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# INTENTIONAL TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

THEORIZING SELF-CULTIVATION IN RELIGION  
AND ESOTERICISM

*Edited by Sarah Perez, Bastiaan van Rijn,  
and Jens Schlieter*

RELIGION AND REASON

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**Intentional Transformative Experiences**

# Religion and Reason

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Founded by  
Jacques Waardenburg (†)

Edited by  
Gustavo Benavides and Michael Stausberg

## Volume 67

# Intentional Transformative Experiences



Theorizing Self-Cultivation in Religion and Esotericism

Edited by

Sarah Perez, Bastiaan van Rijn, and Jens Schlieter

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Sarah Perez, Bastiaan van Rijn, and Jens Schlieter

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

A responsible treatment of the concept of religion and its dimensions of practices, beliefs, and experiences is a cornerstone of the study of religion.<sup>1</sup> One of the, in our eyes, strongest accomplishments of this discipline has been the historicization and contextualization of key terms such as that of ‘religion’ itself, without which we would not be able to deal with the topic in a sensitive manner. The constantly changing forms of religious and spiritual engagement include an equally changing variety of reported religious experiences. An analysis of these experiences has proven to be a complicated and extensive task. Even the concept ‘religious experience’ itself has been the topic of a long struggle within the history of the study of religion. In this sense, it is a thorny issue. On the one hand, the dimension of experience is ascribed a high importance by many modern practitioners of religious traditions and within the spiritual and esoteric milieu.<sup>2</sup> Within the academic investigation of religion, this importance has been recognized and led at times to dubious theories that posited religious experience at the origin of religion as a class.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, experience is an unquestionably intangible concept, leaving only memory, narrative, and changes in life orientation, declared to be an outcome of this experience—again through the medium of the narrative—as possible evidence. This has led some to disregard ‘religious experience’ as a useful tool within the study of religion.<sup>4</sup> Between these two extremes, calls for a responsible use of the term have been issued.<sup>5</sup> With this edited volume, we hope to continue refining this concept that, despite its flaws, has a tremendous importance for adherents of religion—and therefore also for those who study them.

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1 The authors of this introduction thank Laurie A. Paul, Karl Baier, and our anonymous peer reviewer for helpful comments, the Swiss National Foundation for funding the project ‘Experiments with Experience,’ in whose framework this edited volume was conceived, as well as the Open Access Publication Fund of the University Library of Bern. The contributions were initially presented at a conference in Bern, based on earlier work on intentional transformative experiences by one of the editors (Jens Schlieter), and generously funded by the Hermann und Marianne Straniak Stiftung, Vienna.

2 E.g., Hammer 2004, 331–453.

3 While phenomenologists like Rudolf Otto (1918) are the most obvious, more recent neurological theories similarly place experience at the bottom of a biological—rather than perennial—origin of religion.

4 E.g., Sharf 2012.

5 E.g., Taves 2009.

The difficulty of academically dealing with religious experiences lies in the variety of the reports of these, which requires a limitation of scope. This edited volume will therefore deal with experiences that are on the one hand intentionally sought after, while being on the other hand described as transformative or life changing. Exceptional life-changing experiences, such as near-death experiences or revelations, are often believed to be ultimately beyond the individual's control—they are thought to simply happen. Such transformative experiences—addressed for example as awakening, enlightenment, or conversion—are said to possess the quality to transform the individual completely. The model of passively received transformative experiences certainly has been described by many spiritual and religious protagonists, and, following the trajectory of their reports, by scholars interested in such revelatory transformative experiences. Yet the point that many transformative experiences are deliberately sought out has found much less attention. How do individuals search intentionally for such experiences—especially, if these experiences are at the same time considered to be an encounter with a numinous presence, or an interaction with a supernatural reality? How do the practitioners prepare the ground for them to happen, and on which basis do they form their action-guiding expectations? Furthermore, how are the expected or allegedly realized transformations conceptualized? What part or parts of the person is said to be transformed, and to what purpose?

The various authors of this volume will pick up topics connected to intentionality and transformation within the field of religious, spiritual, and esoteric practices. In four overarching contexts, they will draw connections between intentional transformative experiences and 1) theories that might explain their cognitive underpinnings; 2) the societal and cultural contexts in which they are embedded; 3) the personal histories and interpretations of the practitioners; and 4) individual (sub-) aspects of these concepts that can serve as further analytical tools. Every chapter will pick up one or more of these points and illustrate it with a case study from the Modern West or South and Central Asia. In this way, the intentionally sought direct experiences resulting from often long-term practices of various actors are put into different types of contexts, while serving as possible inspirations for further engagement with the topic. The choice of geographical and temporal delineation was taken on pragmatic grounds. To fully cover the global diversity in traditions, both historical and contemporary, would far exceed the scope of a single volume. Here, the goal was to first formulate new questions and approaches to the topic of intention transformative experiences. Due to the comprehensive literature on European, North American, and South Asian religious interconnections over the past two centuries, this scope seemed adequately diverse *and* contained to result in useful contrasts. In the future, we hope that contributions from other areas and times will be added—no doubt enriching the concept with their unique contexts and new methodologies.

To outline the above-mentioned questions and approaches, the introduction will first shortly address the most important terms. As already described, the central concept is experience. Although this term has already been extensively discussed in the literature of the study of religion, it should nevertheless here be defined in a fruitful way for the edited volume. Then, the concept of transformation is discussed. Transformation, too, contains different characteristics, which have been described and analyzed previously by various authors, whose work can be broadened and built upon in this volume. Finally, intentionality plays a key role in delineating and examining the case studies presented and will therefore be discussed. In a further step, historical, philosophical, and psychological perspectives on intentional transformative experiences are discussed. Finally, a chapter-by-chapter overview of the volume is offered, subdivided in the above-mentioned thematic cognitive, societal-cultural, personal, and conceptual focal points.

## 1 Experience

Experiences are at the core of each chapter within this book. It is therefore important that the term is operationalized. On the one hand, it is too broad a term to pass by without clearer definition; while on the other hand, the legacy of ‘experience’ within the study of religion has given the concept ideological baggage that must be avoided for a fruitful elaboration of the category to take place. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that much ink has already been spilled to describe the problems above. Therefore, this section will have as its main function to highlight the problems in order to see what there still is to gain by using the term ‘experience’ in connection to religion, spirituality and esotericism.

In a study on several key concepts within the English language, linguist Anna Wierzbicka points to the complex history of the term experience.<sup>6</sup> Starting from the time of William Shakespeare, she distinguishes between six different meanings of the term. These range from the oldest meaning of experience as ‘accumulated knowledge’ to the newest meaning of ‘a current, subjective awareness-*cum*-feeling.’ Any consideration of a category as big as experience needs to take this diversity seriously. Usually, when studies of religion, spirituality and esotericism talk about experience, the focus is on the short-term, subjective meaning of experience. This type of experience can be characterized by an altered or changed state of awareness, knowledge, and/or feeling, which often has a clear beginning and ending. While we agree that this is the ‘typical’ religious or spiritual experience, it is important to keep in mind

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<sup>6</sup> Wierzbicka 2010, chap. 2.

the multiplicity of the term. We propose to denote this specific meaning, which can be defined tentatively as “a temporary, subjective change in awareness, knowledge, and/or feeling,” as *immediate experience*. As will be discussed below under ‘intentionality,’ such immediate experiences are often embedded in long periods of active practice, which in themselves can be denoted as long-term experiences as well. As long-term experiences in the religious domain, we think of those experiences that emerge from repeated, often ritualized behavior (e.g., meditation). In this case, long-term experiences may assume the form of a standardized (or summative) account built from a large number of individual experiences. One could illustrate this with multi-year enterprises as the writing of a book, or the process of holding down a certain job. These can (and are) readily described by many as experiences that could either be good, bad, informative, constitutive, and so forth.

A first problem that arises when immediate experiences as described above are the object of study, is their subjective status. After all, how is one supposed to study something that only the experiencers themselves are aware of? This is the problem Robert Sharf has eloquently pointed out in various of his publications.<sup>7</sup> To uncritically take over an experiencer’s claims about their purported experiences could lead to unwarranted and unwanted consequences. For one, such a course of action could lead to the reification of categories of experience over time and across cultures based on perceived similarities. Romantic thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and phenomenologists of religion such as Rudolf Otto took this line of reasoning so far that they perceived religious experience to be at the core of all religions. Differences in this view were caused by culture, while similarities pointed towards a perennial truth. A different problem is that it simply cannot be verified whether a narrative based on an experience is based in any type of reality at all: after all, the issue could be based on false memories or even conscious deceit. We simply do not have direct access to the inner states of the subjects of our studies. From these problems, however, it does not follow that we cannot study the narratives about such immediate experiences. After all, the study of religion generally does not offer value judgements on super-empirical matters such as the factual existence of gods, or the literal efficacy of rituals that purport to effect unseen realities. This does not have to be any different for experience reports. However, care must be taken to put such narratives on immediate experiences in their correct context: it is important to ask the right questions of such sources.

A second problem with dealing with immediate experiences within the study of religion and esotericism is the use of the adjective ‘religious,’ ‘esoteric,’ or ‘spiritual.’ While not inherent to the title of the current work, most chapters will indeed

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7 Sharf 2012.

deal with religious or spiritual experiences. In her 2009 book *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, Ann Taves argues in Durkheimian fashion—with the help of ascription theory from psychology—that one should differentiate between experiences deemed religious or special on the one hand, and experiences which are not deemed religious or special on the other hand.<sup>8</sup> By taking the claims of one's research subjects, a *sui generis* approach is prevented. We fully agree with Taves on this point, but at the same time want to widen our analytical scope. Taves does this by opting for 'specialness' as category which circumvents ideological biases and introduces the possibility for cross-cultural comparison by including cultures that did or do not work with the term 'religious.'<sup>9</sup> While such an approach is perfectly valid, we instead choose to see 'religious' experiences as those experiences that function centrally within the framework of a chosen definition of religion. By taking a definition of religion such as Martin Riesebrodt's—"religion is a complex of practices that are based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, that are generally invisible"<sup>10</sup>—any experience interpreted as communication with the superhuman, as induced by the superhuman, or otherwise connected to the superhuman could be designated by researchers as a religious experience.<sup>11</sup>

Our differentiation between 'religious,' 'esoteric,' and 'spiritual' is a rather pragmatic choice. The experiences dealt with in this book can usually be ascribed to either two, or even all three categories at the same time. However, in contemporary scholarship, nuances have appeared within these categories. Esotericism is often defined with reference to practices and beliefs centered around an ineffable wisdom, or seen as a group of historically marginalized traditions, studied by its own interdisciplinary field of the study of esotericism.<sup>12</sup> Religion and spirituality are often conceptualized—to follow the definition of Riesebrodt above—as divisible into *communal and organized* forms of practices based on the existence of superhuman powers (i.e., religion), and *individual* attempts to do the same (i.e., spirituality).<sup>13</sup> While we leave open the question whether religion and spirituality are best analyti-

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8 Taves 2009.

9 The perspective of Taves will be further taken up in the chapter by Maddalena Canna.

10 Riesebrodt 2010, 74–75.

11 In this sense we still follow, like Taves, an ascription model. It is, however, more top-down in the sense that the researcher's definition of religion will influence what type of experience narrative may or may not be interesting to investigate. This should be no problem: definitions serve as temporary lenses for us to focus on that which is of interest to us, we should simply be clear about what interest that is (cf. Strenski 2010).

12 Recent discussions in the study of esotericism have taken up the question on how to delineate what exactly its object of study is (e.g., Asprem and Strube 2021). Our description here is, of course, highly simplified.

13 See, e.g., Riesebrodt 2010, 77–78.

cally separated in such a way, it does point to the fact that taken together, it would be unhelpful to take a single term as an umbrella to cover all three. Stylistically, we will not be able to avoid this completely, and each author in the volume has likewise made their own decision on which concept to focus. Programmatically, however, our interest includes religious, esoteric, and spiritual phenomena and traditions in all their specific nuances—and similarly the various chapters in this book draw from a wide range of (inter)disciplinary backgrounds including the study of religion and the study of esotericism. It is our explicit wish to go beyond single disciplines to gain a wider overview of intentional transformative experiences.

Concretely operationalized, this book aims to analyze narratives of immediate experiences that are embedded in personal and cultural contexts in such a way that they are either described as religious or spiritual by the participants themselves or fit centrally within the religious or esoteric framework of their direct environment. It is from there that such immediate experiences can be put into 1) wider personal contexts such as cultivational practices (i.e., long-term experiences) and idiosyncratic reinterpretations; 2) wider societal contexts such as traditions; 3) dialogue with other branches of science in order to look for cognitive underpinnings of certain experiences; or 4) theoretical models that aim to make typologies, or that subdivide concepts into smaller analytical units.

## 2 Transformation

Numerous publications deal with the definition and formation of the term transformative experience, which are also decisively incorporated into the present edited volume. Among others, the works of Laurie A. Paul and Edna Ullmann-Margalit, which are briefly presented below, are of importance for this volume.

How does one (rationally) make the decision to undergo a life-changing experience of which it is unknown what the effects will be, and of which it is equally unsure how it will impact the perspective one has on oneself, or on one's life before the experience? This is the main question L.A. Paul asks in her book *Transformative Experiences*.<sup>14</sup> For this, she first analyzes what kinds of transformations these life-changing experiences include. The examination of the types of transformation is particularly interesting for this volume, since the chapters and case studies similarly consider various differing types of transformations.

L.A. Paul's focus lies on the distinction between an epistemic transformation and a personal transformation. She understands epistemic transformative experi-

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<sup>14</sup> Paul 2014.

ences to include those kinds of transformations that follow from knowledge only accessible through the experience itself. One mundane example given is the tasting of new fruits: only through the experience is it possible to gain the knowledge of how the fruit tastes. However, L.A. Paul's initial question is dedicated to those decisions that—unlike fruit tasting—are so decisive that they can be life changing in the long term. The problem here is that it is not possible to understand what life is like afterwards without having experienced it. At the same time, the question arises as to what is missed if one decides against this very experience. An example here would be the changing of careers: one would give up a known situation for an unknown one. The core of L.A. Paul's argument is that an epistemically transformative experience involves certain knowledge that is only accessible through that experience and, for this reason, the response to it is unpredictable.

In contrast, personally transformative experiences refer to the impact that certain experiences have on the self-identification, the core values, and preferences of the experiencer. This would include, among others conversion experiences, as they alter the core preferences of the experiencer and, with it, their self-identification. Thus, a personally transformative experience changes core values as well as how individuals see themselves.

L.A. Paul is particularly interested in those experiences that contain both epistemic as well as personal transformations, because these transformative experiences can determine the future of one's life. It is here that she comes back to her starting question: the problem of how to decide for or against such a transformative experience. L.A. Paul argues that it is not possible to make a rational and informed decision in such situations because of the epistemic and personal dimensions these experiences have.<sup>15</sup> That is to say, the combination of the change in the individual's core values, combined with the fact that the individual does not know how they will change until they are actually in the process of changing them (through having the experience).

Similarly, the question of how to rationally decide in cases with potentially transformative choices has already been raised by Edna Ullmann-Margalit.<sup>16</sup> Like L.A. Paul, Ullmann-Margalit first narrows down the transformative decisions she

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, transformations that come with positive effects both on the epistemic as on the personal level are choices one may never regret. In their discussion of L.A. Paul's framework, Havi Carel and Ian J. Kidd point to more ambivalent experiences that may result in epistemically positive but personally negative transformation. Here, they point to cases in which a traumatic experience may come along with new insights. Other experiences may be epistemically negative but personally positive. For this, Carel and Kidd refer to religious experiences by Thomas Aquinas and Blaise Pascal. See Carel and Kidd 2020, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Ullmann-Margalit 2017.



considers and distinguishes small decisions from big decisions—the latter being those that are personally transformative and can change one’s life in a sustainable way. Next to the transformative character of such decisions or experiences, Ullmann-Margalit also identifies them as irrevocable, taken in full awareness, and as followed by a lingering shadow concerning the choice *not* made. Regarding the characteristics of transformation, she defines such choices as those that are “likely to change one’s beliefs and desires (or ‘utilities’), that is, to change one’s cognitive and evaluative system.”<sup>17</sup> She also points out that there are a number of such decisions that can change life in a lasting way over a longer period of time, but Ullmann-Margalit is particularly interested in those transformations that are the result of abrupt changes or decisions.

Finally, Ullmann-Margalit makes a distinction between initially defined decisions and conversion experiences. Although conversions can also be described as life-changing, core-affecting and often irrevocable decisions, the experiencer or the decision-maker may take a different stance. Ullmann-Margalit mentions two aspects here: 1) the situation is often not identified as a decision by the decision-maker and 2) the previous life is often rated negatively by the decision-maker. From an outside perspective, a conversion can be perceived as a big decision, but the person who made the decision or experienced it perceives it differently.

Going beyond this introductory summary, Ullmann-Margalit’s distinction between “old person” and “new person” is particularly relevant for this volume. In big decisions “the personality-transforming opting situation is one in which the old ‘rationality base’ is replaced by a new,”<sup>18</sup> which will almost necessarily result in the following: after the decision that implies a transformative experience, reasons and intentions change in retrospect. Significant to our topic, Ullmann-Margalit demonstrates this complex situation with the example of “a high-tech executive who, craving spirituality, considers opting for a life as a Buddhist monk.” The executive longs for some perceived important characteristics of Buddhism, such as simplicity and peace, and tries to gather as much information as he can about a possible change to Buddhism for making the decision. Most likely, the Buddhist monk will be transformed in a way that makes it difficult for him to evaluate rationally whether the whole transformative process conforms to that what the “old person” originally had in mind. However, this example also shows that “converting” to become a monk will usually be a complex process of path-dependent decisions and not just a “grand transformative experience”—it might equally be a series of smaller life-altering experiences, that change the course of life. In this regard, philosophers Carel and Kidd

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17 Ullmann-Margalit 2017, 69.

18 Ullmann-Margalit 2017, 75.

argue convincingly that many transformative experiences may unfold gradually and arise cumulatively over the course of a longer period.<sup>19</sup>

In the field of spirituality, such major epistemically transformative experiences may result in adopting a “cosmic” perspective on the world, becoming aware of one’s innate nature of supra-individual consciousness, or the like. However, both Ullmann-Margalit and L.A. Paul look at such transformative experiences from decision theory and ask whether a person has sufficient knowledge to decide what a certain decision—for example, to take a potent psychedelic drug—will mean to them. In sum, “epistemically transformative experiences” will result in a largely incommensurable and unforeseeable state: one may in principle never know before but only by actually experiencing it what such a major transformative experience will yield for the individual.

The works of L.A. Paul and Ullmann-Margalit present tools for further considerations—with regard to the communication and repeatability of such transformative experiences as well as the duration or processual nature of these. Their terms can be used to more specifically question what types of transformations we are dealing with, and they can serve as heuristic tools for comparing the statements of the experiencers about the effects of their transformations.

### 3 Intentionality and Self-Cultivation

The last term that will be emphasized in connection with transformative experiences is ‘intentionality.’ This element will further down be discussed in its connection to self-cultivation. For our purpose, we can define the characteristics of being “intentional” in these experiences as either their quality of being intentionally transformative or the fact that experiences are sought out by the practitioners. Respective individuals have developed a certain mental state—a desire, a will, or a wish—to undergo such a transformative experience, or even a succession of such experiences. To achieve this, individuals follow purposeful behavior which they believe should enable exceptional experiences. These experiences therefore emerge neither involuntary nor nonvoluntary.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Carel and Kidd 2020.

<sup>20</sup> See Paul 2014, 16; Carel and Kidd 2020, 3; 7–9. For nonvoluntary transformative experiences, that one would never chose deliberately, Carel and Kidd refer to the case of Primo Levi, surviving a concentration camp, evaluating it in part as an experience that made his post-experiential life ‘richer,’ whereas involuntary experiences are instinctively chosen, that is, devoid of deliberation: “transformed, but through an unintended consequence of a choice” (Carel and Kidd, 2020, 8).

But how can such major transformative experiences in the spiritual realm be intentionally sought, and how do those experiences bring about transformative change? Paradigmatic are those experiences that result from spiritual practices.<sup>21</sup> Here a bridge can be made to the concept of self-cultivation as discussed by Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault. Questions about actions or ways of life aimed at a specific transformative experience have been addressed early in different cultures and periods. Hadot, for example, argued that within Hellenistic and Roman philosophical, as well as medieval Christian traditions, practice was not only aimed at reflection of the world. Instead, these traditions understood the aim of a philosophical life as actively exercising spiritual practices. For that matter, he defined the spiritual practices as “voluntary, personal practices intended to cause a transformation of the self.”<sup>22</sup> Already earlier, Michel Foucault had developed his concept of “care of the self,” again from Hellenistic and Roman philosophers, arguing that its purpose is to transform the self, namely, to “change, purify, transform, and transfigure oneself.”<sup>23</sup> For Foucault, spiritual practices are essentially somatic since the focus of such depictions is often on embodied practice that can be described with Foucault’s notion as ‘technologies of the self.’ These technologies consist of techniques that allow individuals to affect “a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, or to attain a certain state of perfection.”<sup>24</sup> Foucault distinguished between Greek and Roman Stoic technologies of the self as transforming the self, whereas, he argued, Christian hermeneutic technologies of the self (e.g., as meditation, self-examination, or confession) aim at a renunciation *from* the self, as ‘conscience-vivisection,’ popularized in the Reformation, and transmitted into modernity as the goal to (merely) ‘know oneself.’<sup>25</sup> In sum, both Hadot and Foucault share an interest in life-long practices of philosophical schools as ongoing self-cultivation<sup>26</sup> but are less interested in a typology of the respective transformative experiences. Nor did they engage with the prevalence of intentional transformative

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21 See Hadot 2002.

