and in turn associated the latter with sexual energy, which can be sublimated and transformed by the skilled magician. As Gordan Djurdjevic explains,

Fortune suggests that [the *mūlādhāra*] *cakra* corresponds with the *sephira Yesod*, associated with the “planet” Moon [...]. But *Yesod* is the place of the “very personal sex force” [...]. Fortune suggests that if the sexual energy is set in motion at the level of the “Moon Center,” this will result in the stirring of sexual imagery. The crucial difference between an ordinary person and the magician (or yogi) lies in the fact that the former will habitually remain focused on [...] this sexual impulse, while the latter will attempt to bring it to a higher level, to sublimate this energy and transform it into spiritual force. (2014, 82; see Fortune and Knight 1998, 73)

At the same time, Fortune also understood *kuṇḍalinī* itself primarily as a ‘sex force’ and thus as a powerful but dangerous energy: “beyond question the rousing of Kundalini is a tremendous sexual stimulus, as is perfectly understood in the east” (Fortune and Knight 1998, 156). It is worth noting that in her reading of both *kuṇḍalinī* and the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, Fortune made frequent reference to Freudian psychoanalytic ideas, particularly to those concerning the ‘elemental energy’ of sexuality. Thus, she suggested that “Freudian psychology supplies the key to phallicism and opens a door that leads into the Adytum of the Mysteries” (Fortune 2000, 142–43), and, when understood together,

10 As Crowley put it, “[t]he serpent is also the Kundalini serpent, the Magical force itself, the manifesting side of the Godhead of the Magician” (1997, 105; Djurdjevic 2014, 50). *Kuṇḍalinī* is also discussed in the works of Crowley’s student, Kenneth Grant (1924–2011), where it is understood as a primordial feminine power that is important in sexual rituals (Grant 1992, 30; Hedenborg White 2019, chap. 6).

11 In other works, we should note, Fortune associates *Yesod* with the *svādhiṣṭhāna cakra* and both with sexual energy (2000, 74–75).

“Tantra, the Qabalah, and Freudian psycho-analysis form a trinity, which is the key that [...] admits to the Mystery temple”—above all, in their understanding of sexual energy (Fortune and Knight 1998, 74).<sup>12</sup>

### 3 From Sex to Superconsciousness: Tantra and *Kuṇḍalinī* in the Works of Osho-Rajneesh

However, it is really during the 1960s and 1970s that we see both Tantra generally and *kuṇḍalinī* in particular enter widely into European, British, and North American popular discourse—and usually redefined primarily in sexual terms, as a matter of awakening and optimizing sexual energy. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most European Orientalist scholars, British colonial authorities, and Hindu reformers had an intensely negative view of Tantra. Typically dismissed as “black art of the crudest and filthiest kind” (D. L. Barnett, quoted in Avalon 1952, 7), Tantra was generally seen as an absurd superstition at best, and as a perverse mixture of spirituality and sensuality at worst (Urban 2003, 44–105). In the 1960s and 1970s, however, a new generation of Western authors began to embrace Tantra and *kuṇḍalinī* yoga as a much-needed celebration of the body and sexuality. Now reimagined as a ‘yoga of sex,’ a ‘cult of ecstasy,’ and even a ‘manual of sexual liberation,’ Tantra was incorporated into the broader countercultural movement and sexual revolution (Garrison 1964; Rawson 1973; see Urban 2003; Ramos 2020).

Arguably the most important figure in this modern transformation of both Tantra generally and *kuṇḍalinī* specifically was the controversial Indian guru known in his youth as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and in his later years as Osho. Today, most of us probably only remember him as the controversial ‘guru of the rich,’ known for his infamous fleet of ninety-three Rolls Royces, who led a briefly successful but ultimately catastrophic utopian commune in Oregon in the 1980s (which became the subject of the popular Netflix series *Wild, Wild Country*; see Urban 2016; Carter 1990; Way and Way 2018). Yet, Osho-Rajneesh was also a key figure in the modern re-imagining of Tantra as a technique primarily focused on *sex* and in the re-imagining of *kuṇḍalinī* as a primarily *sexual* energy to be transformed through his unique ‘Neo-Tantric’ methods.

Born Chandra Mohan Jain in Madhya Pradesh in 1931, he was given the nickname ‘Rajneesh’ and raised by his elderly Jain grandparents (see Joshi 1982; Bhed 2006). After a period of intense spiritual searching, doubt, and existential

12 She goes on to say that Freud discovered the basic “psychological truth” that “elemental energy [...] is very closely connected with the sex life of [the] individual” (2000, 217).

crisis, he claimed to have broken through to full enlightenment or Buddhahood in 1953, at the age of twenty-one (Osho 2000, 68–73; Joshi 1982, 61). Assuming the title of ‘Bhagwan’ (venerable, glorious, or divine), Rajneesh began to teach widely and soon became known as “India’s most dangerous guru” due to his deliberately shocking, humorous, and iconoclastic style; he was infamous, for example, for his attacks on national heroes such as Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) and Mother Theresa (1910–1997) (Appleton 1987; Urban 2016, 1–48).

Beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s in Bombay and Poona, Rajneesh began to attract a large number of European and North American young people and aimed his new meditation techniques directly at these waves of Western tourists, hippies, and spiritual seekers (Gordon 1987; Dillon 2005; Urban 2016). In his view, modern Westerners are not capable of sitting for long periods of time in silent meditation but instead require “active” techniques that involve the entire body, mind, and emotions in an intense catharsis that will “melt our blocks” (Rajneesh 1978, 41–42).<sup>13</sup> Thus, in place of seated meditation, he developed explicitly “chaotic” techniques such as “Dynamic Meditation,” which involved periods of intense catharsis, primal screaming, jumping up and down, and free-form dance (Osho.com 2019; Urban 2016, 59–60).

At the same time, Rajneesh also began to incorporate elements from Western psychology, particularly ideas drawn from the renegade disciple of Freud, Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957). Many of the early members of the early community in Pune had in fact been trained in Reichian therapy at places such as the Esalen Institute in California, and Pune itself became known as the “Esalen of the East” (Urban 2016, 26–75; Kripal 2008).

Beginning in India in the late 1960s, Osho-Rajneesh delivered a series of popular but also intensely controversial lectures on Tantric yoga, such as *From Sex to Superconsciousness* and *Tantra, Spirituality, and Sex*, that fundamentally helped redefine the modern understanding of Tantra (Rajneesh n.d.; 1983a). In its historical South Asian forms, Tantra does contain a good deal of sexual imagery and in some cases may involve esoteric sexual techniques.<sup>14</sup> In Rajneesh’s creative re-working, however, Tantra (or ‘Neo-Tantra’) is now defined almost

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13 “Modern man is a very new phenomenon. No traditional method can be used exactly as it exists, because modern man never existed before [...]. I use chaotic methods rather than systematic ones because a chaotic method is useful in pushing the center down from the brain [...]. The method is so chaotic that the center is automatically pushed from the brain to the heart [...]. Then there is a catharsis” (Rajneesh 1978, 41–42).

14 See Silburn 1988, 157–58; Urban 2010, 99–124. Shaman Hatley provides a useful outline of seven different kinds of sexual practices found in Tantric literature: love magic; love magic for non-human beings; ritualized orgasmic coitus wherein sexual fluids are given a ritual function; highly regulated coitus as part of the secret assembly; initiation; highly

entirely in sexual terms, as a form of ‘spiritual sexology’ aimed at personal liberation and sensual pleasure. In his words, all the world’s religions to date have repressed and denied sexuality, thereby creating neurosis and all manner of social ills; but Tantra is the first path that recognizes the tremendous power of sexuality and transforms that energy into a source of personal freedom and social transformation:

Tantra is basically a spiritual sexualology. Man’s mind is perverted throughout the world by religions teaching the repression of sex. (Osho 2010)

That’s my effort here: to introduce a neo-Tantra to the world, a new vision of love [...] and an insight into the reality of the orgasm—because orgasm is your greatest source of finding godliness [...]. If you can be one with one woman, one man, you have the secret key in your hands. You can be one with the whole universe. (Rajneesh 1981, 341)

In a similar way, Osho-Rajneesh also fundamentally re-defined *kuṇḍalinī*, now reframing it primarily as a *sexual* energy. As mentioned earlier, traditional Tantric literature does describe *kuṇḍalinī* with gendered imagery, and some Tantric authors such as Abhinavagupta recommend sexual techniques as one means for advanced practitioners to awaken *kuṇḍalinī*. Yet, in Osho-Rajneesh’s interpretation, *kuṇḍalinī* is now understood more or less entirely in sexual terms, as a powerful sexual energy that can either be used to create new life through procreation or redirected through meditation: “Kundalini practice [...] is a system to transform sex energy for meditation and awareness” (Osho 2005, 131).<sup>15</sup> He also identifies the *mūlādhāra cakra* as essentially the ‘sex center,’ which is the fundamental source of the sexual energy that is then channeled through *kuṇḍalinī*: “The source and the origin of all your energy is the sex center. Just adjacent to this sex center is the center of kundalini. [...] That center of kundalini is the source of energy for the life of the sannyasin” (Osho 1996, 140).

The ultimate goal of *kuṇḍalinī* meditation, in Osho-Rajneesh’s interpretation, is therefore to channel this sexual energy toward a kind of supreme, internalized orgasmic experience. Whereas older forms of yoga seek to control sexual energy through celibacy and asceticism, he argues, Tantra seeks to

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ritualized ecstatic gnosis; sexual yoga as a sublimation of bliss; and yogic techniques involving sex without seminal loss (2018, 196–99).

15 “*Kundalini* is the passage through which the life force moves. The life force is located in the sex center, stored in the sex center (the *muladhar*). It can be used as sex energy. Then it generates [...] biological life” (Rajneesh 1976, 78).

channel and transform the power of *kuṇḍalinī* through a new, more profound kind of orgasm:

If your energy, your kundalini, goes up, rises and rushes up towards the head, you cannot have an ordinary orgasm. And if you try to have it, you will be in a deep conflict within, because energy is moving up and you are forcing it down. But the tantric orgasm is not a difficulty. It will be a help [...]. Your sex energy moving upwards is what is called kundalini. In the sex act it moves downwards. Yoga will say to be a celibate [...]. That is why Yoga techniques are against sex, but Tantra is not against sex, because Tantra has a different type of orgasm, a valley orgasm. (Rajneesh 1974, 39–40)

In addition to his creative re-imagining of the subtle energy of *kuṇḍalinī*, Osho-Rajneesh also developed his own unique technique of ‘Kundalini Meditation.’ Like his Dynamic Meditation, this is intended to be a radically more ‘active’ and ‘chaotic’ sort of practice than traditional forms of yoga. Lasting an hour, his ‘Kundalini Meditation’ begins with a period of intense shaking as participants feel the energies move up from the feet until they ‘become the shaking.’ Subsequently, there is a period of free-form dance, in which participants let the body move in whatever way it desires. Next, there is a period of stillness, in which participants close their eyes and remain either standing or sitting, observing whatever is happening inside or outside the body. And in the final stage, participants lie down and remain silent and still for the last fifteen minutes. The goal of the initial shaking stage is not only to cause the body to shiver but also allow the shaking to happen on its own, abandoning a person’s sense of self within the movement and dissolving the ego into a kind of pure liquid flow of energy:

A great energy is blowing through you. Shake! Vibrate! Allow every cell of your body to dance [...]. Forget everything and become the shaking. (Rajneesh 1974, 12–13)

If you are doing the Kundalini Meditation, allow the shaking—don’t do it! Stand silently, feel it coming, and when your body starts a little trembling, help it, but don’t do it! Enjoy it, feel blissful about it, allow it, receive it, welcome it, but don’t will it [...]. When I say shake, I mean your solidity, your rocklike being should shake to the very foundations, so it becomes liquid, fluid, melts, flows [...]. Then there is no shaker, only shaking. (Rajneesh 1983b, 21)

But what accounts for Osho-Rajneesh's reformulation of *kuṇḍalinī* in terms of this sort of sexual, dynamic, and shivering energy? While some of this is surely due to the historical context of the counterculture and sexual revolution, I think we can also see clear influence from Freudian psychoanalytic theory here, and particularly psychoanalytic views of sexual energy. As Osho-Rajneesh himself put it, Freud, Jung, and their students basically cleared the way for Tantra to come to the modern West: "[T]he days of Tantra are coming. Sooner or later, Tantra is going to explode for the first time on the masses, because for the first time, the time is ripe—ripe to take sex naturally [...]. Freud, Jung, Reich, they have prepared the background" (Osho 2010, 20).

Perhaps the most direct influence on his reformulation of sexual energy comes specifically from the last of these, Wilhelm Reich. Indeed, Reich is one of the few authors whom Osho-Rajneesh cites as a direct influence on his own thinking, recognizing that many of his own students had been trained in Reich's methods, and even calling Reich a kind of "Tantra master." Reich's work, he concludes, "has immense potential. It needs to be developed and it needs to be developed in collaboration with Tantra" (1987, 141–42).

I will call Wilhelm Reich a modern Tantra master, although he was not aware of it. Perhaps in his past lives he may have known the secrets of Tantra—because his work contained the secrets of Tantra [...]. I give him posthumous *sannyas*. (1987, 143)

Like Reich, Osho-Rajneesh identified sex as the most powerful force in human nature, the cause of most of our social and psychological ills, and also the most powerful tool on the path of spiritual liberation: "I am wholly in agreement with Reich's approach. Really, sex is the problem, all other problems are byproducts. And unless man comes to a deep understanding of sex energy, it is impossible to help him" (Osho 2022, chap. 4).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Osho-Rajneesh's understanding of *kuṇḍalinī* as a kind of primal sexual energy or life force that lies latent in the body bears more than a passing resemblance to Reich's famous notion of 'orgone' energy or the cosmic life force that is expressed in the human body through sexual energy and the experience of orgasm (Reich 1973; Dillon 2005; Turner 2011). He frequently discussed Reich's orgone energy, which he identified as "love energy," while also equating it with the yogic concept of *prāṇa*

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<sup>16</sup> See Rajneesh n.d., 65: "The sex inside the man, the libido, is more vibrant than lightening, A minute atom of matter could ANNIHILATE the enter city of Hiroshima [...]. Sex is more powerful than an atom bomb."

(breath and vital energy).<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Osho-Rajneesh's methods of shivering *kuṇḍalinī* call to mind Reich's descriptions of the vital power of orgone energy and his various attempts to optimize it (such as his 'orgone accumulator' devices; see Turner 2011). Perhaps most importantly, like Reich, Osho-Rajneesh also linked sexual repression to social and political repression;<sup>18</sup> and therefore, like Reich, he identified the liberation of sexual energy with the ultimate source of social and political transformation.

Sex is the most powerful human instinct. The politician and the priest have understood from the very beginning that sex is the most driving human energy. It has to be curtailed, it has to be cut. [...] Listen to the Tantra message [...]. It is a great revolutionary message. It is against all priests and politicians [...]. Reclaim your freedom. (Osho 2011, 102, 112)

Passages like these closely mirror Reich's call for both sexual and political freedom in works such as *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1970), which directly link the repression of sexuality to political repression and the liberation of sexual energy to social and political freedom.

This melding of South Asian concepts of *kuṇḍalinī* with Reich's concept of orgone energy is perhaps one of Osho-Rajneesh's most important innovations and one that has had a lasting impact on contemporary popular understandings of *kuṇḍalinī* and Tantra as a whole.

#### 4 Conclusions: *Kuṇḍalinī* as Subtle Energy in Popular Culture Today

To conclude, I would like to reflect on this brief genealogy of *kuṇḍalinī* and the legacy of Osho-Rajneesh's reworking of Tantra in contemporary popular literature. Obviously, my short chapter could not possibly do justice to the complex genealogy of *kuṇḍalinī*; the various twists and turns of its serpentine 'journey to the West' could surely be explored in far greater detail. However, I do hope to have at least revealed a few of the key transformations in this South Asian

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17 "Reich tried to make contact with the energy the yogis call *prana*, and he called it orgone" (Rajneesh 1977, 236).

18 "Sexual repression, Reich argued, was the cornerstone of totalitarianism, so in order to liberate people politically it was necessary to liberate them sexually first" (Allyn 2001, 45; see Reich 1963).

concept of subtle energy as it was taken up by a global audience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Today, we need only browse the shelves of any popular bookstore or search on Amazon.com to find dozens of books on the topics of Tantra, *cakras*, and *kuṇḍalinī*. Thus, we have best-selling paperbacks such as *Kundalini Exposed* and *Kundalini Sex: Unlocking the Secrets of Energy Orgasms* (Clow 2001; Howe 2016), as well as numerous videos such as *Love Yourself: Kundalini Yoga* (Fiennes 2018), and countless websites such as “Purifying Waves of Love” (Sara 2021).<sup>19</sup> Almost all of these popular works follow Osho-Rajneesh’s lead by equating *kuṇḍalinī* primarily with *sexual* energy and with the goal of attaining ultimate sexual *pleasure*.

Many of the best-selling works on Tantra, we should note, are also written by former students of Osho-Rajneesh, such as Margot Anand’s widely read books, *The Art of Sexual Ecstasy* (1989) and *The Art of Sexual Magic* (1995). Some contemporary Neo-Tantric authors, such as Aneesha Dillon, are not only students of Osho-Rajneesh but are also trained in Reichian therapy, and they draw explicit connections between Reich’s orgone energy and the sexual power of *kuṇḍalinī* (Dillon 2005; Judith 2014).

In sum, the subtle energy of *kuṇḍalinī* today is largely reduced to sexual energy, usually translated through a kind of post-Freudian lens such as Reich’s orgone energy. This is not, of course, a *complete* departure from the representation of *kuṇḍalinī* in older South Asian Tantric literature, where it does have some sexual aspects and can in some cases be roused through sexual rituals. Yet, it is in many ways an extreme simplification and reduction. As we saw in texts such as the *Śāradātīlaka Tantra*, *kuṇḍalinī* is described as having two dimensions—a macrocosmic aspect, as the creative energy of the goddess that pervades the entire universe, and a microcosmic aspect, as the presence of that energy within the body of all beings. Most contemporary popular literature on *kuṇḍalinī* reduces it almost entirely to the latter, while simultaneously reducing that microcosmic aspect still further to sexual energy alone. As Osho-Rajneesh himself put it, aptly summarizing the modern discourse on *kuṇḍalinī*, “[s]ex and superconsciousness are both the same energy. The serpent and the savior are not two. There is no separation between divine love and human, four-lettered love” (2011, 14).

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19 As Anodea Judith puts it, “Kundalini is sexual” (2014, 40).

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# Awakening *Śakti: Kuṇḍalinī* within the Nondual Tantric Teachings of Sally Kempton

*Tova Olsson*

## 1 Introduction: Becoming a Missionary of the Goddess

The primary research question in this chapter is how the terms *kuṇḍalinī* and *śakti* are used within the nondual tantric teachings of Sally Kempton (1943–2003). But it also concerns itself with power dynamics, questions of authority, and gender in contemporary lineage-based tantra and yoga, especially in online spaces. Kempton was an influential teacher in that field and her legacy is likely to continue to impact the understanding of said terms among her numerous students. According to her website, Kempton first became interested in meditation after a drug-induced experience in the early 1970s, when she was “overcome by a feeling of all-encompassing, unconditional love that seemed to come out of nowhere.”<sup>1</sup> At the time, Kempton was working as a journalist in New York, publishing on popular culture, the arts, and feminist issues—a job she abandoned to pursue spiritual teachings. In 1974 she encountered her guru, the ‘enlightened Siddha master’ Swami Muktananda (b. Krishna Rai; 1908–1982), and became his full-time student.<sup>2</sup> At the time Muktananda was traveling in the United States, where he had made a name for himself awakening people’s ‘spiritual potential’ through his touch or mere presence. According to his own testimony, Muktananda was following an order from his guru, the unconventional Indian holy man, Bhagawan Nityananda (1897–1961), to create a “meditation revolution” (Brooks et al. 1997, 4). It might as well have been called a ‘kundalini revolution,’ as the meditation he taught contained a special ingredient known as *śaktipatā* (descent of power). Muktananda believed he had inherited from his guru the power to pass on his own spiritual force to awaken the receiver’s *kuṇḍalinī* (ibid.). Kempton studied and traveled with Muktananda from 1974 until his passing in 1982. Just before his death, Muktananda initiated her as a *sannyāsī* and gave her the name Swami

1 See <https://www.sallykempton.com/about/meet-sally/> (accessed: October 15, 2023).

2 Ibid.

Durgananda.<sup>3</sup> Over the next twenty years, she worked as a teacher in the Siddha Yoga meditation community where she created and taught workshops, courses, and trainings, and served as editor of the magazine *Darshan*. In 2002, Kempton put aside her monastic identity to “create a teaching path that could help students deal directly with the challenges of 21st century life.”<sup>4</sup> Since then, she has been teaching telecourses, workshops, and teacher-trainings on meditation, as well as what she referred to as

hands-on, contemplative practices for moving through psychological obstructions, understanding the intricacies of inner life, and how to apply spiritual principles to relationships, work, and life in our time.<sup>5</sup>

After reclaiming her family name, Kempton wrote two books, both of which have become hugely popular among practitioners of contemporary spirituality: *Meditation for the Love of it* (2011) and *Awakening Shakti* (2013).<sup>6</sup> Although both books frequently use the term *śakti* and speak of the consequences of living with an awakened *kuṇḍalinī*, especially the latter has become known as a handbook to enter into relationship with and learning to recognize the many faces of spiritual power in every-day life. Through it, Kempton became widely known as a teacher of meditation and of what she would call the “divine feminine” (Kempton 2013, 31). Her teachings and understanding of subtle energy have so far never been the subject of scholarly examination, making this chapter a valuable contribution to Kempton’s understanding of *kuṇḍalinī*, as well as regarding the use of discourse related to gender in contemporary spirituality.

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3 *Sannyāsī* can be translated as ‘abandoning’ or ‘throwing down.’ In the Hindu traditions, the term is referring to a renouncer.

4 See <https://www.sallykempton.com/about/meet-sally/> (accessed: October 15, 2023).

5 Ibid.

6 For a discussion of the term ‘spirituality’ as a scientific concept and self-attribution, see Streib and Klein 2016. For more on the ‘spiritual revolution,’ see Heelas and Woodhead 2005. When I use the term ‘contemporary spirituality’ I mean to include individuals who refer to themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious,’ who do not self-describe as ‘New Age’ practitioners, and who are not members of any specific New Religious Movement. The term aims to describe a field which combines developments of yoga and tantra (including meditation, somatics, and sexual practices) with forms of divination, witchcraft, self-care, and pragmatic psychology.

## 2 Letting *Kuṇḍalinī* Lead

According to Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, the word *śakti*, tracing its origin from the verb root *śak*, refers to “the power to produce an effect, capability, efficiency, or potency” (1998, 5). Kempton’s primary and preferred translation of the term appear to have been “divine energy” (2013, 25), although she did refer to other meanings, such as “divine feminine power” (6). James Mallinson and Mark Singleton describe *kuṇḍalinī* (she who is coiled) as “the power of the divine feminine (*śakti*) residing within the body of the yogi, which can be stimulated by means of yogic practices in order to actualize spiritual potential” (2017, 178). In a similar manner, Kempton equated *śakti* with “the kundalini, the spiritual energy, the awakened Presence within you” (2011, 164). But she further defined *kuṇḍalinī* as an intelligent, playful, and caring force which should not be feared but worshiped and revered as a portion of the Great Goddess (Kempton 2013, 75–77). Overall, her writing and her teaching sessions portrayed the awakening of *śakti* or arousal of *kuṇḍalinī*, not as a terrifying and chaotic display of physical ailment (as in some other descriptions; for example, Gopi Krishna’s [1967] famous testimony) but as a condition leading to a deepened dedication to spiritual studies and practices. Kempton would suggest that her students “let kundalini lead” to “follow her like a dance partner” (2011, 165) and allow their meditation to unfold naturally.

Kempton’s language comfortably combines religious, psychological, and scientific terminology (a mixture which is rather common in contemporary spirituality), while giving an ideological nod to the second wave of feminism she never seems to have abandoned.<sup>7</sup> In *Awakening Shakti*, she tells the story of goddess Sati who, disrespected by her husband Śiva and father Dakṣa, chose to leave her body behind, sending her “life force into the ether” (Kempton 2013, 3). In Kempton’s retelling of the famous *śakta* story, the “World-Mother” and “power of life itself” has been insulted and exiled by patriarchy, disappearing from sight except as a consort of male deities. That is, until our time, when the “Goddess has come roaring out of her hiding places” (5). According to Kempton, we

sense that something profoundly important is missing in a world [...] in which women themselves are out of touch with their own Shakti, the force of feminine strength and the flavors of feminine love. (Kempton 2013, 5)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In the 1970s, Kempton was part of a group called The New York Radical Feminists.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion on how Hindu Goddesses have been embraced and appropriated by Western feminists, see Hildebeitel and Erndl 2000; Fell McDermott and Kripal 2003.

Although Kempton claimed to be teaching from a nondual perspective (referring to the nondual tantric teachings of Kashmir Śaivism) and often reminded her students that *śakti* is just as present in biologically male bodies as in biologically female bodies, she simultaneously seemed to voice an understanding that the power of the ‘divine feminine’ is intimately connected to women. As a consequence, or perhaps reflecting the wider milieu of contemporary yoga and tantra, most of Kempton’s students were women. She even referred to “goddess practice” as “a form of sacred feminism—not political feminism, but feminism of the soul,” asking the question “what is true feminine power?” (Kempton 2013, 11). Throughout this chapter, I will argue that Kempton’s teachings not only reflected the lineage of Siddha Yoga, spreading her late guru’s ideas on subtle energies to a global *sangha*, but also strived to consolidate her early dedication to radical feminism with a lifelong spiritual commitment.<sup>9</sup>

### 3 Method, Material, and Research Position

As Amanda Lucia (2018) has argued, to hold a position within a powerful leader’s inner-circle engenders social and material benefits—a social fact devotees are often aware of. In Kempton’s case, her investments in the Siddha Yoga organization, even long after having left it, still generated authority linked to the sovereignty of her guru. But unlike Muktananda, who seems to have been, in her words, not only a “great alpha male raised in a patriarchal society” but also fond of dramatic gestures, Kempton used a non-authoritarian teaching style, inviting the experiences and opinions of the students and referring to her own spiritual experiences and failures in an unpretentious, even vulnerable, manner.<sup>10</sup> Although this teaching style might be regarded as ‘empowering’ by the students, the experiences they shared in a group setting almost always reflected on Kempton’s capacity as a teacher to invoke meditative or spiritual states (thus strengthening her authority). Kempton’s teaching style can also be regarded as an example of the tendency in contemporary spirituality to shy away from hierarchies, or replace previous terminology with a new one, while keeping the actual power structures intact (Fedele and Knibbe 2013).<sup>11</sup>

9 A Sanskrit term meaning ‘collection’ or ‘assemblage,’ traditionally referring to a Buddhist community of celibate monks and nuns. This was the term used by Kempton and her students to refer to the community created around her online teachings.

10 Personal e-mail communication with Kempton (April 27, 2020).

11 In Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe’s words, “the fact that ‘spirituality’ appears as a privatized, individual form of religion emphasizing personal choice and freedom makes it harder to discern how and in what ways power structures play a role” (2013, 15–16).

In this chapter, I use a combination of textual material gathered from Kempton's aforementioned books and her online teaching sessions given between 2018 and 2021. During those years, I participated in eight telecourses, numerous online workshops, and one in-studio meditation teacher training with Kempton. As her former student, my research position can be described as a dual one, combining roles as a relative insider and relative outsider in the field. The objectivity of 'insider' researchers is rarely questioned nowadays, since all production of knowledge is understood to be formed through the position, ambition, and interpretation of the researcher (Haraway 1988). Instead of objectivity, I thus prefer to make claims towards transparency and research responsibility. I understand my position not as a liability but as a variation that benefit the production of knowledge in this particular field of research. It also limits the power imbalance and questions the binary opposition between scholars and practitioners (Jensen 2011; McCutcheon 2014).<sup>12</sup> Unlike the scholars of religion who contributed to *Meditation Revolution* (1997), all of whom I quote frequently throughout the chapter, and whom Jeffrey Kripal critiques for having written not a critical treatment of the history of the Siddha Yoga movement but the construction of that history, I have strived towards what Kripal calls a "methodological nondualism" (1999, 236–37), combining the far-sighted overview of the outsider and the nearsighted focus of the insider, in order to offer a thick description without sacrificing the courage to ask difficult questions. I approach the material through the application of a discourse analysis to examine not only how the concepts *śakti* and *kuṇḍalinī* are used but "how identities, relationships, beliefs and knowledge systems are constructed in language use" (Hjelm 2014, 134).