22 Hadot 2011, 87; cf. Hadot 2020, 36; Hadot 1995, 79–125.

23 Foucault 2005.

24 Foucault 2016.

25 Cf. Foucault 2016, 110.

26 Hadot says that these philosophical schools “imposed a way of life on its members, a way of life which engaged the whole of one’s existence,” consisting of “spiritual exercises,” that is, “practices that aimed at a modification, an improvement and a transformation of the self.” Interestingly, Hadot emphasizes the “act of choice,” the “fundamental option for a certain way of life.” In regard to practices, Hadot explains that most engage in “inner discourse” and “spiritual activity,” that is, “in meditation, dialogue with oneself, examination of conscience or exercises of imagination such as the view from above on the cosmos or the earth” (Hadot 2020, 35–36).

experiences as portrayed and discussed in Asian traditions or contemporary global culture. Nevertheless, their reflections form a helpful foundation for the present consideration of the terms intentionality and self-cultivation in connection with transformative experiences.

Intentionality therefore seems often to be intrinsically wound up—at least within the domains of religion, spirituality, and esotericism—with the concept of practice. This adds an extra dimension to a transformative experience being intentional. No longer is it a question of making a choice, instead, there is an additional question on how to prepare for the sought-after experience. As practices to attain transformation might span periods of time ranging from months to years, additional analytical problems appear. First, the fact that the experiences are often embedded within religious traditions, might shape the pre-experiential expectations and post-experiential reflections of the narrators under investigation. Second, the fact that post-hoc narratives are often the only sources we have on the experience, it becomes hard to reconstruct the original intentions the experiencers had pursuing the transformation in the first place. When properly taken into account, however, the problems raised above can be used to enhance our analysis of specific instances of intentional transformative experiences.

## 4 Earlier Literature on Transformative Experiences

The concept of transformative or transformational experiences has in the last decade been discussed interdisciplinary from perspectives as diverse as philosophy,<sup>27</sup> various branches of psychology,<sup>28</sup> anthropology,<sup>29</sup> and neuroscience.<sup>30</sup> An extensive literature overview would exceed the scope of this introduction, so instead certain themes that have been raised earlier will be picked up here, in order to delineate what has been done, and in what ways the authors of this volume will expand on this.

A recent attempt to provide a definition of transformative experience that aims at integrating the disciplinary perspectives mentioned above has been made by Alice Chirico and colleagues. It reads:

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<sup>27</sup> Paul 2015; Carel and Kidd 2020.

<sup>28</sup> White 2004; Miller and C’de Baca 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Van Gennep 1908; Turner 1947.

<sup>30</sup> Brouwer and Carhart-Harris 2020.

Transformative experiences can be defined as brief experiences, perceived as extraordinary and unique, entailing durable and/or irreversible outcomes, which contribute to changing individuals' self-conception, worldviews, and view of others, as well as their own personality and identity by involving an epistemic expansion [ . . . ] and a heightened emotional complexity [ . . . ] as the two core phenomenological features. They are usually remembered vividly.<sup>31</sup>

The definition given clearly includes L.A. Paul's epistemic and personal transformations and adds several additional elements, such as a definition of experience close to what we have called 'immediate experience' above, the irreversibility of the transformation, and the vivid recollection of the whole. As will be seen further below, this working definition fits most experiences in the current collection. Yet the authors will bring unique perspectives to the concept that promise to enrich our interdisciplinary perspective of it.

Much literature on the topic of transformative experiences has been on the question of how one should make the choice to have possibly transformative experiences or not, as in the case of L.A. Paul,<sup>32</sup> Ullmann-Margalit,<sup>33</sup> Lambert and Schwenkler<sup>34</sup> as well as Pettigrew.<sup>35</sup> Other literature has pointed out the necessity to include experiences that are unintentional, such as Carel and Kidd.<sup>36</sup> Further questions have been raised regarding the added epistemological and evidential value: will such experiences bring about new insights into reality, or help to bring forth volitional changes of personality or personality traits?<sup>37</sup> Summarized, philosophical and psychological works ask what the personal gain of experiences deemed transformative will be, and how individuals should actively aim for such experiences, and whether they even can.

The authors of the current volume deal with intentional transformative experiences that are part of a broader discourse on experiences of spiritual transformation. They are either interested in the transformative qualities attributed to those experiences in autobiographical reports, or in the embodied practices themselves, which are present in many religious traditions: for example, fasting, meditation, systematic self-observation, ingestion of psychoactive substances, pilgrimage, and so forth. As the diversity of such potentially transformative practices shows, both terms, 'experience' and 'transformation,' can assume various meanings. For example, it can refer to both a very short experiential event such as a near-death experience, or a week-

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31 Chirico et al. 2022, 14.

32 Paul 2014.

33 Ullman-Margalit 2017.

34 Lambert and Schwenkler 2020.

35 Pettigrew 2015.

36 Carel and Kidd 2019.

37 Hudson and Fraley 2017.

long fasting. The same holds true for transformation. With transformation, an individual may address a fundamental change, a revolution of the basis of the person, while others just wish to express that their lives take a new turn.

By limiting the scope to religious, spiritual, or esoteric practices, conceptualization of intentionally sought transformative experiences will be enhanced. Two underemphasized aspects within literature on transformative experiences have been 1) a historical contextualization of these experiences, and 2) a perspective that takes into account the heterogeneity of experiences that can be deemed transformative. Studies on religion, spirituality, and esotericism are situated better than most disciplines to capture the various practices that have been performed and experiences allegedly lived through in the search for transformation in their full context. By broadening the scope historically—including the nineteenth and twentieth century—as well geographically—including South Asia—insights from new cases can point to theoretical reflections that have implications for the concept of ‘(intentional) transformative experiences.’ On the one hand, assumptions that are uniquely contemporary and Western might be amended, while on the other hand aspects that were more prominent in other times and areas might be uncovered.

## 5 Central Themes and Relations between Chapters

The volume’s main contribution to the study of intentional transformative experience will be 1) to focus primarily on religious and esoteric practices from the nineteenth century onwards; and 2) to introduce a multifaceted theoretical and thematic approach to the phenomenon that is based primarily within the study of religion and esotericism. In order to highlight the underlying processes involved in such practices, the chapters will take important religious and esoteric case studies and analyze them from new perspectives. Below, the main themes and their case studies are sketched. The themes range from contextualization on the macro level, by embedding transformative experiences within cognitive terms, to the mesolevel of societal and cultural factors, all the way to the micro level, where the particular lives of experiencers are analyzed closely. A last theme deals more conceptually with central aspects of intentional transformative experiences that have so far not received much attention. Taken together, the themes show how any intentional transformative experience can be tied to biological constants, societal constraints, and personal idiosyncrasies—and how any such experience has the potential to teach us more about the general concept as a whole.

## 5.1 The Cognition of Intentional Transformative Experiences

Multiple contributions in the volume use cognitive theories to better understand how experiences can intentionally be induced in and interpreted by would-be experiencers. These approaches give a strong impetus to look carefully into the bodily and psychological bases of transformative experiences and how they are induced by practitioners. A cognitive approach has the potential to bridge the life-world of the experiencer with the analytical view of the academic, without succumbing to a naïve understanding of transformative experiences as perennial. A careful consideration of cognition and embodiment allows to move beyond questions of authenticity and into an area of tentative and educated speculation on the phenomenology and neurocognitive background of described experiences. Although such approaches by themselves will not allow the study of transformative experiences to go beyond its primary source of narratives, they can form an additional interpretative framework on which analyses can build.<sup>38</sup>

The work of Keith Cantú (chapter 2) provides an interesting example of the use of cognitive theories in the context of intentional transformative experiences. He takes the case study of Sri Sabhapati Swami's (1828–1923/4) flight to the celestial mountain Kailāsa as a starting point for an investigation of the responses to such extraordinary experiences by European, American, as well as South Asian authors who questioned the validity of these accounts. Specifically, Cantú presents the communications and critical considerations of the leading members of the Theosophical Society about the alleged flight. He then turns towards the cognitive science of religion to look for a more sympathetic reading than the critical disapproval Sabhapati received before, yet more critical than taking the experience at face value. Instead, Cantú takes his cue from the developments within the study of human perception. Using the notion of decontextualized processing, he shows how Sabhapati's training might have consisted in overriding the default mode network of the brain, through which the flight to the celestial mountain could have been perceived as real. By raising this as an alternative explanation, Cantú consciously attempts to go beyond a Western common-sense notion that transformative experiences such as Sabhapati's must rest on rationality-based belief in their veracity. Instead, the interpretation of the event should be seen as based in the (cognitively enhanced) nature of the personal experience, rather than as a simple question of dogmatic belief.

The second chapter in the cognitive section, by Flavio Geisshüsler, deals with meditation practices of “Direct Transcendence,” which primarily emerged from

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<sup>38</sup> See for earlier attempts to cognitively situate religious experiences Asprem and Taves (2017), as well as Asprem (2017).

Tibetan Buddhism (chapter 3). Geisshüsler is particularly interested in the visionary experiences that should emerge from such an intentional practice of meditation. Such visions include a crescendo of spectacular images starting from small dots which change to lassos, eventually culminating into a vision of a hundred buddhas in their celestial abodes. Direct Transcendence occurs in settings of sensory deprivation and are said by the tradition's texts to occur from a sense of 'naked perception,' or a non-judgmental attitude—they happen spontaneously and unintentionally. Geisshüsler instead turns to cognitive research on perception to question just how non-intentional such visions can be, utilizing enactive cognition and perceptual activity theory. He shows that between the strong expectations of how such a visually-based experience should unfold, and the constructive nature of perception—which is shaped not passively by outside stimuli only, but rather created as much through the brain—it would be hard to speak of non-intentionality.<sup>39</sup> Rather, Geisshüsler shows how to be at once accommodating to the experiencers' claims of grandiose visions while staying critical at how such visions could cognitively occur.

The section is closed by the chapter of Maddalena Canna (chapter 4), who takes the theories of Tanya Luhrmann, Rebecca Seligman, and Ann Taves as a starting point to compare them and to show their potentials and limits in connection with analyzing intentional transformative experiences. From Luhrmann and Taves she takes the notion that religious or transformative experiences are formed of a cognitive and a cultural component; combined these components lead to the interpretation by experiencers that they had an encounter with the extraordinary. From Seligman, Canna takes the idea that also the counterpart of the previous, what Canna calls an estrangement from the ordinary, can take place: as experiencers look back at their lives prior to the event, they distance themselves from their previous 'normality' which is then considered to be abnormal instead. Canna integrates this new notion into the componential approaches of Taves and Luhrmann to come to a more complete understanding of how religious and transformative changes are experienced and evaluated by the practitioners who said to have had them. She adds empirical evidence for her theoretical addition through her own case study of contemporary Advaita Vedānta as practiced in this case in a European ashram. Canna shows that there is much to learn from approaching extraordinary events from the opposite angle instead.

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<sup>39</sup> In this sense, the chapter of Geisshüsler is complemented by the later chapter of Karl Baier, who argues that there often is a non-intentional factor to otherwise intentionally sought experiences.



## 5.2 The Sociological Contexts of Intentional Transformative Experiences

Two chapters of the volume focus on the sociological contexts of specific practitioners or traditions to better understand the cultural background of certain transformative experiences. The nineteenth and twentieth century saw sweeping changes to both the West and South Asia. New understandings of the self, consciousness, and religion were being formed through mutual exchanges that were informed by contexts of colonialism and a professionalization of science. Practices from old traditions had to be reinvented in light of these changes or were adopted by thinkers from complete different cultural backgrounds. Change, therefore, was the rule, rather than the exception. The chapters discussed within this theme will show exactly how specific intentional transformative experiences were swept along in larger societal and cultural reconfigurations—and how they have been transformed in the process. These chapters therefore show that intentional transformative experiences—and even how we as academics conceptualize the term itself—can only be understood when read against their cultural backgrounds, simultaneously giving meaningful tools for further studies into similar phenomena.

The section opens with a chapter by Joseph Azize and Steven Sutcliffe on G.I. Gurdjieff (1866?–1949) and the spiritual movement he led (chapter 5). They show in great detail the types of exercise Gurdjieff believed were necessary to awaken the self. More than any other chapter in the volume, the effort behind the attainment of a transformative experience is described, as Gurdjieff believed only thousands of exercises would result in success. The practices are shown to include many proprioceptive elements, and the objective of complete awareness of one's actions and thoughts through painstaking repetition. Yet Azize and Sutcliffe go beyond showing just how Gurdjieff and his followers believed they could reach their goals. Additionally, they situate the movement in the twentieth century spiritual seekership culture, in which many participants sought out new methods to satisfy their religious needs. Gurdjieff's approach is shown to fit within such a culture, but to differ from some of its aspects as well. In doing so, Azize and Sutcliffe demonstrate the importance of analyzing the specifics of singular persons and movements within the wider context in which they were embedded. Their work sheds new light not just on the Gurdjieff movement, but on the religious landscape of the twentieth century as well.

The second and final chapter of the sociological section is by Magdalena Kraler, who investigates the instructional texts on yogic breath control, or *prāṇāyāma*, which promise to induce transformative experiences ranging from this-worldly health effects to liberation from the cycle of rebirth (chapter 6). Kraler shows how

the ancient practice was transformed in the nineteenth and twentieth century and analyzes two of the biggest changes. First, in the late nineteenth century, in the shadow of colonialism, South Asian writers started to legitimize the practice through science, conceptualizing *prāṇāyāma* as an empirical—and therefore experimental—science. As a result, however, the description of subjective experience was much less prominent than the observable and predictable results the practice should have. On the other hand, the hygienic self-culture movement is shown to have likewise changed the practice of *prāṇāyāma*, albeit in a different direction. There, the resulting subjective, transformative experiences were once again highlighted in order to pursue open-ended self-development. While there are clear differences in the two movements, Kraler closes by showing the interdependence of the two contexts of science and self-culture. The personal experience of the practitioner cannot be completely disregarded, even in the context of scientific legitimization, whereas the main protagonists of the hygienic movement always saw the need to prove their claims and practices in order to gain recognition within the field. The tension between objective and subjective value might very well be present in many other cases of intentional transformative experiences.<sup>40</sup>

### 5.3 The Personal Contexts of Intentional Transformative Experiences

Even though individuals are to a certain extent constrained by their surroundings, there is a capacity for substantial agency of single persons as well. The chapters of this section show through their analyses of single author-practitioners that the specific contexts, ideas, and actions of certain individuals can lead them to innovative ideas—even if not all these ideas become influential. Through proper historical contextualization, the authors of these chapters show how there is always a dialogue between the cultural heritage of (would-be) experiencers, and the outcome of their idiosyncratic interpretations of practice, transformation, and experience. It is in the micro-history of such individuals, that themes central to intentionality, transformation, and experience become identifiable, and may be once again operationalized on a conceptual level to further amend the way we use such terms.

This section opens with the chapter by Wouter Hanegraaff, who takes the hermetic writer Mary Anne Atwood (1817–1910) as a case study to investigate her approach to the transformative experience of hermetic rebirth (chapter 7). In par-

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<sup>40</sup> See for example the chapter of Bastiaan van Rijn, which shows similar tendencies in a case study of roughly the same timeframe.

ticular, Hanegraaff analyzes Atwood's contribution to *Early Animal Magnetism* and her *Suggestive Inquiry* to supplement earlier work on the author. Specifically, the indebtedness of Atwood's ideas to the Hermetic literature from late antiquity is emphasized: even though Atwood started from a spiritual alchemical basis, Hanegraaff shows that we see in her work a remarkable understanding of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Particularly relevant to this volume is Hanegraaff's focus on the transformative practices Atwood believed would lead to a hermetic rebirth, as well as the transmission of the knowledge. The case shows the quest of Atwood to decipher the correct practices to gain hidden knowledge through animal magnetism, alchemy, and potentially spiritual procreation, as well as her endeavors to hide her findings within her books. Only diligent, and therefore worthy, readers could uncover just what Atwood discussed. Hanegraaff demonstrates that thorough investigation of single authors can bring a wealth of information about particular instances of searches for intentional transformative experiences.

The following chapter by Marleen Thaler deals with the kuṇḍalinī awakening of Gopi Krishna (1903–1984) and its effects (chapter 8). Thaler describes how the experience strongly influenced Krishna, and how he went beyond a religious explanation of kuṇḍalinī to instead embrace a science-based understanding of the energy concept in question. In doing so, Krishna opened the practice up for a non-Indian audience eager to adopt Indian spiritual phenomena and adapt them according to their own cultural interests. In a further step, Thaler underlines the influence of Krishna's experiences and framing of kuṇḍalinī on subsequent experience reports among non-Indians. Of special interest to the volume is the negotiation of religious and scientific terminology. Thaler shows how Krishna's understanding of kuṇḍalinī involved not only the potential for individual transformative experiences, but also the root of a spiritual evolution: according to Krishna, the acceptance and experience of the biological mechanisms behind kuṇḍalinī might underpin the emergence of a universal religion and thereby align humanity with its spiritual-evolutionary path. The case study lays bare the entanglement between intentionally sought personally transformative experiences, and the oft-found wish to use such experiences to transform societies, or even the whole of humanity.

Finally, Bastiaan van Rijn's chapter builds a typology for intentional transformative experiences by taking up L.A. Paul's scheme and expanding it with features that emerge from the case study of the French animal magnetizer Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet (1809–1885) (chapter 9). Van Rijn shows how Cahagnet's work initially focused on intentionally inducing transformative experiences in magnetic somnambulists to gain knowledge about life after death. Later on, however, Cahagnet instead took to hashish to cut out the intermediaries and have himself and others directly experience what the afterlife is like. In the end, Cahagnet mostly returned to his somnambulist-based research due to the fact that hashish was harder to use

for his scientific purposes. The two approaches to gain scientific proof of an afterlife through the practices, illustrated by Cahagnet, are used by Van Rijn to further divide the concept of intentional transformative experience into the terms of ‘intentionally induced self-transformative experiences’ and ‘intentionally induced states of knowledge.’ These two sub-categories point to different goals and methods of such phenomena, such as the self-transformation of the experiencers or the transformation of others. Both terms can be used to better understand the concept of intentional transformative experience and to make it more operationalized for future analyses.

## 5.4 The Conceptual Aspects of Intentional Transformative Experiences

Various authors of the volume look at specific sub parts of intentional transformative experiences to better understand the whole. The chapters within this section expand the analytical language of transformative experiences and provide useful tools for investigation of such phenomena. Case studies in this section are chosen, not only because they contain interesting examples of intentional transformative experiences, but because they shed light on undertheorized aspects of the very concept itself. Such conceptual analyses combine the historical specificity of their direct subjects, with the addition of a more abstract theoretical depth. These chapters thereby create the potential to see other instances of intentional transformative experiences from new perspectives, as well as to reconceptualize our terminology as a whole.

Karl Baier opens the section by investigating the relationship between intentionality and non-intentionality within transformative experiences (chapter 10). He analyzes the role ‘active imagination’ played in the work of Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). Baier shows that while Jung’s open-ended journey contained intentional elements, for example through the building of a miniature city, it was exactly the uncontrolled subjective experiences that followed which brought with them a transformative quality: one’s imagination should actively and purposefully be followed to unconscious contents, which in turn has to be interpreted and expressed. The essential role of the unintended, through the unconscious, is thereby put into the forefront. The chapter further chronicles the reception of Jung’s active imagination by later generations of psychologists and juxtaposes Jung’s conceptions on active imagination with those of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) on will-directed thought and non-willing. Ultimately, for Baier, Jung is an exemplar of how intentional transformative experiences often obtain their actual value through the unpredictable and likewise unintentional aspects. The unconscious is but one instance of the unintentional powers

that can be sought by practitioners. Conceptually, Baier sets forth an intriguing, seemingly paradoxical, notion that deserves attention: that to intentionally seek transformative experiences, is often to intentionally seek the unintentional.

The chapter by Jens Schlieter likewise deals with the core aspects of the volume (chapter 11). Drawing on various works that are crucial for the analysis of intentional transformative experiences, such as L.A. Paul, Taves, and Wierzbicka, he argues for the relevance of religiosity for the understanding of what is it that makes experiences life changing. His thesis is that an understanding of the finite, mortal existence as (actually) ultimately infinite, immortal or part of a meaningful whole constitutes the quintessential transformative experience. According to Schlieter, only such experiences can be understood as truly transformative and life changing. Schlieter furthermore argues that such experiences should always be framed in an autobiographical background, which integrates them into a long line of earlier autobiographical experiences. Using various case studies, he shows how intentionality and a pre-existing expectation of the transformation often play a crucial role in the evaluation of potentially transformative experiences. From this he concludes that even religious experiences—often believed to be instantaneous and unintentional—can always be traced back to an individual's biography. Schlieter therefore argues that transformative experiences in this regard should be seen as resulting from accumulated knowledge (throughout one's life) rather than being singular, one-time extraordinary events.

Concluding the section, Sarah Perez takes up the issue of how one can analyze intentional transformative experiences in the first place (chapter 12). Her case study is the contemporary phenomenon of 'reality shifting,' in which mostly young adults actively try to temporarily or permanently enter a different, often highly pre-determined reality. Perez shows that it is fruitful to divide the experience narratives of practitioners into smaller subsections: in her case how one prepares to shift, how the initial shift is experienced, what life is like in the other reality, and how the experience is evaluated afterwards. This way, immediate experiences are combined with long-term experiences into one conceptual framework. The identification of multiple stages allows Perez to more precisely handle analytical concepts such as those offered by L.A. Paul. This way, it becomes easier to identify what kind of change is said to happen at what point, and the structure of the phenomenon is laid bare. For example, reality shifting seems to get its personal transformative elements mostly from the preparatory, and evaluative stage, rather than through the experience—as the latter is mostly the fulfilment of the shifters' wishes. The experience, on the other hand, offers the epistemic certainty without which one could not have spoken of a transformative experience. The chapter shows that there is much to gain from a close analytical gaze.

The four themes—cognitive, sociological, personal, and conceptual—all work together to give complementary views of how intentionally transformative experiences can fruitfully be investigated. Together, they link social and contextual factors to deeper biological and cognitive ones, while providing analytical tools to investigate the sub processes of such experiences. By looking at all these levels, a deeper understanding of specific instances of transformative experience as well as the category itself can be achieved. Each chapter does not only add new perspectives on a specific case study from the history of religion, spirituality, or esotericism, but also allows for new insights on how to analyze similar intentional transformative experiences. The contributions to this volume show the strengths inherent in each single approach. Yet put together, they demonstrate what is to be gained when analyses of themes such as intentional transformative experiences combine different perspectives.

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**Part I: Cognitive Analyses of Intentional  
Transformative Experiences**





Keith Edward Cantú

## Chapter 2

# “A Ridiculous Story”: Sri Sabhapati Swami’s Flight to the Celestial Mountain

In December of 1879, a yogin named Sri Sabhapati Swami (ca. 1828–1923/4) traveled from his birthplace near Madras (now Chennai) to Lahore, British Punjab (now Pakistan).<sup>1</sup> There he delivered a series of lectures, which were first published in 1880 along with additional material and an account of his life in English published by an anonymous “Admirer,” most likely his Bengali editor Shrish Chandra Basu (1861–1918). These original lectures were subsequently translated and greatly expanded upon in a variety of languages, such as Bengali and German, and new works in Tamil, Hindustani (a precursor to modern Urdu and Hindi), Telugu, as well as multilingual editions, were also produced. The main contents of these lectures and published books were teachings on the “Royal Yoga for Śiva” (or Śivarājayoga), which I have treated at length in a previously published chapter and my book.<sup>2</sup> However, another aspect of these works worth considering are the extraordinary experiences that the yoga claimed to produce in Sabhapati’s life as well as the lives of his students, the most exemplary of which is Sabhapati’s “flight” to the celestial mountain and legendary abode of the great god Śiva in the Himalayas.

One doesn’t have to be a “guru” or “mahatma” to realize that closing the eyes, assuming certain postures, and breathing in a controlled way can bring calm and provoke certain physiological changes, otherwise “modern postural yoga” (MPY) and mindfulness meditation would not be billion-dollar global industries.<sup>3</sup> However, what of Sabhapati’s seemingly extravagant claim to the reader that a successful practitioner of his yogic techniques will be able to transform their body so as to have “one eye to the universe [ . . . ] embracing the sun, moon,

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1 I am grateful to Ann Taves who first inspired this chapter during a graduate seminar she taught on the Cognitive Science of Religion at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and to Sarah Perez, Jens Schlieter, and Bastiaan Benjamin van Rijn who have offered valuable feedback that has enhanced this chapter, which was adapted and greatly expanded from a section in my doctoral dissertation.

2 Cantú 2021 and Cantú 2023.

3 The typology of “modern postural yoga” (MPY) was first developed by the scholar Elizabeth De Michelis, whose work on modern yoga distinguished it from the yoga of figures like Swami Vivekananda (De Michelis 2008). For the industry of yoga see Jain (2015).

stars, the earth, and all their creations within the universal circle of your Linga Sorup [*liṅgasvarūpa*],” of which the illusionary body is the mere pedestal (*gaurīpīṭha*, Tam. *āvuṭaiyār*)?<sup>4</sup> This claim is partially reflected in Sabhapati’s own well-documented story of flying with three rishis or Vedic seers to Mount Kailasa (Kailāsa), the legendary abode of Śiva, the experience of which was apparently so profound that he even composed some verses in Sanskrit (and a highly Sanskritized Tamil hybrid language called Maṇipravāla) on the god’s transcendent and immanent nature. This experience was not framed as the spontaneous vision of an otherwise average person but is framed as the granting of a boon for Sabhapati’s yogic devotion (i.e., it is Sabhapati’s intention to see Śiva). As a result, the story provides a useful narrative blueprint of an intentional transformative experience, albeit one that is framed as taking place in the past and as a result can only be analyzed in terms of the textual claims that we have for it occurring.

Soteriological claims and promises of special powers (*siddhis*) or experiences (*anubhavas*) like Sabhapati’s are commonplace in Indian hagiographical literature on yogins,<sup>5</sup> and in this respect Sabhapati’s own hagiographical accounts are no exception. Yet Sabhapati’s story is unique in that it is one of the first such claims to be engaged with in colonial modernity; it provoked responses by European and American “foreigners” as well as South Asian authors who questioned the validity of these accounts. It is likely that these foreigners were, knowingly or unknowingly, viewing Sabhapati’s claim through rationalist lenses informed by then-dominant Lockean views of knowledge, especially the view that knowledge of the external world is primarily acquired through “sensitive knowledge,” i.e., knowledge obtained through the senses.<sup>6</sup> The most notable of these responses was the Theosophical founder Henry Olcott (1832–1907) who dismissed Sabhapati’s claim as a “ridiculous story” when confronted with it. At the other end of the spectrum, some other Europeans like the Indologist Max Müller framed Sabhapati’s flight as an unverifiable “miracle” without really considering the practical instruction that Sabhapati claimed to have engaged in to attract the rishis and

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4 Swami 1880, 27. The *liṅgasvarūpa*, “inherent form of the *liṅga*,” refers to the cosmic phallus representing Śiva as both transcendent and mapped onto the human body. It also indirectly alludes to the *liṅgaśarīra* or “mark(ed) body” that by many Hindus is believed to transmigrate as a subtle body after death, and which in some yogic contexts like Sabhapati’s, can be cognized as a result of meditation while living. The pedestal or *pīṭha* refers to the pedestal of the Śivaliṅga, which came to symbolize the *yoni* of the Goddess (Devī, in Sabhapati’s case Pārvatī as Gaurī) later in the development of the Śivaliṅga (v. Mitterwallner 1984). For the interplay of the *liṅgasvarūpa* and *gaurīpīṭha* in Sabhapati’s works, see chapter four of Cantú (2023).

5 Vasudeva 2012; White 2009.

6 Priselac n.d.; see also Locke and Nidditch 1979.

facilitate such a “miracle.”<sup>7</sup> Neither author, in the specific context of Sabhapati’s flight, fully considered the idea that real “knowledge” for Sabhapati, one of whose titles was the “Giyana Guru Yogi” (*jñāna guru yogī*, “yogin who is the teacher of knowledge”), is derived from a cosmological principle (Śiva, < Tamil *civam*, understood as a non-binary transcendent absolute) that can only be accessed when the senses are “canceled.” As I will treat later, however, Olcott did adopt a favorable view of some of Sabhapati’s teachings beyond his portrayal of this particular incident.

The Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) also has, as an emerging field, much to offer on the topic of religious experiences. While there are many authors and competing perspectives, I am inspired by the notion of “reverse-engineering” complex cultural concepts as introduced by Taves<sup>8</sup> and applied to esotericism by Asprem.<sup>9</sup> While this chapter is not by any means a “reverse-engineering” of Sabhapati’s literature, such an idea can be usefully applied to several of the concepts in Sabhapati’s works on yoga that clearly relate to cognitive processes. Sabhapati’s texts have the additional advantage of being multilingual, in that further clarity on a specific component of one’s body or mind can be obtained by consulting not just the English term but also the Indic language correlate often provided alongside the English, whether Sanskrit or Tamil. This is especially useful when attempting to analyze Sabhapati’s notions of “divine pilgrimage” and how it may or may not relate to default processing and theories of mind.<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter I attempt to 1) analyze the flight itself in terms of intentional transformative experiences as recounted by Sabhapati’s followers, 2) treat its reception in Theosophy, and 3) show how developments in the study of human perception offer a more sympathetic view than mediators like Henry Olcott were willing to grant to Sabhapati. To accomplish this, I will first outline Sabhapati’s flight in the context of his own literature and system of yoga. I will then outline its historical reception in Theosophy, noting how a question of its verifiability became an emic point of controversy yet still contributed via Theosophy to occult discourses around astral travel or the “projection of the double.” Finally, I will analyze how it serves as a useful entry point into engaging discourses on the cognitive science of religion (CSR), specifically “decontextualized processing” and the Default Mode Network, that may help us move beyond dichotomies of “true” and “false” when it comes to these kinds of experiences.

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7 Müller 1899, 462–64.

8 Taves 2015.

9 Asprem 2015.

10 Gerrans 2014.

# 1 The Flight in Sabhapati's Hagiographies

There are three distinct accounts in which Sabhapati Swami's story occurs, one English (later also with Sanskrit and Tamil terms added, and translated into Bengali and German), and two entirely in Tamil.<sup>11</sup> In the English account first published in the *Theosophist* periodical in 1879 and later independently in 1880, Sabhapati encounters “three Rishees in antique Aryan dress,” two of whom are later revealed to be Shuka (Śuka) and Bhṛngi (Bhṛṅgī) from the Sanskrit form of the epic Mahābhārata, while the third does not reveal his name.<sup>12</sup> These rishis question Sabhapati about his guru and Agastya's hermitage—where Sabhapati had spent either nine or twelve years, depending on the account, practicing yogic arts—and, upon hearing his answer, they offer to grant him the “Ashtama Siddhis [Skt. *aṣṭamāsiddhi*],” which are framed as “eight kinds of psychic powers the acquisition of which enables one to perform (what is vulgarly called) miracles.”<sup>13</sup> Sabhapati turns down the offer according to a long tradition of rejecting the *siddhis* in favor of *mokṣa* (“liberation,” “release”), saying that he only wishes to pass his remaining days on earth in “Nishkamyā Brahmagiyāna, Yoga tapam [Skt. *niṣkāmyā brahmajñāna yoga tapa*, “the austere heat of yoga that leads to the gnosis of Brahman, free from desire].” They confer upon him the title “Brahmagiyāna Guroo Yogi” (Skt. *brahma jñāna guru yogī*, oddly translated by Sabhapati as “Holy Spiritual Godheaded Ascetic”),<sup>14</sup> and after hearing this answer they ask if they can do anything else for him. He responds in the affirmative, saying that he has desired to see “Kailas [Kailāsa] or the celestial mountain which it is said is invisible to ordinary mortals.” The rishis accept his request, and both they and Sabhapati “began to fly in the air for a time towards the direction of the mountain [. . .] where he had the goodfortune [*sic*] of seeing Mahadeva sitting in Semadhi [*sic*,

11 Swami 1880; Cuvāmikaḷ 1889; Cuvāmikaḷ 1913.

12 Shuka was the son of the sage Vyāsa (the narrator of the Mahābhārata) and revered for his purity of mind. Bhṛngi (lit. “female beetle”) was a rishi who in other temple legends (*purāṇas*) became known in connection with the half-male, half-female deity Ardhanārīśvara for his devotion to Śiva at the expense of the goddess Parvatī; the goddess had deprived him of his flesh after he assumed the form of a beetle to bore through Śiva's side of the composite deity (Doniger 2014). In some versions of the legends Śiva, inspired by this devotion, granted him a third leg to support his body, and there are also Tamil local legends at Tiruchengode (Tirucceṅkōtu) that may have informed Sabhapati's association with this particular rishi (Tilak 2019).

13 Swami 1880, iv.

14 A more typical translation of *brahmajñāna guru yogī* by contemporary standards would be something like “yogin who is the teacher of the gnosis of Brahman.” In Sabhapati's time many of these terms for spiritual and/or religious concepts were still not standardized outside of academic contexts.

< Skt. *samādhi*, “composition,” “composure”] in a cave.”<sup>15</sup> Sabhapati then spontaneously composes verses from his “overcharged emotions” that the rishis named “Śhiva varnana stuti mala [Skt. *śhiva varṇanā stuti mālā*, ‘Garland-Hymn in Praise of Śhiva’].” They then descend back to where they were, and Shuka and Bhṛngi reveal their identities.

The two Tamil accounts give similar readings of this event, although there are a few minor differences. First of all, Sabhapati is not offered the eight powers since in these accounts he had already ostensibly learned these from his guru but was instructed to keep them secret. Second of all, Sabhapati’s response in the second Tamil account after the offer is that he only wants the “liberation of unity” (Tamil *aikya mukti* = Skt.), and it is instead the rishis that praise him as “desireless” (Tamil *niṣkāmmiyam*, < Skt. *niṣkāmya*). While there are some other minor differences, the main difference in the story’s publication after 1880 is the inclusion of verses that Sabhapati composed after his flight to the celestial mountain. These verses were first published in 1884 in both Tamil and Devanagari script with some variations in the third part, and it was also subsequently published in full in one of the Tamil accounts and partially in the other.<sup>16</sup> The composition, to be sung in an obscure “Vedasvara” raga of Indian classical music, contains meditations (*dhyānas*) on Śhiva’s *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* or quality and quality-less natures as well as a meditation on Śhiva as the pure Brahman (*śuddha-brahman*), in his English works translated in a somewhat Hegelian fashion as the “Infinite Spirit.”

## 2 The Flight’s Reception in Theosophy

Adequately addressing the soteriological truth claims and doubts that arise upon hearing Sabhapati’s story would itself necessitate a separate philosophical treatment on the ontological basis of yoga, not to mention religion more broadly, and would also necessitate careful forays into the uncomfortable and controversy-generating realms—from an academic standpoint, at least—of apologetics and ahistoricity. For the moment however, let us suspend judgment on the epistemological verifiability or falsifiability of Sabhapati’s flight and look at its historical context and reception in Theosophy for clues.

As is well known to scholars of esotericism and modern religious history, the Theosophical “founders” Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891) and the aforementioned Henry Olcott, along with other prominent supporters such as William Quan Judge

<sup>15</sup> Swami 1880, iv.

<sup>16</sup> Cuvāmikaḷ 1889, 7–9.

(1851–1896), held a public meeting to establish the Theosophical Society at Blavatsky's New York apartment in 1875. Both Blavatsky and Olcott arrived in Bombay (today Mumbai) a few years later, on February 16, 1879.<sup>17</sup> What is lesser known, and perhaps first recognized in academia by Karl Baier,<sup>18</sup> is the significance of Olcott's recording that he and Blavatsky met Sri Sabhapati Swami in Lahore. This was after each one individually had delivered an address to the same crowd the previous day, on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Arya Samaj in Lahore; a branch of the reformist society founded by Dayananda Saraswati (Dayānanda Sarasvatī, 1824–1883).<sup>19</sup> The day was November 8, 1880, and Sabhapati Swami visited Blavatsky and Olcott at their residence in Lahore along with one Birj Lal and one other unnamed associate, and Sabhapati stayed there from around 9:30 am to 4 pm, or six and a half hours. Olcott wrote the following about Sabhapati's visit in his *Old Diary Leaves*, which I quote in full for reference:

He [Sabhapati] came to our place the next day and favored us with his company from 9.30 A.M. until 4 P.M., by which time he had pretty thoroughly exhausted our patience. Whatever good opinion we may have formed of him before was spoilt by a yarn he told of his exploits as a Yogi. He had, he said, been taken up at Lake Mānsarovara, Tibet, high into the air and been transported two hundred miles along the high level to Mount Kailās, where he saw Mahadeva! Ingenuous foreigners as H.P.B. and I may have been, we could not digest such a ridiculous falsehood as that. I told him so very plainly. If, I said, he had told us that he had gone anywhere he liked in astral body or clairvoyant vision, we might have believed it possible, but in physical body, from Lake Mānsarovara, in company with two Rishis mentioned in the Mahabharata, and to the non-physical Mount Kailās—thanks, no: he should tell it to somebody else.<sup>20</sup>

Compare this with Olcott's unpublished diary entry for November 8<sup>th</sup>, which reads as follows:

Sabhapati Swami came [to] us with Birj Lal & another & stopped from 9 ½ am to 4 pm. His talks are right, but seems to me a possible humbug as his is not a spiritual face, and he tells a ridiculous story about being able to fly bodily 200 miles through the air.<sup>21</sup>

This "ridiculous story" is none other than Sabhapati's flight as recorded by his own followers, and Olcott's readiness to view Sabhapati as a humbug (i.e., a pre-

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17 Godwin 2013, 15–31; Godwin 1994, 307–31; for more on Blavatsky's engagement with India, specifically in the context of reincarnation, see Chajes (2019).

18 Baier 2009; Baier 2012; Baier 2016.

19 For sources specific to this region that treat on the Arya Samaj, Dayananda Saraswati and their relation to modern Hindu reformist movements see Jones (1976) and Scott (2016).

20 Olcott 1900, 258–59.

21 Henry Olcott's unpublished personal diary for 1880, entry "Monday, November 8, 1880," held at the Theosophical Society Archives in Adyar, Chennai.

tender or charlatan) appears odd given some of the other personalities that Olcott readily believed in, such as the Mahatmas and teachers on mesmerism and Spiritualism. In this regard Olcott was likely triggered by Sabhapati’s emphasis on the embodied momentum of his experience, which is very close to traditional Christian dogmas of bodily resurrection.<sup>22</sup>

While it does not mention his flight, Sabhapati’s own perspective on his meeting with Olcott and Blavatsky is worth noting for an alternate, much more positive view. A little over a week after their November 8 meeting, on November 16, 1880, a letter was published in *The Amrita Bazar Patrika* by the “Madras Yogi Sabhapaty Swamy” that was preserved in Blavatsky’s scrapbook held at the Theosophical archives in Adyar and paints a much more positive view of the meeting. In the open letter, Sabhapati recounts that:

I remained with them from 8 A.M. to 4 P.M. of the 8th November 1880. had a long conversation with them on the theory and practice of ancient occult science (*Sarva Sidhoo Shastras*) and on the *Vedantic Giyana Yog Shastras i.e.*, the science and holding communion with one’s Self Impersonal God—The Infinite Spirit. Their explanations of these two branches of secret knowledge of our ancestors were on the whole perfectly correct, and in harmony with my own practical knowledge of them. They agreed with all my main points, and I am fully convinced that they have gained some practical acquaintance of both these sciences.<sup>23</sup>

Sabhapati goes on to recollect Blavatsky’s perspective on the knowledge of these two “ancient sciences,” including a statement by her saying that she owes this knowledge “entirely to the *Yogis* of India” from whom she acquired it on her “first and second journeys through India.” He then follows this by praising her spiritual power, noting the following:

Now, my dear Hindoo Brothers, I have found her through my divine sight of spirit that she is on the right track and has attained considerable progress in *yoge* [Skt. *yog(a)*], and acquired some of the *siddhees* [*siddhis*]—psychic powers, which however ought to be ignored and discarded if a person is in earnest after *moksh* [*mokṣa*]—final absorption [ . . . ] I as a *Yogi* advise you all to listen to these Theosophists and help them in reviving the ancient spiritual sciences.<sup>24</sup>

Despite Sabhapati’s wholehearted endorsement of Blavatsky, likely at least partially mediated by his editor Shrish Chandra Basu who unlike Sabhapati went on to join the Theosophical Society. The prospect of any further relationship between

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<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Jens Schlieter for this insight.

<sup>23</sup> Swamy 1880.

<sup>24</sup> Swamy 1880.



Olcott, Blavatsky, and Sabhapati appears to have been soon abandoned after Olcott's lack of reciprocity.<sup>25</sup>

More important for our purposes is the fact that Olcott at least initially engaged Sabhapati's work positively, and it is notable that the only surviving copy of the first edition of Sabhapati's published lectures in Lahore was Olcott's personal copy and bears his signature. He appears to have been especially interested in Sabhapati's diagram of the *liṅgaśarīra* or "mark(ed) body" that transmigrates in Hinduism, and perhaps most notably makes the explicit connection between this visual diagram and the Theosophical interest in the "projection of the double":

Here is traced a series of lines and circles upon the naked body of a man sitting in the posture of *Padmāsan*, and practicing *Yoga*. [ . . . ] The circles are the *chakras*, or centres of forces, and when he has traversed the entire circuit of his corporeal kingdom, he will have perfectly evolved his inner self—disengaged it from its natural state of commixture with the outer shell, or physical self. His next step is to project this "double" outside the body, transferring to it his complete consciousness, and then, having passed the threshold of his carnal prison-house, into the world of psychic freedom, his powers of sight, hearing, and other senses are indefinitely increased, and his movements no longer trammelled by the obstacles which impede those of the external man.<sup>26</sup>

While Olcott conflates Sabhapati's method of yoga with Pātañjalayoga,<sup>27</sup> it is important that he celebrates Sabhapati's technique as one method of intentionally projecting a "double" outside the body. As Pat Deveney and others have demonstrated, the cultivation of such techniques was a main priority of the early Theosophical Society, in which it was blended with Spiritualist theories of a *perispirit*

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<sup>25</sup> While the reason which Olcott cited was the ridiculous story of his flight, his later response to questions raised by a certain "Yogi" named Sabhapati lecturing in Bombay and encouraging people to join the Theosophical Society implies additional motives for their break: "The 'beloved Colonel' repeats what he has often said already, that all this running after Yogis, Gurus and Hermetic Brotherhoods of sorts, that promise to put students into a short cut to adeptship, is criminal folly and sheer childishness. The particular Yogi in question I have known for years, and while it is kind of him to advise people to join the Theosophical Society, I should like to see his credentials before undertaking to believe that he ever went into or came out of Agasthya's Ashrum" (Shroff 1890, cxxiv). Olcott's need for "credentials" that Sabhapati ever entered Agasthya's hermitage in south India, as well as his skepticism of "running after" Hermetic brotherhoods, may indicate that he thought Sabhapati's social vision of meditation halls across South Asia would eventually compete with Theosophical social organizations.