Manuel Vasquez and David Garbin have argued that computer-mediated communications challenge the "metaphysics of presence" (i.e., privileging physical presence and face-to-face interactions as authenticity). This means that authoritative and authentic religious experience is no longer the monopoly of élites dwelling in particular places, but that people skilled in the use of electronic media are able to invent traditions and generate a religious following (Vasquez and Garbin 2016, 695). Although Kempton was in a privileged position dwelling in a particular place (belonging to the Siddha Yoga lineage

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12 For a discussion on 'co-practice as method,' see Wildcroft 2020, 28. For a discussion on being an 'observant participant' more than a participating observer, see Wacquant 2004, 6. Graham Harvey writes: "Researchers who conduct field research seek to understand religious phenomena by participating as fully as possible while observing and reflecting on what people do. More than seeking merely to describe religious activities, they are involved in a process with rich and radical implications for scholarly engagements with religion" (2014, 217).

and living in California, an anglophone spiritual mecca) and not especially skilled in the use of electronic media, her telecourses nonetheless challenged the metaphysics of presence and interrupted previous notions about authentic forms of teaching.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4 Background: the Siddha Yoga Lineage

Although Kempton left her role as Swami in the Siddha Yoga organization in 2002, she never really parted with the teachings of her guru Muktananda, whose picture decorated the walls of her meditation space until the end of her life. While she was an independent teacher, I argue that one cannot easily separate her teachings from those found in Siddha Yoga. Therefore, a brief background of the lineage she devoted her life to is offered here.

I begin with Muktananda's guru, Bhagawan Nityananda. Hagiographical records assert that he spent years doing yogic practice in the Himalayas before he decided to move into the local Śiva-temple of Ganeshpuri where he proceeded to "manifest marvels" (Durgananda 1997, 8), especially catering to casteless indigenous groups (*ādivāsī*) by producing money and food out of thin air. He soon began to attract devotees from nearby Bombay and became known as a *siddha* (perfected one) with the power to affect people through his mere glance. Muktananda first met Nityananda in his early teens while playing with his friends at school. The yogi is said to have entered the schoolyard, walked up to the boy, and embraced him, igniting a longing in the young Muktananda to "become like him, that that would be much better than anything else" (*ibid.*, 27). Six months later, young Muktananda slipped out of the gate of his family compound and took off down the road. Early in his wanderings, he came upon the *āśrama* of Siddharudha Swami, a reputed *śaiva* yogi. This is where he received sannyasa initiation in the Sārasvatī Order of *daśanāmi sampradāya* in the mid-1920s, along with the name Muktananda, meaning "bliss of spiritual liberation" (Jain 2014, 193). In 1930, he began a period of wandering across central and South India, looking for a guru—a search that would eventually

13 Heidi Campbell has suggested the term "digital religion" to characterize the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended and integrated. Using her words, Kempton's students participate in a 'community online'—a technologically mediated gathering of "people around a specific topic or purpose, with some level of commitment to that topic or purpose, and each other" (Campbell 2012, 58). This chapter further ties into research on digital tantra, which includes studying websites of groups and individual actors such as gurus or ritual specialists (Zeiler and Borkatky-Varma 2022, 155).

bring him back to Nityananda. In 1947, Nityananda gave Muktananda *śaktipāta* initiation through a formal ritual, gifting his own wooden sandals to his disciple and instructing him into the secret of the mantra *Oṃ Namaḥ Śivāya*. Nine years passed after the initiation before Muktananda reached what he called a permanent experience of oneness with the absolute. Nityananda died in 1961. According to Muktananda's account, his guru called him to his bedside before leaving his body and transferred the power of the siddha lineage by putting his hand in Muktananda's mouth (in some accounts of the story, all the way down his throat) (Williamson 2010, 108).<sup>14</sup> Muktananda established several ashrams in India and abroad, stating that "Siddha Yoga belongs to everyone" (Durgananda 1997, 51).<sup>15</sup> In 1970, he traveled to the United States for the first time, invited by Nityananda's student Albert Rudolph, better known as Rudi (1928–1973) and aided by Richard Alpert, better known as Ram Dass (1931–2019). He returned in 1974, on what became known as the "Muktananda World Tour" (ibid., 80). It was during these tours that Muktananda invented his trademark move of touching participants at his retreats with a long wand of peacock feathers, enabling him to reach everyone without strain (and according to testimonies, to deliver *śaktipāta* without restriction).

Muktananda began teaching Kashmir Śaivism outside of India around 1975, a philosophical system he claimed described the world the way he saw it, viz. as a manifestation of divine energy (Durgananda 1997, 97).<sup>16</sup> At this time, he also authorized some of his senior disciples to set up Siddha Yoga courses. According to Kempton, those disciples demonstrated that "the *śakti* of the Siddha Yoga lineage could flow through many channels" (ibid., 98).<sup>17</sup> In 1977, Muktananda suffered a major heart attack. In the wake of his recovery, Muktananda began making plans to visit the United States for the third time. On his previous tour, he had been accompanied by a young Indian woman named Malti Shetty (b. 1955) who translated his teachings to English. This time, he also invited her brother, Subhash Shetty (b. 1962), to come along. In 1980, Muktananda gave Subhash sannyasa initiation and the name Swami Nityananda, and the next year Muktananda declared that the eighteen-year-old would become his successor. Six months later, he officially named Malti as co-successor. In 1982, she received initiation into sannyasa and was given the

14 Nityananda had several other distinguished disciples, though the hagiographical records of his life, written from the perspective of Siddha Yoga, claim that they all understood the singular position of Muktananda (Durgananda 1997, 44).

15 Swami Muktananda founded the institutions Gurudev Siddha Peeth in Ganeshpuri, India and the Siddha Yoga Dham Associates (SYDA) Foundation in the United States.

16 For more on Kashmir Śaivism, see Muller-Ortega 1989; Isayeva 1995.

17 Between 1977–1982, Swami Muktananda initiated sixty-five of his disciples (of whom fourteen were women) into the Śārasvatī Order of *daśanāmi sannyasa*.

name Swami Chidvilasananda. The two successors were formally anointed by Muktananda in May 1982 and assumed responsibility for the movement on Muktananda's death in October of that year. In 1985, Nityananda resigned from the guru's seat "after having demonstrated that he did not wish to fulfill the responsibilities of the position" (ibid., 115), leaving Chidvilasananda as the sole head of the Siddha Yoga lineage.<sup>18</sup> As the organization continued to grow, Chidvilasananda met the challenge of reaching a global network of students through innovative teaching varieties like internationally transmitted television speeches, extending the reach of Muktananda's peacock feathers. In the 'Golden Era' of the Siddha Yoga movement, Chidvilasananda would regularly give *śaktipāta* initiation via satellite television to students in as many as ninety Siddha Yoga centers worldwide (ibid., 6). In 1994, at the height of Siddha Yoga's popularity, a journalist of the *New Yorker* magazine wrote an exposé that covered sexual, physical, and financial abuse of power from Muktananda's days up to that year (Williamson 2010, 126).<sup>19</sup> In the aftermath of the publication of the article, whose claims were never officially refuted by the Siddha Yoga organization, Chidvilasananda began to pull back from the public and eventually closed the New York ashram to visitors.<sup>20</sup> Although Siddha Yoga lost both credibility and members, it still exerts considerable influence over the understanding of subtle energy in contemporary spirituality, as many contemporary teachers of yoga and (śaiva-inspired) tantra were once, or are still, associated with Muktananda's lineage.<sup>21</sup> Kempton counts among the most prominent of these teachers.

## 5 The Role of Śaktipāta within Siddha Yoga

Śaktipāta is the most important concept within Siddha Yoga pertaining to the experience of subtle energy. The official understanding within the Siddha Yoga

18 Other sources claimed that Chidvilasananda "denounced and deposed" her brother "for allegedly participating in antinomian sexual rituals" (Jain 2014, 206) and that she publicly described how she punished Nityananda for his behavior, allowing the women he exploited to slap him with a stick (Caldwell 2011, 28).

19 The article quoted Kempton/Durgananda as saying that the accusations were "ridiculous." See <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/16/business/media/sally-kempton-dead.html> (accessed: December 8, 2023).

20 For more on "the Scandal of Siddha Yoga," see Urban 2003, 243–50.

21 By 'śaiva-inspired,' I mean to point out that they do not instruct the sexual techniques of 'neo-tantra' (Urban 2003) but instead teach what they refer to as 'classical tantra' or Kashmir Śaivism. Apart from Lakshman Joo's students, most teachers of Kashmir Śaivism in the United States and Europe are somehow associated with Siddha Yoga.

organization is that Muktananda bestowed his “transmission of power (*śakti*)” on Chidvilasananda (Brooks et al. 1997, xxvi) and that Siddha Yoga is not so much the

ancient teachings of the lineage per se, but the transmissive power of the awakened spiritual energy (*kuṇḍalinī*), which from the standpoint of Siddha Yoga has been passed down from one guru to the next in a clear succession (*paramparā*). (Brooks et al. 1997, xxvi)

*Śaktipāta* and the awakening of *kuṇḍalinī* thus remain one of the distinct traits of Siddha Yoga. Another one is the understanding that *śaktipāta* is not something that is given after years of purificatory practices, but that it instead

*begins* the process of yogic purification and leads one ever deeper into the process of self-purification and awakening [...]. Like an earthquake, the tremors of shaktipat are felt throughout one’s being and across the span of an entire lifetime. (Brooks et al. 1997, xxxvii; emphasis in the original)

This understanding enabled what Kempton called Muktananda’s “profoundly innovative act of open-handed shaktipat” (Durgananda 1997, 5). According to Muktananda himself, during ordinary circumstances a guru can at most give *śaktipāta* to a few properly prepared people at a time. But because of the extraordinary grace of his guru, Muktananda claimed to be capable of giving *śaktipāta* at will (Brooks et al. 1997, 5). The interpretation of ‘grace first, purification after’ was coupled with a belief that the awakening of *kuṇḍalinī* leads to a process of transformation through which all aspects of the personality are brought to a subtle, inner awareness of the divine’s residence in the body (xxxvii), a message that would echo in the teachings of Kempton.

## 6 *Śakti* Awakens (or after *Kuṇḍalinī*—the Laundry)

Although not all of Kempton’s online courses were focused on *śakti*, most of them ended up touching on the subject, as she became increasingly known for her capacity to transmit the ‘grace of the Goddess’ and ability to communicate the mysteries of the ‘divine feminine.’ Despite (or perhaps because of) her great familiarity with the subject, Kempton avoided describing the power that seemed to guide her whole life in any simplified manner. In one class, she said:

We often struggle to define shakti in a way that defines the fullness of her. For instance, many people identify shakti with being female, or at least

female identified. Other people identify shakti with sexual energy. And of course, the female body is a profound expression of shakti, and sexual energy is one way we feel into our own shakti. Others identify shakti with awakened kundalini energy, which is also a real expression of her. I tend to identify shakti as the feeling aspect of the divine, and to often identify her with the sensations that go along with the felt experience of grace, of divine help, of answered prayers. With pulsations of softness that arise in meditation. So, all these ways of seeing her are partly true, but to really understand shakti, we actually have to relax into the recognition that everything we experience, including the physical world, including our thoughts, including our feelings, including every aspect of the culture, is made of shakti. (telecourse teaching session, 2021)

Kempton would call this understanding “devotional contemplative tantra” (2011, xv). As the name suggests, this approach would combine objective witness practices with devotional ones, in what Kempton referred to as a “fusion of knowing and loving,” which was “tantric in that it recognizes the world and ourselves as a tapestry woven of one single intelligent energy” (ibid.). Kempton encouraged her students to go beyond utilitarian attitudes to meditation in order to let the practice reveal “the real sweetness inside” (10). She would speak of that sweetness as the ‘juice’ of practice, which she associated with śakti or the presence of the Goddess, and which she invited through the dual strategy of “seeing meditation as an experiment and giving myself permission to play” (17). This juiciness was placed in opposition to feelings of dryness, which Kempton associated with a lack of devotion. Perhaps this focus on devotion is why Kempton so often brought her students to the focal point of the “inner heart,” which she located slightly to the right of the physical heart, at the centre of the chest (18). She would describe this ‘energetic’ location as a “world of sensations, love and clarity” (20). Meditating on the heart, Kempton reported experiencing

subtle sensations of being touched from within by a loving energy, a presence that moved and flowed, sometimes very light and subtle, sometimes thrillingly intense. (Kempton 2011, 20)

She would on occasion refer to this presence as “the inner beloved” (Kempton 2011, 20), who pulled her attention inwards, making it almost impossible for her to resist going into meditation. Although it is unclear if she equated this presence with śakti, she spoke of the latter in a similar manner, urging her students to follow the lead of the subtle energy in meditation. In *Meditation for the Love of It*, she recounted how a friend asked for advice regarding her

contemplative practice, since her heart felt dry. Kempton suggested that she focus on the place in the body where she could feel energy, which eventually moved the friend into “a pasture made of emerald-colored light” (ibid., 164). Kempton reflected on the incident, writing:

At that moment, I felt as if I had been handed the ultimate secret of meditation. ‘Of course,’ I thought. ‘Find out where your inner energy is playing and let it guide you.’ Let the subtle energy in your body determine how you meditate. That way, the kundalini, the spiritual energy, the awakened Presence within you, will get behind whatever you do and impel it forward. (Kempton 2011, 164)

She acknowledged that this was in fact one of the ‘core instructions’ she received in her training with Muktananda. According to Kempton, tantric traditions affirm that one of the ways you know that you have awakened *kuṇḍalinī* is that meditation begins to unfold naturally. This, she emphasized, happens differently for everyone as the unfolding is often so subtle that one has to be attentive to attune to it (Kempton 2011, 164). As mentioned in the introduction, this mundane and gentle approach separates Kempton from some other narrators on the unfolding of *kuṇḍalinī*, and perhaps even from the otherworldly experiences of Muktananda (as described in his *Play of Consciousness* [1994]). In her view, *kuṇḍalinī* was neither overwhelming nor dangerous, but instead Kempton described that reputed force as a mother she would take for granted because “She” was always there (2011, 165). In order to recognize that motherly, subtle energy, Kempton would encourage her students to look for the pulsations through which she believed *kuṇḍalinī* communicated. This understanding of *kuṇḍalinī* or *śakti* as pulsation is inspired by the Spanda school of Kashmir Śaivism which depicts the universe as comprising of vibration (Dyczkowski 1987). One of Kempton’s telecourses, “Surfing Reality: The Transformative Journey and the Yoga of Divine Energy,” was dedicated to the primary text of the Spanda school. In a meditation session held in that course, she said:

Mother, show me your liberating shakti. Please, show me your power to take my awareness inside, to use your power of outgoing attention so that I can turn attention around and really see you manifesting as my entire inner world. Please, show me your liberating face. And you might say: I honor this power which gives me life, this life force within my body, this amazing power that is creating thoughts and ideas, images, and emotions,

I honor you, as this power. Please, show me your liberating face. (telecourse teaching session, 2016)<sup>22</sup>

This quote highlights an understanding of *śakti* as not only the life force within the body but as the entire inner world. Kempton would often speak of the mind as made of the Goddess and encourage her students to understand their erratic thoughts as the creative movement of the *śakti* instead of treating them as enemies to meditation. “Once you begin to venerate your mind as the Goddess,” she would say, “it starts acting a lot different” (telecourse teaching session, 2021). She attributed this understanding to Muktananda and would often tell the story of how he changed her approach to and quality of meditation by teaching her that the mind is no other than the Goddess of consciousness (Kempton 2011, 147). The quote above also emphasizes the idea of the Goddess as having two faces: one “*mayic* face which, creates separation and identification with the small self” and one “liberating face, which dissolves duality” (175; emphasis in the original). Kempton would lean on this understanding as she suggested that *śakti* was a playful but ultimately beneficial force that one could communicate with in a mundane and personal manner, like talking to a dear friend. As part of this communicational approach, she advised her students to invoke *śakti* in meditation using a prayer which could be simple or more elaborate, proposing the petition,

O Kundalini Shakti, please show me how you want to meditate today [...]. Mother Kundalini, you are the very foundation of inner experience. You shine like the sun within my body and purify the mind. Please be gracious to me. (Kempton 2011, 176)

Kempton was also a skilful storyteller and her renderings of the mythological narratives about the Hindu Goddesses made them come alive in the imagination of her students. In *Awakening Shakti*, she combined her gift of engaging narration with meditation exercises as she introduced her audience to feminine deities, whom she understood as aspects of *kuṇḍalinī*. Although her descriptions of the Goddesses referenced traditional sources, they were also highly adapted to contemporary, non-Indian readers.<sup>23</sup> Kempton understood *śakti* as the animating force in all living beings and believed that practitioners,

<sup>22</sup> The course was recorded in 2016, but I enrolled in it through Kempton's website in 2018.

<sup>23</sup> For example, she referenced *Ānandalahiri*, *Tantrāloka* and the *Devisūktā* (Kempton 2013, 361–64).

regardless of their gender, could identify with a specific deity in order to awaken its energetic qualities within themselves. But she simultaneously suggested that traits of particular Goddesses could be spotted in certain women. For example, in the chapter on Lalitā Tripurā Sundarī she wrote:

Cleopatra was definitely a Lalita woman, though the conditions of her time brought her to grief in the end. Arianna Huffington, media and political powerhouse, has attributes of the Lalita woman, as does TV personality Diane Sawyer, who from the beginning of her career has been both independent yet supported by powerful men. (Kempton 2013, 286)

As she understood *śakti* essentially as power, it is likely that Kempton thought of Goddess-practice as perhaps especially empowering for women. In *Awakening Shakti*, Kempton introduced her thoughts on “sacred feminism,” which she believed would “take us beyond the association of femininity with gender and show us that the very life-force of the universe is the feminine face of spirit” (Kempton 2013, 11). Being a sacred feminist meant to “be a lover of the feminine face of God” and to “see and love the world as sacred dance” (ibid.). Such ideas were prevalent in 1970s eco-feminism and still thrive in women circles of contemporary spirituality today.<sup>24</sup> The promise of the practice, according to Kempton, was the following:

As you invoke the Goddess in each of these forms, she will show up for you in new ways, unveiling herself within you and outside you, surprising you, loving you up, giving you unexpected gifts, disturbing you, and showing you how the manifestation of Shakti can awaken you to your own heart. (Kempton 2013, 23)

Communities were formed around Kempton’s teachings, in which students could not only share their spiritual experiences and get them validated but partake in each other’s daily lives, as they were understood to be infused with *śakti*. Through an email list created temporarily for the duration of the course, students offered each other spiritual advice and book recommendations, as they shared their medical struggles and relationship problems. Often, they would describe how they were being visited by or became infused with *śakti*: an experience which was narrated as simultaneously terrifying and desirable. The promise of this energy of the Goddess in this context was that ‘she’ would

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24 See, e.g., Starhawk 1979; Sjöö and Mor 1987.

transform the practitioner, a process that seemed to entail a shift in the student's personality. One participant described *śakti* as a subtle force moving through her body in the night causing her to feel fear and panic but which, as soon as she surrendered to it, reconciled aspects of her personality, causing what she expressed as a radical shift.<sup>25</sup> Because Kempton's teaching style was so heart-centered, many students tended to experience an 'opening' of the heart and encounter *śakti* as a compassionate, liberating, and purifying force. According to the testimonies of the students in the tele-courses, this 'opening of the heart'—at times interpreted as a healing process—allowed the practitioner to move more skilfully and intuitively through their mundane life. They often described feelings of being given destined lessons and granted different forms of liberating experiences, sometimes by a particular form of the Goddess. In conversations, and in the overall understanding and experience of *śakti* among the students, 'she' appeared to be depicted somewhere in-between fierce dominatrix, motherly protectress, and irresistible lover. To Kempton's students, the Goddess was in charge, and their *kuṇḍalinī* experiences were not those of ambitious practitioners forcing an inner energy ascension, but ones which encourages them to 'trust the process and the unfolding.' A common denominator among the students seemed to be that they were 'householders,' intent on integrating their understanding of spirituality into their daily lives. One of them described the experience of living with an awakened *kuṇḍalinī* while parenting children: turning, as she said, triggers into practice and undergoing great spiritual openings while squeezing in a load of laundry. Kempton's students understood *kuṇḍalinī* as an aid in the process of parenting as well as the force which orchestrated whatever life circumstances they found themselves in and which pushed them to the limits of their capacity. Although *śakti* was recognized as everything, she seemed to be most intensely present in the hardships and challenges of daily life. But there were also students who expressed that their experience of *kuṇḍalinī* was making it difficult to engage in a 'normal' life as they would be unexpectedly drawn into meditation by what one student called a "visceral magnetic power." Numerous students expressed that grace was pouring through the classes, and that this grace was synonymous with the presence of *śakti* (what Kempton sometimes referred to as being in the "Shakti vortex") but also the capacity of Kempton to hold or mediate that energy. As one student healed from a medical diagnosis during one of the telecourses, she credited Kempton for having "pulled some

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25 All quotes or descriptions found in this section are gathered from email lists created for the telecourses given between 2018 and 2021. No further details are provided in order to protect the students' anonymity.

strings with Lalita” reversing the wheel of her destiny. In conclusion, whether the students were seemingly challenged or blessed, all was interpreted as the grace of the Goddess within this community. In light of this, Kempton’s teachings and her particular portrayal of the concepts of *kuṇḍalinī* and *śakti* could be understood as addressing eternal human issues of despair and disease, while perhaps catering especially to women’s longing for a female teacher and connection with the ‘feminine face of God.’

## 7 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This short investigation does not in any way aspire to be an exhaustive examination of the experiences of *śakti* and *kuṇḍalinī* among Kempton’s multitude of students, or of her multi-layered understanding of these concepts. Instead, it is an attempt to begin to chart the usages and understandings of concepts like *kuṇḍalinī*, *śakti* and the ‘divine feminine’ within contemporary spirituality, especially in relation to yoga and tantra. Kempton exerted significant influence on this particular field during the last decades of her life, not least due to the online availability of her teachings. Because she was seen as a spiritual role model for many, research on her teachings is essential for understanding the ideas and practices circulating in the field. However, also the issues she did not speak of deserve attention.

One of those things were the accusations of sexual abuse voiced against Muktananda after his death in 1982 as well as how these allegations were associated with his seemingly unending capacity to grant *śaktipāta* (Caldwell 2001; Williamson 2010). Through my private correspondence with Kempton on this issue, it became clear that she understood *śakti* to “operate at a level that is not necessarily subject to human ideas, about morality, ethics, and outcomes,” reminding me of how Jeffrey Kripal describes the “transmoral mystic,” writing that there is “something about spiritual charisma that is explosive, something that honors no stable personal boundaries” (2017, 81–82).<sup>26</sup> Whether or not Kempton perceived there was a conflict between her contemporary approach to *śakti* and Muktananda’s understanding of tantra, she did not address it. Perhaps the paradox between the *śakti* that was beyond human understanding and the *śakti* who would offer motherly support permitted Kempton’s students to reconcile ideas and experiences of a force that was simultaneously

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26 Personal e-mail communication with Kempton (April 27, 2020).

described as that which brought their lives ‘into balance’ and the ultimately destructive power of transformation and liberation.

As a young feminist, Kempton wrote what would become an iconic piece, called “Cutting Loose: A Private View of the Women’s Uprising” (1970). In the article, Kempton “took aim at her father, her husband and her own complicity in the regressive gender roles of the era,” concluding: “It is hard to fight an enemy, who has outposts in your head.”<sup>27</sup> Of course, Kempton spoke of internalized misogyny and the hardships of cutting loose from patriarchal structures. But I am sure the irony was not lost on her that she struggled to liberate herself from societal expectations only to find herself in an organization where the word of Baba (an endearing word for father) was irrefutable and where her guru would literally (according to her own testimonies) have an outpost in her head.<sup>28</sup> In lack of sources, we can only speculate about how Kempton continued to be influenced by Muktananda and Siddha Yoga after she left the organization.<sup>29</sup> What we do know is that she continued to praise her former guru, while she taught widely about Goddesses who were warriors and protectresses and on the “danger of underestimating the feminine” (Kempton 2013, 64). This, combined with the fact that she became known as a source of support for many female practitioners in the field of contemporary yoga and tantra, points to how she aspired to combine her feminist ideals with a lifelong commitment to spiritual practice.

The way Kempton communicated, and perhaps even transmitted, *śakti* through conversation and online meditations could be described as breaking with the traditional ways of Siddha Yoga, allowing for a less authoritarian student-teacher relationship. But I would argue that her teaching methods are better understood as a continuation of the tradition, which was always aspiring to adapt to the current world—as seen, for example, in Chidvilasananda’s internationally transmitted television speeches. The continuation can be further exemplified by Kempton’s encouragement of her students to share their spiritual experiences, whether in real life during a meditation training or on

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27 See <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/16/business/media/sally-kempton-dead.html> (accessed: August 25, 2023).

28 Kempton would often tell stories of how Muktananda showed up in her dreams or in meditation to transfer a specific state of consciousness or change the quality of her thoughts. See, e.g., Kempton 2011, 63.

29 Lola Williamson has written about how the Siddha Yoga organization warned their members not to engage with the accusations of abuse against Muktananda as it would “detract from their sadhana,” and how individuals that left the organization were aware that its “powerful lawfirms [...] can harass its critics not only with expensive lawsuits, but have in the past violently assaulted its critics” (Williamson 2010, 130, 128).

the telecourses' mailing list, resembling the practice in Siddha Yoga in which devotees shared their experiences in magazines like *Guruvani*.<sup>30</sup> According to Kempton, the stories in the magazine revealed “the character of spiritual experience in Siddha Yoga: arising spontaneously, and connected directly to the grace, the transmission of energy, from the guru” (Durgananda 1997, 57)—a statement that could have been written by a student in one of her courses. The experiences of *śakti* among her students also resemble those described by Muktananda's students. In Kempton's own words:

That sense of release, of transformation, of a new life beginning, is so characteristic of the experience of shaktipat that it can be found in the reminiscences of Siddha Yoga students from swami Muktananda's day to the present. (Durgananda 1997, 88–89)

Similarly, the idea of purification after (instead of before) *kuṇḍalinī*, which was so important in Siddha Yoga, lived on in Kempton's teachings, as exemplified by the experiences of her students. Kempton addressed this phenomenon in *Meditation Revolution*, when she writes that

since a major aspect of sadhana with an awakened *kuṇḍalinī* involves spontaneous purification, seekers sometimes faced long-buried tendencies thrown up by the awakened *śakti* in order to bring them to awareness and expel them. (Durgananda 1997, 90)

Even here, Kempton pointed out how the processes happened “right in the middle of family life” and quoted one Siddha Yoga devotee who said that “sadhana was all about how I reacted when my husband left the newspaper on the floor or when my son acted like a typical adolescent” (Durgananda 1997, 91) foreboding the contemporary testimonies of her students. Kempton's approach to *kuṇḍalinī* also echoed Muktananda's teaching that her awakening “is safe and productive,” at least when it occurs through “the grace of a guru who has himself completed the spiritual journey” (*ibid.*). Even though Kempton was often portrayed as an independent and somewhat rebellious teacher, all these examples underline that she very much stayed in line with the Siddha Yoga tradition. This notwithstanding, she added distinct flavors of second-wave feminism and a tendency to psychologize spiritual processes. Understanding Kempton as a product of her education—be it a journalist, a feminist, or a

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30 An annual magazine first published in 1964 and later known as *Shree Gurudev-Vani*.

student of Muktananda—is not intended to rob her of her individual agency but simply to acknowledge (what she always acknowledged) that she was deeply impacted by her liberal upbringing and profoundly influenced by her guru. Perhaps, her example can also serve to showcase that there are strands of continuity, and not simply idiosyncratic fragmentation, within contemporary spirituality. Additionally, it indicates that Siddha Yoga continues to influence the global networks of yoga and tantra.

This chapter is just a small contribution to a yet relatively unexamined field. Further research is needed to scrutinize the use and understanding of the terms *śakti* and *kuṇḍalinī* in the field of contemporary lineage-based yoga and tantra, especially in the emerging field of online tantra. As Kempton passed away during the writing of this chapter, it is my hope that it will, in some small way, contribute to the understanding of the work she dedicated her life to and for which so many of her students are deeply grateful.

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## A Pilgrimage of Astral Energies and a French Yogi in the Americas

*Adrián Muñoz*

When Serge Raynaud de la Ferrière (1916–1962) and his wife Louise Baudin (1912–2013) arrived in South America from Europe in the mid-twentieth century, they probably were not fully aware that this journey would become a watershed in the history of yoga on the continent.<sup>1</sup> Although nearly non-existent in North American and European historiographies of global yogic organizations, de la Ferrière was a pivotal character in the landscape of new religious movements in Latin America long before the counterculture made an impact outside of the United States. He developed a system under the name of Yoghism, which quickly took roots in various Latin American countries, and which had a distinct flavor, since it was not merely a continuation of other yogic (mainly anglophone) trends. As we will see, Yoghism is heavily based on transcendent concepts, although its founder sometimes was reluctant to label it as an unequivocal spiritual school. His influence and lasting impact cannot be overestimated. To the best of my knowledge, no study has been specifically devoted to scrutinizing de la Ferrière's writings, except for partisan exegesis from the brotherhood's followers.