<sup>26</sup> Olcott 1885, 151–53.

<sup>27</sup> For the contours of Pātañjalayoga in contemporary scholarship see for example Maas (2013) and White (2014).

leaving behind the body it had been bound to.<sup>28</sup> This brings up our first problem: Sabhapati’s elaborate cosmology in his works, alluded to by Olcott, does make a clear delineation between degrees of “spiritual” and the “physical” (confined to the last or lowest *cakra*). At the same time, Olcott clearly records in his diary that he could have believed it if Sabhapati framed his experience as an “astral” vision, but that it was ridiculous since Sabhapati framed it as a physical flight, a framing that is consistent with his earliest followers’ accounts.

The issue of physical versus astral embodiment that Olcott raises underscores his lack of awareness of a tension already on the ground in South Asia and in Sabhapati Swami’s own works between *videhamukti* (“disembodied liberation”) and *jīvanmukti* “liberation while alive (in the body).” The idea of “disembodied liberation,” which, as Angelika Malinar and David Gordon White have argued, has roots in the Pātañjalayogaśāstra and was reflected in epics like the Mahābhārata (i.e., heroes ascending in chariots as a kind of apotheosis), was largely eclipsed by “liberation in life” as reflected in medieval Tantra and the mythology of Tantric alchemy.<sup>29</sup> The earlier ideal of *videhamukti* is also linked to the notion of “disembodied concentration” (*videhadhāraṇā*), which modern Tantric interpreters like Gopinath Kaviraj (1887–1976) took to mean that the “mind-stuff (*citta*) located inside the body can be sent outside of the body to some desired place.”<sup>30</sup> Sabhapati notably uses both compounds, however, albeit *videhamukti* only sparsely. He describes *jīvanmukti* as “full absorption even while in body” and uses it in the context of describing those rishis and yogins who would, in contemporary Tamil discourse, be considered Siddhas. These yogins “change their body and *bleed* it to become Swambhu Maha Lingam [Skt. *svayambhū mahāliṅga*, “the great phallus that is self-manifesting.”] and their spirit joins the Infinite Spirit.” The phrase *svayambhū mahāliṅga* ( Tamil Maṇipravālam *svayampu mahāliṅkam*) more explicitly refers to naturally-occurring *śivaliṅgas* found inside or under trees, such as the kadamba or burflower tree at the Meenaskhi Amman Temple in Madurai, or as self-manifesting geological phenomena, which connects these natural phenomena with the presence of immortal bodies. Even Sabhapati’s diagrams of rebirth are depicted with anthropomorphic qualities.

In Sabhapati’s case, his description of his flight as specifically occurring in his body is not an isolated story but reflects a belief prevalent in yogic and alchemical movements in Tamil Nadu that sincere *jīvanmukti* or “embodied liberation” is obtained after rejecting the fruits of those powers that were obtained on the path

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<sup>28</sup> Deveney 1997.

<sup>29</sup> White 2009, 112–14; Malinar 2010, 129–56.

<sup>30</sup> White 2009, 165.

to this same embodied liberation.<sup>31</sup> In other words, Sabhapati's flight can be understood not just as an expression of one of his *siddhis* or special powers but as the ultimate gift of his *sādhana* or "practice." This practice is framed throughout his works not as a miracle but as intentional, as it is predicated on an elaborate meditative system in which the yogin gradually ascends (and descends) the *liṅga* of the human body so as to obtain what Sabhapati calls a "communion" with the transcendent Śiva as Brahman, and is in practical terms what Sabhapati's flight conveys in narrative form. The idea of the body being a microcosm of the cosmic Śivaliṅga was already rooted in the Tamil cosmology of the *Tirumantiram* many centuries prior, where this notion is explicitly expressed in the following verse (v. 1726): *māṇṭar ākkai vaṭivu civaliṅgam*, "The human body is in the shape of Śiva's phallus."<sup>32</sup> Such adepts are believed to be still living even after their death, during which their body is transformed into the fullness of Śiva's phallic form (*liṅgasvarūpa*). Sabhapati's own acceptance of this mythology is not only reflected in his embodied flight to the celestial abode of Śiva but also clearly reflected in his statements elsewhere that the gurus of his ashram lived for centuries, and some are still living in the form of spiritual stones, statements that were met with disbelief by the Theosophical Society. A response attributed to Blavatsky notes that Sabhapati is welcome to believe that the moon is made of green cheese but that does not make it so.<sup>33</sup>

In my view such responses missed the point that Sabhapati's "belief" is not so much a belief as a cultural participation in a kind of living mythology, a celebration of longevity that is physically reflected in Tamil Siddha and Viraśaiva milieus by the fact that a stone image of Śiva's *liṅga* itself is placed over the tumulus of a dead yogin and then worshipped as the living embodiment of this same adept.<sup>34</sup> This bears resonance with what White called the "mythology of Tantric alchemy" to describe the diversity of Indian alchemical literature beyond its primary focus on laboratory instructions and apparatus. To see the course of events as merely false or unbelievable—while admittedly it defies all known physical laws—is to dismiss the story's function as a literary meaning-making apparatus that breathes life and purpose into the raw instructions of Sabhapati's instructions of Śivarājayoga.

In any event, at least some of Sabhapati's supporters felt compelled to respond to Olcott's and other theosophists' challenges. By both the second (1893) and third (1895) editions of Sabhapati's lectures on Vedantic Raja Yoga, published by R.C. Bary & Sons (i.e. Ruttun Chund Bary), we find the following footnote—

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31 Cantú 2023; Mallinson 2019; White 1996.

32 Tirumūlar 2013, 1895–97; Tirumūlar 2016, 746; Tirumular 1991, 270–71.

33 Another Hindu Theosophist 1883.

34 Cantú, forthcoming, chapters one, three, and four.

written by his Bengali editor Shrish Chandra Basu—in the section of the revised English account that describes Sabhapati’s vision of Kailasa:

This need not have been in the *physical* body of the Rishis; they might have flown towards the holy mountain in their *Mayavi Rupa Kama Rupa* (astral body), which to our author (who certainly is not an Adept in the sense the Theosophists use the word) must have been as real as if he had travelled through air in his physical body.—ED.<sup>35</sup>

A second footnote note also disputes the identities of the “Rishies” (Skt. ṛṣi) as being from the Mahābhārata: “We beg to differ from our venerable author in this surmise. For our own part, we have *now* come to know that these Rishis were none else but the members of the glorious fraternity of adepts, the “Brothers of the Theosophical Society.—Ed.”<sup>36</sup> This prompted a brief response from one Damodar Mavalankar (Dāmodar Ke Māvalākar, b. 1857), an early Theosophist from Ahmedabad, Gujarat who had been accompanying Olcott during much of this early trip in India and who was also a friend of Shrish Chandra.<sup>37</sup> While Damodar considered “the motives of the author and the editor no doubt perfectly benevolent,” he viewed much of the work as a parable that could be potentially misleading to one not properly versed in “esoteric philosophy.” In response to Sabhapati’s vision he notes that “the Editor has, to some extent, in a special footnote hastened to extricate his hero and himself out of a really perilous situation.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite differing visions on what constitutes a real “fact,” Sabhapati’s favorable disposition towards Theosophy was not forgotten, and there is evidence that Blavatsky and Olcott continued to consider him—at least publicly—as a “friend.” For example, Blavatsky most likely had both his address and his letter in *The Amrita Bazar Patrika* in mind when she wrote the following a year later in *The Theosophist* (April 1881): “Some time ago our friend Sabhapathy Swami, the ‘Madras Yogi,’ publicly endorsed the truth of all that the Theosophists had said about Yoga and Yogis.”<sup>39</sup> Sabhapati and the question of the astral body later appeared in early Theosophy via a partial translation of his work into German by the occult author Franz Hartmann, which exceeds the scope of this chapter, and to a lesser extent into French due to a translation by the President of Le Disciple Branch of the Theosophical Society in Paris, Paul Gillard (d. 1901).

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35 Swami 1895, iv.

36 Swami 1895, iv.

37 For more on the life of Damodar Mavalankar from the Theosophical perspectives of his associates see Eek (1978).

38 Mavalankar 1884.

39 Blavatsky 1881. This piece is also included in Volume 3 of Blavatsky’s “Collected Writings.”

### 3 A Flight Simulator

In the third and final part of the chapter, let us examine how a theory pertaining to the philosophy of mind and neurological foundations of sense-perception can provide another lens through which to view Sabhapati's instructions on what he calls a "divine pilgrimage in the universe of your body" as an intentional transformative experience that may also help resolve the tension in its Theosophical reception between material fact and spiritual fancy.<sup>40</sup>

On the one hand, Sabhapati's flight was clearly intentional on account of it being his wish to see Śiva when asked by the rishis. On the other hand, any consideration of how the rishis made this flight possible for Sabhapati is absent from the hagiography—it appears that the reader would simply assume that such a flight was obviously possible on account of these rishis' yogic power and the might of their ascetic heat or *tapas*. Yet Sabhapati's hagiographical account is unique in that the wonderful story or legend does not stand alone but is a prelude to a rich set of practical instructions—the story only forms a small part of his expansive writing on yoga, pedagogical in tone, which is designed to facilitate similar kinds of divine pilgrimage as Sabhapati's flight for his practicing student (recall his extravagant claim that the yogin would have an "eye to the universe"). In other words, the legend of Sabhapati's flight as recounted by his followers could be viewed as an ideal representation of a yogin who has carried out the guru's instructions faithfully, as the reader is expected to do, and who thus may be similarly rewarded with a transformative experience and identity with Śiva. As has been demonstrated by numerous scholars, from the medieval period on to Sabhapati's time and until relatively recently, prior to Swami Vivekananda's and Theosophical reformulations of modern yoga, a yogin by his or her very nature was widely believed to be able to facilitate such experiences at will on account of the powers or *siddhis* acquired through meditative and bodily practice.<sup>41</sup>

In Sabhapati's works these powers simultaneously make use of the illusionary nature of the world and point the way to overcoming it by allowing the yogin to gradually overcome the false aspects of the self, formulated as *cakras* to be canceled and refuted. These meditations are further linked to Sabhapati's poetic composition on the quality-filled and quality-less nature of Śiva that he composed after his flight. One key to understanding how Sabhapati could make such a claim for ordinary readers to achieve such transformative experiences as his own flight is

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<sup>40</sup> Swami 1880, 38.

<sup>41</sup> For more on Swami Vivekananda's reformulation of yoga and especially his role in changing the discourse on *prāṇāyāma*, see Magdalena Kraler's contribution to this volume.

recognizing his belief in the mutability and permeability of matter and physics as dependent on one’s consciousness. For example, he uses the Sanskrit words *bhrānti* “confusion,” which he translates “delusion” (from root *bhram* “to wander”), *kalpanā* “imagination” (from root *kṛp* “to produce,” “to be adapted”), and *māyā* “illusion,” and he also considers various “states” (*avasthās*) of consciousness (e.g., *jagratavasthā* “the waking state,” *svapnāvasthā* “the dreaming state,” and so on) that affect reality in the eye of the beholder. These are critical to his theory of the royal yoga for Śiva, yet all are notably rooted in a single problem: the limited nature of human perception—what Locke would call “sensitive knowledge”—and a recognition that there is a tripartite relationship between the seer, the state of the sense-faculty or action of seeing, and the quality of the object which is seen. English terms are also used in the works of Sabhapati Swami alongside the Sanskrit or Tamil terms they refer to, like English “delusion” for Sanskrit *bhrānti*, which also helpfully serve to reveal the connotative value attached to an otherwise multivalent word (e.g., *bhrānti* originally simply meant “wandering or roaming about” in Sanskrit but in the later language came to have a negative sense of “perplexity,” “confusion,” “doubt,” or “error.”) In other words, the provided English translation allows for a clearer reading of a cognitive effect being described, regardless as to whether it fully matches up with either earlier definitions of a term as contextualized by scholars of post-Vedic or classical yogic traditions or even the corresponding word in English.

For Sabhapati the question of perception is primarily a religious one, as it also was for many in Europe and North America at the time of his writing. In Sabhapati’s time both clinical and analytical psychology as we know it today were not even on the map as fields, and modern scientists were only beginning to take the question of human perception more seriously and separate it from its dependence on religious paradigms. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) published his *The Interpretation of Dreams (Die Traumdeutung)* in 1899, twenty years after Sabhapati’s first lectures; Carl Jung (1875–1961) published his *Psychology of the Unconscious (Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido)* in 1912. Even William James (1842–1910), who was one of the first philosophers and psychologists to examine the question of religious experience in any rigorous detail, had only delivered his lectures that became *The Varieties of Religious Experience* between 1901 and 1902, also over two decades after Sabhapati’s own lectures. My point in this chronology is not to show that Sabhapati Swami’s works are on the same philosophical or psychological plane as these authors, as his works’ primary concern is religious, but rather to demonstrate that deeper questions about the mind and its fluctuations at the time in which Sabhapati was writing were, at least in South Asia, still squarely situated within the domain of yoga and Indian religious philosophy.

This situation has since shifted, and such questions are today at least equally if not more so the purview of science in South Asia. Despite a radically different focus, let us nevertheless consider putting Sabhapati's system of yoga in conversation, for example, with philosophical theories of mind found in an accessible work like that of philosopher Philip Gerrans.<sup>42</sup> This book, one among many that could perhaps have been chosen for comparison, addresses some of the same cognitive problems that Sabhapati and his interpreters were attempting to articulate in his literature via traditional means, yet could not fully address since one hundred and fifty years ago there was still so little data on the brain and its processes. For example, the past few decades have witnessed the discovery of the Default Mode Network (DMN), which "was discovered serendipitously when investigators began noticing that specific, reproducible brain regions were more active during passive control tasks than during active tasks targeted by the experimenters."<sup>43</sup> This discovery is significant for our purposes in that it proved that the brain has certain connected regions that oversee functions like day-dreaming or simulation-based processes, functions which Sabhapati could only analyze symptomatically as the phenomenon of what he called *kalpanā* or "imaginary show."

Gerrans observes, "it seems that 'mine-ness' of experience, actual or simulated, is a cognitive achievement mediated by the ventromedial prefrontal cortex [which is] a hub of the default network."<sup>44</sup> This has been demonstrated through the study of psychiatric patients treated for a variety of psychological disorders, as in general they "have anomalies in the way this sense of 'mineness' is generated,"<sup>45</sup> which for Gerrans corroborates the idea that the Default Mode Network relies on a kind of "autobiographical context for experience."<sup>46</sup> Sabhapati similarly characterizes subjective delusion, imagination, and illusion as the result of subjective ego-making faculties (*ahaṃkāra*). This notion of a self-generated "illusion" is also salient to clinical psychology and psychotherapy, where "delusion" is probably considered to have too negative a connotation.

In a point that might make Olcott raise his white bushy eyebrows, Gerrans claims that mental delusions are not necessarily based on empirical or rationally "doxastic" beliefs (similar to Sperber's idea of "reflective beliefs"),<sup>47</sup> but rather can also be symptomatic of a failure on the part of our brain's "decontextualized processing," which put simply are those processes in our brain that keep us

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42 Gerrans 2014.

43 Buckner 2013.

44 Gerrans 2014, 82.

45 Gerrans 2014, 83.

46 Gerrans 2014, 75.

47 Sperber 1997, 67–83.

aware that an imagined narrative is not really happening. In other words, the DMN allows for our brain’s capacity of simulation when we read a novel, watch a movie, or have a dream, while decontextualized processing is a continual process in our brain that checks the DMN’s capacity for imaginative stimulation and serves the important function of keeping us from falling headfirst for a simulation as a real event. For example, decontextualization would be the processing that prevents us from believing the ghost in a scary movie or story around the campfire to be a ghost in “real life,” or in Sabhapati Swami’s case the processing that could make him second-guess that his flight was, indeed, a physical flight. Hypothetically speaking, if the power of an “autobiographical context” were such that it inscribed a permanent memory of sorts, decontextualized processing could fail even after such a vivid experience to supply alternative possibilities. This is especially likely since the “narrative fragments” that the DMN supplies during such experiences are “characterized by *subjective adequacy* rather than truth, accuracy, public acceptability, or verification.”<sup>48</sup>

The DMN and decontextualized processing, which as mentioned above keeps our mental simulations in check, are *anticorrelated*, meaning that the less active decontextualized processing is, the more that default thoughts become extremely salient or cognitively compelling, and thus subjective illusions are generated.<sup>49</sup> In other words, activity in one diminishes activity in the other and vice-versa. As Gerrans puts it, when someone suffers from mental illusions then their “ability to subject a default thought to decontextualized evaluation is compromised.”<sup>50</sup>

In my opinion the concept of the DMN’s “default thoughts” uncannily match the phenomena that Sabhapati Swami describes by his use of the term *kalpanā*, which he variously translates into English as “false appearance or show” and “imagination”—the word also is used to translate “imagination” in contemporary Indic vernacular languages, including scientific conceptions of the imagination. If one takes Sabhapati’s metaphysics seriously, for him even an embodied experience of flying could ultimately be part of this false show or *kalpanā*.<sup>51</sup>

Despite these similarities, it is on the theory of *kalpanā* that Gerrans and Sabhapati would also appear to be saying different things that complicates such a

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48 Gerrans 2014, 75.

49 Gerrans 2014, 84.

50 Gerrans 2014, 84.

51 This “false show” of the world (Sanskrit *māyā*) could only be applied to his flight, however, if Sabhapati were not himself partaking in this experience as a transcendent and gender-neutral Śiva (Tamil *civam*). This identity is said to be experienced by and undifferentiated from the yogin in Sabhapati’s Tamil Viraśaiva philosophy that attempts to reconcile both dualist Siddhānta and non-dual Vedānta. For this reconciliation see Steinschneider (2016).



comparison. In contrast to Gerrans' and modern psychotherapy's clinical view of diagnosing and treating individual delusions and their accompanying neuroses, Sabhapati's method is to intentionally define and inscribe illusions in various parts of the body with the ultimate attempt to overcome all of them, and as such they are to be used and subsequently cancelled. Indeed, for Sabhapati the key is to harness the mind's intrinsic power of visualization by means of meditative cultivation (*bhāvanā*) to simultaneously invoke and banish each aspect of the self that binds one in a state of confusion (*bhrānti*) or illusion (*māyā*). In other words, the purpose of invoking all these default thoughts of one illusionary lotus after another in the process of Śivarājayoga is ultimately to realize one's perception as just that, clouded by mental illusions. Sabhapati's claim of universe-transcending yogic power referred to at the beginning of this chapter does seem to imply a much more extravagant reward than the therapeutic "breakthrough" of contemporary psychotherapy, which in any case is more concerned with treating or eliminating illusions in the brain than using them to obtain some goal. Gerrans understandably does not come close to treating on how a release from subjective delusions could in any shape or form lead to a trance-like experience of the "self-luminous Infinite Spirit" or some cognate religious experience as recounted by William James or another author. Indeed, the mechanics of decontextualized processing and de-simulation, if intentionally pursued, would arguably mitigate such an ecstatic state and could logically lead instead to agnostic or atheistic skepticism.

Lastly, the use of associative correspondences or "indexical experiences," that is, an experience that points to a symbolized object of some kind, is one possible key to the functionality and social attractiveness of Sabhapati's system of yoga and allows for a wider appreciation of its function in creating intentional experiences such as his flight to Kailāsa. Gerrans writes the following about the DMN's ability to simulate or engage in the "mental time travel" of the imagination, which does not necessarily need to be a projection into the future but does need to be an autobiographical "simulation" of some kind of activity:

Mental time travel involves the explicit simulation of essentially indexical experiences as part of the process of high-level cognitive control. This is a consequence of the fact that the default circuits on which it depends are densely connected to emotional and motivational systems.<sup>52</sup>

While Gerrans does not write about individuals who may be actually aiming to cultivate intentional "indexical experiences" rather than have unwanted experiences of them, Sabhapati's visual diagram-based system of correspondences aims

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<sup>52</sup> Gerrans 2014, 79.

to cultivate these kinds of experiences in the prospective yogin who follows his instructions. This is also a feature that connects Sabhapati’s system to the wider Hindu and Buddhist Tantric literature of South Asia in which correspondences such as mantric alphabets and seed syllables (*bīja*) and the depositing of mantras on the body (*nyāsa*) play such an important role.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the most common Sanskrit word for “experience,” *anubhava*, is often employed by Sabhapati, as is *anubhūti*, “perception.” It is significant that Gerrans argues that rational belief is not always the operative factor in generating mental delusions, which also serves to at least partially explain the fundamental irrationality of such Tantric correspondences and apparently meaningless syllables. In other words, the functionality of these correspondences and the indexical experiences they could be said to generate rests upon the assertion that it is not necessary to empirically believe that “x” is “y,” only to train the brain to *associate* or *correspond* “x” with “y.” In other words, a yogin does not just rationally “believe” that a deity is associated with a mantra or dwells in a *cakra*—this is intentionally experienced either by flooding the senses in ritual devotion or negating every other aspect of reality in meditation until nothing is left.