Serge Raynaud travelled across the continents and founded the Gran Fraternidad Universal (Universal Great Brotherhood; henceforth GFU) in Venezuela in the late 1940s. This Brotherhood quickly opened branches in other Latin American countries and became one of the most successful centers for the dissemination of yoga in the region. The organization still operates nowadays through several different derivative branches and associations. Despite the unquestionable success of this organization, it has received scant attention from scholars working on modern yoga or global esotericism. Specialists who have written on this topic mainly come from the discipline of sociology and approach this group from the point of view of contemporary religions (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2015) or as part of alternative therapies (Sáizar

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1 I would like to thank Pamela Siegel for fact-checking and correcting valuable information concerning both historical context of the Great Universal brotherhood (GFU) and Serge Raynaud's biodata. I also thank Borayin Larios for making useful suggestions.

and Bordes 2018). Although valuable, the previous work has done few in-depth inspections of the literature produced by de la Ferrière and his followers. Usually, these assessments have provided critiques and historical summaries of the brotherhood and his charismatic leader (Siegel 2014; Simões 2018) or have discussed their role in the reconfigurations of religious identities in urban centers in Latin America (García Medina and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2012). Very few scholars on this topic have come from the field of yoga studies proper, so there is still ample space for probing into uncontested and non-problematized issues around the evolution and innovation of yoga outside of the conventional contexts of discussion.

Indeed, drawing heavily from Indic philosophies, yogic, and tantric concepts—mixed with Kabbalah and Christian imagery—filled de La Ferrière's system, as best exemplified in his influential *Yug Yoga Yoghismo: Una matesis de psicología* (1969; henceforth YYY). Notions such as energy, *śakti*, *kuṇḍalinī*, or power are drawn and refashioned from 'Eastern' lore; their refashioning responds to strategies of adjusting ideas to a specific territoriality. In his vision, Latin America was seen as the new spiritual center of the world. In other words, not only did de La Ferrière take freely from diverse cultural matrixes (Yoga, the Bible, Freemasonry, and more) but also adjusted his thoughts to fit a Latin American audience.

While Yoghism reflects some ideas that were circulated within esoteric groups, it also shows features of its own, as well as an allegedly Latin American focus. An insightful look at GFU's literature can be beneficial to understand the wider spectrum of yoga reception and innovation in the modern world, as well as transregional ramifications of esoteric practice. In contrast to the later phases of consolidation and expansion of the brotherhood he founded, in this chapter I am especially interested in de la Ferrière's exegetical exercise of yogic tropes and how he navigated the complex interplay of subtle energies between and across the micro and the macrocosm. Fortuitously reminiscent of his own constant traveling, notions of movement and pilgrimage are recurrent in his teachings, implying transitioning from base to purer states of being, but also through sacred spaces inside the body and in the physical world. I will discuss de la Ferrière's theories on yoga and subtle categories through his own writings, with special emphasis on his classic YYY, which can be considered his magnum opus. A massive corpus, this composition expounds different aspects of de la Ferrière's yogic vision, a complex system that integrates subtle and material realities and forces, which links the macro- and the microcosmos, and provides instructions on how yoga is to be developed in a new era of spiritual awakening in the promising lands of Latin America.

A brief preliminary insight into the man and the brotherhood he founded is necessary before venturing into his words and ideas.

## 1 Snapshot of a Mystical Entrepreneur

De la Ferrière was born Serge Justinien Maria Raynaud in Paris, France in 1916, but moved at an early age to Belgium. Serge was subjected to constant displacement since his early childhood due to the loss of his mother when he was still a child, his father's incessant re-locations, and his own five-year military service. Movement would become part of Raynaud's destiny.

He is said to have studied a degree in Mine Engineering and Architecture in Belgium, most likely in Brussels. He also allegedly earned several qualifications (advanced studies and doctorates) in various disciplines (among others, in medicine, philosophy, and art) from different institutions in Europe (Paris, Venice, Brussels, Ghent, Leuven, Amsterdam, and more), both before and after his journey to the American continent; however, there is a lack of evidence for most of these claims (Siegel 2014, 46–116). Apparently, his only proven trade before becoming a yogi and prophet was that of a draftsman.

Later in life, he took on the *nom de plume* 'de la Ferrière,'<sup>2</sup> although it is not clear when exactly. It seems that he adopted this appellation as a sign of claimed nobility. Serge Raynaud alluded to a shire by that name, but his widow explained that "there is no such county, just a bunch of small, old stone houses" (Siegel 2014, 279). With claims to numerous academic credentials and certifications, he became an astrologer, an initiatic philosopher, a parapsychologist, and a prolific author. He usually merged all these disciplines with his interests in metaphysics, magnetism, Taoism, yoga, and meditation. As most esotericists and occultists, he also often retained a Christian symbolic background.

Through convoluted astrological computations, Serge Raynaud studied the date of his own birth in the light of Jesus Christ's traditional birth date and concluded that he was destined to become the Messiah and avatar of the New Age of Aquarius, the beginning of which also marked the transition from the Kali to the Satya Yuga according to Hindu cosmology (González Reimann 2014, 5). Even though he did not literally claim to be the avatar of Aquarius, the way in which he esoterically explained the correlations among different energies, categories, and names point to this conclusion with little room for doubt, as his disciples all considered him to be so (cf. Marcelli 1995 [1987]; Soto 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> In this work, I will use both Raynaud (his real surname) and de la Ferrière (his adopted, 'professional' signature) interchangeably.

In an early interview in Venezuela, he called himself the “spiritual missionary of Aquarius” (Siegel 2014, 56). He is likewise commonly addressed as *El Gran Maestre* (Grand Maester)<sup>3</sup> in GFU’s literature and hagiographies.

In 1941, in France, Raynaud met Louise Baudin, the woman who became his long-time companion and co-worker. Facing economic distress in a war-stricken Europe, the couple fabricated and sold perfumes in the French countryside. They married in 1944 in Loire, France, and separated in 1949 in New York (but never formally divorced). Raynaud became involved with other women—who often were his secretaries—during his life. Louise authored a controversial book years after Raynaud’s death, in which she gives numerous details of the mystic’s personality and dealings with the world (Baudin-Raynaud 1991).<sup>4</sup> It was also in 1949 that Raynaud was invited to New York for a peace conference and, amid unclear circumstances, was denied visa for re-entry in Venezuela. Thus, he decided to go on a long journey to Australia and Asia. Louise returned to the brotherhood’s ashram in Venezuela, but the *Maestre* was never to come back to South America.

It was in 1947 that Serge Raynaud envisioned his mission of traveling to South America, where the dawn of a new spiritual age was promised (I will come back to this later). In a journey to Burma in 1950, he lodged in the House of the Pilgrims of the Theosophical Society. It is claimed that in this trip he was recognized by a Buddhist representative of the Dalai Lama as the awaited avatar of numerous auspicious divine personalities (Siegel 2014, 250). This is when Raynaud probably adopted the moniker ‘Mahatma Chandra-Bala.’<sup>5</sup> He also spent time in Australia from October 1950 to June 1951, and from January through September of 1952. Additionally, he traveled to Japan, India, Tibet, and Sri Lanka in 1953, when he allegedly but dubiously climbed Mount Kailas in the Himalayas. Real or fictitious, these pilgrimages strengthened de la Ferrière’s aura of a mystical man of the world.

In 1954, he came back to France and took residence in Nice, at the French Riviera. Raynaud continued his activities as an astrologer and published in magazines and often participated in radio shows. It was during these years that

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3 This honorific title is meant to heighten de la Ferrière’s prominence within the spiritual hierarchy developed by him. He usually copied and adapted orders and degrees from Freemasonry and similar groups. ‘Maestre’ (which I translate as ‘maester’) is different from ‘maestro’ (‘teacher’); the former is exclusively employed in esoteric circles.

4 The original publication date is uncertain. The information in the book belies most of the prophet’s statements. In consequence, many of the GFU’s leaders often condemned the book as a wicked libel against their master.

5 From the Sanskrit ‘Great Soul.’ Presumably, the other compound refers to the force (*bala*) of the moon (*candra*), although it could also be construed as lunar son or ‘boy’ (*bāla*).

he claimed to have acquired multiple certifications and academic credentials, notably doctorates in disciplines such as psychology, social sciences, philosophy, theology, and hermetic philosophy, as well as a legion of honorific titles. As already pointed out, there is no convincing evidence whatsoever for these claims. Raynaud died of a heart attack in 1962, in Nice.

## 2 The Americas, the Age of Aquarius, and Yoga<sup>6</sup>

In 1946, Serge Raynaud and Louise were serious about their quest for spiritual growth and tried to obtain a sponsorship for a research project to be conducted in South America. A documentary on the Peruvian Incas had ignited their curiosity for what seemed an exotic, enchanted land. The couple, however, failed to obtain the sponsorship. Notwithstanding, they decided to go to Peru and so, in 1947, they undertook their journey, first to the United States and then through Guatemala. However, due to some migration technicalities, they decided to redirect to Venezuela instead. Once established in El Limón, Maracay, a locality about eighty km from Caracas, the Venezuelan capital, they founded the first ashram of the GFU in 1948. The French couple had the support of José Manuel Estrada, a local, for the founding of the GFU. Estrada was to become a major (and contentious) figure in the future history of the fraternity.

That specific moment was deemed astrologically auspicious. According to de la Ferrière's computations, March 21, 1948, marked the transition to the Age of Aquarius and therefore the beginning of a new era. Previously, Mount Kailas in South Asia had functioned as the spiritual summit of the world. Now the spiritual center had to be relocated to South America, because "it is destined to the brightest of futures; it is the eternal repetition of history" and will be "a cultural renovation" (YYY 190).<sup>7</sup> All mysteries were to be revealed in this most auspicious of times: "We are going to try to lift the sacred Veil, for the time to prepare the Ways toward the New Age has come" (Raynaud 1972, 57). This was the beginning of a whole new era that entailed the conjoining of all initiatic and esoteric trends of both the East and the West. This coalescence was to awaken a new consciousness of peace, philanthropy, and spiritual growth. The emphasis on peace is not to be overlooked. One conventional greeting among GFU members is 'Pax' (peace).

6 For a fuller discussion of the role of Latin America and esoteric syncretism in New Age yoga, see also Siegel forthcoming.

7 All translations from Spanish are my own.

We must bear in mind that Serge Raynaud was born during World War I and had to witness the hardships of World War II. Dark promises of an ominous near future were imminent and in the minds of thousands of people. De la Ferrière attempted to spread his message while traveling to different countries. His followers sympathized with his beliefs and disseminated them. This helped the rapid spread of the GFU's ideas in various Latin American destinations. Raynaud did not stay for long in Venezuela. However, from this country the GFU soon spread to Peru, Chile, Colombia, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Mexico. And, in the 1950s, when de la Ferrière was traveling around Asia, the GFU experienced multiple ruptures but managed to outlive the *Maestre*.

I have been using terms such as New Age or esotericism in a rather loose way. I cannot here devote space to explain the nuances between these and other related categories. Indeed, to define New Age can prove a difficult task, as it is a category that encompasses such a diversity of beliefs and practices that there seems to be no homogeneity whatsoever. There is no single doctrine, founder, corpus of texts, or fixed body of practices. We can perhaps understand New Age as a kind of huge web of sundry spiritual movements and therapeutical currents with a relative affinity, but also divergence (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2018, 421). Within New Age, one can locate: adaptations of Eastern ideas; the belief in UFOs; spiritual inclinations, but a general rejection of institutionalized religions; shamanism; an advocacy for the human potential; astrology; non-standard Christian imagery; and so forth. Sometimes, Western esotericism is characterized by a tangled re-definition of the relationship between the 'East' and the 'West,' where imaginations of yoga and meditation become common tropes (Strube 2020). The New Age milieu also often resorts to subtle-body notions, which sometimes speak of the way in which the social, the individual, and the ecological concur (Samuel 2013, 251).

Thus, a common theme is the belief in subtle and gross energies than can be accessed and channeled. The methodology for this may vary vastly. To a great extent, Yoghism—de la Ferrière's system—functions as an alternative therapy in that it seeks to carry out a transformation in the individual:

alternative therapies conceive of themselves as agents of radical transformation. [...] The promises they make depend both on the therapy in question and the expectations of those who take them up, for while some alternative therapies (such as reiki and spiritual healing) deal incontestably with an intermeshed physical-spiritual reality, others (such as yoga or massage) can be explained and practised in ways that either emphasize or de-emphasize their spiritual dimensions. (Johnston and Barcan 2006, 26)

Thus, de la Ferrière's influential *YYY* is usually perceived as a work that deals with integral health (Soto 2013, 217). Consequently, *cakras* are defined by the French master as "nervo-fluidic centers" and the "emanation of the endocrine plexuses" (*YYY* 48–50). The endocrine system and the central nervous system are indeed relevant aspects of the actuality of the experiences that impinge on subtle body practices (Samuel 2013, 252). In this sense, the function of hatha-yoga according to Raynaud is the controlling of the organism and the spirit.

The possibility of de-emphasizing aspects of related and sometimes conflicting tendencies was present in the GFU. In his Circular Letter No. 37 (dated March 21, 1960), de la Ferrière bemoans the fact that the adepts are devoted only to the religious aspect, mixing mysticism, religions, spiritualism, occultism, magic, esoteria, and initiation (Siegel 2014, 359) instead of also advocating rational and scientific activities. This seems to have been a constant and growing tension in him: trying to marry 'Eastern' transcendental teachings with 'Western' material objectives. Concerned by an excessive esoteric drive from the designated authority of the institution in his absence from the main ashram in Venezuela, de la Ferrière wrote several letters to correct and try to amend the administration of the GFU. He wanted the GFU to be presented to the world as a prestigious, *avant garde* organization which could incorporate an increasing number of intellectuals and scientists into the brotherhood. In part, this is the reason why he claimed to hold such an impressive number of academic titles, although their legitimacy has proven to be non-genuine and mostly invented (Gonzalez Reimann 2014, 5).

In the context of Serge Raynaud and the GFU, the whole worldview may well fit into what John Bramble, on a different case, has called Metaphysical Orientalism (Bramble 2013). Whereas Latin America was envisioned as the most fitting place for the crystallization of Yoghism, a strong 'oriental' and mystified aura prevailed and embedded Raynaud's entire discourse. Empowering the body and heightening the soul are processes often treated in Yoghism literature. Indeed, the amalgamation of ideas and the resorting to fabled lands was in accord with broader New Age sensibilities and, within this scenario, teachings about the body-and-mind energies played an important role in de la Ferrière's own teachings. Commenting on the subtle body ideology, Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston write:

Indic, Chinese and for that matter 'New Age' subtle-body practices can also be seen as part of a wider range of concepts and phenomena, including soul and spirit concepts, synaesthesia and other apparently anomalous sensory processes, 'shamanic' forms of healing and religion, and non-dualistic modes of understanding more generally. (Samuel and Johnston 2013, 7)

The category of the ‘subtle body,’ at least in English, became prominent—if not first coined—due to a host of writers directly or indirectly influenced by the Theosophical construal of the Sanskrit phrase *sūkṣmaśarīra* as such. It is important to bear in mind that “the Theosophists developed their concepts further on the basis of psychic and clairvoyant insights, and their usage of Sanskrit terminology differs in many respects from the meanings of these terms in their Indian context” (Samuel and Johnston 2013, 2). The same happens with Raynaud’s terminology.

### 3 *Yug Yoga Yoghism and the Yogic Synthesis*

In Raynaud’s Yoghism, notions such as energy, Prana (*prāṇa*), Shakti (*śakti*), Kundalini (*kuṇḍalinī*), or power are drawn and refashioned from ‘Eastern’ lore and this modification responds to strategies of adjusting ideas to a specific cultural and geographical context. This model conceives the mind-body complex as an energetic field to work upon and one that also maps the energies of the universe. Indeed, “[a]s a form of embodiment, subtle bodies slip not only between sharp matter-spirit dualisms, but also among concepts of soul, spirit and self” (Samuel and Johnston 2013, 4). In Yoghism, there is a strong reliance on conceptions of subtle energies at work on different levels of existence. Subtle body practices are said to seek an improvement in the operation of the subtle body while at the same time enhancing the sense of identity and self (Samuel 2013, 252)—something that Yoghism claims to be able to achieve.

De la Ferrière constantly invoked these concepts and pointed toward a deep, inner transformation through his yogic system. He devoted many passages in his oeuvre to promote techniques directed to channeling the vital energy known as *prana*. As with other New Age movements, de la Ferrière’s teachings were based on the idea of the betterment of both the individual and society. To achieve this, a set of techniques was aimed at stimulating various energies within the body.

It cannot be sufficiently stressed that these are de la Ferrière’s own formulations. They are not necessarily faithful observations of arguments from Sanskrit treatises, which he dubiously did not read (at least in the original language). The fact that de la Ferrière retains Indic vocabulary can mislead, so it is important to remain cautious. This is also the reason I have decided to keep the terms as they appear in Raynaud’s writings instead of trying to correct them.

Drawing heavily from Indic philosophies, de la Ferrière’s system was filled with yogic and tantric concepts, as best exemplified in his influential *YYY*, a work heavily packed with yoga, Kabbalah, astrology, and Christian imagery. Published in 1969, *YYY* is a massive composition of over 600 pages. It is divided

into two parts: (I) 'Experience' and (II) 'The Yoga System (its practices)'. The writing of this work had begun in the 1950s, during his trip to Australia, and completed around seven years later, in France (Siegel 2014, 50, 343). Originally penned in French and translated into Spanish by David Ferriz Olivares (one of de la Ferrière's closest early followers and initiates), the book was published by Editorial Diana, a Mexican publishing house whose catalogue included numerous titles on spirituality, self-help, consciousness, esoterica, and so forth.

The full title on the cover page reads: *YUG YOGA YOGHISMO. Una matesis de psicología (con vocabulario e índice de materias)* (Yug Yoga Yoghism: A Mathesis of Psychology [With Vocabulary and Index]). The authorship is ascribed to "Mahatma Chandra Bala Dr. Serge Raynaud de la Ferriere." The cover title itself draws out attention to a couple of things. The author's name is given with all the honorific titles, including an academic (Dr.) and a spiritual one (Mahatma Chandra Bala)—which is in and of itself interesting. Part of de la Ferrière's agenda was to marry the rational mind with the spiritual one. Of course, this was in accord with other esoteric trends of the time, which were eager to merge tradition and science, the East and the West, as well as the gross and the subtle.

There are two or three terms in the title that call for clarification and pondering. "Yoghism" is the name he coins for his own system and which I will shortly explain. Instead of referring to the Indic word for 'aeon' or 'age' (*yuga*), here 'yug' seems to suggest the Sanskrit root *yuj*, 'to join, unite, arrange, employ,' but being used in peculiar ways. The goal seems to "be YUG" (YYY 127), which implies that Yug is a state of spiritual perfection. In one of the Mexican lineages, Yoghism is construed as "an integral, transversal, and transcendental model" (Soto 2013, 215). De la Ferrière was very insistent in underlying that Yoghism was not a Hindu or Indic school, calling it instead his "personal study" of all yogic traditions (YYY 35). In his view, it was his systematization of a doctrine but not the foundation of a new philosophical school. He explained that the ramification of yoga has led to division, and this must be corrected (36), for yoga must not become a sect, as, he claimed, the defenders of Raja Yoga would have it (Swami Vivekananda's stance), not fully comprehending the benefits of Hatha Yoga. Consequently, Yoghism is all-inclusive and undivided: "It is ONE and EVERYTHING, a SYNTHESIS" (37), the alpha and omega of all things (44).

The other curious term in the title is "mathesis." As in English, it is an archaic word in Spanish that means "learning, knowledge." It is very likely that Raynaud borrowed the noun from *Mathesis universalis*, a mathematical model propounded by René Descartes (1596–1650), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), and other sixteenth and seventeenth century philosophers.<sup>8</sup> The

8 Likewise, Michel Foucault (1926–1984) used the word *mathesis* to designate the universal science of measurement and order in his famous *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des*

choice of this word is absolutely conscious and points to Raynaud's cosmological and yogic model.

*Mathesis* is related to other important terms, namely: "thesis", "antithesis" and, more significantly, "synthesis." All of them form part of the core of what Yoghism is supposed to be. Francisco Morales, a contemporary member of one of the GFU's branches in Spain, explains these terms in relation to the experiences of the individual in the world and through the path of this specific yogic path (Morales 2021b). These procedures are arranged in ascending hierarchy, which signals the transition or evolution of the practitioner from the gross to the most subtle. More than just a philosophical exercise of logic, these terms speak of a threefold classification of bodies (which will be further discussed in the next section). In this model, 'thesis' refers to the physical plane. Vegetarianism is strictly mandated so as to stimulate the necessary cleansing of the organism before seeking to activate the subtle energies. That is why de la Ferrière stresses this type of diet in a chapter devoted to this term (Raynaud 1972, 489–95).

In the 'antithesis,' the person's aura is seen as an emanation of both the *chakras* and the physical body (Raynaud 1972, 497–500). The first two bodies are intimately bonded, and diet and other habits influence both of them. The antithetical body does not contradict the physical body but complements it. Thereby, by understanding deeply this relationship, it is possible to reach a synthesis of the bodies (503). Thus, from 'thesis,' the practitioner goes through 'antithesis' to achieve 'synthesis,' with a view to eventually coming to 'mathesis.' In this sense, mathesis is beyond synthesis in that it represents the execution of the attained synthesis of all methods and views. The 'thesis experience' refers to the corporeal or material understanding. It is the first and direct aspect of living in the world, but one should gradually access more subtle dimensions of life so as to become whole. Antithesis is related to the soul (which is also called 'astral body') and synthesis to the spiritual experience. Finally, mathesis becomes the ultimate initiatic experience in which all previous experiences

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*sciences humaines* (1966) (published in English as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [1970]). Mathesis can be a tool of organizing and interpreting all human knowledge, as it offers the possibility of ordering limitless things in succession, even if they are non-measurable (Foucault 1966, 71). Its "universal method" is algebra, and *mathesis* itself was but one form of *taxinomia* in the Classical Age (86). Since the eighteenth century, according to Foucault, mathesis became apophantic and ontological, and has governed the formal disciplines ever since (89). Although *YYY* was published in 1969, its source for 'mathesis' cannot be Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* given that the latter was released in 1966, four years after de la Ferrière's death. In a personal communication (February 8, 2023), Pamela Siegel informed me that in the French manuscript of *YYY*, Serge Raynaud wrote *mathese* and not *mathesis*.

are fully integrated, and a transcendental state can be realized. Thesis is the starting point; mathesis is the destination.

#### 4 A Voyage through Astral, Cosmic, and Human Bodies

Even though some GFU followers may wish to tell their founder apart from the New Age discourse (Morales 2021a), it is obvious that Serge Raynaud partakes of many of the New Age motifs. In this sense, the GFU plays a part in the “circuits of spiritual consumption of transnational reach” in a menu of “religions *à la carte*” (García Medina and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2012, 220–21). This can be corroborated by probing into Raynaud’s views of the body and the cosmos, and the subtle energies that link them. Raynaud’s views on bodies and energies can be read from the subtle body model, in which “subjectivity is understood to be comprised of matter-consciousness, usually termed energy, which is understood to be a constitutive element of mind and the physical body, as well as to exceed the corporeal self into the ‘space’ between self, other and world” (Johnston and Barcan 2006, 29).

As is evident from his background, de la Ferrière’s ideology was embedded in esoteric thought and symbolism. He believed that astrology was the basis of all mythologies, and his branded school of Yoghism did not depend solely on physical yogic techniques. He usually considered these techniques as psychophysical gymnastics that were important for the edification of bodily fortitude. In the GFU publications, there are several photographs showing de la Ferrière either calculating astrological phenomena or adopting yogic postures, as well as weightlifting. He did not just herald yogic *āsanas* or *prāṇāyama* over all existing techniques; he also commended other ones, for example, judo (Raynaud 1978). All of this was in accordance with his belief in the coalescence of Eastern and Western wisdom and spiritual practices, and coincided with approaches such as that of the Theosophists.

Commonly, in some ‘esoteric’ conceptualizations of the subtle subjectivity, embodiment is not understood as inextricably linked to materiality. In this sense, the subtle subject “is simultaneously placed in intimate and detached relations with alterity” (Johnston 2008, 2). Thus, Raynaud writes that it is advisable to think of the cosmos as an organism inhabited by beings who live in psychic bodies which are beyond our comprehension (YYY 95; Raynaud 1972, 180). This is in turn related to the idea that there are three types of bodies, representing the different planes of existence of both the macro- and the microcosm. The world consists of a physical, an astral, and a divine body. At our

terrestrial level, the three bodies are the Earth, the Moon, and the Sun, respectively (Raynaud 1972, 77–78). Human beings are also constituted by three bodies, which are interconnected, but special work has to be done to succeed in the sublimation process:

If a man does not work enough on his astral body, the terrible death of the physical body will occur, because his astral body, still linked to his material eyes [...] cannot evolve [... so that] the individuality locked within will be dissolved along with the physical body [... Yet this] ruin can be mended if the necessary effort is done: through study and spiritual progress, the self will be able to fashion a body of light (astral) capable of resisting disolution. (Raynaud 1972, 397)

In other words, human beings are tripartite and composed of a physical body (somatic), a vital body or soul (*psychicon*), and a spiritual body (pneumatic) (YYY 87). The vital body is also equal to the so-called astral body.

There is very strong emphasis on the relationship of the material and the subtle in Yoghism. This relationship is to be noticed everywhere in the world, for as the alchemical dictum says: “As above so is below.” Both YYY and other works by de la Ferrière go to great lengths to state the underlying connections between different objects, phenomena, and realities. Thus, for example, the sign of the cross is not just the symbol of the resurrection of the Christ but has an esoteric reading as well. The two lines represent the positive and the negative (as in electricity), the masculine and the feminine: “The Hindu religion employs the word *Lingam* to designate the positive and *Yoni* for the negative; it teaches that there is nothing that lacks these two polarities; human beings are born with the strength of both the male and the female; these two polarities are also defined as science and religion and this is what is meant in oriental philosophy by referring to *Purusha* and *Prakriti*” (Raynaud 1972, 459; emphasis in the original). In like manner, the Kabbalistic imagery of the Tree of Life and the ten sefira also represents the dual polarities, more specifically the subtle channels of breath energy, *IDA*, and *PINGALA* (YYY 212).

Due to the intricate and intimate relationship of all things in the universe, the rules of astrology are given absolute credence. The individual is subjected to the influence of the stars, just as his or her lifespan is somehow determined by karma, the Indian law of causation. “To believe in the law of karma is to believe in Astrology,” wrote de la Ferrière (Raynaud 1972, 466). He stressed the effect of the astral bodies and the Zodiacal signs on the organs of the body, on people’s proclivities, and so forth. Yet, “[t]here is a method of self-control

that can liberate from the influence of the Zodiac" (467), namely, yoga. De la Ferrière praised the benefits he finds in yoga, especially the release of said deterministic, astral influxes.

Likewise, de la Ferrière identified some energy centers in the planet which are concurrently Underground Schools and Colleges of Magi. Among them are: an alleged temple under the Khufu's pyramid in Giza, Egypt; an occult shrine in Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet; or a hidden sepulchre in Hermosillo, Sonora in Mexico that preserves the mysterious rituals of the Mayans.<sup>9</sup> By drawing a map, de la Ferrière elucidated that these initiation sites in the globe are located in a straight line and are therefore like the "nervo-psychical centers" under the surface of the human body. As Jay Johnston and Ruth Barcan (2006, 30) expound, "[i]n a subtle body framework, the mind-matter dichotomy is transformed because both consciousness and physical reality are understood to be constituted by the same type of 'substance' in various styles of manifestation." In a context such as Yoghism, this becomes more evident. In poetical fashion, de la Ferrière stated (YYY 207–8): "It feels good that the Earth is not merely a layer of inert matter, but a skin under which the nerves, the psychic centres, the magnetic points vibrate," and concluded that "[e]verything occurs just as below the human epidermis, where a whole nervous system prevails," full of magnetic regions and plexuses.

The notion of placement and movement is evident. According to the same work, seven rivers spring from Mount Kailas for pilgrims to confer with gifts and prayers during their path of initiation. Similarly, the work mentions seven geographical sites that symbolize the seven *chakras*. The pilgrimage becomes both material and immaterial. De la Ferrière mapped his own envisioned trip in Asia onto this cosmic/mystic geography, imaginatively ranging from Sri Lanka to the peak of the Himalayas, beginning the pilgrimage from Kataragama toward Kedarnath and Badrinath (YYY 208–210). These, says the Gran Maestre, are the "eyes of Brahma," just as Kailas is "the thousand-petalled lotus." Thus, the pilgrim will literally ascend from sea level to the peak of the mountain. In essence, this also works as a symbol of the ascent of the *kunḍalinī* in the human body. De la Ferrière repeatedly emphasizes the mystical interconnection of these sites and forces and therefore urges the practitioners to read their symbolical purport:

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9 This is historically impossible as the Maya civilization covered southeastern Mexico and northern Central America. Sonora is one of the northernmost states in Mexico, adjacent to the United States.

This pilgrimage, which needs to be interpreted symbolically, was already undertaken by the Alchemists in the Middle Ages when they claimed that vile metal (lead) should be turned into pure metal (gold) for, as a matter of fact, lead (the symbol of Saturn), an identical vibration of the Muladhara chakra, can be turned to gold (Symbol of the Sun), an identical vibration of the Sahasrara-padma [...] by means of the transmutation of the physical forces into psychic energies [*potencias*]. (YYY 210)

In short, the transmutation of lead or Saturn into gold or the Sun is achieved by the ascent of the *kuṇḍalinī* through the nervo-fluidic centers or *chakras* (YYY 312).

It is possible to identify some common tropes in de la Ferrière's teachings, namely, pilgrimage and transmutation. In the above quotation, both interact and exemplify his typical discursive methodology: the world can be read symbolically; there are hidden correspondences between the cosmos and the body; energies can be acted upon through some (usually) yogic means; the methods have been preserved throughout the centuries by adept masters and spiritual leaders; the impure can and must become pure.

The image of the pilgrimage is recurrent in de la Ferrière's symbolic language. YYY includes plates showing the execution of the Eight-four Asanas in 'the Yoghi Tradition.' The postures are done by the Grand Maestre himself, as well as by several GFU followers in Colombia, Venezuela, Perú, Panamá, El Salvador, Mexico, the United States, and Australia. It is worth-noticing that the plates showing Raynaud are photographs allegedly taken in India or Tibet during his pilgrimage. Every plate shows an Asana and gives an account of the benefits or spiritual purport of said posture. Plate XLVII shows a first variation of Parvata, the posture of the mountain. Undertaken by de la Ferrière himself, this posture is prescribed for a basic series of yogic postures in Yoghism. He claims to have been taught this variation directly from a Guru in Tibet. It is to be identified with the Mountain-Type: the Himalayas—but more concretely, with Mount Kailas. It offers "the magnificent experience of the inner ascent of the pilgrimage of the bija-shakti" (YYY 388). The journey of this inner energy causes a body-and-spirit transformation.

## 5 Cosmic Forces, Breath, and Transmutation

It is very important to bear in mind that YYY is presented as a work on psychology—and this psychological program is an exploration of pretty much

everything.<sup>10</sup> At least theoretically, de la Ferrière conceived YYY as the product of a psychological (therefore, *scientific*) reflection upon key issues that affect individuals and subject matters that are to be mastered if one is to seek perfection. The path or method adequate for this age is Yoghism. As hinted before, it can be difficult to define what exactly is Yoghism, given that de la Ferrière's descriptions are sometimes not clear or even conflicting.

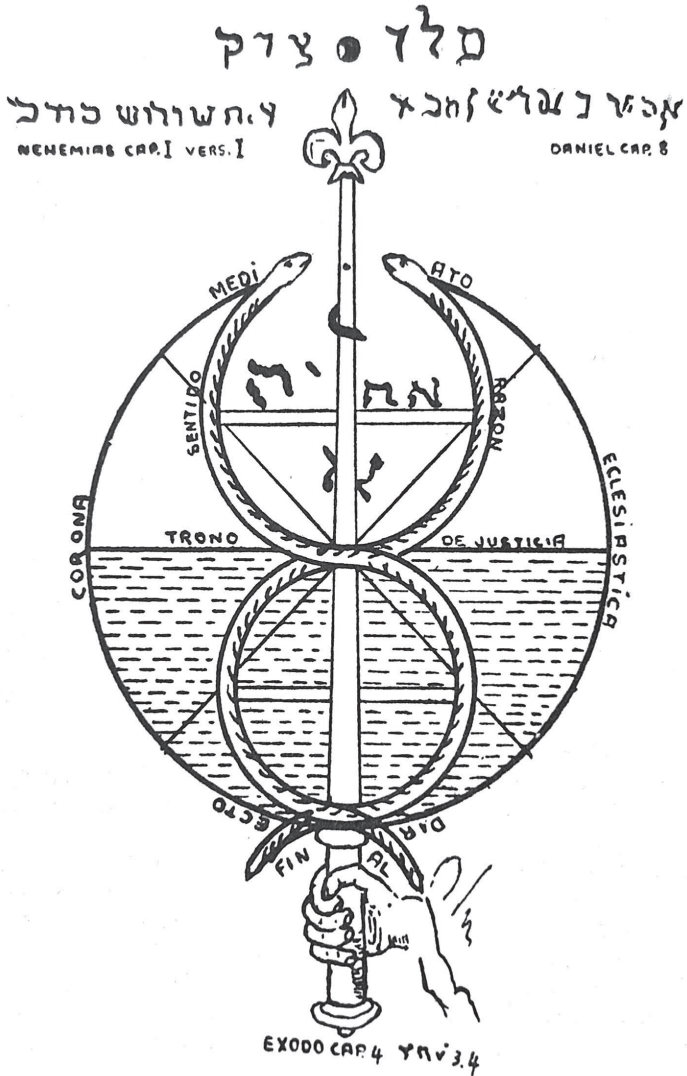
In order to properly understand the intricacies of de la Ferrière's thought, it is worth pointing out that a term summoned throughout his works is *Cosmobiology*<sup>11</sup>—which is not explicitly described, though. However, the actual purport of the term is dealt with repeatedly, although under a different rubric. In essence, Cosmobiology is a special understanding of astrology. In *The Great Messages*, Raynaud overtly states that Cosmobiology is employed in scientific discourse to refer to “the ancient science of the wise.” This means not merely profane astrology, but astrology in an esoteric, religious, and evolutive sense (Raynaud 1972, 74, 157, 171, 594). So, writes the Grand Maester, we can learn from Cosmobiology that whereas it is true that an individual receives the influence of the planets, they can also modify their behavior and then alter said influence (424–25), as already mentioned in a previous section. The influence of the stars and planets is a predisposition, not an unflappable destiny.

By alternating between ‘astrology’ and ‘cosmobiology,’ de la Ferrière sought to 1) stress the fact that there are various energies—cosmic and corporeal—at work in the world and 2) give the system a more scientific character. De la Ferrière founded an organization named Groupement Mondial de Cosmobiologie in 1947 in Paris, which would change name to FISS: Federation Internationale des Sciences Scientifiques in 1960 (Siegel 2014, 128–29). But the truth is that, despite its scientific claims, the whole system bristled with esoteric imagery.

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10 Similarly, apart from the collection *Los grandes mensajes*, another important series of books by de la Ferrière was titled *Propósitos psicológicos* (Psychological Intentions), a collection of thirty-six lectures grouped in six volumes. Like *Los grandes mensajes*, these deal with various religions, witchcraft, esotericism, metaphysics, secret societies, and magic, among other topics.

11 Cosmobiology was a branch of astrology allegedly based on scientific grounds (it is also sometimes called Astrobiology). It was developed and popularized by figures like Friedrich Feerhow (1888–1921), Karl E. Krafft (1900–1945), Reinhold Ebertin (1901–1988), and Alfred Witte (1878–1941). I have found mention of only Krafft in Raynaud's writings—he does this to prove the possibility of “astrological twins.” According to Raynaud, Krafft's life mirrored that of another German astrologer, Otto von Bressendorf (1900–1935/36; Raynaud 1972, 60–63).



IN HOC SIGNO VINCES

FIGURA Nº 3

FIGURE 12.1 Emblem of the Great Arcane. Taken from YYY 32

De la Ferrière presents and discusses an occultist sign, the emblem of the Great Arcane (YYY 32; Raynaud 1972, 169). It is the object of esoteric study in the Initiatic Colleges of the Universal Great Brotherhood. The emblem is accompanied by the Latin motto *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES* ('In this sign thou shalt conquer') and a simple, yet intriguing design: A circle frames the design and a hand holds a sword ending in a *fleur de lis*. A pair of serpents intertwine upward around the sword. Along the circumference are inscribed the words *CORONA-MEDIATO-ECCLESIASTICA-DIRECTO-FINAL*. At the center of the circle, the phrase *TRONO DE JUSTICIA* cuts across the image. In both the Hebrew and the Latin alphabets, there are references to the books of Nehemiah, Daniel, and Exodus. Discussing the symbolic significance of this emblem, de la Ferrière notes that it speaks about the power of transmutation, symbolized by the serpent. Simply knowing this, however, does not confer any esoteric grade; this is but a preparatory state toward the first Initiatic degree, which requires the previous, profound knowledge of astrology and yoga (Raynaud 1972, 171).

Accordingly, YYY devotes considerable space to yogic topics and several illustrations of yoga postures. De la Ferrière repeats the common statement that there are 84,000 postures, of which eighty-four stand apart (YYY 326; Raynaud 1972, 470). According to him, this number corresponds to the eighty-four animal families. He may be indirectly quoting the dictum *āsanāni ca tāvanti yāvanto jīvajātayah* (there are as much postures as there are living beings).<sup>12</sup> Yet, he does not provide any clue, evidence, or account for this claim. What seems important for him is that there is an underlying correspondence between life forms and psycho-physical techniques to master untapped energies.

One of the key issues is that we should understand and accept that a "supranatural Cosmic Force," which manifests itself through the planetary influence, penetrates and animates the body. This is the reason, de la Ferrière asserts, that the seven endocrine glands are directly linked to the solar system (Raynaud 1972, 474). As already hinted at, there is a correspondence between Zodiac signs, planets, forces, glands, and *chakras*, in accordance with the tenets of Cosmobiology, and de la Ferrière goes to great lengths to prove and explain this (e.g., YYY 312ff.). All his oeuvre is replete with charts and diagrams that show this intricate relationship. Johnston and Barcan share the view that "[t]o speak of an individual as comprised of a subtle body is to posit the self as inherently extensive, open and multiple, a stark contrast to the bounded singular subject of modernity" (2006, 29). Yet, this is a more or less 'modern' attempt by Raynaud to portray his views as scientific, instead of just drastically rejecting

12 *Gorakṣaśataka* 8ab. Cf. *āsanāni samas tāni yāvanto jīvajantavaḥ* (*Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā* 2.11ab).

the ‘rationalist’ view of non-religious modernity. In recent scholarship, it has become increasingly clear that different esoteric trends and movements, such as the Theosophical Society (cf. Krämer and Strube 2020; Strube 2020), were in many ways quite instrumental in the construction of our modernity since the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The breath (rather, the whole compound of in and out breaths as in hatha-yoga physiology) receives special attention. De la Ferrière explains “Prana” as an active principle and the divine spark of cosmic movement (YYY 52). Activating and channeling this dynamic element is therefore of ultimate importance. All things are composed of *Akash* and *Prana*, which are understood as the gross body and the subtle body, the material composite and the creative force (51). An exposition of the subtle forces involved is the following:

A subtle energy manifests through all things; it is the essence of the composition of the bodies, the vibratory fluid toward the elements. Its positive aspect is called *Prana*; the negative, *Akasha*. Frequent allusions to pranification can be done, such as the spiritualization in the alchemical sense, that is to say that *Akasha* is considered more gross, by which it is meant this: *Prana* for the Spirit and *Akasha* for the matter. (Raynaud de la Ferrière 1972, 475)

Even though some aspects of this exposition are reminiscent of Indic philosophy, there are significant deviations. For example, de la Ferrière never takes *akasha* as subtle ether. He continues:

Chinese philosophy confers on them the names of *Yang* and *Yinn* [sic], just like Freemasons who work through the hidden knowledge of the Pillars of Solomon’s Temple [...] *Prana* and *Akasha* existing in nature, the yoghi [sic] seeks to harmonise these two polarities by means of *Pingala* and *Ida* (positive and negative), the two subtle currents in the human being. (Raynaud de la Ferrière 1972, 475)

In accord with his whole system and the input of Cosmobiology, de la Ferrière traces the correspondences between different systems while never ceasing to stress the energetic importance of the vital force. He concludes:

The right nostril (*Pingala*) and the left nostril (*Ida*) respectively channel the *Prana* and the *Akasha*, which in turn makes vibrate the *Sushumna*, the conduit where the *Kundalini* (Fiery Serpent) dwells, which is the mysterious current that illuminates the *chakras*, rising the individual to the

superior spheres of Universal Consciousness. (Raynaud de la Ferrière 1972, 475)

Thus, “PRANAYAMA” is comprised of two exercises, one called the “outer chalice” and the other the “inner chalice” (YYY 51). The former entails the stopping of breath after exhaling and the latter after inhaling. We can again notice the Christian echoes in calling these techniques “chalices.” Partly due to this, a so-called pranification process is advised by the Maester, but he warns against practicing breath retention without previous arduous preparation. Yoga is important for Raynaud because it entails the concentration of energy toward a process of overall improvement. In this sense, yoga is a “Vital Science” that leads to infinite wisdom (81). The yogic method, especially if seen through the lenses of Cosmobiology, can produce a deep, transcendental metamorphosis.

Yoga, then, unleashes an inner power which is symbolized by a “formidable vibration,” namely, the *kuṇḍalinī* (YYY 223). By crossing the different energetic centers, this vibration activates the forces and faculties of the human being. Writing on the subtle body concept, Geoffrey Samuel suggests that—more than thinking of it as a philosophical or religious category—it is also important to consider what objectives are pursued by the people who sponsor practices dependent on subtle body conceptualizations (Samuel 2013, 249). For de la Ferrière, the notion of transformation is paramount. Through this sort of techniques, the physical appetites and the material aspirations can be transformed into both spiritual yearnings and a mystical potentiality.

Raynaud alludes to Apostle John when writing of transmutation and urges people to be born again, to “transform the vile forces into subtle powers” (YYY 71). This is but one example of Raynaud’s idiosyncratic exegesis. The Biblical verse in question, however, says something slightly different: “Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you” (John 6.27). So, the subtle power entails the everlasting meat.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

Serge Raynaud de la Ferrière’s teachings of Yoghism were important for the alternative spiritualities that took roots in Latin America from the mid-twentieth century onward. Even though their weight is less visible or predominant nowadays, it is still possible to observe their influence. In this chapter, I have attempted a first partial, critical examination of Raynaud’s *sui generis*

understanding of the yogic activation of energies through the lenses of what one could call ‘applied astrology.’ However, the corpus of his writings is vast and impossible to cover comprehensively in one short essay. Moreover, Raynaud’s expositions can be quite opaque and specialized, thereby requiring more effort to go into more depth. I do not claim to have covered all the possible issues encoded in these texts, not even those pertaining to *Yug Yoga Yoghism*. Many intricate and interesting themes remain open to further examination.

The Gran Fraternidad Universal has been a distinctive genome in Latin America’s yogic DNA. Indeed, some authors rightly consider the GFU to be a new religious movement (Siegel and Barros 2022, 63) and not just one more yoga school. In other words, the GFU needs to be understood and assessed not simply as a single organization but rather as a full, rich spiritual movement (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2015, 3). One of its key aspects is the combination of astrology, Kabbalah, and yoga, usually embedded in scientific language. Yoghism promotes a set of techniques and teachings meant to guide a student toward a deep, inner transformation (or, rather, transmutation), as the methods imply an esoteric reading of realities and forces, both astral and worldly. At the core, the main idea is that yoga is true alchemy (YYY 178–79).

For Raynaud, yoga was one efficient way to bring about the so-much desired inner transformation. The manipulation of the *kuṇḍalinī*, the “Sacred Serpent of Yoga Symbolism” (YYY 269), and the *prana*, or “essential, vital vibration” (302), lies at the center of his teachings, while also relying on other astrological and philosophical enquiries. It is important not to simply and drastically discard these practices and teachings as fanciful, but try to understand the deep meaning they have for those practicing them. At their core, they see them as beneficial and desirable, at both the individual and the societal level (cf. Samuel 2013, 250). If some of these teachings prevail, we should inquire more deeply to understand why.

Many of the ideas that de la Ferrière forwarded through the GFU and his publications can be observed through the work of other people and organizations and within the various branches and subgroups founded after the Brotherhood’s initial schism. De la Ferrière’s yogic method promotes an inner work with both the corporeal and cosmic energies; thus, it conveys the shift in responsibility in one’s own healing processes that some authors have identified in alternative therapies, especially those relying on subtle body techniques (Johnston and Barcan 2006, 33). Yoghism proposed a path of self-cultivation that was to be guided by a proficient and authorized preceptor. For the GFU, this guidance began with de la Ferrière (who himself, in turn, was allegedly guided by mysterious South Asian gurus and became a transmitter of timeless

mysteries) and was continued through his disciples and initiates. The lines of transmission continue to these days, despite the various factions and contentions that have taken place within the GFU throughout the years.

Such outlooks of alternative health techniques are indeed part and parcel of popular culture, at least in Mexico, where the shelves in bookstores devoted to 'spirituality,' 'metaphysics,' 'esotericism,' 'angelology,' and so forth are by no means rare. And even beyond this circuit, an involuntary or unconscious sympathy toward this discourse is not uncommon, even among people who do not necessarily endorse New Age/alternative practices. For example, in a regular, casual chat between friends—one of whom may be experiencing a difficult moment (due to love, job, or health issues)—it is quite common that the interlocutor would speak about taking a 'healing' time, which does not automatically mean attending professional psychological support. It rather entails inner work, getting in touch with one's own true nature, bringing about an ontological healing. In a sense, the legacy of Yoghism is still an important component (albeit less noticeable) of popular spiritual/alternative culture in more than one country. Different disciplines would do well to keep on investigating these phenomena, not just because these topics are still understudied, but also because these issues call for revisions of theories and concepts. Agreeing with Australian scholar Alan McKee, Johnston and Barcan view pop culture not merely as an object of cultural analysis but rather as "a *source* of cultural theory." They suggest that "alternative therapies have the potential to enrich and invigorate—even to radicalise—cultural studies' own theorizations of corporeality, affect and intersubjectivity" (2006, 28; emphasis in the original).

We find an alternative spirituality in Raynaud's philosophy, according to which Yoghism promises a refined path toward a holistic betterment that benefits the body and the soul. In this sense, yoga was to be understood as the balance between the micro- and the macrocosm, as uniformity between Enlightenment and Realization, and as sameness between the individual, personal self and the Universal, Cosmic Consciousness (Raynaud 1972, 469). The GFU conceived Yoghism as a proper means to boost the individual's potential. This, in turn, would be of benefit to society at large. Properly undertaken, the method of Yoghism could bring about a balance of the best elements of different approaches and perspectives, that is, a healthy synthesis of spiritual paths. In other words, not only did de la Ferrière take freely from diverse cultural matrixes (yoga, the Bible, Freemasonry, astrology, etc.); he also adjusted his thoughts to fit a Latin American audience. This corresponded to his belief in the Aquarian Age, in which Latin America was to become the new spiritual center of the world.

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**PART 4**

*Subtle Energies in the Arts and Politics*





## Subtle Energies of Sound: Leser-Lasario’s Vowel Breathing and Mantra Chanting

*Magdalena Kraler*

In our everyday lives, sound functions as an important medium that can evoke various feelings and emotional states.<sup>1</sup> A piece of music may convey a sense of beauty, peace, or comfort, and a sudden sound of unknown origin may cause fear or at least acute alertness. These “soundscapes” (Schafer 1993 [1977], 7) accompanying our lives are important reference points for hearing subjects.<sup>2</sup> However, as an invisible phenomenon, sound inheres also a vibrational quality that is not only audible but—by measurable frequencies hitting lived bodies—even palpable through the skin and bones. In all these qualities, sound appears to have subtle effects on human ways to perceive in moments of increased listening and ‘attuning/attending.’ In other words, it creates a relationship between the environment and the internal state of perceiving the sounding environment, an act of “sensing the world through sound” that involves the “subtle yet very physical quality of sound” (Wilke and Moebus 2011, v). Various religions have harnessed these ‘subtle energies of sound’ as a means to induce transformative experiences, altered states of consciousness, or even in order to attain magical powers. In many contexts, the voice as used in singing, speaking, sighing, or humming is of key importance because it is perceived both within and outside the sounding body. If the voice is used, sound often carries meaning. Just as in spoken language, vocal sounds tend to follow certain linguistic constraints and a script of culturally codified utilizations of vowels, words, phrases, or sentences. Whether semantical or not, vocal sound is always carried by breath, and it is not unusual to cultivate and employ both breath and vocal sound in religious contexts.

It is particularly in South Asian contexts that the role of breath and sound are intertwined and utilized within what Finnian Gerety (2021, 515) has called

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1 I want to thank Karl Baier, Otto Rastbichler, Kohki Totsuka, and the editors of this volume for their valuable comments on this chapter.

2 For R. Murray Schafer (1993 [1977]: 7), a “soundscape” basically denotes “any acoustic field of study;” for example, a “musical composition [...], a radio programme [...], or an acoustic environment as soundscape.”

“sacred soundscapes,” explicated in the term “mantra.” The alternative-religious landscape of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe—a context I will be dealing with in this chapter—was enthralled by the sound and magical potency of mantras. In these and later New Age contexts, hybrid forms of mantras emerged, leading to a polyvalency of the term that is not strictly tied to the Vedic or Sanskrit language.<sup>3</sup> Instead, it “expanded to include a wide range of formulas, positive assertions and guiding principles” (Hauser 2018, 522). *Fin-de-siècle* alternative religions not only adopted mantra—the terms *mantram*<sup>4</sup> and *mantracism* are also being used—but also had a broader fascination with the subtle materiality, corporeal responsiveness, and emotional absorption evoked by the element of sound, an interest that was continued in later New Age. For example, Joachim-Ernst Berendt’s *The World is Sound: Nada Brahma: Music and the Landscape of Consciousness* (1991 [1987]) offers a sonic cosmogony with sound as a universal agent and a means to altering the “landscape of consciousness.” It also shows the fertile intersection of South Asian concepts of sound with new religious currents typical for twentieth-century New Age.

In this chapter, we will encounter another example located at the intersection of South Asian contexts and alternative-religious currents: a system of “vowel gesture breathing” (*Vokal-Gebärden-Atmung*), or simply “vowel breathing” (*Vokalatmung*), developed by the Viennese Benno Max Leser-Lasario. Leser-Lasario was born in the second half of the nineteenth century and passed away after 1931 (as yet, there are no precise life data available). Originally a physician, he was also a trained opera singer. By the late 1910s, he became known as a breath therapist and vocal coach who employed voice and breath for healing purposes. With the typical vitalistic inclinations of the *Lebensreform* movement, he stressed the life-sustaining qualities of breath. Like many other members of this movement, he promoted a lifestyle that emphasized the importance of loose clothing, relaxation, and the ability to breathe deeply and fully.<sup>5</sup> His vowel breathing was also designed to prepare singing students

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3 This also raises the question what the term mantra denotes, which cannot be dealt with in-depth here. Annette Wilke and Oliver Moebus (2011, vi) paraphrase “mantra practices” with the “devotional repetition of one single name.” However, in many cases, the term mantra is applied in a much broader sense. For details, see Gerety 2021; Haas 2023. An ERC Synergy Grant recently awarded to Finnian Gerety, Borayin Larios, and Carola Lorea will greatly advance the field of mantra studies and yield further publications.

4 *Mantram* is the word’s neuter ending in the nominative which was also used in first-generation Theosophy.

5 He himself suffered from a deformation in his vocal apparatus—an adhesion of the tongue with parts of the mouth cavity—which he was able to cure through his system of vowel

for more advanced practices. Moreover, it was a safe introduction to mystical experiences, as he explained.

In his hygienic, artistic, and religious leanings, Leser-Lasario drew on nineteenth-century medico-hygienic literature on breathing,<sup>6</sup> singing schools and treatises, occultistic ideas and practices of German and Viennese occultism, as well as Ariosophical and *völkisch* literature. This chapter will contextualize his system within German and Viennese occultism and their understanding of yoga and mantra chanting, and also throw spotlights on its reception history. As we shall see, Leser-Lasario's system fit the mould of the eugenic tendencies of the *Lebensreform* movement and was increasingly implemented within the reach of growing Nazism. Although important influences on Leser-Lasario will be traced, I will also address the question of why his system is often described to have originated in yoga.<sup>7</sup>

## 1 Leser-Lasario's *Vokalatmung*

Leser-Lasario's work as a breath therapist was known already in the late 1910s, as various testimonials show. Around 1923, he set forth his system of vowel breathing, which appeared in English translation as *Breath is Life: Newly Discovered Ways for the Prevention of Illness and Rejuvenation [sic] of the Body: The Vowel-Type-Breathing Method*, a thirty-two-page booklet.<sup>8</sup> Although Leser-Lasario's system was probably not yet fully developed in the 1920s, the *Lehrbuch der Original-Atmungs-Methode* contained the complete system and appeared as late as 1931. The basic sound material used by Leser-Lasario were the cardinal vowels I-E-A-O-U. He taught them in this sequence because he felt that

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breathing. The overcoming of an ailment by a technique developed by working on the problem makes Leser-Lasario a typical hygienic 'expert' (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2017, 27–29).

6 The hygienic context into which Leser-Lasario's work can be placed is far-reaching and can only be hinted at here. An important idea is the three-part-breath which engages three main breathing spaces: the abdomen, the chest, and the region of the clavícula. If combined, they are often termed the "full breath" (*Vollatmung*) (cf. Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 50–53). For the relevance of these 'deep breathing' practices in hygienic and yogic contexts, see Kraler 2025, 226–28.

7 See, for example, <https://www.biologie-seite.de/Biologie/Vokalatmung> (accessed: January 29, 2023).

8 I was not able to trace the German version or title of this book. The earlier *Die Zehn Gebote des Atmens* (1918) did not contain vowel breathing but more general hygienic recommendations regarding respiration. I have consulted the Christof Uiberreiter Verlag edition of 2013 of Leser-Lasario's *Zehn Gebote in Drei Vokal-Gebärden-Typ-Atmungs-Bücher mit Hermetischen (sic) Anklang* (Leser-Lasario 2013, 4–19).

I-E-A, or the “triad of life” (*Lebensdreiklang*), were safer for a beginner’s practice (Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 79).<sup>9</sup> He placed much emphasis on how the lips and the whole body formed these vowels, and held that the vibration of each vowel has a specific location in the body (76) (see Figure 13.1). He found that by singing them—or even just imagining them and imitating their gesture, the “vowel gesture” (*Vokalgebärde*)—the whole body was affected.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, in his system, each vowel correlated with certain emotions and colors (90).<sup>11</sup>

Each vowel breathing exercise has four stages (Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 83): (1) One must have a clear image of a vowel in their mind, often the bright and joyous sound of ‘I,’ together with a word that represents it, for example, *Licht, Liebe* (light, love). He also terms this phase “concentration.” With this image and vowel gesture in mind, (2) one inhales through the *nose* (never through the mouth) “as if inhaling the smell of a flower.” Then, (3) one retains this for two to three seconds as to one’s breath-holding capacities. Finally (4), the most essential stage, in which one exhales through a specific formula (a phoneme, syllable, word, or sentence) either with imagined or actual sound. Here, also humming is applied.<sup>12</sup> A good example is the phrase “*Meine Seele wird gut belebt*” (my soul is being revitalized). In following the vowel sequence and its location in the body, this sequence involves a reach from top to bottom, followed by a reversed movement from bottom to top (*ibid.*, 95).<sup>13</sup> In many of these phrases we see a vitalistic element in the words thus contemplated, like “life” (*Leben*), “breath” (*Atem*), or “light of heaven” (*Himmelslicht*) (90, 119). These can also be read as allusions to the “light and air” (*Licht und Luft*) motto of the German *Lebensreform* that sought to revitalize human beings by exposure to these elements. Indeed, for Leser-Lasario, human respiration is the individual expression of a cosmic vital breath that links human beings to their divine source, an idea that he moreover correlated with the notion of *prāṇa* (denoting both

9 Only in advanced practice does Leser-Lasario advise to use the vowel ‘U,’ the umlaut ‘Ü,’ and the diphthong ‘UI,’ which are said to activate the lower centers in the body.

10 According to Leser-Lasario, ‘I’ works on the head and brings light and joyous emotions, and its vibrations can be felt on the top as well as in the skull. ‘E’ mainly benefits the throat; it is also a bright vowel and very important for singers and speakers. ‘A’ affects the upper lobes of the lungs and one can feel it under the clavícula. ‘O’ works on the diaphragm, ‘U’ on the peristaltic movements. The combination ‘UI’ affects the sexual organs (Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 76, 90–105).