Gerrans claims that the activation of those neurological regions that govern the DMN “leaves the subject at the mercy of entrenched *patterns of association* in her default system” (emphasis added).<sup>54</sup> While in most clinical contexts these patterns of association are deemed to be haphazard or random, it is clear in reading Sabhapati’s own work that such patterns of associative correspondences were created with the intent to be memorized and internalized, and lists of such correspondences between mantras, astrological data, and gods and goddesses are a recurrent feature of his works in vernacular languages, especially those in Tamil and Hindi. If it is possible, therefore, to 1) internalize these “patterns of association” through intense mnemonic activity and repeated ritualized inscription,<sup>55</sup> and then also to 2) discover a means to activate and deactivate the processes that control default thinking at will, then according to Gerrans’s theory of anti-correlation such an activity would automatically revert the mind to those patterns of association that had been previously assembled or “programmed” in the memory.

To the extent that these patterns of association are all-encompassing, this activation of the DMN would feasibly generate comparable symptoms to the kind of “composure” (*samādhi*) that Sabhapati describes in which the universe seems inextricably interconnected, or at the very least complements his theory of “divine

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53 Padoux 2010.

54 Gerrans 2014, 40.

55 e.g., by means of a system of micro ritual practices outlined in Collins 2011.

pilgrimage” within one’s body. It also helps a contemporary reader understand the mental processes that may have been behind Sabhapati’s conviction of his experience as real even when faced with the criticism that it sounds like nothing more than a ridiculous story.

Here it should be stressed that, although my position is critical of Olcott’s, I find the reductionist position that Sabhapati had somehow tricked himself into believing that he was flying when in fact his default processing was just firing away at least as equally problematic. Instead, the example of his flight points us to a new starting point altogether for thinking about the difference between decontextualization and what Gerrans calls “subjective autobiographical forms of thinking.”<sup>56</sup> All claims of veracity aside, Sabhapati’s experience was subjective. Yet what interpreters and scholars contrast his subjectivity *with* makes all the difference. Here we can move beyond the usual dichotomies of “subjective versus rational,” “subjective versus abstract,” and “subjective simulations versus beliefs” to focus on deeper cognitive intricacies that inform subjectivity more broadly.

The latter dichotomy, a distinction between simulations and beliefs, is especially salient to this discussion since it destabilizes the position that beliefs need be “symbolic or abstract forms of representation that have nothing to do with simulation.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, it first challenges the notion that it is even possible for experiencers, in this case Sabhapati himself, to abstractly “believe” (or “disbelieve”) in an experience separate from their own simulation of it. Second, it challenges the notion that we as interpreters of an experience can fully decontextualize from an experience to “believe” or “disbelieve” in it after reading the account and placing ourselves in the experiencer’s narrative. As we have seen, narrative fragments fire our own DMN and faculty of simulation when experiencing an account, calling our own supposed decontextualized objectivity into question. This means that we as readers are also already subjectively partaking, albeit with varying degrees of clarity and proximity, in Sabhapati’s own subjective experience. This may, after all, have been an unwritten intention of many such hagiographical accounts and fascinating stories after all, even those far removed from Sabhapati’s context, namely to contagiously spread subjective experiences in such a way as to bypass a perceived absurdity in believing in abstract forms of representation without such forms being intentionally enlivened through simulation.

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<sup>56</sup> Gerrans 2014, 77.

<sup>57</sup> Gerrans 2014, 77.

## 4 Conclusion

To conclude, Sabhapati’s “ridiculous story” of a flight to the celestial mountain of Śiva is not just a hagiographical legend but also inextricably linked to his practice of yoga and theory of “divine pilgrimage” in the body. As we have seen, this is after all what many Theosophists and other modern occultists found relevant or compelling about Sabhapati’s literature to begin with, even if they could not accept that Sabhapati felt that such a celestial pilgrimage could occur by means of the human body as a vehicle. As alluded to previously, Henry Olcott and Helena Blavatsky, who met with Sabhapati personally, were interested in discovering Indian parallel techniques in yoga for what has been variously called “astral projection,” the “liberation of the double,” or “rising on the planes,” and this was something that Aleister Crowley and Franz Hartmann were also very interested in.<sup>58</sup> However, we have also seen that contemporary philosophy of mind has a lot to add when brought into conversation with this discourse of embodied flight and its inherent subjectivity, especially when in the background there is an intentional internalization of rubrics of “indexical” or associative correspondences. More details on the cognitive effects of activating these networks of correspondences have already been analyzed in an article by Asprem on the “esoteric imagination,” which includes mention of occult interest in yoga and the *tattvas*.<sup>59</sup> Sabhapati’s instructions on yoga to obtain intentional transformative experiences, of which his flight to the celestial mountain of Kailāsa is perhaps an ideal example, also seem to make use of this faculty of the esoteric imagination. More analysis in this direction of research is clearly of historical, anthropological, and comparative importance, and helps us move discourses on yoga and esotericism beyond imagination as a mere “flight of fancy” and into new domains that emphasize the practical techniques intended to allow such flights to launch.

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<sup>58</sup> Deveney 1997; Cantú 2023; Cantú 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Asprem 2017.

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Flavio A. Geisshüsler

## Chapter 3

# Direct Transcendence: A Cognitive Perspective on Meditation as an Intentional Transformative Experience

It seems only appropriate that a volume about intentional transformative experiences should contain a contribution about meditation practice. In fact, meditation, particularly in the form of mindfulness-based exercises, has become a phenomenally popular form of transformational practice in recent years. Nowadays, meditation is practiced by all strata of society and applied in many different settings that range anywhere from schools and hospitals to prisons and board rooms. The surge of interest in meditation has also benefited from growing empirical evidence about its transformative effects for mind and body. Capitalizing on the remarkable advancements in imaging techniques, the empirical research produced by this burgeoning “science of mindfulness” shows the efficacy of meditation practice by pointing to the functional and structural changes in the brain by means of electroencephalography (EEG) or functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

In this chapter, I rely on evidence from the cognitive sciences to explore a particularly spectacular type of meditation, namely “Direct Transcendence” (*Tögal, thod rgal*).<sup>1</sup> This technique, during which the practitioners famously meditate by gazing into the open sky,<sup>2</sup> represents the most secretive meditation practice of one of the most esoteric traditions of Tibetan Buddhism,<sup>3</sup> namely the “Great Perfection”

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<sup>1</sup> *Tögal*, a word consisting of the Tibetan words *rgal* (“to leap over”) and *thod* (“peak,” or “crest”), is sometimes believed to be the translation of the Sanskrit terms *avaskanda*, *viškanda*, or *vyutkranta* (Stein 1987, 51–55.; Germano 1992, 944). In Indian sources, such as the *Prajñāpāramitā* and other Mahāyāna texts, these terms are also used to indicate practices that leap or skip over something, particularly steps in the meditative itinerary (Ruegg 1989, 164–75). However, we do not find a sky-gazing practice in these Indian texts. In a forthcoming book, I emphasize the influence exerted by pre-Buddhist and indigenously Tibetan beliefs and practices on Direct Transcendence and suggest that the term *thod* might have originally been connected to the headdress of shamanic practitioners of Tibet (Geissshuesler 2024).

<sup>2</sup> There exist other forms of Direct Transcendence, during which the meditators stare into the rays of the sun, a lamp, a reflective pool, a crystal, or into the void of a completely dark chamber.

<sup>3</sup> The Great Perfection, which is also known as “Utmost Yoga” (Skt. *Atiyoga*, Tib. *shin tu rnal ’byor, gdod ma’i rnal ’byor*), intentionally—as if trying to pierce the sky—styles itself as the pinnacle of Buddhist religion.



(*rdzogs pa chen po* or *rdzogs chen*, *Dzogchen*).<sup>4</sup> The practice is especially interesting for the present volume because it allows us to shed light on the complex relationship between “intentional practice,” on the one hand, and “transformative experience,” on the other.

Just like other intentional transformative experiences studied in this volume, it could be argued that Tögal is marked by a paradoxical attitude as it attempts to “intentionally cultivate a state of non-intention.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, the practice aims at creating the conditions for a type of life-changing experience that is generally thought to be beyond the control of the individual. Unlike other tantric meditation practices, during which the meditator intentionally visualizes complex images consisting of deities, their protectors, and so forth, the Direct Transcendence yogi is instructed to cultivate a state of non-intention. In fact, here, the meditator awaits in a state of complete concentration and calm for the emergence of visions that naturally and spontaneously populate his field of visions without intentionally imagining anything. By significantly restricting environmental stimulation, particularly visual input, the practitioners intentionally expose themselves to a context in which liberating visionary manifestations simply and spontaneously “happen” to them. In the Great Perfection tradition, one of the most compelling terms used to describe this “unintentional state” pursued during Tögal is “naked vision” (*cer mthong*).<sup>6</sup> Reality, in short, manifests itself naturally without our conscious mind imposing itself upon it.<sup>7</sup> Matthieu Ricard, a renowned meditator and pioneering figure in the dialogues between Buddhist studies and the cognitive sciences, locates the strength of Buddhism precisely in such a type of utterly luminous mind and its “naked experience of awareness devoid of mental constructs.”<sup>8</sup>

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4 The Dzogchen tradition consists of a complex amalgamation of teachings, lineages, and orientations. Unless otherwise indicated, I use the terms Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) and Seminal Heart (*snying thig*) interchangeably in this study. This is not only a result of my focus on the latter, but also due to the fact that the Seminal Heart tradition itself self-identifies as the Great Perfection, even if there are, in fact, many other variants. The most prominent method of separation is the division into three “series”: the “mind series” (*sems sde*), the “space series” (*klong sde*), and the “instruction series” (*man ngag sde*, lit. “secret oral instruction series”), which corresponds to the Heart-Essence tradition. For a discussion, see Geisshuesler 2020.

5 For a different perspective on the relationship between intentionality and non-intentionality, see the chapter by Karl Baier in this volume.

6 Like many other traits of Direct Transcendence, we find parallels to naked vision in *mahāmudrā* Buddhism. Here, so Klaus-Dieter Mathes notes, the idea of “straight or naked looking (*cer lta* or *rjen lhang lta*)” plays a central role in meditative practice (Mathes 2006, 203).

7 Letting go of all frames of reference, the tradition submits to a logic that Robert Sharf and Bernard Faure have called the “rhetoric of experience” or the “rhetoric of immediacy” (Faure 1991; Sharf 1998).

8 Ricard and Singer 2017, 243.

This being said, the sky-gazing practice allows us also to critically reflect on the tricky question whether experience can ever be truly non-intentional. Indeed, while my approach to meditation is generally grounded in historical-cultural analysis and I insist that meditation is best studied as part of a contemplative system<sup>9</sup> this chapter takes the Dzogchen emphasis on “experience” nonetheless seriously by taking a close look at a set of early scriptures known as *The Seventeen Tantras* (*rgyud bcu bdun*),<sup>10</sup> which provide us with the first official traces of Direct Transcendence, and the commentaries composed by Longchenpa, who systematized the tradition in the fourteenth century. Indeed, like many other intentional transformative experiences, Direct Transcendence is a self-reflective practice as the tradition presents us with highly detailed accounts of what practitioners perceive during these contemplative experiments. This, of course, leaves us with a fundamental tension between the imperative upon “non-intentional perception,” on the one hand, and rather elaborate phenomenological descriptions of “transformative experience” (i.e., what the yogis actually perceive), on the other. On the one hand, the nakedness of direct perception stripped of our ordinary mind’s proclivity for conceptualization can be represented through the metaphor of the open blue sky. As Reginal Ray puts it, the “conceptual mind refers not only to actual thinking, but also to the way in which we continually solidify our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world at large.” Through practices like Direct Transcendence, this “overlay that conceals the enlightenment within” starts to dissolve. Just as the dissipation of clouds allows us to perceive the endless horizon of the deep blue sky, “experience begins to become increasingly vivid, but also more and more ungraspable and empty of anything solid.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, despite this rhetoric of freedom, the visual field of the yogis does not simply remain wide open, vast, and free of reference point. On the contrary, it appears that the sky, during the visions, is unconsciously framed by the Tibetan practitioner’s own cognitive mechanisms. The blue space spontaneously starts to be punctured by specks of light, structured by shapes and patters, and populated by divine beings.

Without going into too much detail, this chapter will conclude that although the tradition’s consistent imperative on unintentional practice is remarkable, the evidence from both the ancient phenomenological accounts of yogis and the latest cognitive science research on perception clearly demonstrates that the visionary meditation practice cannot escape the fundamentally intentional nature of human

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<sup>9</sup> Geisshuesler 2019b; 2020; 2023; 2024.

<sup>10</sup> *The Seventeen Tantras*, which eventually came to constitute part of the standard collections of Nyingma Tantras, the so-called One Hundred Thousand Tantras of the Old School (*rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum*), are sometimes also classified as eighteen or nineteen.

<sup>11</sup> Ray 2002, 126.

thought. Direct Transcendence should therefore be understood as an experimental technique that shows both the benefits of deconstructing our mind's natural proclivity for attributing meaning to our perceptions and the fundamental impossibility of ever truly escaping this mechanism.

## 1 The Four Visions from a Cognitive Perspective: Direct Transcendence and the Experimental Study of Perception

As I mentioned, Direct Transcendence functions by significantly restricting environmental stimulation, particularly visual input. Indeed, the yogis—who await in a state of complete concentration and calm for the emergence of visions that naturally and spontaneously populate their field of visions—not only meditate during the day by gazing into the open sky, the rays of the sun, a lamp, a reflective pool, or a crystal, but also with the framework of a completely dark chamber. I am speaking here, of course, of a particular style of practicing Direct Transcendence, namely the so-called “dark retreat” (*mun mtshams*) practice.<sup>12</sup> In this meditation, which is sometimes also known as the “nighttime practice,”<sup>13</sup> the meditators spend time in complete isolation and darkness within a special cave, room, or hut (*mun khang*) that hinders light penetrating from the outside. The standard time of such dark retreats is forty-nine days, but it has been claimed that Dzogchen masters have spent several years in dark retreat.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, such techniques of “sensory deprivation,” in which “darkness, silence, isolation, bodily stillness,” are used to restrict “the subject’s visual, auditory, social, and kinesthetic experience,” are not only popular in Buddhism,<sup>15</sup> but also a standard staple in experimental research.<sup>16</sup> It is no coincidence that researchers, who have extensively studied how sensory deprivation contributes to

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<sup>12</sup> While there are references to the dark retreat practice in both the TDZ and the TCZ, Longchenpa’s most elaborate explanations on the dark retreat practice are found in two Nyingthig texts dedicated to this practice (the *nyin mtshan ‘od gyi ‘khor lo* and *rgya mtsho ar gtad kyi mun khrid ‘od gsal ‘khor lo*) as well as in his commentary on the *Guhyagarbhatantra*, titled *Dispelling all Darkness Throughout the Ten Directions* (*gsang snying ‘grel pa phyogs bcu mun sel*).

<sup>13</sup> Lobel 2018, 221.

<sup>14</sup> Wangyal 2000, 166.

<sup>15</sup> Lindahl et al. 2014, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Suedfeld 1980.

neuroplasticity<sup>17</sup> and visual manifestations,<sup>18</sup> did so by putting subjects in contexts that closely resemble those found in the Tibetan tradition: they are exposed either to specifically designed chambers<sup>19</sup> to flotation tanks,<sup>20</sup> or to ganzfeld imagery, which creates an unstructured and homogenized visual field.<sup>21</sup> Especially the ganzfeld experiments have a parallel in the typically Dzogchen *topos* of the uniform sky as the ideal backdrop for sensory deprivation.<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, Direct Transcendence, providing ideal conditions to explore the subtlest activities of mentation, can be understood as an experimental practice dedicated to the study of consciousness. It is a type of technique that Alan Richardson finds to be “recognizing and breaking through the illusory or virtual character of human cognitive experience.”<sup>23</sup> “The aim of the Buddhist enterprise,” so another commentator strikes a similar tone, “is therefore not just to show that all things are like illusions because the way they appear is different from the way they are,” but rather “to bring about a complete change in how we perceive and conceptualize phenomena.”<sup>24</sup> Finally, Janet Gyatso makes this same point, specifically discussing the Direct Transcendence visions, as she states that “the point is not simply to have more meditative experiences but to achieve ‘realization’ (*rtogs pa*) or understanding of the nature of such experiences.”<sup>25</sup>

The Dzogchen discussions surrounding the four visions take the form of detailed phenomenological descriptions of what meditators see during the practice.<sup>26</sup> The visions unfold over time, gradually intensifying as they progress from one stage to the next, before reaching their denouement in the dissolution of any manifestation during the final vision. Within the sequence of appearances, the “seminal nuclei” (*thig le*), drop-like specks of light that one translator pertinently describes as “pixels,”<sup>27</sup> take a privileged position. As they are ordered in a pro-

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17 Boroojerdi et al. 2000; Fierro et al. 2005; Pitskel et al. 2007; Maffei and Turrigiano 2008, 3.

18 Zubek et al. 1961; Merabet et al. 2004; Mason and Brady 2009.

19 Zubek, Hughes, and Shephard 1971.

20 Lilly 1977; Kjellgren, Lyden, and Norlander 2008.

21 Avant 1965; Jiri Wackermann et al. 2002.

22 Jiri Wackermann, Pütz, and Allefeld 2008.

23 Richardson 2010, 23.

24 Westerhoff 2010, 7.

25 Gyatso 1998, 191.

26 Of course, the phenomenology we are speaking of here is not the one concerned with “identifying background or implicit structures of consciousness,” but rather “the perceived content of experience.” For the differentiation between these two types of phenomenology, see Chalmers (1996, 4, 11).

27 Dowman 2013.

gressive sequence that follows the manifestation of the four visions<sup>28</sup> and conceptualized as specific “signs” that mark the progress of the practitioner’s meditative practice,<sup>29</sup> the seminal nuclei are a useful heuristic category to reconstruct the *modus operandi* of awareness as it radiates through and emerges out of our bodies, and is perceived by our eyes.

## 2 The Growth of the Seminal Nuclei and Perceptual Meaning-Making

The first vision is known as “the vision of reality’s immediacy” (*chos nyid mngon sum gyi snang ba*), which is described as follows: “Initially you see something that resembles smoke, then white wafting clouds, mirages, stars, fire sparks, butter lamps, and the great pervading blue light in the form a black *naro*. Eventually, light rays, seminal nuclei, and immeasurable empty forms of the wisdom-expanse (*dbyings rig*) will shine forth.”<sup>30</sup> The visions start with the manifestation of luminous and foggy appearances of low intensity, which may or may not develop into sequences of “seminal nuclei,” specks of light that can vary in size. The opening vision is generally characterized by a lot of movement and instability as the seminal nuclei never remain still in one place. They are described as “minute and linked” (*phra la 'brenng*), manifest fluttering and undulating, appearing and disappearing, coming and going, and become steady only after extended periods of contemplation. Contemporary teachers compare the nuclei to a waterfall coming off a high mountain or drops of quicksilver.<sup>31</sup>

The second vision is known as “the vision of contemplative experience’s intensification” (*nyams gong 'phel gyi snang ba*). This vision is characterized by an intensification of the appearances in terms of their number, shape, and size. At first, the perception of light (*'od*) that was present in the inaugural vision intensifies radically and its manifestation becomes more balanced so that it now includes five colors. The seminal nuclei increase in number and size and there is a gradual appearance and multiplication of “linked vajra sheep” (*rdo rje lu gu*

28 TDD, 257.5; LYT1 463.1.

29 TCD2 372.2.

30 de la dang po du ba lta bu dang/ sprin dkar po lang long lta bu dang/ smig rgyu lta bu dang/ skar ma lta bu dang/ me stag lta bu dang/ mar me lta bu dang/ mthing ga khyab pa chen po'i 'od re khaa nag po'i rnam pa na ro lta bu mthong ste/ 'od zer dang thig le dang dbyings rig gi stong gzugs tshad med pa 'char ro (TDD, 283.2).

31 Wangyal 2000, 196–99.

*rgyud*). These resemble lights that are strung together like a garland of pearls appearing within the seminal nuclei. Besides the seminal nuclei and the linked sheep, the practitioner perceives a vast array of additional luminous configurations, such as cloudbanks, smoke, background patterns of the light at dawn, dusk, or the sky in the fall, sunset or shooting stars, checkered geometric forms, lace-work designs, vertical lines, wheels, round rainbows, lotus flowers, fireflies, or large *stūpas*. Like before, these appearances fluctuate greatly in intensity and stability.

The study of such perceptual phenomena has become an indispensable theme of investigation in meditation research, particularly as the field starts to move beyond the overwhelming focus on mindfulness-based techniques. Exemplary for this revolution is the research conducted by Willoughby Britton and Jared Lindahl in the Clinical and Affective Neuroscience Laboratory at Brown University. They focus on meditation experiences described as lights or as having luminous characteristics, showing that they are characterized by a noteworthy continuity across various Buddhist traditions and geographical contexts. Like the Great Perfection phenomenology of visions, they illustrate the prevalence of various isolated light manifestations in the early phase of contemplation, which meditators define as “globes,” “white spots,” “little stars,” or “ropes of shimmering,” and specified as “very distinct,” like “Christmas tree lights hanging out in space except they were round,” or “float[ing] together in a wave, like a group of birds migrating.” There appears to be some cross-traditional stability to the manifestations in those first two visions, as the pattern of crystallization is found in other meditative experiences across the Buddhist universe, particularly the Theravāda literature.<sup>32</sup>

The simplest physiological explanation for this perceptual spectacle is that we are dealing here with entoptic phenomena, visual effects which are created by the eye itself, without external stimulus. The so-called “floaters,” also known as *muscae volitantes* or “flying flies,” manifest as spots, threads, or fragments of “cobwebs,” which usually float slowly before the eyes.<sup>33</sup> However, this seems not enough to account for what is happening to the Direct Transcendence yogis as their perception is much richer in detail and fundamentally meaningful to the practitioner. Invoking an English expression, we could say that the yogis make sense of their perceptive experience during Tögal by “connecting the dots,” gradually allowing the specks of light into more elaborate patterns and motifs. In this context, the recently emerging research into the phenomenology of perceptual

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<sup>32</sup> In this context, we read about a phenomenon known as *nimitta* (lit. “sign”), visionary phenomena that appear as a consequence of the concentration achieved through sustained attention to one’s breath (Ledi Sayadaw Mahathera 1999; Upatissa 1977, 157–58; Buddhaghosa 2003, 277).