11 ‘I’ is “joyful” and yellow; ‘E’ is “cheerful” and orange/gold; ‘A’ is “neutral” and blue/green; ‘O’ is “serious” and red; ‘U’ is “very serious” and dark blue/black (Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 90).

12 For example, the syllable “mmmomm.” The humming exercises and their subtle vibrations are said to alleviate indigestion, congestion in the lower abdomen, and the hardening of the arteries (Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 93).

13 For details on the vowel sequence, see n. 10.

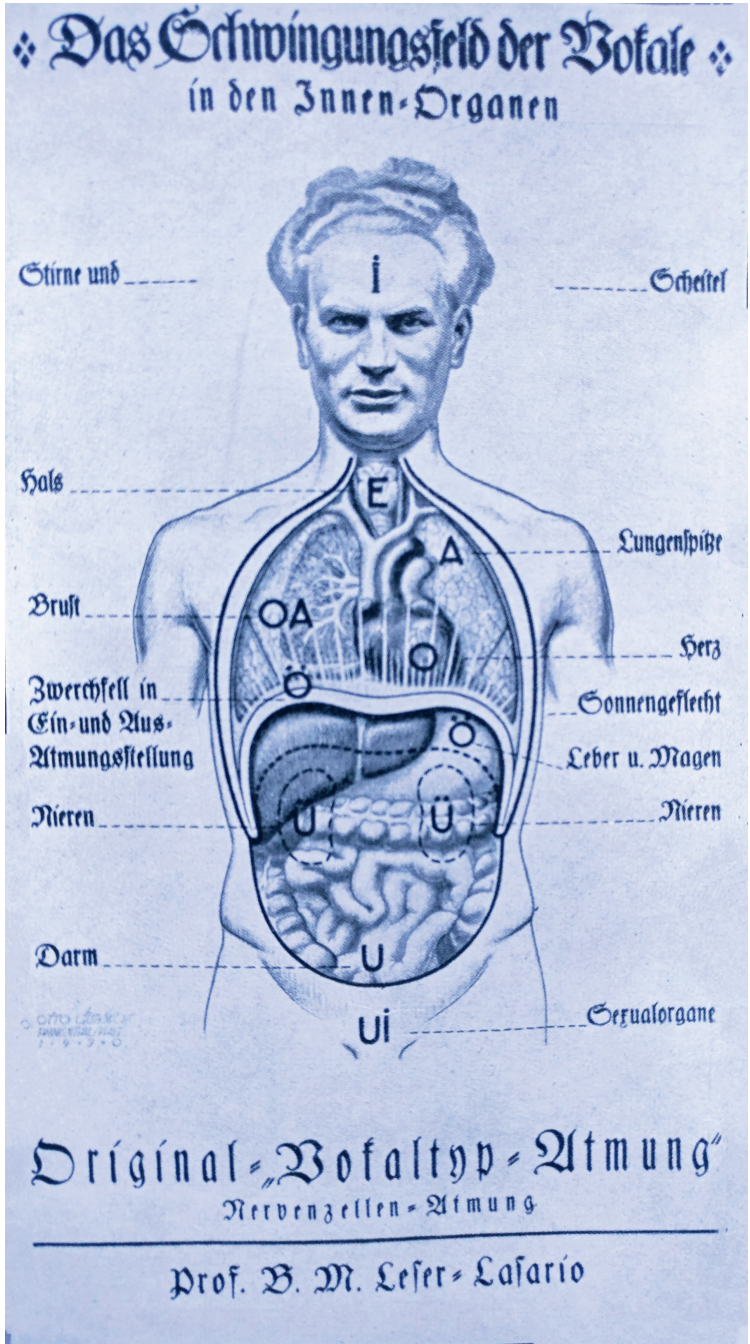


FIGURE 13.1 Leser-Lasario's scheme of vowels working on the body  
 TEMPORA BY OTTO GUTKNECHT, IN LESER-LASARIO 1954  
 [1931], 31

vitality and breath in South Asian religious history) (108). Next to healing various ailments and its effects on different glands in the body, his system also has beneficial effects on the sexual life of partners (132, 134). Its higher goal lies in utilizing breath, sound, and imagination to potentially induce religious experiences, just as the practice of chanting mantras does. It would safely lead one to the study of the “mysticism of mantras” (*Mantramystik*) and to “reciting psalms” (*psalmieren*) (144).

As an opera singer, Leser-Lasario was certainly aware of contemporaneous singing techniques. The idea that a trained voice uses certain resonance and breathing spaces within the body to unfold its full potential is found in Italian, French, and German singing traditions. The basic material of Leser-Lasario’s system, the vowel sequence of I-E-A-O-U (in precisely this sequence), is commonly used in singing treatises, as this moves from the brightest to the darkest sounding vowel and corresponds to Christoph Friedrich Hellwag’s (1754–1835) vowel diagram<sup>14</sup> and Hermann Helmholtz’s (1821–1894) vowel theory of 1863.<sup>15</sup> This vowel sequence was explicitly applied by Julius Hey (1832–1909) in his influential *Deutscher Gesangsunterricht* (1884), in which vowels—much like in Leser-Lasario’s work—are whispered in order to better shape their special timbre (*Klangfarbe*) (Hey 1884, 12, 20, 50; cf. Reinders 2000, 187). In *Meine Gesangskunst* (1902), penned by Lilli Lehmann (1848–1929), we even find a similar idea of locating certain vowels within resonant spaces of the body, as well as locating several of these spaces in the skull (Reinders 2000, 191–92). Both Lehmann and Leser-Lasario agreed that the vowel ‘I’ most clearly resonates at the top of the skull (Lehmann 1902, 22–23; Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 90).<sup>16</sup> A technique used by Leser-Lasario in almost every exercise was *mesa di voce*, a term ubiquitously found in *bel canto* (a classical style of singing developed in early Italian baroque opera) to denote a sustained holding of a note and changing its volume from soft to loud and vice versa (as found, e.g., in Stockhausen 1884, 16–17). Of all these authors, Leser-Lasario referred explicitly only to Helmholtz, and once, in a more general manner, to *bel canto* as a useful singing technique (Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 66, 113).

14 The vowel diagram shows where vowels are produced in the mouth cavity in relation to the position of the tongue. In ‘I,’ the tongue has the highest position whereas in ‘A’ the lowest; ‘U’ also has a high tongue position, but further back in the mouth cavity (cf. Helmholtz 1863, 167). It was first systematically described in Hellwag’s dissertation *De formatione loquela* of 1781.

15 Vowels have their own frequency; ‘U’ having the lowest and ‘I’ (particularly in the front where the tongue is close to the palate) the highest frequency (Helmholtz 1863, 163–81, particularly 172–73; cf. Reinders 2000, 186).

16 See also n. 10.

While the famous Spanish *bel canto* singer and teacher Manuel García (1805–1906) taught that singing—and the promulgation of certain vowels—deeply engaged human emotions (García 1847, 3), he did not establish a fully developed scheme in which each vowel correlated to a certain emotion, as Leser-Lasario did. Furthermore, there is no singing treatise that I am aware of in which vowels correspond to colors. Such attributions to vowels were made by the poet and composer Ernest Cabaner (1833–1881) and his student, the poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891) (Emons 2011, 31–34), but in our specific case they lead to Ariosophy-informed literature (see Section 3). Although other aspects need to be considered, Leser-Lasario saw a clear link to the recitation of mantras in South Asian history (Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 30). Indeed, the efficacy of his system lies in harnessing sound as a subtle energy to unleash the hidden potential of the human voice and breath. It utilizes the whole body to attune to resonance spaces of certain vowels, words, or phrases. The semantic meaning is important, but even more so the underlying sonic quality of the breath, vowels, or hum. Considering these basic ingredients, the inspiration derived from the concept of mantras is not too surprising, even more, as yoga was on the rise in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. Although the religious, cultural, and linguistic (including semantic-symbolical) aspects of the practices were different, the “sonic-somatic sensation of chanting mantras” (Hauser 2018, 518) is the underlying structure that is also relevant here. What must be stressed is that there are concrete historical reasons why his system came to be associated with the chanting of mantras and yoga. This also leads us to the question of the occult roots of Leser-Lasario’s work.

In the following, I will deal with a wider cast of protagonists, spanning from the German opera singer and high-degree freemason J. B. Kerning (1774–1851), who had a major impact on the illiterate weaver and Rosicrucian Alois Mailänder (1843–1905); the latter, then, is acknowledged to be an important spiritual teacher for several figures of German occultism (with Vienna as a hotspot), like Friedrich Eckstein (1861–1939), Karel Weinfurter (1867–1942), Carl Polycarp zu Billingen-Leiningen (1860–1899), Franz Hartmann (1838–1912), Carl Kellner (1850–1905), and Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932). As part of their Theosophical interest, yoga was one of the major subjects discussed and practiced within this group. Quite likely, Leser-Lasario associated with members of these circles, although concrete historical data is pending.

## 2 Possible Precedents within German Occultism

Already Johann Baptist Krebs (alias J. B. Kerning; 1774–1851) had experimented with sound and breath during the first half of the nineteenth century as part

of his masonic and opera singing regimen. His so-called “letter exercises” (*Buchstabenübungen*) consisted of the meditation on and recitation of phonemes (both vowels and consonants), words, and prayer texts. Kerning was inspired by the Kabbalah—terming it a ‘philosophy of nature’—to develop these exercises (Baier 2020, 51).<sup>17</sup> He did so in the so-called *Buchstaben Buch*, first published as *Die Wiedergeburt* in 1857 and then reedited in 1905 by Kerning’s student Karl Kolb (d. 1895). For Kerning, the significance of letters lies in the idea that they are the smallest entities of the Logos (Kolb 1905, 44–45).<sup>18</sup> The vowels gain additional importance since they represent the “life currents” (*Lebensströme*), whereas the consonants are the “cuts for individualization” (*Einschnitte zur Individualisierung*) (69). The combination I-A-O, signifying the masonic symbols of the line, triangle, and circle,<sup>19</sup> denotes the “root of God’s name” (*die Wurzel des Namen Gottes*) (68).<sup>20</sup> Kerning combined the visualization of letters and the silent murmuring of their sounds with the concentration on certain parts of the body to awaken the powers of the letters in oneself.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, he placed strong emphasis on the idea that breath could be absorbed through various openings in the body (Baier 2020, 52; Kerning 2013 [1917], 6–13). Ordinary breathing is for the physical body, but imagining the letters is “breathing for the spiritual body” (*atmen für den geistigen Leib*) (Kolb 1905, 56). The most important body awareness practice to begin with is to feel the letters in one’s feet every morning after waking up (51, 56). Starting from the feet upward, one gradually learns to attend to them in every part of the body—and to breathe in and out through these body parts so envisioned and enlivened. Kerning was aware of yoga as a practice to engage body awareness, breath, and sound, although his overall knowledge of yoga was quite sparse (Baier 2020, 54–55). It is his legacy that more clearly linked

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17 It is notable that Kerning dedicated his *Briefe über die königliche Kunst*, in which he also described letter exercises, to the philosopher, freemason, and Christian kabbalist Franz Joseph Molitor (1779–1860). The atomistic approach to divide language into its smallest entities in order to construct a meaningful whole can, furthermore, at least partly, be traced to the theories of the Swiss educational reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) (Baier 2020, 55).

18 “Gott ist das Wort und das Wort sind Buchstaben” (Kolb 1905, 45).

19 These represent the planning and construction tools ruler, square, and compasses, respectively, which are important masonic symbols.

20 This relates (though not fully consistently) to the name of God in the Old Testament (Jehova), which consisted of five vowels, according to Kerning: I-E-O-U-A (Kolb 1905, 68–69).

21 For example, one concentrates on the index finger until one sees the letter ‘I’ in it; then one completes, with two more fingers, the image of an ‘A’; if the image is clear, one places it on the throat until the whole body absorbs the idea (Baier 2020, 51).

these practices to yoga as part of the Theosophical influence within German and Viennese occultism.<sup>22</sup>

Despite some interesting correspondences in Kerning's and Leser-Lasario's works—most importantly the emphasis on the significance of imagination and guided awareness in breathing and vocal sound—there are also differences in the approach of the two opera singers. Kerning developed body awareness from the feet upward, whereas Leser-Lasario chose a top-down approach by first activating the skull and the chest as resonant bodily locations through the vowels I-A-E. For the former, I-A-O were the key vowels to represent God and all further 'life currents'; for the latter, I-A-E was the 'life triad.' Leser-Lasario may have been inspired by Kerning (possibly by reading the *Buchstaben Buch*). Yet, even if he was, he modeled his own more secular system with an orientation toward (vocal) health and overall well-being. In Leser-Lasario, mystical experience may appear as a side product or in advanced stages of practice not directly described in his work, whereas Kerning aimed at just that, envisioning the letter exercises as a kind of "primordial religion" (*Ur-Religion*) (Kolb 1905, 50). In other words, we find similarities but no full congruence. It is in the later occult and Ariosophical works of Peryt Shou (1873–1953) that Kerning's and Leser-Lasario's systems really grow together (see Section 4). But to link these protagonists, I will first turn to another influential figure for various exponents of German occultism.

The German Rosicrucian weaver Alois Mailänder, clearly influenced by Kerning in many ways (Baier 2020, 48), applied a similar yet still distinct method. It was embedded in a "mixture of pietism, Rosicrucianism, Kerning's thought, and maybe also Jakob Böhme and spiritualism" (46).<sup>23</sup> In the group that flocked around the influential Rosicrucian teacher, the so-called *Bund der Verheißung* (Covenant of Promise), it was common to silently or semi-silently murmur certain sentences and phrases. Mailänder most likely derived these practices from his reception of Kerning's *Schlüssel zur Geisterwelt* and *Wege zur Unsterblichkeit*, but not from the *Buchstaben Buch* that was probably not known to him (Baier 2020, 50). However, Kerning recommended to work with much shorter linguistic entities (letters or words) than Mailänder did (50–51). The phrases mainly consisted of one or two sentences, tailored for the individual student, and mostly reflected Christian piety (47). The murmuring of these sentences was expected to produce certain phenomena, such as stigmata,

22 Wilhelm von Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916), for example, terms the Kerning and Mailänder practices "German Yoga training" in his *Indisches Tagebuch* of 1894/96 (cf. Baier 2020, 53).

23 Emil Bock assumed that Mailänder's teachings were a simplified version of the ones of the Theosopher Jakob Boehme (1575–1624) (Bock 1990 [1961], 185; cf. Baier 2020, 46–47).

letters appearing on the skin, vibrations felt in certain body areas, or a sense of an inner humming (48; cf. Robinson 2021, 105). According to the occultist and Mailänder's student Gustav Meyrink, the highest goal of these practices was the transformation of the human being as a whole (including the physical body) through the awakening to an inwardly perceptible light-shaped body that corresponds to the immortal body (*Unsterblichkeitsleib*) of Jesus Christ (Meyrink 1981, 229; cf. Baier 2020, 47).

Mailänder's Vienna-based students mainly understood this body-oriented approach of diligent observation of sudden changes or "processes" (*Vorgänge*) within the body as part of the Rosicrucian tradition (Baier 2020, 48). The Theosophist Karl Weinfurter and others noticed the proximity of Mailänder's teachings to the ones by Kerning (49), but there is little to suggest that Mailänder taught exactly the same letter exercises, breathing methods, and body awareness practices as Kerning's (52). The common feature is the silent murmuring of a shorter or longer set of letters or phrases that induced mystical experiences and aimed at a refinement and ultimately immortality of the human body. Nevertheless, Mailänder's influence was important for the further development of yoga- and mantra-related practices, as we shall see.

Although this is speculative, Leser-Lasario may have been aware of Kerning's and Mailänder's teachings through the acquaintance with key actors of Viennese occultism that were immersed in them: the mystic and freemason Friedrich Eckstein and the Theosophist Carl Polycarp zu Leiningen-Billigheim.<sup>24</sup> Besides the utilization of certain vowels and phrases to uplift body and soul, one observes a clear emphasis on a body-oriented approach within the works of Kerning, Mailänder, and Leser-Lasario. Indeed, the communion of bodily and spiritual practice evidenced in Kerning's teachings certainly changed how the body was conceived in Viennese occultism. It soon became a source of enlightenment that was quite literally infused with the "Divine Word" (Baier 2020, 56–57). In an environment in which various alternative religious practices surfaced, this also had a major impact on how yoga was understood.<sup>25</sup> It allowed for intertwining yoga and occultism with the wider field of gymnastics and breath cultivation, in which Leser-Lasario saw himself placed. And the set of techniques described in this section enabled the falling into place of 'mantra' chanting, to which Leser-Lasario alluded and others had turned. Before we

24 Son of Carl Wenzeslaus (1823–1900) who was personally acquainted with Krebs/Kerning (Baier 2020, 30).

25 For example, the Viennese occultist Carl Kellner described Haṭhayoga as superior to Rājayoga ("kingly yoga," conceived as a purely mental practice) "from a physiological point of view," highlighting its overall psycho-physiological dimension (Kellner 1896, 12; cf. Baier 2018, 414).

investigate this connection, another spotlight on contemporaneous theories within Ariosophy and ‘Ario-Germanic’ thought is due.

### 3 Contemporaneous Theories in Ariosophy and Ario-Germanic Thought

Although not made explicit in Leser-Lasario’s text, an important context in which his ideas developed was Ariosophy and related literature that promoted what they called an ‘Ario-Germanic superiority.’ Ariosophy is a movement that emerged specifically in Austria, with its main exponents being Guido List (1948–1919) and Jörg Lanz v. Liebenfels (pseudonym of Adolf Josef Lanz; 1874–1954).<sup>26</sup> Of these two, List was clearly involved in German-speaking Theosophy, whereas Lanz was interested in occultism and occult phenomena more broadly, such as mesmerism, telepathy, spiritism, and astrology (Baier 2021, 428–29, 437). In any case, they added “the prototype of a *völkisch*-racist occultism to the Viennese alternative religious landscape” (Baier 2020, 37). List propagated the concept of an Ario-Germanic society that was organized strictly hierarchically, while it was patriarchally feudal and ruled by a religiously legitimized king (38). Introduced to Theosophy by Franz Hartmann, List recruited followers from the Viennese Theosophical camp (39). His student, Lanz v. Liebenfels, continued to promote the nexus of racist ethnic ideology and occult ideas, radicalizing it in terms of anti-Semitism and patriarchal thought (40).<sup>27</sup> While it is not clear whether Leser-Lasario was directly acquainted with these figures or their work (which, in any case, remained influential as part of the reception history of his own work), he clearly drew on literature with very similar ideological propositions.

A major case in point is *Aufgang der Menschheit* (1928) by the Nazism-inspired writer Herman Wirth (1885–1981),<sup>28</sup> which proposed a direct transmission of cultural and religious ideas over millennia within a so-called “Atlantean-Nordic race” (*Atlantisch-Nordische Rasse*). He utilized linguistic (particularly etymology- as well as runes-related) and ethnographic pseudo-scientific investigations to substantiate the superiority of the ‘Nordic race.’ In our context, his linguistic-etymological propositions that correlate with a symbolic reading of vowels are the most relevant. Exemplified through

26 For details on these figures, see also Hufenreuter 2012; Goodrick-Clarke 2006.

27 For details on the subject, see Baier 2020, 37–44; 2021; Goodrick-Clarke 2004, 90–106.

28 For a treatment of Wirth as a co-founder of the *völkisch* ‘research society’ *Ahnenerbe* (together with Heinrich Himmler [1900–1945] and Walther Darré [1895–1953]), see Löw 2009; Strube 2015.

the “Sommergedicht,” a poem by the minstrel Walther von der Vogelweide (1170–1230), Wirth attributed various qualities and colors to vowels, as found in natural phenomena of the seasons. For example, the vowel ‘U’ bears the colors of the winter solstice, which are dark blue and black (Wirth 1932 [1928], 508, 510). In his opinion, von der Vogelweide’s “play with vowels” (*Vokalspiel*)<sup>29</sup> was a late example of a millennia-old “continuity in the transmission of the North-Atlanteans” (*Kontinuität in der Überlieferung der Nord-Atlantiker*) (504). Occasionally, his arguments, which point to a variety of (quite imaginative) examples in various folk traditions, led Wirth to cosmogonic speculations that involve the etymology of the German word *Atem* and the older *Odem* (both denoting breath) (506–7). Besides referring to the Sanskrit term *ātman* (literally: ‘self,’ but etymologically related to the German *Atem*), Wirth linked this to the Germanic god “W-otan,” also called “Odinn”—who bestowed man with “breath,” “life,” and “soul” (*Atem, Lebensatem, Leben, Seele*) (507).

This passage is quite relevant, as Leser-Lasario paraphrased it in his chapter “Study of Breath” (*Atemkunde*).<sup>30</sup> However, in contrast to Wirth, Leser-Lasario also referred to the Biblical *ruah* (‘breath,’ ‘live’; Genesis 1.2), which denotes a divine vitalistic principle, indicating thereby that his *völkisch* leanings were probably not as pronounced as Wirth’s. Additionally, Leser-Lasario did not make a direct mention of Wirth, but instead referred to another work that explicitly adopted Wirth’s thought and his vowel-color correlations (Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 27), namely, *Farbe und Heilweise* (1931) by Bruno Schliephacke (b. 1900). *Farbe und Heilweise* constructed its theory of colors on Wirth’s analysis of von der Vogelweide’s *Vokalspiel*,<sup>31</sup> the psychological investigations on synaesthesia of Georg Anschütz (1886–1953),<sup>32</sup> astrological speculations, and, in drawing on Franz Hartmann’s interpretation, the Hindu

29 This is a term used by exponents of German studies in reference to von der Vogelweide’s poem (Emons 2011, 27–28). Thus, Wirth’s analysis was not entirely new but he partly drew on the works of W. Wilmann (1883, 295–98; cf. Wirth 1932 [1928], 504). However, in Wilmann’s work, there are no explicit vowel-color correlations derived from von der Vogelweide’s *Vokalspiel* as in Wirth’s.

30 “Das Wort ‚Atem‘ und ‚Geist‘ ist in vielen alten Sprachen ein und dasselbe Wort [...]. Man denke auch an ‚Wotan—Wode—Odin—Odem‘ der alten Germanen” (Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 31).

31 Leser-Lasario’s vowel-color correlation only slightly differs from Wirth’s and Schliephacke’s. Leser-Lasario associated ‘A’ with blue/green, whereas the others attributed white to this vowel (cf. Schliephacke 2022 [1931], 38). In contrast, in following Cabaner, Rimbaud established entirely different correspondences in his famous poem “Voyelles”: “A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu” (Emons 2011, 31–33).

32 Anschütz was a German psychologist whose career was fostered by the Nazi regimen. His work *Farbe-Ton-Forschungen* (1927) investigates the psychological base of synaesthetic phenomena.

*guṇa* (quality, attribute) doctrine of the *Bhagavadgītā*. For Schliephacke, all this was “Atlantean knowledge” transmitted to us via Hermes Trismegistos, the “Isis-priest” (*Isispriester*), making it thus a “hermetic science” (*hermetische Wissenschaft*) (Schliephacke 2022 [1931], 11). Although we do not know the depth of Leser-Lasario’s engagement with the “Atlantean-hermetic” transmissions and their authors, their traces in his work are evident. This also explains why Leser-Lasario was quite influential within further Ariosophical, *völkisch*, and hermetic literature (and all the synergies in between). This leads us to a brief overview of important aspects of the reception history of his work, as well as a discussion of how the practice of mantra chanting developed in relation to vowel breathing.

#### 4 Reception History: Peryt Shou and *Mantramistik*

The occultist and Ariosophist Peryt Shou (pseudonym of Albert Christian Georg Schultz)<sup>33</sup> drew on both Leser-Lasario’s work—which he developed further—and Kerning’s and Mailänder’s methods. Next to Ariosophical ideas, he was immersed in *Neugeist* (the German equivalent of American New Thought) as well as hygiene and yoga. Thus, Shou was most likely aware of the works of William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), who published under the pseudonym Yogi Ramacharaka. Just as other exponents of New Thought, Ramacharaka applied affirmations for health and healing, and he termed “mantrams” a set of sentences to uplift body and mind,<sup>34</sup> which probably inspired Shou. All these contexts and ideas proved to be a fertile ground for the reception of Leser-Lasario’s *Vokalatmung*, and, under Shou, it was explicitly and more concretely linked to chanting mantras, or mantracism (*Mantramistik*), as he called it.

In 1928, he went on a lecture tour to teach practical mantracism (*Praktische Mantramistik*) (Hauser 2018, 519), specifically featuring vowel breathing. Shou probably promoted what he had set forth in *Praktischer Mantramistik: Das Mantram und die Vokal-Atmung* (1927). In this work, he called “mantrams” all the words and phrases to be chanted, be they of Indian, Germanic, Egyptian,

33 For a discussion of Peryt Shou, see also Strube 2013, 91–94 and his contribution in this volume.

34 “A mantram is a word, phrase, or verse, used by the Eastern people in concentrating upon an idea and letting it sink deep into the mind. It is similar to the ‘affirmations’ or statements of the Mental Scientists and other thinkers of the Western world. Constant repetition of a mantram impresses upon the mind the thought behind it” (Ramacharaka 1931 [1903], 279). In Ramacharaka’s *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism*, we find a variety of affirmations dubbed “mantrams” (ibid., 279–86).

or Biblical origin. Vowel breathing is introduced in relation to the first mantra in the booklet, which is “Isis,” being a reduplication of the “primordial sound” (*urlaut*) “is” (Shou 2008 [1927], 14) and representing the Egyptian goddess.<sup>35</sup> Much aligned with Leser-Lasario, Shou explained that the vowel ‘I’ is felt at the top of the head, particularly affecting the pineal gland (19; Leser-Lasario 1954 [1931], 90, 132).<sup>36</sup> To increase the effect, one should stretch the pointer to symbolize the ‘I.’ Here, Shou looped Leser-Lasario’s technique back to Kerning’s letter exercises.<sup>37</sup> Just like Kerning, Shou stressed the peculiarity of the vowel sequence I-E-O-U-A as representing the biblical name of God, i.e., Jehova (Kolb 1905, 69; Shou 2008 [1927], 20). He called this way of chanting God’s name a “Neugeist-religious” (*neugeistig-religiös*) practice (ibid.). As all this was linked to the mantra “Isis” and, moreover, the Vedic “Om,” which is combined with a specific hand gesture, we should further investigate the intricacies of Shou’s instruction. In his work, exercises are often comprised in diagrams into which the instruction is imprinted, as it were—if one manages to decipher it (see Figure 13.2).

In this exercise, called the “banner” or the “flag” (*Banner, Fahne*), one marks out a banner that is imagined to surround one’s body by connecting the lines between the letters AE and BF (image a). In chanting first “Isis” and then “Om,” one should feel the vibration of the sound of ‘S’ and ‘M’ (with nasal pronunciation) in the palm of the hand (Shou 2008 [1927], 16). This may hint at Mailänder’s influence, because to him the palms as the places of Christ’s stigmata were significant (Robinson 2021, 112–14). As a result, the letter ‘S’ is then said to vibrate along the spine (image b). It is in this state that the “banner” is activated by sound and becomes a “papyrus scroll” or an actual bearer of the Logos. The wave-like shapes of the scroll’s lines represent and multiply the line of the human spine that one is supposed to focus on (16–17). The scroll—which surrounds the body as a kind of aura—becomes a “resonance field” (*Resonanzfeld*) in which the ‘word’ or Logos will start to vibrate (16). One should practice this particularly in the evening; and in an advanced state, one combines “Isis” and “Om” to the “key word of heaven” (*Schlüsselwort des Himmelreiches*), the Jewish

35 The reference to Isis is quite common in Theosophical and Ariosophical circles at that time.

36 As Leser-Lasario’s first booklet with the subtitle *Vowel-Type-Breathing* was published in English in 1923, we can assume that, with regard to *Vokalatmung*, it was Shou that drew on Leser-Lasario and not vice versa. However, a cross-fertilization between the two after 1927 is likely, and Shou may well have inspired Leser-Lasario to mention mantracism (*Mantramystik*) in his 1931 book.

37 As probably transmitted to him by Meyrink’s *Der weiße Dominikaner* (1921) (Shou 2008 [1927], 19). For a description of Kerning’s precedent of this exercise, see n. 21.

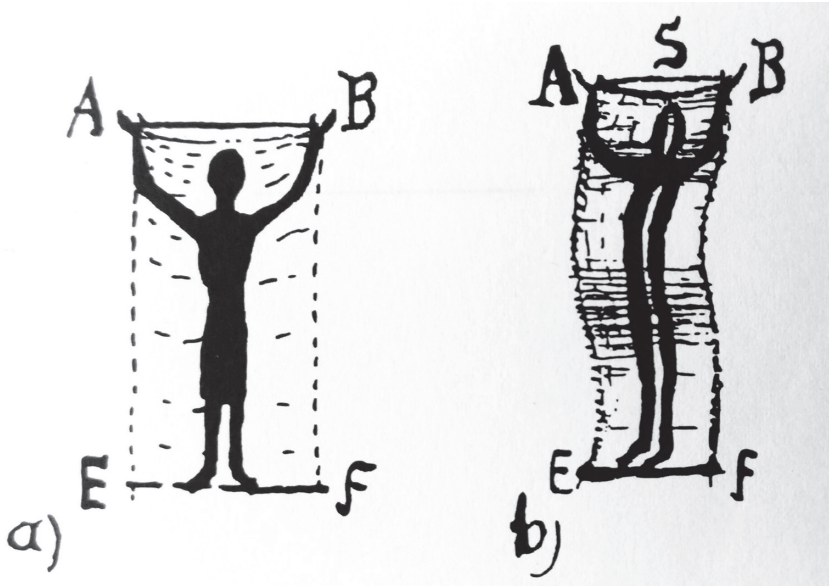


FIGURE 13.2 “Flag, Banner, Papyrus Scroll” (Fahne, Banner, Papyrus-Rolle)  
SHOU 2008 [1927], 14

and “Ur-Christian” (*urchristlich*) “his-man” (16–17).<sup>38</sup> This experience will be increased by subjecting the Eros to the Logos, which means the drawing-up of sexual energy to the brain (particularly the pineal gland), or the transformation of sexual energy into “divine creation” (*göttliche Zeugungs-Energie*) which is made available to the “mature human being” (*geistiger Voll-Mensch*) (Shou 2008 [1927], 18, 38–39). All this was well-aligned with the teachings of Kerning and Mailänder as well as practices hinted at in Viennese Occultism, in which the incarnation of the Logos and the sublimation of sexual energy was an important part.<sup>39</sup>

As for the importance of yoga, besides the Vedic mantra *om*, Shou engaged a range of yoga-inspired terminology in this work. He referred to the concept of *kundalini*, or “Kundali,” which, in his interpretation, is the “dragon” in the body to be slayed (Shou 2008 [1927], 46). The *cakras* are described as “electro-magnetic whirl fields” (*elektro-magnetische Wirbel-Felder*) (49). Further Sanskrit mantras are directly adopted from yoga, most prominently the *hamṣa* mantra

38 These mantras are then combined to produce the word “hes-man” which is said to be related to the Jewish notion of “h-esch-main,” denoting “heaven” (Shou 2008 [1927], 16–17).

39 On the sublimation of sex, see, for example, the sexual magic of Kellner and the ‘Inner Occult Circle’ of the early Ordo Templi Orientis (cf. Baier 2018, 421–26).

which Shou correlates to the Sanskrit term *ahimsā* (“non-violence”) (41–42). The practice of the yogic and tantric *haṃsa* mantra that alludes to the subtle sound produced by the in- and outbreath (cf. Gerety 2021, 510) is mentioned, for example, in the eighteenth-century *Gheraṇḍasamhitā*, which was known to German occultists via the English translation of Sris Chandra Vasu of 1895 (Kraler 2025, 221).

To sum up, what Shou clearly took from Leser-Lasario was the prominence of the idea of *Vokalatumung*, the notion of resonance spaces of vowels in the body (particularly the ‘T’ on top of the head), as well as the importance of relaxation and detox for health (Shou 2008 [1927], 48–49). However, in Shou’s work, the connection between the notion of the Logos and mantra was deepened—for him, they were virtually synonymous (Shou 1931, 75). Despite allusions to yoga and the Egyptian goddess Isis, Shou is more inclusive toward Christian ideas than other Ariosophically-inspired authors. Indeed, for him, Isis referred to the biblical Isaiah, and both Isis and Isaiah herald the coming of “Chr-is-tos,” or Jesus of Nazareth (Shou 2008 [1927], 38). Harnessing the power of the Logos, which was taught by Jesus to his disciples, also lies at the heart of Neugeist practices (54).

The further reception history of Leser-Lasario’s work (which soon would become inseparable from Shou’s) has many strands, the most important contexts being German breath gymnastics, transnational yoga, and specific circles of German magic. An early point of reception are the works of the breath therapists Clara Schlaffhorst (1863–1945) and Hedwig Andersen (1866–1957) (see Hauser 2018, 519) as well as Herbert Fritsche’s (1911–1960) *Die Atemschule: Richtig atmen—besser leben* (1938). A major representative of a similar genre, Ilse Middendorf’s (1910–2009) *Der Erfahrbare Atem* (1984) is quite influential in Europe and North America until today. The idea of resonance spaces activated by vowel breathing evolved in her work (Middendorf 1991 [1984], 60–67), perhaps representing the most well-known and accessibly reception point of Leser-Lasario’s ideas.

But we also find them in transnational yoga. First, Felix Riemkasten (1953, 93) mentions Leser-Lasario’s healing techniques in *Yoga für Sie* and traces them (probably drawing on the many connotations and origination stories of vowel breathing) to the “priests of old Egypt.”<sup>40</sup> One of the most influential and transnationally active yoginis of the twentieth century, Indra Devi (pseudonym of

40 “Die Priester im alten Ägypten heilten damit Kranke; sie heilten durch Tonwellen, die den Körper durchliefen” (Riemkasten 1953, 93). I thank Dr. Beatrix Hauser for providing me with this reference.

Eugenie Peterson; 1899–2002) further linked Leser-Lasario’s “sound therapy” to “mantra yoga” in *Forever Young, Forever Healthy* (1953, 72–74).

On the occult side, the *Fraternitas Saturni* (“Brotherhood of Saturn”)—a German magical order founded in 1926—adopted some techniques by Leser-Lasario. The prominent member Karl Spiesberger (1904–1992) placed *Vokalatmung* and mantra chanting, particularly the Isis- and Om-exercises, next to runes gymnastics (*Runengymnastik*) and yogic breath practices (*prāṇāyāma*) in his *Magische Einweihung* of 1976. Through these lines of reception Leser-Lasario’s work lived on in esoteric circles but also in systems of body and breath work of the late twentieth-century, and will probably continue to do so well into the twenty-first century.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Leser-Lasario harnessed the subtle energies of sound through a system of vowel breathing that engaged a combination of various hygienic, artistic, occultistic, and Ariosophical ideas and practices. In this chapter, I have shown how the common association of sound and breath with yoga involves a multi-layered net of ideas that draws on various religious and political camps and orientations. Leser-Lasario and his direct followers and interpreters had Ariosophical leanings, a fact that normally remains unrecognized within the history of vowel breathing. In his work, the subtle energy of sound was mainly used for the purpose of health and healing which is typical for *Lebensreform*-oriented practices. However, he also hinted at the possibility of delving into mysticism through mantra and psalmody.

Up to the present, his system is often mentioned in the context of ‘yoga,’ mainly due to the fact that the yoga-cum-occultism of *fin-de-siècle* central Europe had a major role to play in shaping Leser-Lasario’s work. As discussed in the introduction to this volume, the notions of the subtle body and harnessing subtle energies are common within contexts of yoga. Given that Leser-Lasario’s work can be seen as a central-European contribution to a wider history of mantra chanting, it is not too far-fetched to think of breath and sound in his work as ‘subtle energies.’ Indeed, the subtle vibrations that the vowels were said to produce in various body parts (e.g., in the forehead) can be compared to the placing of mantras on the body as found in yogic-tantric sources, e.g., the *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā* 3.68–81 (Vasu 1895, 26–29). This suggests that the notion of ‘subtle energies’ includes the realm of breath, sound, language, and speech—in brief, the sonic and vibrating quality of the human voice and breath. I argue that integrating these modes of human expression situated at the interface of

the perceivable and the imaginative means to arrive at a fuller understanding of what the concept of subtle energies can denote and include.

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# Subtle Energies and Blunt Politics: Occultism, Technology, and the Politics of Vril

*Julian Strube*

## 1 The Vril: from Dystopian Satire to Esoteric Neo-Nazism

This chapter traces the dazzling reception of the fictional occult force called *vril*, invented by one of the most influential Victorian authors, Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873), in his successful 1871 novel *The Coming Race*. The English lord wrote down his ideas at a time when the emerging modern natural sciences were struggling with currents such as mesmerism and spiritualism for the interpretive hegemony of phenomena such as electricity, magnetism, and a growing number of newly discovered forms of radiation. Unknown, powerful forces seemed to permeate the entire world and be a possible explanation for magic and miracles. Bulwer-Lytton played a central role in this discourse not least because of his pronounced ‘esoteric’ interests. With his Rosicrucian-themed novel *Zanoni* (1842), he had captivated a large number of enthusiastic readers who believed the author to be the bearer of Rosicrucian secret knowledge (Strube 2013, 13–32). In this and other works, Bulwer-Lytton explored the phenomena of occult natural forces, which he presented as an explanation of magic, the understanding of which could mean not only deciphering but mastering nature (ibid., 21–32). It was in this context that *The Coming Race* elaborated ideas of universal, all-pervading elemental forces, which Bulwer-Lytton summarized under the name of vril. The work, one of the first science fiction novels ever written, was received with enthusiasm by the public and especially within esoteric circles (Roukema 2021). This success was due in no small part to the social critique underlying the narrative: the story can be read as a dystopian satire, a commentary on contemporary scientific, religious, and social developments (Strube 2013, 35–52).

Theosophists and occultists, however, who had long identified Bulwer-Lytton as an ‘initiate,’ were mostly captivated by *The Coming Race* because of its discussion of occult forces, futuristic technology based on them, and the spiritual-biological evolution of the human race. The vril was reinterpreted by authors such as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), the leading figure of the Theosophical Society, and Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), the founder

of Anthroposophy, who regarded it as a powerful elemental force that had enabled the inhabitants of Atlantis to build—and destroy—their superior civilization (Strube 2013, 65–79). In *fin-de-siècle* Germany, the vril was vividly discussed in esoteric and alternative milieus and was to be used in the interwar period to develop utopian visions of a society that used the primal power of vril to ultimately ascend to the level of omnipotent divinity. This combination of esoteric, biological, and technological discourse was typical of contemporary occultism and lent itself to radical political interpretations (Treitel 2004; Owen 2004; Noakes 2019). These included an enthusiastic reception by the adherents of Ariosophy, a blend of *völkisch* and esoteric ideas that was decidedly fascist, racist, antisemitic, and misogynistic (Goodrick-Clarke 1985; Paape 2020; Baier 2021). The leading Ariosophist Adolf Joseph Lanz, who called himself Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (1874–1954), was among the propagators of the supposed transformative powers of vril, as interpreted by its occultist reception.

This politically tinged reception would continue after World War II, leading to a bewildering spread in popular culture, esoteric circles, and right-wing extremism (Strube 2012; 2013, 126–89). In bestsellers such as Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier's *Morning of the Magicians* (1960), the vril was associated with a mysterious 'Vril Society,' which was portrayed as the dark force behind the 'Third Reich,' and the SS in particular (John-Stucke and Siepe 2021). As early as the 1950s, it also played a central role in the development of an esoteric neo-Nazism that revolved around the notion of the 'Black Sun,' a symbol now widely used in right-wing extremist circles around the world. The vril, already considered by Bulwer-Lytton and his esoteric recipients to be the driving force behind futuristic flying machines, was explained in this context as the technological basis for alleged Nazi secret weapons, with the help of which the Nazi élites would have retreated to secret German bases in South America and under the two poles. Since then, these followers of the 'Midnight Mountain' (a metaphysical representation of 'the North,' Thule, Atlantis, or Hyperborea) have waged a spiritual struggle against the materialistic forces of the 'demiurge' Yahweh and his followers from 'Mount Sinai'—a thinly veiled antisemitic conspiracy narrative.

These developments significantly shaped the image of vril that prevails today. Whereas the adherents of esoteric neo-Nazism operated in the political underground, the understanding of vril they constructed exerted a great fascination on a broad audience and continues to be received in an unmanageable mass of publications as well as on the internet. Indeed, a direct reception can be traced from the beginnings of esoteric neo-Nazism to still existing circles that are more active—and effective—than ever in spreading their ideas

(Pöhlmann 2021, 123–36). This includes the omnipresent topoi of Nazi flying saucers, secret technology powered by vril, secret societies struggling for world dominance, the supposed origin of ‘the Aryans’ in the star system of Aldebaran, preoccupations with Atlantis and Thule, as well as *völkisch* fantasies about ‘the East.’ This shows how the occultist desire for a new stage in human evolution, following the development or rediscovery of a superior science, was prone to a combination with racial ideas and elitist ideologies. In what follows, this development will be traced and illustrated in the light of little-studied sources from the decades around 1900.

## 2 The Theosophical Transfiguration of Vril and Its Author

Even before Blavatsky helped Bulwer-Lytton to further prominence in Theosophical circles in *Isis Unveiled* in 1877, English Rosicrucians had claimed to have recognized an initiate in him and unceremoniously declared him a member of their order (Strube 2013, 55–64). Given the esoteric contents of *Zanoni*, it is not surprising that the novel had a great attraction for Rosicrucians—or people who thought they were. A year after the publication of *The Coming Race*, and shortly before his death, Bulwer-Lytton learned by accident, so to speak, of his membership in a Rosicrucian order. The fact that he died without the matter really being cleared up is probably the main reason why rumors about his possible membership in secret societies and orders of various kinds persist vigorously to this day. Without these allegations, which began to spread in the 1870s, the vril might have never been charged with the importance that has been attached to it over time.

The story of *The Coming Race* deftly played with some of the most prominent discourses of the nineteenth century, revolving around issues of science, technology, social reform, religion, and Orientalism. A young and wealthy American, together with a mining engineer friend, descends into a cave to search for mineral resources. The two men come across a long and apparently not naturally formed shaft, which is illuminated by mysterious light sources. As they continue their descent, the engineer is killed by a fall, but the protagonist is able to descend unharmed (Bulwer-Lytton 1871, 1–11). Left to his own devices, he soon encounters the subterranean race of the Vril-ya, whose monumental architecture immediately suggests their high level of development and is likened to that of ancient Egypt and ‘the Orient’ (15).

The civilization of the Vril-ya, which the narrator comes to know in the course of the novel, is characterized by its absolute technical superiority over the human upper world. Countless ‘automata’ relieve the Vril-ya of much of

their work, and the 'oriental'-looking city they inhabit is thoroughly luxurious, beautiful, and orderly. This superior civilization would not have been possible without the force that had assumed such prominence that the race named itself after it. All life is governed by vril. Practically the entire culture of the Vril-ya is based on the application of this almost omnipotent force, which can be used for constructive and healing as well as for destructive purposes. It is likened by the protagonists to electricity and Michael Faraday's (1791–1867) "atmospheric magnetism," akin to "mesmerism, electro-biology, odic force, &c., but applied scientifically through vril conductors." Thus, the Vril-ya "can exercise influence over minds, and bodies animal and vegetable, to an extent not surpassed in the romances of our mystics. To all such agencies they give the common name of vril" (Bulwer-Lytton 1871, 47). The Vril-ya have even evolved biologically to conduct vril, having developed a special nerve that connects to engineered 'vril staffs.' The vril thus represents a symbiosis of technology, religion, and nature, as the Vril-ya were not only spiritually capable of handling such a tremendous force, but they also physically evolved to operate their impressive devices and vehicles. The latter include flying ships powered by vril, which especially arouse the narrator's curiosity (182–83).

Considering Bulwer-Lytton's reputation as an adept, it is not surprising that it did not take long before his *mélange* of occult forces, subterranean civilizations linked to ancient Egypt, and futuristic technology would attract the attention of occultist authors. A major admirer was Blavatsky, whose writings were significantly influenced by Bulwer-Lytton. His novels *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Zanoni*, *A Strange Story*, and *The Coming Race* served Blavatsky not only as sources of inspiration but also for numerous quotations (Liljegren 1957; see also Coleman 1895). This can be seen in *Isis Unveiled*, which displays extraordinary admiration for the English author:

No author in the world of literature ever gave a more truthful or more poetical description of these beings than Sir E. Bulwer-Lytton, the author of *Zanoni*. Now, himself "a thing not of matter" but an "Idea of joy and light," his words sound more like the faithful echo of memory than the exuberant outflow of mere imagination. (Blavatsky 1877, 285)

Here, Blavatsky referred to the author as almost superhuman, thus giving his books a prophetic, divine character (Liljegren 1957, 13–14). In an article in *The Theosophist*, she later wrote that Bulwer-Lytton was "one who is still claimed by the mysterious brotherhood in India as a member of their own body" (Blavatsky 1884, 17). This special place of Bulwer-Lytton in Blavatsky's work led numerous Theosophical authors to elevate him to one of the most prominent

initiates. The resulting extensive body of writing in Theosophical journals and monographs helped to further propagate the claims about Bulwer-Lytton's secret knowledge or his initiation by 'the Masters' (Stewart 1927). That Bulwer-Lytton's descriptions of a coming race held a great fascination for Theosophists is not surprising. The coming race could be readily harmonized with the Theosophical teaching of the 'root races,' whose next stage of development was already predicted in the near future.

The first time Blavatsky referred to vril was to describe an all-pervading life force that, in her view, flows through the universe. In a long list, she enumerated the various names that have been used for it in human history: Chaos, the Zoroastrian fire, the torch of Apollo, the Egyptian Phtha or Ra, the burning thorn bush, the vapors of the Oracle of Delphi, the sidereal light of the Rosicrucians, the Akasha of the Hindus, the astral light of Eliphas Lévi (1810–1875), the aura and the fluid of the Mesmerists, the *Od* of Karl von Reichenbach (1788–1869), atmospheric magnetism, galvanism, electricity, the Archeus (a Paracelsian term), and a number of other terms (Blavatsky 1877, 125). She continues:

Sir E. Bulwer-Lytton, in his *Coming Race*, describes it as the VRIL, used by the subterranean populations, and allowed his readers to take it for a fiction. [...] Absurd and unscientific as may appear our comparison of a fictitious vril invented by the great novelist, and the primal force of the equally great experimentalist, with the cabalistic astral light, it is nevertheless the true definition of this force. Discoveries are constantly being made to corroborate the statement thus boldly put forth. (Blavatsky 1877, 125–26)

The identification of vril with these terms was especially easy because Bulwer-Lytton himself had made such comparisons in his writings. Blavatsky went on to explain that behind both all so-called miracles and magic there is nothing but the mastery of natural laws. "The phenomena of natural magic," according to Blavatsky, have nothing to do with sleight of hand, but are based on the skillful control of natural forces by the willpower of the practitioner (Blavatsky 1877, 128–29). She viewed Mesmer and his followers in the tradition of the "thaumaturgists of all periods, schools, and countries" and concluded that Mesmerism is the most important branch of magic; its phenomena were the effects of the universal agent which underlay all magic and had produced at all ages the so-called miracles (129).

Clearly, vril was a term suitable for Blavatsky to collect a multitude of other terms from the entire history of humankind, and this especially under the aspect of contemporary scientific discoveries and theories. In doing so, as time

went on, she interpreted the *vril* less and less as a fictional literary notion and more as a veiled reference to a real, existing force. At the end of 1883, she wrote in a letter: “The *vril* is not altogether a fiction, as some chelas [disciples] and even ‘lay’ chelas know” (Blavatsky 1985, 143). When Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* appeared in 1888, she had already formulated this idea. It is remarkable that she referred to the *vril* in connection with the experiments of the American inventor John Ernst Worrell Keely (1827–1898). According to Blavatsky, Keely had unconsciously discovered a tremendous force during his experiments.

[It] is the terrible sidereal force, known to, and named by the Atlanteans Mash-mak, and by the Âryan Rishis in their *Astra Vidyâ* by a name that we do not like to give. It is the *Vril* of Bulwer Lytton’s *Coming Race*, and of the coming Races of our mankind. The name *Vril* may be a fiction; the Force itself is a fact, as little doubted in India as is the existence of the Rishis, since it is mentioned in all the secret books. (Blavatsky 1893 [1888], 614)

Keely had claimed the discovery of an etheric force that enabled him to operate an engine by means of vibrations using only water and air. He had not been able to convince the experts with his experiments and fell into public disrepute. However, Keely had attracted much attention with his experiments only a few years before the publication of *The Secret Doctrine* and was much discussed in occultist circles. That Blavatsky combines in one breath Atlantis, Indian teachings, the claims of an American inventor, and a Victorian novel is characteristic of her approach. Since Indian teachings in *The Secret Doctrine* occupy a much larger space in Blavatsky’s thinking than they did in the times of *Isis Unveiled*, the *vril* now appears not in the company of the ancient Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, but of the Indian Rishis. The presence of the Atlantis motif, highly popular at the time, can be explained by Bulwer-Lytton’s descriptions of the *Vril-ya* as heirs to a sunken civilization (Strube 2013, 35–44).

In *The Story of Atlantis*, published in 1896, the Theosophist William Scott-Elliot (1849–1919) dealt with the location and heritage of the sunken continent and, on the basis of clairvoyant visions, described it in minute detail in the second part of his book (cf. contemporary writings, such as Donnelly 1882, 214–36). Scott-Elliot even included four geographical maps of Atlantis and described the social conditions of its inhabitants, members of that “principal or root race which preceded our present fifth or Aryan” (1903, 10). In a chapter on education, Scott-Elliot described the teaching of the young Atlanteans, which was devoted primarily to “the development of the psychic faculties and the opening of the pupils’ understanding of the hidden forces in nature” (62–63).

The development of the vril supposedly enabled the Atlanteans to employ advanced technological inventions. Among these were impressive aerial warships that had powerful “destroyer engines” and could accommodate fifty to a hundred fighting men (Scott-Elliot 1903, 70). Just as in *The Coming Race*, these airships are described as powered by a machine that works with vril (cf. Bulwer-Lytton 1871, 182–83). At one point, Scott-Elliot discussed the mastery of “personal vril,” implying that the Atlanteans first controlled their flying ships by an individually applied vril, but later designed machines that harnessed a different force (Scott-Elliot 1896, 53). He also referred to Keely and the English inventor Hiram Stevens Maxim (1840–1916), addressing, like Blavatsky, current developments in scientific discourse and suggesting that contemporary humans could tap into occult forces even if they are less spiritually developed. Consequently, in Scott-Elliot’s work, the vril takes on the features of a primordial elemental force which the Atlanteans were able to avail themselves of due to their superior spiritual abilities. By the invention of a machine which used an alternative force, however, the vril was no longer necessary for the control of the airships. The individually applied vril is thus contrasted with a machine-set force. In this way, Scott-Elliot formulated his great confidence in the technical progress of humankind: the unspeakable powers of the vril from *The Coming Race*, unattainable by humankind on spiritual and biological levels, could still be tapped by human ingenuity. In the following years, the Theosophically transformed notion of vril was thus further related to all kinds of ideas about occult forces and technology to harness them, leading to a new step in human evolution.

### 3 Contested Science and the German Enthusiasm for Vril

This increasing preoccupation with occult forces and technology must be viewed against the background of the scientific discoveries at the turn of the century, which left a great impression on German occultists and would decisively shape the face of occultism. Rapid advances in the fields of electronics and radiology transformed public life and ushered in the age of the atom. The invisible forces and rays that had been the subject of learned speculation and debate for centuries became scientifically tangible and technologically exploitable (Noakes 2019). Cathode rays had already been discovered in the 1860s and 1870s, and from 1886 to 1888 Heinrich Hertz discovered radio waves, which were successfully transmitted by Nikola Tesla in 1891 and by Oliver Lodge in 1894. In 1895, Wilhelm Röntgen had discovered x-rays, for which he received the first Nobel Prize in Physics in 1901. This was followed in 1896 by the discovery and

study of radioactivity by Henri Becquerel (Noakes 2008, 323–34; Kragh 2002, 27–43). How deep radiation research was still in its infancy, despite all progress, is shown by the supposed discovery of n-rays by René Blondlot, which caused fierce debates in scientific circles and finally led to a refutation by the American physicist Robert Wood (Nye 1980, 125–56). It is therefore important to bear in mind that the pioneering work of radiation research was by no means uncontroversial, and its subject matter often appeared diffuse not only outside but also within academic discourse.

In the eyes of many occultists, all this seemed to prove at last the old doctrines of invisible, all-pervading forces. In numerous publications, as well as in literally all occultist journals, well-known topics such as magnetism, hypnotism, electricity, and *Od*-rays were discussed more vividly than ever before in light of the new scientific discoveries. Hitherto ridiculed things, such as the human aura, control over mind and matter, or telepathy, now appeared scientifically provable and feasible in the eyes of occultists. An excellent example from the history of technology is telegraphy, which, after its development in the mid-nineteenth century, was considered by many to be an “occult art” (Noakes 1999). Through new technical achievements it would even be possible for humankind to reach a new evolutionary stage. With disgrace, however, the occultists had to realize that science was still generally dismissive of their teachings (Noakes 2008, 329–31). They wanted to oppose the despised “materialism” of the “established sciences” with a science that was dedicated to humankind in its totality and its relation to nature and cosmos, without disregarding the latest scientific findings. More than ever, the “occult sciences” became a counter-science (Treitel 2004, 16, 34–55).

In 1886, the first issue of the journal *Sphinx* was published by the Leipzig publishing house Th. Griebens Verlag, bearing the subtitle *Monthly Journal for the Historical and Experimental Substantiation of the Psychic [übersinnlich] Worldview on a Monistic Basis* (Treitel 2004, 40–55). The editor of the journal, Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916), was president of the German branch of the Theosophical Society, founded in 1884 (Zander 2007, 75–432; Howe 1995, 111). The *Sphinx* occupied a central position among German publications and counted among its contributors notable authors as Carl Kiesewetter (1854–1895) and Carl du Prel (1839–1899). Modern science, we read in the “Appeal and Preface” of the first volume, has not come any closer to understanding humankind and its relationship to nature and the universe. The scientists of the century had made the mistake of investigating humankind “on a predominantly materialistic basis” and had lost sight of what was essential. By founding “transcendental psychology,” the editors wanted to establish a science dedicated to the exploration of the psychic (*übersinnlich*). Especially the

“mystical” and “magical” phenomena of the “life of the soul” were to become the subject of research, because a science that renounced these aspects could hardly come closer to its goal (Anonymous 1886, 1–11). It is further said:

But as modern *science was born* out of misunderstood knowledge of nature and even partly *out of superstition*, so also the beginning of this *science of the psychic* is shrouded in doubtful darkness, and all the more so because the control and guidance of this study has been neglected so far by official science. [...] Passionless, impartial and impersonal, as all science as such is, we strive for the goal of a scientific, i.e., *monistic, uniform* explanation of all sensual and psychic facts, which we feel compelled to recognize as *real*. (Anonymous 1886, 11–111; emphasis in the original)

This criticism of ‘official science’ defined the character of ‘counter-science’ and at the same time formulated a claim to superiority of the latter which did not close itself off to important aspects of human existence but wanted to explore it in his entirety. It was in this environment that Bulwer-Lytton’s vril made its entry into the circles of German occultists. This was possible due to the fact that Bulwer-Lytton already had the reputation of being an ‘initiate,’ which is why his works were used as source material in occult publications (Strube 2013, 55–79).

In the second and third volumes of the *Sphinx*, Bulwer-Lytton’s ghost short story, *The Haunter and the Haunted*, was printed under the title “A Kind of So-Called Ghosts: An Own Experience and its Explanation” and annotated by Hübbe-Schleiden and Kiesewetter (Bulwer-Lytton 1886/1887). Remarkably, Bulwer-Lytton’s ghost story is treated as a “study” rather than a work of fiction. The commentaries of Hübbe-Schleiden and Kiesewetter speak of Bulwer’s “experiences,” which were considered to be of great importance because of their “explanations of such facts” (Bulwer-Lytton 1886/1887, 399/56). This shows that Bulwer-Lytton was no longer perceived by Hübbe-Schleiden and Kiesewetter as a novelist but as an investigator of occult phenomena. The successful ghost story was thus transformed into a ‘scientific’ article.

The literary work of Bulwer-Lytton was also referred to in the fifth volume in an article on “Hypnotism and Electricity in Ancient Egypt” by the Munich-based painter Franz Lambert, a member of the Psychologische Gesellschaft (Psychological Society), co-founded by Du Prel and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929). Hübbe-Schleiden referred in a footnote as a matter of course to “Bulwer’s vril-power (coming-race)” in connection with “electrifying machines” possibly used by the Egyptians (Lambert 1888, 3). To what extent Hübbe-Schleiden became aware of *The Coming Race* can only be conjectured.

It is likely, however, that he was well aware of the great esteem in which Blavatsky held the book. In any case, this reference in 1888 seems to have been the first—albeit casual—mention of vril in German occult or theosophical circles.