<sup>33</sup> Johnson and Hollands 2012.

processes might be useful. Analogous to the Dzogchen insistence that the visions are occurring spontaneously, experts emphasize the tremendous impact of unconscious, implicit, and automatic processes in human perception.<sup>34</sup> Mario Sigman, for example, observed that “from a stream of light, our visual system manages to identify shapes and emotions in a tiny fraction of a second, and what is even more extraordinary is that it happens without any sort of effort or conscious realization that something must be done. But converting light into shapes is so difficult that we have yet to create machines that can do it.”<sup>35</sup>

Much of the insight into the miracles of perception comes from various experimental phenomena, such as binocular rivalry,<sup>36</sup> visual masking,<sup>37</sup> or attentional blinks.<sup>38</sup> These experiments, as Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi assert, show that we “are often incapable of seeing things happen right before our eyes.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, phenomena like poor peripheral vision, the continuous eye movements known as saccades, and blind spots demonstrate that our perception—despite its seeming coherence—is not very accurate, stable, or clear. The images our brains receive through our retinas are distorted, discrete, tiny, upside down, and marked by absences. The fact that our experience is nonetheless characterized by a great degree of constancy is largely due to our brain’s capacity to fill in the gaps. Vilayanur Ramachandran, the foremost living expert on a phenomenon known as “gap filling,” launched a series of experiments in order to probe the brain’s capacity for filling in perceptual gaps.<sup>40</sup>

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34 Goodale and Milner 2004; Jacob and Jeannerod 2006.

35 Sigman 2017, 193.

36 For details, see Alais and Blake (2005); Cosmelli et al. (2004); Ooi and He (1999, 2006); Williams et al. (2004); Carter et al. (2005). See, in addition, Crick (1994); Eagleman (2011); Dehaene (2014).

37 Loftus, Hanna, and Lester 1988; Breitmeyer 2007; Ansorge et al. 2008; Bachmann and Francis 2014; Rey et al. 2015.

38 For this type of research, see Shapiro, Raymond, and Arnell (1997); Jolicœur, Dell’Acqua, and Crebolder (2001); Vul, Hanus, and Kanwisher (2008); Dux and Marois (2009); Nieuwenstein, Potter, and Theeuwes (2009); Martens and Wyble (2010); Griffiths, Herwig, and Schneider (2013).

39 Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 108.

40 In one case, studying a particular type of blind spot known as scotoma—typical in sufferers of migraine—Ramachandran projected a series of numbers and letters in front of a patient. Despite the presence of a blind spot in the middle of his field of vision, the subject did not just perceive a black spot without visual information but rather a continuous column of numbers without gap. However, when Ramachandran asked him to read the numbers, the patient said: “Um, one, two, three, um, seven, eight, nine. Hey, that’s very strange. I can see the numbers but I don’t know what they are. [ . . . ] They don’t look blurred. They kind of look strange. I can’t tell what they are—like hieroglyphics or something” (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998, 101).

### 3 The Arraying of the Seminal Nuclei and Enactive Cognition

Perception, of course, is part of a larger human need for sense-making. As Ramachandran puts it, the ultimate reason for our gap filling is that the mind “abhors a vacuum,” propelling it to “supply whatever information is required to complete the scene.”<sup>41</sup> According to such enactive approaches to cognition, all living organisms are “sense-making” or “seeking” because they are both autonomous yet adaptive to their environment.<sup>42</sup> Life is inherently precarious and living organisms strive to maintain themselves through self-regulation and exchange with the environment,<sup>43</sup> with the seeking system allowing them to meet their basic biological and emotional needs.<sup>44</sup>

Attempting to unify all cognitive functions under one model, enactive approaches to perceptual awareness also argue that much of what we “see” depends not primarily on our eyes, but on the much larger sensorimotor apparatus of our bodies. In *Direct Transcendence*, of course, this is most apparent in the “six key points” (*gnad drug*), according to which the practitioner should adjust his gaze, posture, and breathing pattern in order to induce the visions. It could be argued that they perform what Alva Noë suggested to be our basic mode of establishing perceptual “presence.” Taking a mundane example, such as the desire to see the back of a tomato, he insists that “we peer, and squint, and move, and adjust ourselves, nearly continuously, in order to come near to, achieve access to, and stabilize our contact with the world around us.”<sup>45</sup> In the Great Perfection, the dynamic sensorimotor system that pervades the entire human body is described in terms of four “divine palaces” (*zhal yas khang*) that represent the central foci of enlightened awareness, namely the heart, the channels, the skull, and the eyes. From an enactivist perspective, meditation is best understood as an emerging procession of our innermost essence through these four hot spots: It abides in the heart (*tsitta*), overflows through the luminous channels (*’od rtsa*) that serve as pathways, spreads inside of the skull (*dung khang*), and is finally released through the eyes (*tsakshu/ briguta*).

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<sup>41</sup> Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998, 89.

<sup>42</sup> For more on the enactivist model of religion, see the chapter by Maddalena Canna in this volume.

<sup>43</sup> Varela 1979; Thompson 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Panksepp 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Noë 2012, 40.



Furthermore, the seminal nuclei are not only visual phenomena that appear to our eyes in the form of luminous displays, but also scintillas of energy located in our bodies. If the channels are seen as “sanctuaries” (*gnas pa*) for our enlightened energy and the winds as the “moving” (*g.yo ba*) force that propels awareness throughout our bodies, the seminal nuclei are described as “arrayed” (*bkod pa*) throughout our bodies.<sup>46</sup> In their dual-function as both internal drops of energies and external visionary flashes, the seminal nuclei are consequently both “arrayed” within the luminous channels of our bodies and also “arraying” our visionary experience. As Germano aptly put it, the seminal nuclei are “the informing intelligence that ‘arrays’ or ‘organizes’ our energy into meaningful complex patterns that are integrated to form a functioning *gestalt*.”<sup>47</sup> In accordance with the nexus of meanings of the term *god pa*—the present form of the word *bkod pa*—we could say that enaction is marked by a “framed freedom”: The seminal nuclei are both “arranged” and “placed,” as well as “transferred,” “displayed,” and “manifested”; they are both confined within structures and freely moving within space.<sup>48</sup>

## 4 The Unfencing of the Seminal Nuclei and the Construction of Perception

The tension between confinement and freedom is not only present in the dual-nature of the seminal nuclei as something that is both stabilized by structure within our bodies and dynamically displaying externally in our field of vision but also present in the visual (re)-presentation of the seminal nuclei: On the one hand, they are imagined in the form of enclosing structures, such as fences, corals, walled cities, or lassos. On the other hand, the visionary display of seminal nuclei is also said to be naturally disclosing itself in the sky. “The move from the inside to the outside,” so Hatchell reminds his readers, “is in fact one of the main features of these visionary *thig-le*, which not only function as containers—of bodies, buddhas, ideas, energies, and so forth—but also put those contents on display so they can be seen, recognized, and function in the external world.”<sup>49</sup>

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46 TDD, 210.2. *gnas pa rtsa/ g.yo ba rlung/ bkod pa byang chub sems kyi gnas lugs so.*

47 Germano 1992, 523.

48 In a forthcoming article, I show that the frame of freedom must be challenged in its authority as themes of confinement, constriction, and limitation are pervasive throughout the tradition’s entire system of thought and practice (Geisshuesler 2023).

49 Hatchell 2014, 144.

The seminal nuclei form part of a larger visionary anatomy of the Great Perfection, which ultimately allows for the concretization of the flow of energy out of its latency into the world. A key concept during the cognitive process of awareness manifestation are the “lamps” (*sgron ma*), which indicate the externalization of the internal wisdom in the form of visionary manifestations. One of the most interesting of those lamps is the so-called “water lamp of the far-reaching lasso” (*rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma*). This particular lamp stands not only for the totality of luminous pathways and gateways, but for our inner luminosity radiating outward. As such, the “water lamp of the far-reaching lasso” plays a stellar role in the process of blurring the boundaries between internal imagination and external reality. It has rightly been explained that this lamp’s designation as a “far-reaching lasso” points to the particular trait of the sensory faculty of vision, which has the ability to apprehend objects of external reality that are quite distant from us.<sup>50</sup> Direct Transcendence, consequently, “involves a radically active mode of perception, as instead of the mere passive registering of incoming sensory data or even the semi-active filtering and manipulation of that data, the ‘sensory data’ (i.e., the lights) itself [ . . . ] issues outwards from our own interiority via the eyes.”<sup>51</sup> The darkness of the hut and the monochromatic background of the cloudless sky, of course, reduce external stimuli and provide us with a screen for the performance of a largely internal theater of our minds.

In its emphasis on the externalization of the interior, the imposition of what is “imagined” over that which is a “real” stimulus from the exterior world, Direct Transcendence could be construed as a type of hallucination. Oftentimes, the central mark of a hallucinating person as well as a schizophrenic is that they cannot distinguish between what is truly experienced because of an external stimulus and what is imagined in the form of an internally generated thought. This being said, the association of Direct Transcendence with pathological or hallucinatory phenomena is not as simple as one might think. Consider, for instance, the following reflections by Ann Taves, who recovers the value of internally manufactured visionary worlds in the study of religion, noting that “the pejorative (and presumptively pathological) definition of hallucinations as false perceptions artificially divides the class of phenomena that arise from internal sources and completely ignores visions that occur (remarkably frequently) in the normal population.”<sup>52</sup>

The notion that the vividness of imagination “bleeds” into the world<sup>53</sup> is even compatible with a neurological perspective, where hallucinatory visions are in

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<sup>50</sup> Germano 1992, 104.

<sup>51</sup> Germano 1992, 98.

<sup>52</sup> Taves 2009, 78.

<sup>53</sup> Luhrmann 2013, 159.

many respects just as real as the perception of “real” external stimuli.<sup>54</sup> The Great Perfection conceives of the visionary manifestations displayed during Direct Transcendence in a parallel way, namely as an interplay between the mental and the physical eye. Herbert Guenther, for instance observed:

It would be extremely helpful if one could understand “awareness” in a verbal sense as an ‘awaring’ inasmuch as this pristine awareness is not only a process (a “way”) of understanding, but also a certain manner of seeing which for all practical purposes has as its starting-point the eye. The eye that “sees” does not exist apart from its cognitive domain: light and eye codetermine each other and what we call the eye is therefore nothing solid, but a dynamic regime. As such a dynamic regime the eye is termed *spyān*—the eye that “sees” in contradistinction to *mig*—the eye as an object removed from its living context.<sup>55</sup>

In the cognitive sciences, such an active understanding of perception reminds us not only of the theories of meaning-making and enactive cognition discussed earlier, but also relates to studies on imagery and imagination. Researchers are gradually gaining awareness of a continuity between quotidian perception and meditative visions, or between the physical eye and the mental eye.<sup>56</sup> The neurobiology of perceptual hallucinations and veridical perceptions, for example, have been found to be closely related to one another.<sup>57</sup> According to the so-called “perceptual activity theory,”<sup>58</sup> the mind plays an active role in constructing its apprehended objects, thus not only blurring “the boundary between indirect perception and imagination” but also suggesting “that imagery should in fact be viewed as a process of perceptual projection.”<sup>59</sup>

In the Great Perfection, the constructivist nature of perception is expressed as a dialectical movement between freedom and constraint. As before, the seminal nuclei serve as the primary metaphor to articulate this tension: On the one hand, the nuclei change their form from that of an enclosure into an extended chain of interconnected dots as they move out of the frame of the body into the

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54 A relevant phenomenon in the experimental study of perception is the so-called Charles Bonnet syndrome, which is frequently associated with various types of visual hallucinations, particularly light-related experiences (Vukicevic and Fitzmaurice 2008; Kazui et al. 2009). However, what is striking is that the hallucinations we observe in patients with Charles Bonnet syndrome are merely an exaggerated version of the same processes that account for gap filling in patients with scotomas or even healthy individuals. Or, put differently, all of us generate a coherent picture of the world despite imperfect perception (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998, 111–12).

55 Guenther 1992, 81. The eyes that see (*spyān*) are clearly referring to the Eyes of the Buddha as it is a honorific term as opposed to *mig*.

56 Ffytche et al. 1998; Lloyd et al. 2012.

57 Ffytche, Blom, and Catani 2010; Lloyd et al. 2012.

58 Ellis 1995; Ramachandran and Hirstein 1996; Noë 2004; Thompson 2007.

59 Coseru 2012.

practitioner's visual field. On the other hand, as they take on the shape of long ropes, they swiftly reclaim their potential to be flung through the air as lassos. Perception is a grasping, constructing, and ultimately constraining process that imposes separations, division, and structure on the surrounding environment. Imagined as a lasso, Dzogchen vision is not only a freeing activity that opens up the containment of the human body but also a projective operation, an active process through which the meditators impose themselves onto the material universe surrounding them.

## 5 The Faith in the Seminal Nuclei and the Theory of Mind

As I protocoled, the first two stages of the four visions are characterized by a gradual growth in size, a steady increase in complexity, an intensification in vividness, and a strengthening in stability of the manifestations. The climax of Direct Transcendence is characterized by the manifestation of vast *maṇḍalas*, divine palaces filled with richly adorned buddhas and their retinues in the third vision in the *scala contemplationis*, named “the vision of awareness reaching its limit” (*rig pa tshad phebs kyi snang ba*). As its designation already indicates, this is the moment when “awareness” (*rig pa*) reaches its limit (*tshad phebs*, lit. “arrived at the full measure), the moment when the visionary manifestations appear in their greatest clarity and crystallize in their most structured form. The meditators confirm that this is the high point of transforming the initial chaos into order as they report seeing the *maṇḍala* of 100 peaceful and wrathful deities, buddhafields (*zhing khams*, *dag pa'i zhing*), and palaces (*gzhal yas khang*).

Again, like in the previous visions, the seminal nuclei remain central to this process. The circle-shaped seminal nuclei and the linked chains are said to “mature into spiritual bodies” (*rig pa skur smin pa*)<sup>60</sup> and to “ripen into the Spiritual Bodies and wisdom” (*sku dang ye shes smin pa*).<sup>61</sup> Longchenpa specifies that there are six stages over the course of which the *maṇḍala* of deities gradually takes shape. First, only half of a Buddha's body (*phyed sku*) is seen, then single bodies (*sku rgyang*), then the Buddha in sexual union with his consort (*yab yum*), then the five Buddhas with their retinues (*tshom bu*), then the five Buddhas arranged in their *maṇḍala* (*dkyil 'khor*), and finally the “great *maṇḍala*” (*dkyil 'khor chen*

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60 TDD, 247.3.

61 TDD, 211.5.

*po*), which represents all the 100 peaceful and wrathful deities and the climax of the Tögal visions.<sup>62</sup>

Although such a natural evolution of a rich mixture of living beings in their own inhabitable spaces might sound extravagant, the fact that visions are populated in such ways is not entirely surprising from a cognitive perspective. Researchers, in speaking about this human tendency to attribute mental or soul-like presence to our environment, have coined the term “Theory of Mind.”<sup>63</sup> This field of investigation is concerned with the “folk psychology” of social cognition, specifically with how humans identify mental states of others in order to predict, understand, or explain their actions.<sup>64</sup> As Tooby and Cosmides phrase it, “normal humans everywhere not only ‘paint’ their world with color, they also ‘paint’ beliefs, intentions, feelings, hopes, desires, and pretenses onto agents in their social world. They do this despite the fact that no human has ever seen a thought, a belief, or an intention.”<sup>65</sup>

Cognitive scientists of religion, in particular, have combined this biosocial view of meaning-making with an evolutionary perspective. They speak of a “hyperactive agency detection device” when trying to explain the human tendency to make mentalistic inferences. Specifically, they suggest that our tendency to attribute agency to our environment, not only other humans, but also animals, nature, and other “hard-to-identify” phenomena, offers evolutionary benefits to humanity.<sup>66</sup> Jesper Sørensen, for instance, suggests that “religion” can be seen as “a by-product of an evolved ability to scan an ambiguous perceptual environment for agents.” Indeed, from an evolutionary perspective, according to which our life on earth is inherently precarious, this makes a lot of sense: “Since false positives are relatively cheap (seeing a stone as a bear) in contrast to a false negative. Not perceiving a potentially dangerous agent (seeing a bear as a stone) is most likely to be fatal.” In short, so Sørensen summarizes his position, “the popularity of culturally transmitted concepts of religious agents might be conceived as the result of human tendency to infer the actions of intentional agent from scarce an ambivalent perceptual cues.”<sup>67</sup> Something similar appears to be happening in the later stages of the unfurling of visions as the yogi multiplies actualizations of gods, spirits, and other anthropomorphized figures in light of unclear visual stimuli.

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62 TDD, 258.3; TCD2, 83.5.

63 Bloom 2004; Lillard and Skibbe 2005; Mar and Macrae 2007.

64 Premack and Woodruff 1978, 515.

65 Tooby and Cosmides 1995, xvii.

66 Guthrie et al. 1980; Barrett and Keil 1996; Boyer 2001; Atran and Norenzayan 2004; Barrett 2004; Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007.

67 Sørensen 2007, 288.

## 6 Veiled in a Fine-Spun Garment: Direct Transcendence and the Impossibility of a Truly Non-Intentional State

It is now time to return to my initial question regarding the very possibility of an experience ever being truly non-intentional. According to the stance of the Great Perfection tradition, of course, the answer appears—upon first sight—to be a resounding “yes.” In fact, the dissolving of any sort of structure to enter the open realm of sky-like freedom is perhaps nowhere as apparent as in the final vision of the practice. At that moment, the yogi is truly liberated (*grol ba*), disrupts the sequence of cyclical existence and new births, and enters a state of immortality. The self-recognition in the luminous appearances is said to impact even the coarsest parts of the practitioners as their physical corporeality dematerializes and the body transubstantiates into a “body of light,” literally becoming one with the deep blue sky of Tibet.

This being said, and despite the tradition’s explicit claims of cultivating an “unintentional state” that they describe as “naked vision,” the analysis of the four visions by means of specific theories, experiments, and empirical findings from the cognitive sciences made it clear that this claim needs to be relativized. Dzogchen—despite its intentions to do so—does not strip the practitioners of ordinary cognition. As a technique scrutinizing the unconscious processing mechanisms involved in human perception, Tögal shows that human mentation—whether it be conscious or unconscious—can never be truly naked. On the contrary, it is always clothed since it tends to make meaning, to create order, and to impose structure in its thirst for understanding. This brief investigation tunes into the chorus of recent commentators that questioned the validity of descriptions of mindfulness as marked by the doctrine of non-judgmental acceptance. Bhikkhu Bodhi, for example, argues that “from a theoretical perspective it is questionable whether any act of attention, or any other mental act, can literally be ‘bare.’”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Rupert Gethin notes that even though whatever is remembered during mindfulness practice is relative, this does not mean that there are no differences between these states as they can “be skillful or unskillful, with faults or faultless, relatively inferior or refined, dark or pure.”<sup>69</sup> In harmony with such reflections, this chapter argued for the unavailability of judgment in human acts of cognition. Indeed, I demonstrate that the presumed perceptual nakedness of Direct Transcendence

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<sup>68</sup> Bodhi 2013, 30.

<sup>69</sup> Gethin 1992, 39.

is clothed in a series of garments of varying levels of subtlety. Drawing on the latest findings from the cognitive study of perception—specifically meaning-making, enactive approaches to cognition, the constructive nature of perception and emotion, or the Theory of Mind—I demonstrated that the four visions are ultimately grounded in ordinary perceptual processes, which are always geared towards the generation of meaning, rather than the suspension of judgment.<sup>70</sup> Seeing, in short, is just as much an internal process of conceiving, creating, and forming, as it is receiving stimuli from the outside. Perception, in other words, predicts the world around us according to our own priorities and needs, making it highly improbable that we will ever be able to “see” without some form of judgment.

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YGM – The Absence of Letters Tantra (yi ge med pa'i gsang ba rgyud chen po; vol. 2, 215–44).

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TCD – The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle (theg mchog mdzod).

TDD – The Treasury of Words and Meanings (tshig don mdzod).

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<sup>70</sup> The interdisciplinary approach suggested in this chapter matured within the cognitive turn, which has swept across virtually all humanistic disciplines in recent years (Slingerland 2008; Bainbridge 2006; Bloch 2012; Carroll 2004; Cohen 2007; Dutton 2009; Hogan 2009; Richardson 2010; Smail 2007; Starr 2013; Vermeule 2011; Whitehouse 2004; Zunshine 2010). For an attempt to apply this cognitive framework in the study of religion, see Geisshuesler (2019a).

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Maddalena Canna

## Chapter 4

# Liberation from the Ordinary: The Unseen in Religious Experience

Something happens to me in that state of intoxication. Now I feel ashamed of myself. In that state I feel as if I were possessed by a ghost. I cease to be my own self. While coming down from that state I cannot count correctly. Trying to count, I say, 'One, seven, eight,' or some such thing. *Mahendranath Gupta*<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction: Beyond the Ungraspable

Religion is a relevant object of the social sciences.<sup>2</sup> Since the inception of the discipline anthropologists have looked at religion as one of the main areas of cultural variability in human societies.<sup>3</sup> Uncountable debates on religion have been constructed and deconstructed by opposing schools and approaches, and the anthropology of religion has become one of the most developed and autonomous branches of the discipline. Nevertheless, some selected aspects of religion have been privileged over others. Roughly before 2009, anthropological debates on religion pivoted mostly around two themes: belief and ritual.<sup>4</sup> The anthropology of religious conversion represented a prolific third avenue.<sup>5</sup> Other aspects, such as religious experience—e.g., the intimate, unspoken encounter with the divine—were traditionally met with epistemological skepticism. Indeed, religious experience seemed to escape any empirical inquiry based on participatory observation and communicative interaction (in-depth

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1 Gupta [1942] 2022, 1001.