There are also several references to Bulwer-Lytton in the *Zentralblatt für Okkultismus*, published since 1908. The *Zentralblatt* (Central Gazette) was initially edited by the well-known astrologer Karl Brandler-Pracht (1864–1939) and was published by the Leipzig publishing house Max Altmann (Howe 1995, 113–15; for more on the Leipzig milieu, which was central to German occultism, see Bigalke 2016; Schuster 2018). Its declared goal was “researching the entirety of the secret sciences,” while its editors emphasized their claim to “Scientific Occultism” with an article of the same name in the first volume. An article on “The Prophecies of the Conquest of the Air” by one Ch. Thomassin dealt with past achievements in aircraft construction and recounted the prophecy of a Berlin somnambulist. The short article ends with the following passage:

When the prophecy will have been fulfilled and the conquest of the air will have succeeded, we will still not be as far as the race of the Vrilya, which Bulwer has described to us in his interesting novel “The Coming Race” (“Das Geschlecht der Zukunft”), which has been published in German translation by Max Altmann in Leipzig. According to the poet’s visions, these lucky Vrilya have already harnessed a power that is even more effective than electricity, that unites all natural forces, the old magnetic fluid of the occultists, which they can use for various purposes due to their advanced constitution. This power, the vril, serves them for their larger air vehicles, as for moving the wings they use for air travel. (Thomassin 1909, 470)

As in the writings of Scott-Elliot, the vril is mentioned in connection with the operation of flying machines and the wisdom of Atlantis, yet with direct reference to the German translation of *The Coming Race*. The fact that the novel was published by Max Altmann automatically brought it closer to readers interested in theosophy and the occult. For example, Franz Hartmann also mentioned *The Coming Race* in an article on “The Hollow Earth” in the fourth volume of the *Zentralblatt*.

#### 4 Bulwer-Lytton’s Reception among German Occultists

The enthusiasm with which Bulwer-Lytton’s novels were received is made clear by an article by one ‘Sindbad’ on “The Elixir of Life in Bulwer’s Novels

and in the Writings of Real Adepts,” which appeared in several parts in the *Zentralblatt* in 1918. Behind the pseudonym Sindbad hid the astrologer Friedrich Schwickert (1857–1930). He was *supérieur inconnu* of the Martinist Order, member of the Ariosophical List Society (Goodrick-Clarke 2004, 36–48) and, as Frater Gonsalvo, a member of Lanz’ Ariosophical Ordo Novi Templi (Howe 1995, 130; Goodrick-Clarke 2004, 53, 108; Hieronimus 1996; Paape 2020). Schwickert’s article was additionally published in the same year as an independent print, with a laudatory preface by the well-known occultist and great Bulwer-Lytton admirer G. W. Surya, whose civil name was Demeter Georgievitz-Weitzer (1873–1949). He had been editor of the *Zentralblatt* after Brandler-Pracht, before Max Altmann took over this position. Surya was a great admirer of Bulwer-Lytton especially because of *Zanoni*—in Surya’s writings, including his best-known book, *Moderne Rosenkreuzer* (1930), there are numerous favorable references to Bulwer-Lytton (e.g., Surya 1923, 240). Schwickert, in turn, took up the well-known allegations that Bulwer-Lytton was a Rosicrucian initiate who transported veiled secret knowledge in his novels:

Among the works soaring with eagle wings above the knowledge of the scholastic wisdom of our time are Bulver’s [sic] “Zanoni,” “A Strange History,” and “The Coming Race,” which in a certain sense may also be regarded as true initiatory writings of a Hermetic connoisseur and expert who was probably a genuine Rosicrucian and therefore knew much more than he was allowed to communicate to the general public. (Schwickert 1918, 10)

Schwickert tried to prove not only Bulwer-Lytton’s secret knowledge but also his abilities as a magician and referred to the account of a man who had allegedly visited Bulwer-Lytton to ask for “initiation into practical magic.” On the third night, Bulwer-Lytton is said to have replied to the aspirant that he would visit him. Indeed, the master appeared in the man’s room on the said evening:

He rose to shake hands with those who had arrived, but when he had almost come close to touching the figure, it disappeared. The initiate, who had never before perceived such a phenomenon, stood there for a while in amazement, wondering what to do next. Then a voice whispered, so close to his ear that he thought he could feel the warm breath of it: “Come!” He turned quickly in the direction from which the voice had sounded, but saw nothing. (Schwickert 1918, 11)

The astonished magician-to-be then decided to seek out Bulwer-Lytton at his hotel. On the way there, however, the whispering voice guided him to a

completely different place, where he would have never suspected to find Bulwer-Lytton:

When he entered the room, he found Bulwer standing in the middle of a pentagram drawn on the floor with red chalk, holding a staff pointed at him. The magician asked the initiate whether he had considered his decision carefully and was now ready to carry it out. On the affirmative answer the apprentice had to take the oath of obedience and secrecy of a neophyte of the Hermetic Lodge of Alexandria. (Schwicker 1918, 11)

This curious passage has been quoted at length to illustrate the extent of the transfiguration of Bulwer-Lytton into a supposed ‘initiate.’ The fact that the well-known authors Schwicker and Surya published such a story through an important publishing house and in an influential periodical cemented Bulwer-Lytton’s reputation as an occult master. How much this influenced the reception of Bulwer-Lytton’s books in the relevant circles is obvious. Schwicker speculated that Bulwer-Lytton, “the great pioneer of occultism,” had chosen the form of a novel for his “revelations [...] in order to make the hermetic teachings and warnings that can be communicated at all accessible with the greatest clarity to the widest circles of those thirsting for knowledge,” without time revealing too much (Schwicker 1918, 12). *The Coming Race* and the occult force of vril were received not as literary inventions but as veiled ‘Rosicrucian’ knowledge. This reception of Bulwer-Lytton was not limited to Germany, for translations of his works also appeared in esoteric circles in France. *A Strange Story* was published as a feuilleton in *Le Théosophe* in 1911 and later, from July 1920, in *Le Voile d’Isis*; the popularity of vril, however, was incomparably greater among Germans.

## 5 The Writings of Peryt Shou

Of great importance for the reception of vril in German occultism are the obscure writings of the esotericist Peryt Shou (né Albert Christian Georg Schultz; 1873–1953). Despite his considerable influence and a revival of attention in recent years, Shou’s work remains largely unexplored (see, however, Lenz 2004; Krumm-Heller 1919; Fritsche 1954). Shou’s numerous small independent publications, as well as his essays in well-known esoteric journals such as *Prana* and *Hag-All*, attest his multifaceted esoteric interests, which were reflected in a synthesis of predominantly Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Egyptian, and Germanic neopagan motifs. In the 1920s they took on

an increasingly Ariosophical character. The *vril* first appears in Shou's 1921 publication *Kwa-non-she: Die Weltreligion des Neu-Buddhismus und die abendländischen Geistesströmungen* (*Kwa-non-she: The World-Religion of New Buddhism and the Occidental Currents of Thought*). As "Kwa-non-she" Shou described the coming "world savior" of what he called the "New Buddhists." He signified "the completion of the present, the 'Aryan' root race and brings back the *splendor* that was lost to it in the beginning." The New Buddhist teachings, wrote Shou, are ultimately to be traced back to "ancient Aryan" roots, which is why corresponding teachings and prophecies are also found in Zoroastrianism as well as in the Bible. These "elements of a world religion" would lead to a "fulfillment of all religions," to be realized by the coming of the Avatar (Shou 1921, 3–10). By this, Shou understood the return to an "Aryan faith" that had been lost to the West because the Church had distanced itself from the "Aryan idea of original Christianity" (22). Through the arrival of the Kwa-non-seh, the "bringer of Shamballah," a "new humanity" would arise. Shamballah was called by Shou the "Aryan future land," the "light-land of the Aryans" (33–35). In his somewhat garbled language, Shou explained:

But nevertheless an event is waiting to be realized. "Shamballah," the city of the masters of the *present Aryan race*, the city of the celestial "Manasaputras," whose threads *go* not only over the earth but *through the universe*, will appear at the same time in the West, as the Tibetans also teach. Namely, it will rise from the north, from the *light of the north, which is eternal* in the north, by which is meant a radiation effect of the upper air layers or light spheres, from which the "northern light" is said to come. (Shou 1921, 40; emphasis in the original)

Shou's remarkable Shamballah symbolism stands for the source of an "*Aryan faith in knowledge that comes neither from thought nor feeling alone, but rather from blood!*" (Shou 1921, 42; emphasis in the original). While in the Occident "Christianity lay fallow," Buddhism flowed through whole Asia—the "strong religious longing of the Occidental" had to be directed for this reason to the East. This allegory reflects the idea of an "Aryan religion of the blood," which would have been preserved in its original form in the East and would have to be rediscovered by the special religious disposition of the "Nordic man" and would have to arise anew "from the light of the North" (*ibid.*).

The appearance of the Kwa-non-seh would cause the "overflowing" of a so far unknown cosmic primeval force whose positive pole is called "Aldebaran" (or "Al Dwar-an") and whose negative pole is called "Anthares" (or "An-dwar") (Shou 1921, 36). Aldebaran and Anthares were also described by Shou as the

“guardians of Shamballah,” with Aldebaran standing for the “god-man” and Anthes for the “man-animal” (56–57). These bewildering ideas demand attention because the vril was similarly associated with both Shamballah and the star system Aldebaran, as the supposed home of “the Germans,” within the context of esoteric neo-Nazism in the decades following World War II (Strube 2012; 2015). Indeed, these motifs can be discerned for the first time in Shou’s *Kwa-non-seh*, demonstrating continuities up to the present day.

Shou devoted a separate chapter to vril at the end of *Kwa-non-seh*, entitled “Vril, the New Power. Epilogue!” (Shou 1921, 153–55). There he presented the vril as a real force which “Lytton Bulwer” would have described in “his ‘Coming Race’ and in ‘Zanoni.’” It will “bury, indeed destroy, the present Europe, as the maritime volcanoes buried Atlantis.” In the form of a “mountain-crystal” it is in the hand of a “Jm-Lama of the East” and lies in a bowl which is also called the “Grail”:

[A]round him gathers that silent community of the East, which dwells behind high mountains, by which the power of that Vril is guarded and exercised. Bulwer describes them bound to a *staff*, which is in possession of those “Vril-ja,” the “Easterners.” He reaches them in the form of a poetic disguise through a dream that leads him through the tunnel of a high mountain to that land. (Shou 1921, 153; emphasis in the original)

Bulwer, Shou continued, would have described it as a “primordial force” which “underlies the various manifestations of energy, such as magnetism, heat, electricity, light.” He also associated it with telepathy on the basis of the “communications of Bulwer, Blavatsky, Surya and others,” and saw it as a future force that would pave the way to the “new race.” It is applicable only by the hand of a “pure and noble” man, and for this reason is safe from abuse by “black magicians,” since the “members of the Eastern Order” watch over it (Shou 1921, 154). Vril was the “crown of all natural forces, their union to a *highest synthesis*, also at the same time the power which *will rule the future Europe!*” (155; emphasis in the original). The sources Shou cites—Bulwer-Lytton, Blavatsky, and Surya—reveal a line of reception from German occultism to Theosophy to the fantastic ideas of Bulwer-Lytton’s ‘secret knowledge.’ Unlike his occultist contemporaries, however, Shou associated the vril not only with Atlantis but also with ‘Eastern’ secret orders, an allusion that had already been found in a vaguer form in Blavatsky (Strube 2013, 65–69).

Further information about Shou’s sources is given in a manuscript which he had presented in 1930 to the Fraternitas Saturni, a magical lodge founded in 1928 by Eugen Grosche (known as Gregor A. Gregorius; 1888–1964) and which

was published in 1951 in the *Blätter für angewandte okkultistische Lebenskunst* (Pages for Applied Occultist Art of Living) edited by Gregorius (Lechler 2015). In this essay, titled “The Spiritual Return of Atlantis,” Shou again made reference to the Atlantis motif and cited specific sources:

Rudolf Steiner, Hans Much and Mereschkowski were precursors. Hermann [sic] Wirth made wide circles sit up and take notice in his ingenious work “Der Aufgang der Menschheit.” Eugen Georg deepened in his fundamental book “Verschollene Kulturen” (Lost Cultures) the only rudimentary previous knowledge about Atlantis. [...] Today’s atomic physics and quantum theory point again to the mysterious elementary power of the Atlanteans, which Bulwer-Lytton called the Vril. This mysterious radiation power was certainly still partly known to the old Egyptian priesthood, because Egypt was an Atlantean colony at that time. (Shou 1951, 15)

With Rudolf Steiner we encounter once more the connection of Atlantis and vril, mediated via Scott-Elliot, which had spread among the German occultists. Hans Much (1880–1931) and Dmitri Sergejewitsch Mereschkowski (1865–1941), both of whom were widely received in occultist circles, had also dealt with these popular Atlantis theories. Shou probably referred to Mereschkowski’s *Das Geheimnis des Westens* (The Secret of the West) from 1929, which had appeared in German translation in 1929. Notably, Mereschkowski had attended a lecture by Rudolf Steiner in Paris in 1906 and had become acquainted with him there (Webb 2008, 205). Herman Wirth (1885–1981), especially emphasized by Shou, was one of the most important personalities in Atlantis research (Löw 2009; Wiwjorra 1995; 2012). One of the most influential ideologues of an ‘Aryan Atlantis,’ Wirth had described in his book *Der Aufgang der Menschheit* (The Rise of Humankind; 1928) the matriarchal culture of the “Nordic-Atlantean race,” which had had to leave their homeland Atlantis more than 50,000 years ago (Wirth 1928, 27–29). In 1935, Wirth was involved in the founding of the pseudo-scientific research institution, the Ahnenerbe of the ss, but soon fell out of favor due to his overly embarrassingly unscientific way of working and was forced out in 1938 (also see Kater 2006, 11–16, 41–43, 58–65; Heinrich 2002, 58–59).

Less known today, but quite influential in its time, was Eugen Georg’s *Verschollene Kulturen* (Lost Cultures), published in 1930 by R. Voigtländer in Leipzig. Therein Georg combined the common Atlantis theories of authors like Steiner, Scott-Elliot, Hermann Wieland (1922), and Wirth with Ariosophical race theories, which he took mainly from the writings of Lanz and List. In addition, he relied on the so-called ‘World Ice Theory’ of the Austrian Hanns

Hörbiger (1860–1931), who had explained the sinking of Atlantis with the falling of a moon onto the earth (Wessely 2006; Kurlander 2017). Georg referred to the vril in connection with Atlantean airships, whose description he adopted almost unchanged from Scott-Elliot. We learn that, at first, the airships had been operated with a kind of “astral fluid,” “which is described as a magnetic-odic force personally inherent in the Atlantean man. Later, however, by Vril: the seed fuel of an ethereal nature ‘distilled’ from plant germs.” The vril, Georg explained, was described “accurately” by Theosophical clairvoyants, evidently a reference to Scott-Elliot’s clairvoyant description of Atlantis (Georg 1930, 86–87).

All of the sources mentioned by Shou that address the vril can be traced back to Scott-Elliot, which once again shows the great influence the ‘Atlantean Vril’ of the Theosophical author has exerted. It is interesting to note that beyond these undoubtedly un- or ‘pseudo’-scientific sources, Shou also referred to the latest scientific findings, namely, atomic physics and quantum theory. Being always anxious about the ‘scientific’ foundation of his statements, he saw in the new discoveries both a confirmation of “ancient knowledge” and a possibility for human development. According to Shou, the recent research of one man had come especially close to this possibility: “The Austrian Schappeller,” he wrote, “claims to have rediscovered in Aurols-Münster this primal force, the VRIL, in its vacuum force” (Shou 1951, 17).

## 6 Karl Schappeller’s *Raumkraft*

The inventor Karl Schappeller (1875–1947) had claimed to be able to use a cosmic elemental force, which he called *Raumkraft* (space force or spatial force), with the help of machines he had engineered. To this end, he had conducted research and constructed apparatuses in the castle he had acquired in the small town of Aurolzmünster in Upper Austria. The few publications on Schappeller depict him as either charlatan or genius (Freund 2000, 167–82; Bahn and Gehring 1997, 112–33; also see Kalmar 1932). It is a fact that Schappeller’s work made a great impression on many contemporaries and that he was able to gather numerous followers and supporters—among them even the former Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941), to whom Schappeller owed a large part of his financing. Schappeller’s theses also attracted much attention in occultist circles.

A prominent admirer of Schappeller was Lanz, who called the inventor “a titan in the technical-physical field” (Lanz von Liebenfels 1930) and mentioned him in several of his publications. In his *Bibliomystikon*, Lanz wrote that the research of Schappeller helped to give back to man his old “electrozoic

powers" (Lanz von Liebenfels 1931, 44). In the same breath, Lanz also referred to the Ariosophist Frenzolf Schmid, a "former professor of the Academy" who later became an ss Obersturmbannführer with connections to Heinrich Himmler's Ariosophical protégé Karl Maria Wiligut (1866–1946), and who was apparently involved in the famous ss expedition to Tibet (Wegener 2013, 98; 2016, 60; Miliopoulos 2007, 163). Lanz was interested in Schmid because he wrote about the properties of still unexplored rays in connection with healing procedures. In 1931, he published the alleged text of an *Attalantean Ur-Bible* according to "Attalantean traditions and ancient Indian records." The prophet Moses, Schmid claimed, had merely copied these original texts (Schmid 1931, 5). Herbert Reichstein (1892–1944), the influential Ariosophical publisher, also wrote about Schmid's and Schappeller's researches (Reichstein 1930, 201–6; see also Goodrick-Clarke 2004, 145–54; 1985).

It is not surprising, then, that Schappeller's theses enjoyed a high reputation in Ariosophical circles and must have been known to anyone who followed the Ariosophical publications of that time. Even though Schappeller's records are lost, a large part of his theses and experiments are preserved through the writings of his followers (Wetzel et al. 1928; X. X. 1929; Talus 1929). A booklet on *Raumkraft* published in 1928 was edited by Franz Wetzel and Louis Gföllner. The former had made a name for himself as a dowsing expert and ran the Munich-Solln-based Herold-Verlag, which printed, among other things, the journal *Natur und Kultur*. Wetzel's publishing house also printed a *Guide to the Use of the Terrella Magnetic Globe*, which Gföllner had written together with other authors. The term 'Terrella' derives from the experiments conducted in 1600 by William Gilbert (1544–1603), the personal physician of Queen Elizabeth I, which suggested that the earth itself was to be regarded as a large magnet.

A much more comprehensive account of Schappeller's theories can be found in a book published in 1955 by the Briton Cyril W. Davson (1881–1969). According to the author, he had already written the book in 1942, after having spent three to four years with Schappeller. Since he was separated from his companion by the war, he was forced to write it by himself (Davson 1955, 9, 21). Davson's book should be taken with a grain of salt, if only because of its hagiographic character: "When the right motives are there, the New Age will dawn, and the new instrument with which to construct a new and better world will at last be recognized and gratefully accepted" (27). Although forgotten today, Schappeller's *Raumkraft* had a considerable influence at the time, as evidenced by the former Kaiser's support of the Austrian inventor.

In his *Verschollene Kulturen*, Eugen Georg also referred to Schappeller's apparatuses and saw in them a possible future source of energy. He emphasized that "the fate of the human race" would be decided by "technical-scientific

and spiritual-moral progress” (Georg 1930, 282). Technical progress would give the individual the means to become a “magician” and ultimately even a god. “Once, in Atlantean early periods, mankind seems already to have experienced a great technical, probably even a metatechnical-magical culture.” After this development had been interrupted, humankind was again

on the way to a metatechnique and magiotechnique. The goal lies in not assessable distance. One day man will be able to intervene into the innermost essence of matter and life with an energetic technique which is unimaginable today. Then he will “conjure” in exactly the same way as nature has been “conjuring” for millions of years—in a way that is still inimitable at the moment. (Georg 1930, 255–56)

The understanding of science of many occultists becomes abundantly clear in these lines. “The realm of phenomenal science is over,” Georg proclaimed. “The realm of occult and magical physics and biology begins” (1930, 256). By mastering these advanced new technologies, man could become master of nature: “That makes him the energetic master of the world! That makes him the renewer of the creation! To the Second Demiurge: to the Homo demiurgos and Imitator Dei!” (258). This way of thinking is reflected in numerous contemporary publications that play an outstanding role for the later reception of vril. These publications express the longing to ascend to the nature-controlling god-man in a time of perceived decline, by mastering the all-pervading elemental force—the vril.

## 7 Conclusion and Outlook: Postwar Continuities

We have seen how, since the publication of *The Coming Race* in 1871, ideas about esoteric teachings, occult forces of nature, and superior ancient civilizations were combined with contemporary scientific discourse and attempts to develop revolutionary technological devices that would solve society’s problems and elevate humanity to a new evolutionary stage. In the interwar period, these desires took on an increasingly political character, reflecting cultural anxieties, especially in German-speaking Europe, where currents such as Ariosophy were an expression of the skyrocketing success of *völkisch* and other nationalist and racist ideologies, including National Socialism. The constant emphasis on the spiritual, biological, and civilizational superiority of the Vril-ya lent itself to far-right fantasies of racial superiority, the Atlantean origins of the ‘Aryan race,’ and world domination following the mastery of

occult forces. From the 1930s onward, these ideas were crucial for authors such as Julius Evola (1898–1974), Savitri Devi (1905–1982), or Miguel Serrano (1917–2009). This discourse produced a range of elements that are at the center of present-day far-right esoteric narratives, including the idea of ‘the North’ and the star system of Aldebaran as well as futuristic technical devices, especially flying machines powered by vril.

Rather than a relic of Victorian fantasy and a bygone interwar radicalism, these ideas are rapidly *growing* in importance, particularly within far-right networks spanning from the United States, Europe, and Russia to Australia and New Zealand. The symbol of the ‘Black Sun,’ for instance, which is inherently linked to the notion of vril since the 1950s (Strube 2012; Pfeiffer 2021), was prominently displayed in 2017 at the white nationalist Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA, during the 2019 terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, during the 2019 attack on a synagogue in the German city of Halle, during the Buffalo, NY, attack in 2022, among Russian radical nationalists and neo-Nazis, and as part of the former official insignia of the Ukrainian Azov Battalion. Although these are obviously no marginal developments, their historical sources remain largely under-studied. This chapter has only been able to shine a spotlight on them, which will hopefully serve to highlight the importance of further investigation into esoteric networks of the decades around 1900 and their continuities since the end of World War II.

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# Sexual Education and Vital Forces to Heal the Race: Ida Craddock's and Frances Swiney's Use of Eugenics and Esotericism

*Jessica A. Albrecht*

## 1 Introduction

The debates concerning contraception, abortion, women's sexual rights as well as their relation to a presumed 'race' continue to agitate people across the world, often because they are related to religion and religious sentiments, such as in the case of many 'pro-life' activists. The connection between 'proper' reproduction and religion can be traced back to late nineteenth and early twentieth century eugenics when it was appropriated by anti-feminists and feminists alike. This chapter will focus on two women who seemingly do not appear to be much alike: Frances Swiney (1847–1922) and Ida Craddock (1857–1902). Even though one could have met both of them at a meeting about women's rights or the need for the sexual education of the youth, they were very different in appearance. An Irish-British suffragist and feminist writer, Swiney was the mother of six children, one of whom died at an early age, and wife to Colonel John Swiney.<sup>1</sup> Born and married into the life of an upper-middle class lady, she embodied the ideal of contemporary British womanhood: wife and mother. The US-American Craddock, on the contrary, remained legally unmarried throughout her short life, which was ended by suicide, even though she claimed to have been married to a ghost, named Soph, at least since 1893.<sup>2</sup> Because of these claims, she was seen as a madwoman<sup>3</sup> or was accused to be an obscene criminal<sup>4</sup> who used her 'lawful marriage' to educate the youth in

1 For an account of Swiney's life, see Albrecht 2021.

2 The origin on the name Soph remains unknown. However, the links to Ein Sof of the Kabbalistic interpretation of God before any manifestation come to mind, as Craddock often uses Kabbalistic elements in her writings. For a detailed account as well as a thrilling and insightful read on Craddock's life, see Schmidt 2006.

3 Even her own mother thought so and repeatedly tried to admit her to an asylum.

4 This was the argumentation by Anthony Comstock (1944–1915) whose efforts to convict Craddock were eventually successful. Craddock committed suicide in order to evade the prison sentence. See Schmidt 2006, 179ff.

matters of sex and sexuality. Swiney and Craddock might not have met but their paths could have crossed, as they were active in the same spiritualist, theosophist, and sexologist circles, read the same authors, wrote on similar topics themselves, and put most of their efforts in circulating pamphlets, lecturing, and conducting personal meetings to educate women and couples to be married, as well as those in the early years of marriage. In general, both maintained that sexual relations should only take place between a husband and wife, and only if and when the wife chooses to. To legitimize their claims, both combined, applied, and transformed the discourses on social purity and eugenics, esotericism, and sexology surrounding them.

Scholarship on Craddock (Burton 1993; Chappell 2011; Schmidt 2006; Silberman 2009) and Swiney (Albrecht 2021; Delap 2004; Dieteren 2000; Robb 1996; 1997; 2005; 2006) agrees that their teachings and writings have to be seen as part of social purity activism and, in some cases, might be considered to be in accordance with eugenic thought. This does not come as a surprise, as the link between first wave feminism and eugenics has been made evident (Delap 2007; Hasian 1996; Nadkarni 2014; Passet 2003; Richardson 2003), as has the link between female voices in esotericism, science, and eugenics (Albrecht 2023; Coudert 2019; Ferguson 2012; Sica 2016; Singleton 2007). However, the writings and teachings of Swiney and Craddock have not yet been examined together. This, I will argue, will provide a new and insightful view on the interrelation between the history of esotericism, eugenics, and women's rights, converging in the question of women's sexuality. More precisely: the questions of woman's acceptable sexual activities, her right to choose her partner, and her role as mother and wife. In this chapter, I will illustrate that it was the notion of vital forces or energy that made it possible for women like Craddock and Swiney to combine the teachings of eugenics and esotericism. Furthermore, the combined analysis will make it possible to see the ways in which they utilized both these discourses for their personal and political purposes without either having to fully agree with eugenic teachings or denouncing their Christian faith. Contrary to the above-mentioned scholarship, neither Swiney nor Craddock were solely spiritualists or theosophists. Rather, both repeatedly affirmed their Christian beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

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5 For instance, even as late as 1897, Craddock called herself a Unitarian (Craddock n.d., 212). As Leigh Eric Schmidt has shown, there are various religious influences for Craddock: her mother was a Methodist; she had friends who were Quakers; herself was a Unitarian and member of the Theosophical Society—for a short while—and the American Secular Union (Schmidt 2006). A niece of an Anglican priest, Swiney also never renounced Christianity but rather tried to argue for its renewal and regeneration from patriarchal misconceptions (see Albrecht 2018).

To examine this, I will first give an overview of Swiney's and Craddock's historical context, especially that of the relationship between first wave feminism, sexual reform, and eugenics, so as to show how they used tropes and themes from those contexts for their own argumentations and actions. I will give examples of how they both applied this to their political and social endeavors, particularly their efforts to educate the youth. I will then look at their writings to illustrate their use of *vital forces* and *energies* as well as how this enabled them to combine esoteric receptions of 'Eastern religions' and Yoga with eugenic thought and women's sexuality. Lastly, I will show how and why they applied and utilized eugenic thought. I argue that, for personal or political reasons, Swiney and Craddock used the notions of vital forces, energies, yoga, and sexuality to find answers that their Christian faiths could not provide. However, their aim was not to argue against Christianity but to expand it along the lines of sexual reform and social purity. This illustrates the way in which biographical research challenges the ways in which the study of esotericism and religion conceptualize their fields, and shows how a focus on gender and racialization can shed new light on the relationship between science, religion, and esotericism.

## 2 Sexuality, Eugenics, and Feminism

Swiney and Craddock are often described as esotericists and social purity feminists (Robb 1996; Schmidt 2006, 150). At the end of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth, there were many women who could be defined as such. Social purity feminism as well as some esoteric teachings<sup>6</sup> offered women the opportunity to—or at least argue for the—change of sexual relationships. For social purity feminists, the ideal society was to be centered around the monogamous marital relationship in which both partners came into marriage chaste and also practiced continence within marriage (Hall 1998, 191). During that era, the male sexual urge was often seen as powerful and inevitable, but social purity feminists argued that it was necessary for women's as well as men's sexual health to practice self-control. Often dismissed or not explicitly named is the relation between social purity feminism, the temperance<sup>7</sup>

6 Some women used the teachings of the Theosophical Society to argue for chasteness within marriage and the spiritual equality of men and women. For sexuality and the Theosophical Society, see Burfield 1983; Dixon 1997; 2001.