2 My deepest gratitude to the ashram community, with a special acknowledgment to S., for allowing me to share his experience. The elaboration of this manuscript was funded by the Fyssen Foundation (Paris), in the congenial environment of Northwestern University. I thank my colleague Rebecca Seligman at Northwestern for her insightful comments. The final version of this chapter was completed in the welcoming environment of Washington University in Saint Louis.

3 Tylor 1889; Frazer 1890.

4 Needham 1972; Lindquist and Coleman 2008; Mair 2012; Houseman and Severi 2009; Severi 2014; Berger 2012.

5 Stromberg 1993; Hanks 2010; Farhadian and Rambo 2015; Mahadev 2018.



interviews), the two methodological pillars of ethnography. As Jonathan Mair pointed out, this reluctance may be convincingly traced back to Edmund Leach's legacy:

A residual anti-psychologism that still affects many anthropologists, a hangover from the days when structuralism nearly turned to behaviourism as Edmund Leach condemned the foolishness of speculating about the 'internal psychological state' of ethnographic subjects.<sup>6</sup>

Leach's condemnation resonates with current narratives of religious experience as empirically ungraspable. Anthropology's depiction of religious experience as ineffable, elusive and constitutively unobservable, relegated the field to a hesitant posture vis-à-vis a slippery topic that seemed more appropriate for psychological and philosophical speculations.

Nevertheless, a similar attitude of reducing religious experience to a psychological matter can be found among religious studies scholars as well. As Jens Schlieter points out, most religious studies scholars feel that psychological theories of religion erase the specificity of the religious, by approaching it as a non-specific mental phenomenon:

From their point of view, analysis of, say, 'religious experience' in psychological terms will remain a psychological endeavor (explaining '[religious] experience'). For them, usually, that the experience is attributed to be 'religious' does not create the need for a systematic study of religion, or to develop theories that explain exclusively the 'religiousness' of experience.<sup>7</sup>

Religious experience is equated something "internal," conceived as purely psychological and then easily removed from the fields of culture and ontological specificity.

The construction of religious experience as immaterial was countered by the recent expansion of the notion of material religion, now broadened to: "include in its repertoire a vast set of somatic experiences, along with substances, places, environments, and even technologies, imparting an axiomatic status to the notion that 'all religion is material religion' (Engelke, 2011, 209)."<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, the focus of religious studies shifted from identifying an immaterial kernel of religion to acknowledging that its components equated to, such as embodied sensations and ritual interaction, are grounded in material and empirically observable facts.

Along with the broadening of the concept of material religion, the so-called cognitive turn in anthropology offered another opportunity to experiment with empirical approaches. Human consciousness entered the debate of anthropology

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<sup>6</sup> Leach 1966, 40; in Mair 2013, 452—53.

<sup>7</sup> Schlieter 2020, 122.

<sup>8</sup> Reinhardt 2016, 76.

as a bio-cultural construct<sup>9</sup> where sensations and affects are observable as part of the empirical grounding of culture.<sup>10</sup> This fostered anthropological attempts to explore the cognitive underpinnings of the two traditional objects of belief<sup>11</sup> and ritual,<sup>12</sup> but also to explore the *terra* almost *incognita* of religious experience.

A final turn is represented by recent anthropological perspectives adopting an enactivist approach. Anthropological enactivism does not conceive mind as a separated, “internal” domain, but rather as a dynamic system of interactions with the environment.<sup>13</sup> As Peter Stromberg puts it: “Thinking is increasingly understood not strictly as an interior process hidden away in the brain, but rather as public activity that engages with the environment.”<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, Leach’s opposition between an internalist conception of religious experience as purely psychological, and an externalist conception of culture as purely material, could be overcome. Conceived as a system spanning across the brain/environment divide, mind is a dynamic process of exchange with the environment and *within* the environment.

Therefore, from the perspective of enactivism, cognition is not a private process. It unfolds in the public sphere of human everyday transactions with the world. In Edward Lowe’s terms:

Cognitive processes extend out of the brain to include the lived body and the living social, cultural, and natural environment means that this tidy division between the (public) behavioral and the (brain-bound) mental in the study of culture and human conventionality can no longer be maintained.<sup>15</sup>

Enactivist approaches of cognition bridge the gap between the individually cognitive and the public material, conceived as two sides of the same integrated dynamic process.

These approaches are particularly relevant to address the intentional and transformative aspects of religious experience, which are the focus of this essay collection. As for intentionality, conceiving religious experience as a dynamic process of exchange *with* and *within* the world highlights the individuals’ intention of acting *in* and *upon* their environment through religion. In this sense, religious self-transformation is not radically different from the intentional transformation

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9 Seligman 2018.

10 Halloy and Servais 2014; Ramstead, Veissière, and Kirmayer 2015.

11 Cohen 2007, 2008.

12 Stroeken 2011.

13 See Flavio Geisshüsler’s chapter in this book for another application of enactivist theory in the study of religion.

14 Stromberg 2021, 427.

15 Lowe 2021, 442.

of the world. By intentionally changing the way in which the Self inhabits its environment, the Self is transforming the world from the perspective of an active participant.

In this chapter I compare three theories of religious experience bridging the gap between the individually cognitive and the publicly material by presenting them as two co-constitutive polarities of the same dynamic process. Intentionality and self-transformation, in this perspective, are modalities of action *within* and *upon* the world.

Two of these theories are by anthropologists Tanya Luhmann and Rebecca Seligman, and one by a cognitive science of religion (CSR) scholar Ann Taves. These theories present important conceptual and epistemological overlaps. They share a grounding in empirical methods and a cross-disciplinary dialogue with the cognitive sciences. In the first part of this article, I assess the potentials and limits that these theories offer to the anthropological understanding of religious experience.

In the second part, I propose a theoretical innovation on this tradition. I claim that religious experience studies have been dominated by the exploration of the encounter with the extraordinary. By “encounter with the extraordinary” I mean the discovery of divinity as something transgressing ordinary ontological, epistemological, and empirical expectations. The “numinous,” the supernatural, the transcendent or the exceptional have been overemphasized as if they were the only distinctive features of religious experience.

Instead, I claim that the counterpart of the encounter with the extraordinary—the estrangement from the ordinary—deserves more attention. By “estrangement from the ordinary” I mean the process of reappraisal of what was deemed ordinary before religious experience (e.g., everyday life, ordinary existence) as something that becomes estranged, distant, irrelevant, or almost unreal to the eyes of the believer. Rather than being a mere by-product of the encounter with the extraordinary, the estrangement from the ordinary is a distinctive process contributing to the specificity of religious experience. In this article, I argue that the estrangement from the ordinary is a constitutive aspect of religious experience, demanding specific theoretical and empirical tools to be explored in its specificity, and not as a mere consequence of the encounter with the extraordinary, whether this is intentional or non-intentional.

While the theories by Taves and Luhmann present important innovations, they are mostly based on the encounter with the extraordinary as the main distinctive aspect of religious experience. The case of Seligman is slightly different, as it gives more importance to its counterpart, i.e., what I call the estrangement from the ordinary. In this article, I present Seligman’s theory as an intermediate step leading towards my theoretical proposition. Indeed, Seligman does not formulate

the notion of “estrangement from the ordinary” nor theorizes this process, though her ethnography paves the way to its formulation. My proposition consists in building on these precursory theories to outline a theory of religious experience encompassing the two processes—the encounter with the extraordinary (1) and the estrangement from the ordinary (2). These two aspects are conceived as co-constitutive but distinct, each one requiring a specific set of analytical concepts.

## 2 Three Theories of Religious Experience

Religious experience is a challenging object to approach empirically. Often considered intimate, ungraspable, and even not expressible through words, religious experience seems to resist participant observation. The three theories of religious experience that I am about to consider, instead, strongly engage with empiricism, each one from a different perspective. I will start with the “building-block approach” proposed by Ann Taves.

### 2.1 Taves’s Building Block Approach

In an influential book published in 2009, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, Ann Taves proposed a “building-block approach” to religious experience. By “building-block” Taves means an analytical approach breaking down religious experience in two constitutive components, or blocks:

- a) **FIRST BLOCK:** “Non-Ordinary Experiences,” NOE, i.e., experiences that stand out for their unusualness, or exceptionality. They are generally disruptive, or shocking, and they frequently entail altered states of consciousness, such as trances, visions, out-of-body experiences, voice-hearing, and any other state of consciousness considered extra-ordinary by a given society.
- b) **SECOND BLOCK:** processes of appraisal and/or reappraisal, which attribute to some NOEs a religious character. By “appraisal” I mean, in cognitive terms, the process of subjective interpretation of a stimulus.<sup>16</sup> Appraisal is always socially shaped, as humans interpret things differently across societies. For example, a sudden racing heart can be interpreted as a sign of demonic attack and/or as an emotional reaction, depending on interiorized beliefs on spirits and bodies.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Taves 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Canna and Seligman 2020.

Let us see how this two-blocks approach operates through an example. The sudden apparition of an immaterial figure, according to Taves, is a Non-Ordinary Experience. This experience, per se, is not necessarily religious. It requires a process of appraisal and/or reappraisal to be deemed religious. The individual who saw the immaterial figure must interpret it through a cultural affordance suggesting that this is a religious event. Appraisal depends on cultural expectations and beliefs. Some societies share the belief that most immaterial apparitions are divine, some discriminate between divine and demonic apparitions, others consider apparitions as mendacious hallucinations, and so forth. The possibilities are as infinite as the human capability to produce interpretations and share them socially. Furthermore, it is common that within the same individual many different interpretations co-exist and shift across time. Hence, a NOE can be appraised and re-appraised differently depending on the sociocultural context in which it takes place.<sup>18</sup>

Taves's theory is informed by a Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) approach, and based on second-hand empirical data taken from textual sources. An important source for Taves is a personal account of religious experience by William Barnard.<sup>19</sup>

William Barnard, in his 1997 book *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* relates the experience that led himself to a religious transformation. His religious self-transformation started after an involuntary episode of ego-dissolution, where his ordinary sense of bounded ego was completely dissolved. This state of ego dissolution was triggered by a paradoxical thought. While he was trying to think about himself after death, he experienced an intense feeling of paradox. At that time, indeed, Barnard conceived of death as pure non-existence. Hence, the attempt to conciliate the thought of non-existence with a sense of continuity ("him after death"), produced in Barnard a cognitive paradox resulting into a sense of ego dissolution. Barnard felt that he was losing his sense of ego and any other perception of boundedness. He appraised this loss as the access to a modality of existence that was radically different from everything he had ever experienced before. This experience was so disruptive, so phenomenologically novel, that he subsequently interpreted it as the discovery of a new dimension. Hence, Barnard, according to Taves, interpreted his experience as religious because of its disruptive and extraordinary nature.

Hence, for Taves, Barnard's account is an illustrative example of the building block theory. Religious experience is made by a non-ordinary experience—in Barnard's case, the paradoxical ego-dissolution (first block)—interpreted through a

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<sup>18</sup> Taves 2009; Taves, Fortier, and Canna 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Barnard 1997.

process of reappraisal—Barnard’s conclusion that he accessed a spiritual dimension (second block).

In an interview made in 2018 by philosopher Martin Fortier and I, Taves elaborates further on the role of paradox in triggering non-ordinary experiences deemed religious. While comparing Barnard’s account with my ethnography of demonic possession in Nicaragua,<sup>20</sup> Taves advances the hypothesis that paradox may act as trigger for many NOE that are deemed religious.<sup>21</sup>

Paradox as a trigger of spiritual realizations, indeed, is not a new concept in religious studies, especially in Eastern Religious Studies, but also in the study of Christianity, namely concerning the notion of Trinity. Moreover, transversally to the field of religious studies, Micheal Houseman and Carlo Severi proposed a theory of ritual identifying the cumulation of contradictory features—a form of paradox—as the constitutive feature of all ritual action, within and outside the domain of religion.<sup>22</sup>

What is important to note, here, is that Taves conceives of religious experience as a composite event incorporating the extraordinary in an individual’s existence through a process of socially shaped appraisal. Religious experience, then, is the act of integrating the disruptively extraordinary and/or the paradoxical in the range of possibilities of one’s life. To be deemed religious, an experience must be extraordinary, but the mere fact of deviating from the expected is not enough. The extraordinariness of the experience must fit into acquired expectations about what a religious event should be. In the case of Barnard, the sensation of ego dissolution was identified retrospectively (or reappraised) by the experienter as a proper religious experience.<sup>23</sup>

Before delving further into this position, let’s consider a similar focus on the encounter with the extraordinary in our second theory of religious experience, by anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann.

## 2.2 Luhrmann’s Absorption Hypothesis

Tanya Luhrmann is an anthropologist conversant with the fields of cognitive sciences and psychology. Her empirical approach is based on ethnography, i.e., the first-hand participant observation of the social life of a group, in this case US Evangelical Christians. In her 2012 book *When God Talks Back: Understanding the*

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<sup>20</sup> Canna 2017, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Taves, Fortier and Canna 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Houseman and Severi 2009; Severi 2015.

<sup>23</sup> See Jens Schlieter’s chapter in this book on the same issue.

*American Evangelical Relationship with God*, Luhrmann lays the foundation of her theory of religious experience. Religious experience, according to Luhrmann, is the result of two conditions: (1) an individual proclivity to absorption and (2) a process of sociocultural shaping, or social kindling, as Cassaniti and Luhrmann put it later.<sup>24</sup> By “proclivity to absorption” Luhrmann and her collaborators mean a tendency to get caught or absorbed in a state of abstraction from ordinary reality, where individuals are less tuned into their immediate environment, and deeply focused—or captured—in another dimension, which is not accessible through the ordinary senses. Absorption, thus, is defined as “the mental capacity common to trance, hypnosis, dissociation, and much other spiritual experience in which the individual becomes caught up in ideas, images or fascinations.”<sup>25</sup>

The second component of religious experience according to Luhrmann, is a form of sociocultural shaping that identifies this proclivity as religious and canalizes it into a structured religious practice. Like Taves, Luhrmann adopts a componential approach, where two constitutive elements are articulated together to form a religious experience. Like Taves, the first block—an individual proclivity—is not necessarily religious but is canalized or kindled to be deemed religious through a process of social shaping.

Luhrmann builds on an ethnography of US Evangelical Christians, who report extremely vivid perceptions during prayer, including hearing the voice of God talking back and responding to their calls. Absorption facilitates this intimate connection God, as it predisposes the individual to be caught in a mode of consciousness where ordinary sensations are suspended in favor of the perception of a divine presence.

Nevertheless, if absorption predisposes to this intimate connection to God, this proclivity is not limited to religion. A secular form of absorption, for example, is getting “caught” in the reading of a book. Individuals with a high proclivity to absorption, according to Luhrmann, are more easily captured by a fictional world, to the point of losing sight of the surrounding environment. Hence absorption, per se, does not entail any religious content. It is a common potential of the human mind. And, as any other cognitive potential, it can be trained through practice. A person with a low proclivity to absorption can become more skilled through exposure, repeated exertion and all the practices entailed by a learning process.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is not the proclivity to absorption per se that leads to religious

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24 Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2014.

25 Luhrmann, Nussbaum, and Thisted 2010.

26 Luhrmann, Nussbaum, and Thisted 2010; Luhrmann 2012.

experience, but the process of sociocultural shaping, or social kindling, which leads some experiences of absorption to be deemed religious.

The theories of Luhrmann and Taves have much in common. They both present a building-block approach based on two fundamental components. The first ones (non-ordinary experiences in Taves and absorption proclivity in Luhrmann) are not necessarily bounded to religion, while the second ones are both a form of socio-cultural shaping: appraisal in the form of being “deemed religious” in Taves and social kindling in Luhrmann.

The main difference between these approaches is that Luhrmann focuses on individual proclivities and skills, while Taves focuses prevalently on marking events (non-ordinary experiences, or NOE). That said, it can be argued that a proclivity to absorption is likely to predispose a person to a non-ordinary experience. Indeed, the “mental capacity common to trance, hypnosis, dissociation, and much other spiritual experience in which the individual becomes caught up in ideas or images or fascinations”<sup>27</sup> is the ideal precondition to have a vision, an ecstasy, and any other modulation of consciousness deemed religious. Absorption proclivity, as defined by Luhrmann, is the psychological predisposition to experience Taves’s non-ordinary experience.

These two empirical approaches to religious experience are extremely interesting. They allow for a cross-disciplinary study of some shared human potentials, as absorption and NOE are not religiously bounded and can be found within and outside of what we traditionally construct as religious. This paves the way for approaching our third perspective, Seligman’s theory of religious experience as biosocial self-transformation.

### 2.3 Seligman’s Biosocial Transformation of Selves

Seligman is a biosocial anthropologist who conducted ethnography on Candomblé in Brazil. Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion based on spirit possession. Candomblé adepts, called *mediums*, are initiated to be possessed by the deities of Candomblé pantheon. Possession is based on a structured, ritualized form of dissociative trance. During Candomblé trance, mediums’ bodies are possessed by one or several deities. Possession entails that they speak, move and act as the incarnation of these Other, Divine Selves.<sup>28</sup>

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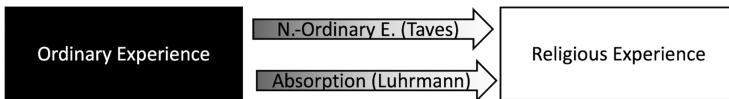
<sup>27</sup> Luhrmann, Nussbaum and Thisted, cited above in this chapter.

<sup>28</sup> Seligman 2014, 2018.



Seligman's approach to religious experience is one of the rare—if not the only—biosocial theories of religion mixing ethnography and physiological data. Seligman measures the regulation of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) through portable equipment allowing her to gather physiological data on the field while conducting ethnographical research. Autonomic regulation correlates with cardiac efficiency and is a measure of overall health, namely of resilience to stress.<sup>29</sup> Seligman's hypothesis is that the transformation from non-initiated to initiated mediums in Candomblé catalyzes an overall restructuration of the persona in all her components, physical and mental. While the lay person is socially elevated to the status of medium, the physical body transforms through the spiritual practice of embodying deities. This overall self-transformation is physiologically trackable, as the body improves its system of self-regulation. Seligman provides evidence of this physiological transformation through a field-portable device which tracks the improvements in the cardiac regulation of the autonomic system (ANS) of initiated mediums versus non-initiated individuals.<sup>30</sup> This approach paves the way for an integrative approach to religious experience, which crosses the traditional disciplinary boundaries between biological and social sciences.

An innovation from the previous theories concerns the direction of religious transformation. In Taves and Luhrmann, religious transformation is seen as the access to an extraordinary realm. In both theories we see a paradoxical and/or disruptive dimension, more explicit in Taves and more implicit in Luhrmann. Hence, In Taves and Luhrmann the sense of extraordinary is encountered in the movement *from* the ordinary world *towards* the realm that will be deemed religious (Figure 4.1).



**Figure 4.1:** Religious Experience in Taves and Luhrmann.

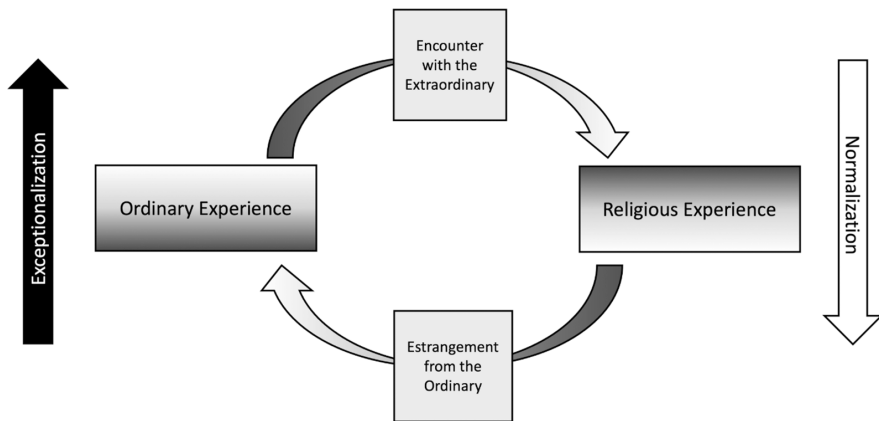
Seligman's ethnography, instead, suggests a double movement. In Candomblé, the person who will become a medium is generally in a state of deep emotional, moral and physical suffering before becoming a medium. Future mediums are generally ill with unexplained symptoms, afflicted by multiple misfortunes, and/or in an overall state of distress. This initial state of chronic distress is re-appraised

<sup>29</sup> Seligman 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Seligman 2014.

after initiation as a sign that initiation to mediumship was necessary to reestablish normalcy and health. Hence, appraisal processes do not act only on the experience deemed religious (here, trance possession) but expand to an overall reappraisal of the previous life of an individual before embracing religion. This distressing life of non-initiated, which was considered ordinary before, after initiation is reappraised as an abnormal distortion which needed to be overcome. Mediums look back at their previous non-initiated self as a state of extraordinary suffering seeming almost absurd or unreal from their new perspective of reestablished wellbeing. Hence, this ethnography highlights another direction of self-transformation: religious experience is described not only as the incorporation of the extraordinary of divinity (which happens during possession), but also as the estrangement—or distancing—from the previously ordinary distress of living without a religion. From the physiological perspective explored by Seligman, the estrangement from the ordinary is manifested by a more effective, more resilient response to stressors. Initiated mediums can be triggered by life stressors as anyone else, but their physiological regulation is more effective in moderating stress responses, such as increased heart rate and cortisol production. This induces a calmer, more relaxed state of mind and body. Even though further progress in field-friendly physiological trackers should be made, Seligman's work is ground-breaking in measuring autonomic regulation to empirically ground claims on religion. In this sense, intentional religious transformation partially overlaps with self-healing. Indeed, the initiated individual is also a more resilient psycho-physical being.