7 Craddock's mother was also a member of the Woman's Christian Temperance Movement and, in her younger years, Ida took part in those meetings (Schmidt 2006, 95).

and hygienic movements, and the discourse of eugenics.<sup>8</sup> At that time, most countries experienced a decline in birth rates among the upper and middle classes and an increase in venereal disease and infant mortality among the lower classes (Bland 2001, 189ff.). To counter both these developments, feminists used the discourses provided by science at the time to argue for women's choice in selecting her partner as well as how often to have sexual intercourse in marriage (Passet 2003, 152ff.). This, they argued alongside other eugenicists, would help to re-generate the race. The meaning of race in these discourses varies, even within the writings of the two authors.<sup>9</sup>

As Marouf A. Hasian, Jr. has made clear in his thorough study of the rhetorics of eugenics, women often used the discourse of eugenics, in whole or in part, to extend earlier discussions surrounding voluntary motherhood and reproductive rights (Hasian 1996, 73). In doing so, they often redefined the eugenic narratives of men such as Francis Galton (1822–1911) and Karl Pearson (1857–1936) that denounced women as the cause of racial degeneration, and argued instead that women, as mothers, were the ones who could secure the future of the race (ibid., 79). As sexologist and eugenicist Alice Bunker Stockham (1833–1912) proclaimed, it was the “mental dread of excessive and undesired childbearing” (quoted in Hasian 1996, 79) that resulted in the increase of child deaths. Men's sexual urges were the problem and in need of control. This enabled them to argue not only for the reform of sexual rights, divorce, and marriage laws, but also for the right to vote. The argument used was that women with rights were able to make the correct decisions for the health of the mother and the child. This line of argumentation was also supported by some male physicians, such as Caleb Saleeby (1878–1940)—a contemporary and

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8 For instance, the British Eugenics Education Society consisted of members who were also part of the Institute of Hygiene, the Infants' Health Society, the National League for Health, Maternity and Child Welfare, and others (Hasian 1996, 75).

9 In this chapter, the use of *race* can change depending on the sources used. Some eugenicists thought there were different human races, such as the white and the black race, others used race for the nation, such as the British, including the Empire. Still, others thought there was only one human race in need of regeneration. In the case of Craddock, she never made her use of race explicit, nor did she talk about different races. Swiney, however, most likely used race for the “British race” as she compared it to the Indian and others or writes about “all races of men” (Swiney 1909, 58). Nevertheless, she did not make specific references to a hierarchy of races or differences between them based on biological assumptions. Rather, she argued that the Eastern races are more progressed than the British due to their matriarchal-based religions which would only now be corrupted by patriarchal Christianity due to colonialism. At some instances she also refers to the crucial effects slavery had on the lives of black women, and explicitly says that there is no difference between black or white women (Swiney 1910–1914c, 2).

acquaintance of Frances Swiney and fellow member of the British Eugenics Education Society. As he wrote: "I believe in the vote because I believe it will be eugenic" (Saleeby 1911, 24).

Swiney often cited the works of Saleeby and agreed with his view that the venereal diseases, low birth rates, and child deaths are due to the vices of the man, his excessive use of alcohol, and need of prostitution. In doing so, she argued against most of her contemporaries who blamed the prostitutes for venereal diseases.<sup>10</sup> Swiney's writing career coincided with her joining the Theosophical Society. After meeting Annie Besant (1847–1933) in feminist and socialist circles, she became a member in 1899, the year she published her first book, *The Awakening of Women or Women's Part in Evolution*. Having lost a child shortly after giving birth and being the mother of five more, the topic of maternal and child health is deeply rooted in her biography. In 1907, Swiney became a member of the Londoner Eugenics Education Society, but soon left to found her own society, the League of Isis. The chief aim of this society was the education of the youth in matters of the laws of the mother and the father. The League of Isis was designed to educate the youth in order to fight venereal diseases and vices such as alcoholism (Swiney date unknown, 1910–1914). Swiney argued that it was the lack of sexual education that caused the decline of the race. The League of Isis was active for only a few years, but it had branches in various parts of the world, including the United States, South Africa, and India. Furthermore, Swiney's books were circulated and praised by eugenic societies around the world (Swiney 1910–1914c). The link between the League of Isis and eugenics is apparent, as Swiney said in one of the booklets published by the League:

The Eugenic movement at the present day is one of the most hopeful signs of the times, because it deals with origins, and recognises the right of the child, not only to be cared for after birth, but to be well born, and more, to be well conceived. [...] The knowledge of this fact is, I believe, at the root of our desire to teach our children rightly about sex. (Swiney 1910–1914a, 1)

In contrast, Ida Craddock's biography is a little different. She was never married in the legal sense of the term. She also never had children. However, she argued that she had insights into marital sexual relationships because she was married in the spirit world to someone she had met in her youth who died

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<sup>10</sup> Even though Craddock never explicitly did so, there are various instances in which she denounces the life of a prostitute (Craddock 2010 [1895]).

young. There is no mention of his real name, but Craddock said his spirit name was Soph,<sup>11</sup> and that is what she called him in her diary and to others. In the 1890s, she started to publish books and pamphlets on the topic of marital relationships and spiritual intercourse, and she advertised for instructions and lessons for married couples and those about to marry. She particularly argued that women had to be educated in sexual matters to be able to ensure the best health for themselves and the children. This resulted in either being accused of unlawfully educating the youth in sexual relations, especially without being married herself—she was accused of circulating so-called obscene literature (Burton 1993; Schmidt 2006, 179ff.)—or denounced as a lunatic for saying to be married to a spirit.<sup>12</sup>

Although they cited different authors, Swiney's and Craddock's teachings were quite similar. Both argued that it was the woman who was to decide whether, when, and how often to have sex. Also, there was to be no male ejaculation during the time of pregnancy and lactation for up to three years in order to ensure the best relationship and care between mother and child in accordance with "modern researchers" and "some sex reformers" (Craddock 2010 [1895], 159; Swiney 1912): "To render the mother pregnant while nursing, as is sometimes done, is cruel to her and to both children" (Craddock 2010 [1899], 181). Moreover, there was to be no sex during menstruation days (Craddock n.d., 41). Craddock said that men who cannot restrain themselves during those times should be prohibited by law from ever creating a child (2010 [1895], 159). It was to be the woman's choice when to have sexual intercourse because, as Swiney said, "here, in truth, we are on the threshold of the great mysteries of woman's evolution, woman's fall, and woman's ascent. [... T] he whole work of reproduction is thrown upon the female" (Swiney 1899, 89). It was "in the hands of women" that the "future of our race" lies on (98). Similarly, Craddock wrote about a conversation she had with a woman who came to her for consultation:

"When my husband doesn't want me!" Why should he ever approach her, unless *she* wants *him*? It is not the man, but the woman, who must be the best judge of when union is desirable; and for her to yield to a husband's solicitations when she does not desire union is a fraud upon him, since

11 She met Soph for the first time while using a Ouija Board (Schmidt 2006, 107).

12 Because of the accusations, Craddock went to a physician—namely, Dr. Mary Wood-Allen (1841–1908), who was also a sexual educator and writer—to be examined whether she had sex. According to her own testimony (n.d., 189), Wood-Allen confirmed that her vagina looked like that of a married woman. Wood-Allen herself was an advocate of hygienics, temperance, and the sexual education of girls (Wood-Allen 1897, 85, 93, 102, 104).

he finds only a corpse or a hypocrite in the place of a sincerely loving and tender marital partner. Moreover, it encourages him to think that, no matter what his wife desires, she is quite willing to serve at any time as a convenience for his lust; so that she confirms him in his selfishness, and degrades herself from the position of priestess in a sacred mystery, to become a mere cuspidor. (Craddock 2010 [1895], 158; emphasis in the original)

Craddock called this the “natural law” (2010 [1899], 181), as did Swiney, who named it the “Natural Law,” the “Law of the Mother,” or the “Law of Isis” (1908, 12). For them, nature symbolized a specific sacredness, better left to be untouched by mankind and preserved by womanhood. Women, according to Craddock, would live a more “self-controlled and temperate life” than men (2010 [1894], 74). Both believed that it is not inherent nature but society and culture that promote this idea, so men could possibly change their behavior. Ejaculation was said to be unhealthy or not to be considered ejaculation as such, apart from when in relation to a parental function, meaning heterosexual reproduction. For centuries, men have been “perverting the natural functions of their sexual organism” (Craddock 2010 [1899], 181). The seminal fluid would only exist for the purpose of creating a child—“in order to secure the propagation of the race” (180). All publications by the League of Isis were dedicated to the education of the youth in order to minimize the spread of venereal diseases and lower the rate of child deaths. As Swiney had already written in her first book, “no women should be brought up in ignorance of her own physical organism, of the important function, as race-producer” (1899, 113). Craddock went a step further and—in line with many eugenicists—argued that if there “were fewer children born to a family, those who are born could be better taken care of than they are at present” (2010 [1895], 160). According to her, an economically poor man would not be able to provide for and educate a large family, only the very rich could do so. She concluded that “from a financial as well as from a hygienic standpoint, large families are undesirable, [...] as rendering it unlikely that proper care can be bestowed upon each individual child” (*ibid.*).

Clearly, Swiney’s and Craddock’s writings use eugenic, temperance, and hygienic discourses to argue for women’s rights in general and women’s choice of partners and sexual intercourse in particular. However, for them, sexual intercourse was restricted only to marital relationships. In this way, they could argue for women’s rights but without the criticisms the advocates of free love or the idea of the New Woman had to face. In contrast, Swiney and Craddock stayed within the accepted discourses of motherhood, family, and eugenics.

### 3 Vital Forces and Energies

As mentioned above, in her writings, Swiney mostly referred to Caleb Saleeby's books, who was also a member of the Eugenics Education Society and advocated the education of girls, especially those "highly civilized" girls who were otherwise well-educated but, perhaps because of that education, did not approve of marriage and motherhood. In the "interest of the race," those girls had to be educated on sexual relations and partnership in order to wish for motherhood within marriage once again (Saleeby 1909, 232). Furthermore, like Swiney, he explicitly refers to the so-called "vital energy." This may come as a surprise, but it should not, since the terms 'vital force' and 'energy' were commonly used in eugenics discourse (see Cogdell 2004, 27, 56, 125). Unmarried women who did not become mothers would lose this vital energy and, therefore, abolish it for the future of the race (Saleeby 1909, 231). This idea of the conservation of energy goes back to the eugenicist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) who claimed "that the differences between the sexes came from 'a somewhat earlier arrest of individual evolution in women than in men; necessitated by the reservation of vital power to meet the cost of reproduction'" (Hasian 1996, 74). In order to conserve the energy of the nation and the race, female energy was not to be expended in the wrong form of reproduction (*ibid.*). This concept of the vital force/energy/power and its conservation in (rightful) reproduction can be found in the esoteric adaptations of Swiney and Craddock. For both, sexual intercourse was inextricably linked to a divine life force.

In Swiney's various articles and books, she elaborated on the concept of the Divine Feminine,<sup>13</sup> a force that she argued was at the beginning and end of all life, and could be traced back to the Divine Mother, *viz.* the mother of all. Her energy was to be returned to her at the end of the cosmic circle: "All emanations are from that mystery of the Divine Mother, and must return to it" (Swiney 1909, 12). This cycle of energetic exchange, Swiney said, was played out on a small scale in the reproductive cycle of man and woman. However, she maintained that "science reveals that all life has a feminine origin," which is why "the Feminine is therefore the inner nature of man, and woman as the most highly evolved organism [...] is the objective representative of the Divine Feminine" (*ibid.*). Hence, women were the ones to structure, regulate, and have power over the sexual intercourses and processes of reproduction. For Swiney, the law of nature proclaimed that there was to be a balance of the expenditure of energy, structuring human's sexual intercourse:

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13 For the influence of theosophical kabbalistic thought and the Tarot, see Albrecht 2018.

Fertilisation, therefore, is beset by inexorable conditions of time, fitness, quantity, and quality, according to the exigencies of each species. For every flower the seed-time is fixed. For every animal the period for reproduction is limited and controlled by a natural law which admits of no deflection. And the act of fertilisation has but one object, that of aid to the reproduction of kind by the procreatrix, the mother. (Swiney 1907, 14–15)

Continence was the conservation of vital forces within the body, which should not be wasted: “And what he [Harry Gaze]<sup>14</sup> ignorantly calls the ‘sex-force’ is the one creative life element that equally vitalises the sperm and the ovum and the heart” (Swiney 1910–1914b, 1). Likewise, Swiney argued that parenthood would result from the “divine and spiritualizing influence” that emerged as a result of the “love of two individuals for each other,” practiced and created “through a union of spiritual qualities” (1912, 23). “The pure love of husband and wife, of father and mother, is akin to the Divine Fount of Life” (*ibid.*). This Divine Fount of Life, however, was essentially feminine as it came from the Divine Feminine:

For the soul is the female creative principle in man [...]. The Feminine is therefore the inner nature of man, and woman [...] the objective representative of the Divine Feminine. (Swiney 1909, 21)

Swiney’s vision of a true religion, which was to be taught in the League of Isis, had to teach the knowledge of life, in particular the rule of the mother and the natural law. That included the teaching of the Divine Feminine and the force of life. This ‘basic law’ was not adhered to in other religions. However, it was the fault of a corrupted Christianity that this was the case in the other religions as well. Present Christianity, in contrast to her reception of the Gnostics,<sup>15</sup> Swiney said was the “reason for all the discord, injustices, strife, inequalities, misery, and inhumanity in the world at the present time” (Anonymous 1910, 27). It “divorced from the feminine creative principle of the true balance of life forces” (*ibid.*).

Craddock argued for something quite similar in her book *Psychic Wedlock* (1895). This psychic wedlock was the only true and therefore desirable way

14 The New Thought author and minister Harry Gaze (1878–1949).

15 In “The Maternity of God” (1906) and *Esoteric Teachings of the Gnostics* (1909), Swiney explicitly argued that the early Christians, exemplified by the Gnostics, were in fact a maternal society that celebrated the maternal part in God. For Swiney’s writings about the Gnostics and her use of them for her feminism, see Albrecht 2018.

to feel and sense “God, the Unknowable, the Ideal, Unconscious Energy, Law Force” (Craddock 2010 [1895], 151). Therein, Craddock described three stages of sexual intercourse: (1) sex union was forbidden, except for the distinct purpose of creating a child at that particular time (chosen by the mother); (2) sex union was to be enjoyed in absolute self-control and aspiration to the highest (no male ejaculation in order to ensure the health of all); and (3) sex union practiced as the communion with the Deity as the third partner in the marital union (153). Only within the third stage could one experience “the One Sustaining Energy of the universe” (165). Similarly to Swiney, Craddock used *Energy* and *Force* interchangeably when referring to what was to be experienced within (the proper marital) sexual relationship:

Take it as you will—Personal God, Impersonal Spirit, or the Impulsive Power of Primordial Matter—there is no logical escape from the recognition of the possibility of entering into personal relations of love and tenderness with the Ultimate Force of the universe. And no man and woman who have once known what a beautiful and blessed thing it is to have that Ultimate Force as the third partner in a sex union which is self-controlled and aspiring to the highest throughout, will ever again wish to have a marital embrace from which personal relations with that Ultimate Force are excluded. (Craddock 2010 [1899], 190)

However, for Craddock, the “Ultimate Force of the universe” could only be both masculine and feminine (2010 [1900], 148). It was the “Cosmic Vital Force” of the universe that set the relation between the sexual partners (Craddock n.d., 56). However, this force, Craddock concluded near the end of her life, was at its highest when a woman was in “the mood” to conceive a child (*ibid.*). It was when she had the “desire to become a mother” that she was a real woman (*ibid.*). As she said in her last diary entry which ended with the expectation to become a pregnant woman like the “Virgin-Mother”: “I was in full control of myself, as queen of myself; and I WAS A WOMAN! A woman for the first time in my life” (*ibid.*). Craddock also argued that the wrong sexual intercourse—unmarried, oral, anal, or masturbation—led to a loss of energy: “Every ejaculation means a waste in psychic energy” (Craddock 2010 [1895], 164). Further, there were three places in which marital union would take place: “body, mentality and spirit” (Craddock 2010 [1899], 149) and the exchange between those places would be that of energy:

In the perfect union, the amount of energy expended on any one plane is in exact equation with that expended on either of the others. But

when the reverse occurs, the union is imperfect; and when the inequality is marked, the union has no claim to be called true wedlock. Thus, when the energy is expended upon bodily union is greatly in excess of that expended upon the mental and spiritual planes, it is called lust, and right-thinking people turn from it with a shudder. (Craddock 2010 [1899], 149)

The second stage of psychic wedlock, Craddock claimed, was in line with the teachings of Alice Stockham (1833–1912) laid out in her book *Karezza: Ethics of Marriage* (1896). Stockham also situated sex within monogamous marriage relations and was widely read by (mostly Christian) sex reformers in the United States and the British Empire (Passet 2003, 149). Contrary to most social purity feminists, Stockham proclaimed sexual pleasure instead of suppression, an opinion shared by Craddock, but not Swiney. However, most likely it was not Stockham who mainly influenced Craddock. Her diary suggests it was Alma Gillen who particularly introduced her to the so-called “Divine Science,”<sup>16</sup> as in various instances she wrote “thank God for Mrs. Gillen” (Craddock n.d., 174). Also, the combination and often interchangeable use of the terms ‘universe and god,’ ‘energy,’ and ‘power’<sup>17</sup> can be found directly in the writings of Alma Gillen, who proclaimed that god was the universe, the “all-powerful power out of which all energy and forces proceed” (Gillen 1900a, 126). In an article entitled “Practical Use of Divine Science,” Gillen quoted the US-American eugenicist David Starr Jordan (1851–1931) who said that: “We are encompassed about by forces that make for righteousness. All power we possess or seem to possess comes for our accord with these forces. There is no *lasting* force except the *power of God*” (Gillen 1900b, 134; emphasis in the original).

For both, the life force exercised during sex as that which was to produce life was not only material but also spiritual. Sexual intercourse was the direct link to the spiritual life force—held by the woman. “She has the mighty power to strengthen a spiritual life, to bring forth a divine offspring. For this purpose she possesses in every cell [...] the surplus energy of the vital force to form another

16 Although there is not much biographical information available on Alma Gillen, it is most likely that Craddock had come across her either personally or through her writings while staying in London in 1894. Gillen lived in London but also had an active correspondence with social purity feminists, eugenicists, and followers of Divine Science in the United States and Britain, as her correspondences in the journal *Shafts* illustrate (Gillen 1894). She wrote many books and articles and published a short-lived magazine called *Expression* around the turn of the century.

17 The terms ‘force,’ ‘energy,’ and ‘power’ are widely used within the discourse of Divine Science, such as, e.g., in the journal *Harmony*.

self within the self" (Swiney 1910–1914b, 3). Neither too many children nor contraception were acceptable alternatives. As Craddock wrote:

But if large families are undesirable, so, also, are the usual preventive checks undesirable, being abnormal, unhealthy and immoral, whether by withdrawal or other methods. They are immoral, because they place no check upon passion, but allow it full range. They are unhealthy, because the psychic powers of both parties are depleted, without sufficient interchange of magnetism. And being a violation of the natural and healthy relation, they are abnormal. (Craddock 2010 [1895], 160)

Similarly to the energy processes taking place within sexual intercourse, Swiney and Craddock argued that an exchange of energy was occurring during gestation and lactation: "The mother gives much more than nutriment with her milk. 'She gives of her nervous power, her vital force, her heart, and mind, and soul'" (Swiney 1907, 39).<sup>18</sup> Therefore, there was no sexual intercourse to be practiced during that period, and the worst case for the mother and child would be if the mother became pregnant again and had to spend her energy on two children at the same time (Craddock 2010 [1895], 160).

The use of the terms 'force,' 'energy,' and 'power' by Swiney and Craddock perfectly shows how it was possible for them to combine eugenic, esotericist, and feminist discourses. They could refer to eugenicists such as Spencer, Caleby, and Nichols who taught the principles of balancing energy in order to secure the future of the race while simultaneously following the line of other feminists and sexual reformers who proclaimed a change in double standard and rights for women and children. They were not alone in this endeavor and often cited the works by Havelock Ellis (1859–1939), Alice Stockham, and Alma Gillen, who also combined eugenic ideas with spiritual sexual relationships. Most strikingly, however, was the fact that the use of eugenic teachings enabled them to be heard by those whose thoughts could be considered conservative: social purity and Christian feminists as well as their male allies, who might have been opposed to restructuring the order of the sexes but were in agreement with the teaching of a divine life force and its relation to the marital relationship of man and woman. Swiney never explicitly referred to sexual practices. However, as she stressed the relation between the male sperm and the female germs, it seems as if there was no other sexual practice in her mind than that of reproduction. This seems to be the right place to note that neither

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<sup>18</sup> Here, she quotes American physician, spiritualist, and eugenicist T. L. Nichols (1815–1901).

Craddock nor Swiney ever talked about non-heterosexual relationships. They did not condemn them in any way, but their complete absence from their writings underscores the heteronormative structure in which their eugenic, spiritual, and feminist discourses were embedded.

#### 4 Creating Something New

As shown above, Ida Craddock's and Frances Swiney's use of eugenic, feminist, and esoteric ideas enabled them to approach a wide and diverse audience. This might lead to the conclusion that their writings were eclectic mixtures of all the contemporary discourses, making them thereby exemplary children of their time. However, as much as they proclaimed to write and teach about sexual education, their efforts were grounded in personal experience and a search for answers which they could not find in any single teaching they encountered. This suggests that, instead of passively copying and combining various teachings, they actively created something new.

For Craddock, the problem to be solved laid in her personal bodily and spiritual experiences with her husband Soph. As her diary shows, she consulted the writings by sexologists and others to gain answers for her ongoing problems within that relationship. It seems as if there were many instances in which Soph, and/or her spiritual guide, the "Indian guru" Iases, raped her as a form of punishment (Craddock n.d., 52). In general, the diary mostly consists of her sexual experiences with Soph, which are, most of the time, quite unsatisfactory. On some occasions, she even wanted to separate from Soph (53). To enhance her sexual pleasure, Craddock tried to apply the teachings of "Divine Science" she learned from Gillen, and over the years she fell more and more in love with her husband (176). Throughout the diary, there are instances in which Craddock is punished for forms of masturbation, either on herself or on Soph. To back up Iases' arguments, she refers to the writings of Pierre Garnier,<sup>19</sup> a French hygienist and doctor who wrote various books on onanism (Cryle and Moore 2011, 59ff.; Pozzi 2021, 36). However, there often was an "unpleasant phenomenon at [her] genitals" or "genital sensations" (Craddock n.d., 53, 51). After consulting her spirits, Craddock found out that it was Iases who punished her

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19 During her time in London, she had read "that French book on Onanism" (Craddock n.d., 52). One time, she was told by Iases that an organism by the clitoris was wrong and she remembered to have read that in the book as well (Craddock n.d., 179). Garnier wrote that the basis of a woman's sexual pleasure was not the clitoris but her heart, love, and tenderness (Cryle and Moore 2011, 180).

for not practicing enough yoga. According to him, she only needed to practice more yoga to get rid of the feeling (53). She felt “humiliated” and “degraded” in such a way only a woman would understand, says Craddock, and tried to defend herself from the intrusion and penetration (52). Clearly, Craddock’s diary entries relate to the story of many women, her intended audience. She turned to yoga and referred to it in her books and booklets, as this was the cure for her problems proposed by her spiritual guide. However, it becomes clear that Craddock was not practicing it in a way that actually helped her—she was constantly in the search for new practices and teachings to help her own physical sensations and her spiritual relationship with Soph.

Swiney, on the contrary, lived in India for half of her life time and encountered Hinduism as well as Buddhism. As becomes clear in her writings, she thought that those traditions illustrated a version of religion which was not patriarchally corrupted. This made her think about the current status of women—whereas most religions in their early centuries, so she argued, were matriarchal in nature. Her answer was to blame Christianity in its current form and the effect it had on other religions through colonialism and mission. The answer to rejuvenate Christianity and enhance the status of women was to be found in early Christianity as well as in the religions of the so-called ‘East.’<sup>20</sup>

Both Swiney and Craddock argued that the “philosophy” of yoga, as they called it, was based on the ‘union’—the term chosen to encapsulate that philosophy (Craddock 2010 [1900])—of the human with the Divine, exercised within the right spiritual-sexual relationship between husband and wife. In *The Wedding Night* (1900), published around the time that she referred to yoga in her diary, Craddock described it as the practice a married couple had to undertake to have a sex life, “so holy, so healthy, so happy” (Craddock 2010 [1900], 206). Clearly, this is yet another attempt for reforming marital sexual relationships. But these teachings are in no relation to her previous teachings of the three stages. Similarly, Swiney changed her teachings over time, depending on the books she read and audiences she intended for her writings, whether they were pamphlets, books, or speeches. Surely, this is not surprising, given that thoughts, ideas, and teachings change over time, especially when engaging with as many writings as these two women did in their lifetime. What does surprise, however, is the fact that neither of them ever renounced their Christian faith—even though they did not propose Christian teachings as answers to their problems and did not even condemn (contemporary) Christianity as inherently patriarchal. Craddock acknowledged that “we have gained much by

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20 Swiney’s interpretation of early Christianity (meaning Gnosticism) and its compatibility with eastern religions parallels the writings of Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891).

this religious revolution" (2010 [1893], 7), meaning Christianity's taking over Sun Worship, but also lost something: "(1) the clean-minded consideration of the human form divine, and (2) the recognition of sex as the chief educator of the human race in things material and things spiritual" (ibid.). Swiney draws a similar line, proclaiming that Christianity took over "superstitious myths" by emphasizing that "the ideal of humanity was chastity" (1899, 91). This was, she said, in line with the "scientific and spiritual truth" (ibid.), only because Christianity had fallen away from that truth. Because of this, womanhood degraded and fell, and "her fall has retarded the evolution of the race, both physically, morally, and ethically" (96).

It seems that renouncing Christianity was no option for Swiney and Craddock, or even a thought they might have had. Nor does it seem that drawing from other sources to solve problems they encountered in Christian teachings contradicted their Christian identity. Instead, they wanted to stay within the discourse of Christianity in order to transform it from within along the lines of reformed sexual relations and women's rights. This is why their use of eugenic rhetoric and teachings was so fruitful: it allowed them to refer to other religious traditions and scientific teachings in regard to one aspect that was accepted as common knowledge at the time, even in Christianity: eugenics.

## 5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the teachings and writings of two extraordinary women: Frances Swiney and Ida Craddock. Even though they most probably never met during their lifetime, their writings show many similarities in content as well as in impact and context. Their use of esoteric and religious teachings to enhance the status of women and reform (marital) sexual relationships was deeply embedded within the discourse of eugenics—as were other globally influential contexts they were part of: social purity feminism, hygienics, and the temperance movement. This chapter has also shown that it was the discourse around *energy*, *life force*, and *power* that created the link between esotericism, eugenics, and feminism.

The relation between spiritualism, esotericism, and scientific language and research has been established in the study of esotericism (Asprem 2014; Bergunder 2016; Ferguson and Sera-Shriar 2021). However, the case studies of Frances Swiney and Ida Craddock illuminate something quite new: the rupture between science and religion was never as crucial as it was made out to be in scholarship on religion in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Nor was it esotericism that wanted to aid the rupture. When it comes to eugenics,

sexuality, and women's rights, the language of science is the same as that of religion, namely, because the focus was on women—aka nature. Without entering into the debate about the gendered and racialized conceptions of nature and culture, I would like to stress the following: the interconnection between feminism, science, and esotericism is not just an addition to that between science and esotericism as such, but a call to rethink the relationship and the conceptualizations themselves. A gendered and racialized analysis of the relationship between science, religion, and esotericism is needed in order to shed light on the gaps that Eurocentric and phallogocentric scholarship has produced.

Craddock and Swiney are often called 'spiritualists,' 'theosophists,' or 'occultists,' but never 'Unitarian' or 'Anglican'—contrary to their own self-conceptions. With Swiney and Craddock, a problematic gap in the scholarship on esotericism becomes apparent, one that is inherent in the separation of approaches and fields of study in the disciplines—in this case, gender study/history and the study of esotericism/religion. Addressing this problem opens up new ways of looking at the interconnectedness of religious, gendered, and racialized discourses in which a person is situated. It illustrates the need for inter- and transdisciplinary exchange, in terms of theories, methodologies, and the research topics themselves. Biographical studies might seem to be the most straightforward way to do so, as many other studies of contemporaries of Swiney and Craddock have shown (Delap 2007; Rowbotham 2016). Nevertheless, such biographical studies should go beyond their self-imposed limits and start a conversation with the broader conceptions of religion and esotericism, their boundaries, impacts, and constrains as I have proposed in this chapter.

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