If we represent this double movement in the previous graph, we obtain the graph of Figure 4.2:



**Figure 4.2:** Double-sided dynamics of religious experience.

The upward arrow corresponds to the encounter with the extraordinary present in the examples of Taves and Luhrmann. What is new, here, is represented in the downward arrow. Once the adept is fully initiated, what was extraordinary before (divinity) becomes the new normal (see the arrow of normalization on the right). At the same time, the old ordinary (a life of suffering) is estranged to the point of becoming the new extraordinary. Expressions like “*If I look back my previous life seems absurd*” are a manifestation of this process of estrangement and reappraisal of a whole life.

Before moving forward, I must clarify that this double movement is not specific to Candomblé. At different degrees, it can be found in many other religions.<sup>31</sup> For example, accounts of converted Christians depicting their previous life as a sinful state of absurdity and pain are abundantly documented. The reframing of life before conversion as a state of senseless, destructive, distress is quite typical. As Peter Stromberg highlights:

It is commonplace to observe that the experience of personal transformation that is often a part of the Christian Protestant conversion narrative includes an account of healing from some sort of emotional or physical distress [. . .]. the conversion narrative is often a story about how a believer transformed his or her motives from the destructive to the righteous.<sup>32</sup>

This reframing of life before conversion as the new extraordinary comes together with the realization that the new life of the converted is saner, healthier, and more righteous than the past. Hence, anthropological studies of the estrangement from life before conversion are not rare. What is missing, I claim, is an integration of this process in a general theory of religious experience.

This is not to state that in Taves and Luhrmann there is no recognition of these processes. On the contrary, I acknowledge that Taves’s and Luhrmann’s approaches leave room for this recognition. Luhrmann’s monography on Evangelical Christians provides rich empirical insights on the reframing of pre-conversion lives as extraordinarily senseless and exceptionally full of sorrow.<sup>33</sup> Taves, in her book *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*,<sup>34</sup> studies how some extraordinary events, such as ecstasies and apparitions, act as revelations catalyzing the start of new spiritual paths. These new paths are frequently framed as redemptions from a past life reappraised as extraordinarily destructive.

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<sup>31</sup> Perdomo 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Stromberg 2014, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Luhrmann 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Taves 2016.

This is the case, for example, of Bill Wilson, who cofounded Alcoholics Anonymous after having an ecstatic experience while hospitalized for alcoholism in 1934.<sup>35</sup>

In all these examples, we see rich empirical evidence and theoretical recognition that a form of estrangement from the pre-conversion life is in act. Nevertheless, this process is not integrated in an encompassing theory of religious experience.

Among the disciplines empirically engaging religious experience, most of the attention has been placed on the incorporation of the extraordinary, and less on the estrangement from the past ordinary. Nevertheless, I claim that these two processes are complementary and inseparable. In the second part of this paper, I will lay out some suggestions for the empirical study of the estrangement from the ordinary that, I argue, deserves to be approached in its specificity, and not as a mere by-product of the encounter with the extraordinary.

To illustrate my hypothesis, I will draw upon an autoethnography of Advaita Vedānta in Europe. The data I am presenting comes from a pilot-study, based on my personal practice in an ashram—or center of spirituality—in Europe from 2014 to 2019. To respect the privacy and spiritual policies of the place, I won't give any identifying information allowing to locate it. Also, my intent is to offer this case as an example of the multiple potential sites of empirical observation for the estrangement from the ordinary. As claimed above, I argue that this process must be deemed constitutive of any religious experience, rather than bounded to specific traditions.

I will focus on three components of the estrangement from the ordinary, according to three areas of empirical observation: perceptual reconditioning (1), interiorization of new habits of estrangement (2), and suspension of previous beliefs (3). I will use the example of Advaita Vedānta in Europe to outline a general theory of religious experience as a practice of subversion—or liberation from—the ordinary. While the term “liberation” overlaps with “subversion” here, I would specify that the degree of intentionality implied is different: it is higher in the notion of “liberation” than in “subversion.” For further inquiries, I would use liberation when the individual is actively affirming their distancing from the ordinary, while the term subversion is more apt to capture the intrinsic erosion of the hegemony of ordinary experience, which is less dependent on individual affirmation. As for the specificity of the Vedānta case, my ethnographic focus is not intended to bound my theoretical claims to the particularities of Advaita Vedānta, nor to the specificity of this particular fieldwork site.

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35 Taves 2016.

### 3 The Reversal of Ecstasy. Religious Experience as Liberation from the Ordinary

Like an insane person I ran out of our house. He asked me, ‘What do you want?’ I replied, ‘I want to remain immersed in *samādhi* [religious ecstasy].’ He said: ‘What a small mind you have! Go beyond *samādhi*! *Samādhi* is a very trifling thing.’ *Mahendranath Gupta*<sup>36</sup>

Contemporary Advaita Vedānta is a widespread spectrum of religious traditions originated in India and currently globalized. I decided to de-identify the ashram where I conducted my autoethnography to respect the wishes of its religious authorities, concerned with preserving the intimacy and sacredness of the place. As a general reference, this spiritual center belongs to a branch of the Advaita—or non-dualist—Vedānta tradition, stemming from a Hindu spiritual discipline. Nevertheless, in the form practiced in this site, Advaita Vedānta is presented as a universalistic spiritual practice. Not bounded to Hinduism, Advaita Vedānta is lived as a meta-religion embracing any other orientations, including atheism. Different theist and non-theist orientations are practiced in the ashram as variants of a shared spiritual sensitivity. Advaita Vedānta’s sensitivity, as expressed in this site, is based on the belief that the *ātman*, or individual inner self, is ontologically coincident with the Brahman, or the Absolute. The path of the adepts is to get detached from the material world, which is illusory (*māyā*), and realize their fundamental state of undividedness and ontological unity with the Absolute, or Brahman.<sup>37</sup> At the site of my study, the main scriptural sources are the Hindu classic *Bhagavad Gītā*, and Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra*. Conscious that globalized Vedānta entails adaptation and syncretism, I won’t engage in any textual discussion on Advaita Vedānta as a literary tradition. My main interest is to see how the current re-invention of this tradition is lived, engaged, and experienced in the life of a European ashram. The specificity of this case will provide an empirical illustration of three main components of the estrangement from the ordinary, which, I claim, is a constitutive process of any religious experience.

Empirically, the construction of a sense of estrangement, or “liberation” from the ordinary, takes place through perceptual, cognitive, and emotional shifts reshaping the experience of the adepts. In what follows, I will explore three main forms of reshaping: perceptual reconditioning (1), interiorization of new habits of estrangement (2), and suspension of previous beliefs (3).

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<sup>36</sup> Gupta [1942] 2002, 1125.

<sup>37</sup> Fowler 2002.

### 3.1 Perceptual Reconditioning

Anthropologically, rituals have been studied as the loci of production of the exceptionality of religion. Christian masses, shamanic trances, Candomblé spirit possessions provide perceptual and cognitive spaces to encounter the exceptionality of the divine. These encounters take place in well delimited areas, such as churches, shamanic tents or Candomblé *terreiros*. The consecration of a space, organized by distinctive ritual rules, defines the religious context as exclusive and marks the ritual event as distinct from the ordinary life. While the inner space of the ritual has been richly explored, its counterpart, i.e., the exo-space excluded from the ritual, is systematically overlooked by mainstream theories of religion. Even when it is acknowledged, it tends to be presented as a mere by-product, an “empirical leftover” of the ritual delimitation.<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, I will offer a counter-example where this exo-space is engaged as a relevant component of the ritual, and a core locus of production of religious experience.

The ashram celebrates New Year’s Eve in alignment with the Western secular calendar. The celebration starts on December the 30<sup>th</sup> at 9 pm, with the recital of a mantra for 24 hours without interruption. Volunteers take turns to ensure a constant presence in the chapel, where the mantra is recited. The celebration can attract hundreds of participants. Participants enter and exit the chapel to be part of the shared mantra recitation. The chapel is a sensorially saturated space, where the cradling vibrations of the mantra, the pervasive red and orange colors of the decoration and the olfactory intensity of incense embrace the adepts and attune their senses to a contemplative state of mind. Some describe this state of mind as “ego dissolution” or “state of unity,” in accordance with Advaita Vedānta principles. At the end of the recitation the swami, i.e., the leading monk, performs a puja, a devotional homage to a deity, generally the Hindu goddess Kali. The puja ends exactly at 23:30 pm. After the puja, all the participants observe 30 minutes of complete silence to contemplate the transition towards the New Year. This silent passage is the climax of the celebration.

It is during this silent climax that the exo-space of the external world enters the space of the ritual in a meaningful way. During four years of participation, I observed that this climactic silence is never intact. Fireworks and toasts from the external New Year’s celebration inevitably irrupt in the chapel, amplified by the silence of the participants. Far from being a matter of mere disturbance, these echoes from the ordinary world play a meaningful role in the ritual experience. Indeed, they never fail to elicit retrospective comments and reflections by the

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<sup>38</sup> Severi and Houseman 2009.

participants. Several hours of shared mantra in the chapel, followed by silence, produce a sensorial background of uniformity, cradling rhythmicity, and uninterrupted flow, which creates a sharp contrast with the discontinuous, fragmented, and dissonant irruption of mundane noise. As a participant, I remember perceiving the external celebrations as particularly disruptive, and hearing other participants sharing the same sensations after the end of the celebration. The appraisal of external festivities as intrusive chaos is a direct consequence of the perceptual conditioning cultivated in the chapel. Many participants are aware of this perceptual reconditioning and attribute a moral value to their sensorial transformation. They liken the process of religious self-transformation to the acquisition of a subtler spiritual sensitivity. The previously ordinary (here, New Year's lay celebrations) seems—and literally, sounds—more and more like a disruptive cacophony with respect to a perceived purer state of mind.

Perceptual reconditioning, interpreted as a sign of progress towards a subtler, higher state of mind, is common across religions. The reshaping of the senses, indeed, acts as a form of estrangement from the ordinary, which in this example is perceived as sensorially dissonant. Rather than being a by-product of ritual delimitation, the perceptual reshaping of the previously ordinary world (in this example, New Year's ordinary festivities becoming cacophonous) is lived as a meaningful component of religious experience. Perceiving as a disturbance what was previously deemed ordinary celebration, and sharing this perception with other participants, marks a sensorial turn, a perceptual shift likened to the acquisition of a higher state of consciousness. The more adepts re-attune their senses to the perceptual landscape associated to their religion, and share this experience, the more the previously ordinary is phenomenologically estranged.

At this point, a precision must be made. Even though external noise is not *produced for* the ritual, it is *engaged* by the participants as a meaningful component of their religious experience. As a ready-made object, found by chance but filled with meaning, external noise becomes the demarcation symbol of the previously ordinary life, which now is estranged. No matter if a component is deliberate or casual, the process of perceptual reconditioning leads to a distinctive demarcation from the old ordinary.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, the exo-space of the ritual is meaningful as it is recurrently engaged through comments, references, and reflections shared by the participants. The exo-space is the reference allowing

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39 See Karl Baier's contribution in this volume on intentionality and non-intentionality in intentional transformative experiences.

adepts to demarcate themselves from a discarded sensorial world identified as a lower form of life without religious experience.<sup>40</sup>

Processes of distinction and demarcation are not exclusive to religious experience. Nevertheless, they are constitutive of the construction of salience allowing an experience to be deemed religious. Hence, besides the encounter with the extraordinary represented by the sensorial world of the chapel, the estrangement from the ordinary, re-appraised as intrusive cacophony, is equally important to build and share a sense of religious experience.

### 3.2 Interiorization of New Habits of Estrangement

My second empirical focus is the acquisition of new habits of estrangement. I define “habit” as an interiorized disposition to act in a specific set of ways.<sup>41</sup> I will illustrate this point through an example regarding S., an aspiring monk at the time of my autoethnography. A Frenchman in his late twenties in 2018, S. was studying to become a monk and resided permanently in the ashram. The following episode comes from his retrospective account of going to a lay party outside of the ashram. As I did not record nor take notes at the time of this dialogue, I will report in third person. Nevertheless, this account has been read and confirmed by S.

One day, S. participated in an external birthday party organized by some of his old friends. He had not seen them for some years. His lay friends were extremely curious about his new lifestyle, and asked for explanations about his religion. S. wanted to be as transparent as possible about his experience. At the question: “What is your religion?” (*Quelle est ta religion?*), S. responded, with a certain perplexity: . . . “Well, I am. . . calm” (“*Bah. . . je suis. . . tranquille*”).

Later, when S. commented with me on this episode, he stated that the question took him by surprise. He said that he did not feel identified with any creed or affiliation, but simply grounded in an overall state of calmness. Hence, he tried to provide the most honest and transparent answer he could formulate: “I am calm.”

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<sup>40</sup> In this article I use “religion” for conformity with the tradition of anthropological theories of religious experience. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that many of the adepts mentioned in my ethnographic example would prefer the term “spirituality,” perceived as more apt to demarcate themselves from dogmatic forms of religion.

<sup>41</sup> This definition of “habit” partly draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” (Bourdieu 1977, 2000). Nevertheless, I prefer “habit,” as the lay term is polysemic enough to convey meanings associated to practice, disposition and tendency. All these components are co-present in the process of reshaping described here.



Analyzing this episode can be tricky. First of all, we must not misattribute S's response to a lack of theoretical elaboration. In more than 4 years of dialogue, I could assess that S. had a fine-grained knowledge of the doctrinal endorsements of his ashram and could provide a thorough explanation of what Advaita Vedānta is.

Also, this sentence must not be mistaken as a strategic understatement, downplaying religion as mere calmness to make it palatable for a group of partying adults. This was not, either, a variation on the current medicalization of Eastern spirituality, which tends to secularize meditative religions as a lay way to calm the mind.<sup>42</sup>

Instead, according to S., his friends' question sounded strange because in the ashram he had learned to distance himself from any form of identification with a creed or affiliation. He had not only suspended his identification with any Advaita Vedānta dogma, but also distanced himself from any other social identifier, including ethnicity, gender, and all the determinants considered indispensable to belong to a structured Western society. This sounded particularly surprising to his old friends. Indeed, from the perspective of many Western non-adepts, the endorsement of a creed is seen as an indispensable component of religious life.

This process of estrangement from the social determinants of ordinary life, such as creed, gender, ethnicity, and so on, tends to be stronger in older adepts and in those who are intensely dedicated to religious life. Indeed, through the eyes of S., the "normal," baseline condition is being de-identified and peaceful, hence "calm." Societal expectation about endorsing—and, in other religions, proselytizing—a creed are distanced and suspended. Here, the ordinary formatting of social identity through categories of belonging and creed is re-framed as the new exceptional, while religious life is described as a natural, neutral, unmarked default condition.

It is possible that, in S., the memory of societal expectations was still present at the moment of answering this question. It is plausible that he had an idea of the kind of answer expected by his friends. Nevertheless, even though he may have remembered that his friends expected a creed statement, his new habits of transparency and de-identification prevailed on his previously acquired skills. Rather than conforming to the old norms and providing a creed, he embraced his new habits and refused self-identification.

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<sup>42</sup> Kirmayer 2015; Cassaniti 2019.

### 3.3 Suspension of Previous Beliefs

The suspension of previous beliefs is directly connected to the acquisition of new habits of estrangement. Swami X, the leading monk at the time of my autoethnography, produced a vast number of conferences, lectures, and collections of thoughts. Regularly, Swami delivered a lecture on the principles of Advaita Vedānta and/or invited external lecturers, spanning from biomedical doctors to leaders of other religions (e.g., rabbis, nuns, pastors, Buddhist monks). The ashram functioned as a meta-confessional cultural center, where members of other orientations, including atheists, came to share similarities of practices and sensitivities, beyond creeds. At first sight, such extensive cultural activity may suggest a strong engagement with doctrinal theory. This is true and false. It is true in the sense that theological reflections were a regular practice at the ashram. It is false in the sense that theorization was practiced as a normal human proclivity, but never taken seriously as an exclusive way to access spiritual truth. A leitmotiv quotation circulating in the ashram stated:

Ignorance is like a plug in the foot. Knowledge is a second plug that helps you remove the first plug of ignorance. But, once you removed the first plug, you should get rid of all the plugs. You don't need anything more than your feet to walk.

This sentence reflects a specific attitude towards religious theorization, that I will call “suspended engagement.” In the ashram, elaboration on religious meanings was constantly practiced. Nevertheless, practice came with the caveat that no theory or product of the human mind must be taken as the ultimate truth or rigidified into a dogma. The act of theorizing was practiced, but interpreted as an inescapable human need, a coping response to the discomfort of the ultimate unknown. Theorizing, hence, was considered helpful to soothe the mind, with the caveat of not being rigidified into dogma.

This form of soft, playful engagement with theory is in stark contrast with the expectations that adepts find outside of the ashram. The act of expressing, defining, and identifying with a creed is expected in secular societies. Religion is frequently understood by secular societies, and mostly by non-believers, as a set of philosophical endorsements and/or as an identarian orientation. This expectation is evident in the previous example about the aspiring monk S. (5). On the contrary, the endorsement of a creed – religious, professional, intellectual, political or of any other sort – was perceived in the ashram as one of the unnecessary burdens of ordinary non-religious life.

Together with perceptual reconditioning (3.1) and the interiorization of new habits of estrangement (3.2), the suspension of previous beliefs (3.3) is a structural component of the estrangement from the ordinary that, I argue, is constitutive of

religious experience. As I stated before, anthropological literature on religion is abundant with empirical evidence of these processes. From conversion to enlightenment, religious experience cannot happen without some involvement of these kinds of processes.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, what is missing from current theory of religious experience is the recognition that the estrangement from the ordinary is not a mere by-product of the encounter with the extraordinary, but a distinct, co-constitutive aspect of religious experience deserving to be analyzed on its own. Therefore, it requires a specific set of analytical tools and an appropriate range of empirical focuses to be properly identified and explored. This is particularly relevant when we focus on intentional self-transformation. The intentional liberation from the ordinary entails a series of transformations, such as those highlighted here, which cannot be achieved only as by-products of a willed encounter with the extraordinary. Working on one's Self, and on one's Self-in-the world, entails intentional reflexivity on both sides. Focusing exclusively on one – or subsuming the other as a by-product – would entail a truncated intentionality unable to encompass these co-present facets.

## 4 Conclusions

In sum, I argue that the theory of religious experience should shift its focus from the encounter with the extraordinary to the estrangement from the ordinary. Religion, thus, can be explored as the space *from which* the ordinary is re-appraised as a new anomaly. Often absurd, arbitrary, sometimes cacophonous, or dissonant, always insufficient to achieve a full human development, the old ordinary is estranged by specific processes of distancing and reappraisal.

This theoretical shift would allow for recognizing the dynamic dialectic between what is deemed extraordinary and what is deemed ordinary. Rather than a fixed dichotomy, the extraordinary/ordinary divide is a porous threshold, continuously renegotiated through social dynamics such as conversion, enlightenment, and initiation. While recognizing the interplay of these two polarities is crucial, I argue that increasing the focus on the estrangement from the ordinary would correct a deeply engrained tendency to overlook this process as a mere by-product of the encounter with the extraordinary. As shown in the examples, the estrangement from the ordinary implies distinct dynamics and appropriated areas of empirical focus.

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<sup>43</sup> Perdomo 2022; Stromberg 1994.

In addition, refocusing on the estrangement from the ordinary would make the field of religious studies less compartmentalized, and more integrated to the rest of the social, psychological, and biological sciences approaching religion. As Jens Schlieter points out, cross-disciplinarity requires a common ground of epistemological compatibility across scientific communities.<sup>44</sup> Rather than the locus of exceptionality, religious experience can be explored as the daily process of subverting the ordinary. In this sense, religion would not be preferentially bounded to the confined space of events marked as religious (e.g., rituals, confessional statements), but expanded into a cognitive and emotional attitude reshaping all aspects of life, from going to a party to negotiating identity in everyday interaction. The three theories compared in this article successfully integrate different disciplines across the psychological/social divide, with particular attention to the encounter between cognitive sciences and social sciences (Taves), psychology and anthropology (Luhmann) and biology and anthropology (Seligman). What they have in common is a conception of human mind as a dynamic space beyond the individual brain, engaged in a constant process of co-creation with and *within* the environment. This line of approaches is currently being developed by enactivist orientations in anthropology.<sup>45</sup> Building on this line, I argue that an increased focus on the estrangement from the ordinary will allow to develop a more flexible understanding of religion as a cultural dynamic.

To conclude, some limitations should be considered. First, the extent of generalizability of this framework has still to be assessed. As stated, I used the European Advaita Vedānta autoethnography as a first-hand example, but I claim that the processes identified (perceptual reconditioning, interiorization of new estrangement habits and suspension of previous beliefs) apply to any religious experience. Adjustments are required to fit the specificities of each religious tradition. For example, I expect different habits of estrangement in proselytizing religions, and a different selection of beliefs to be suspended in dogmatic creeds. That said, even if the forms taken by the estrangement from the ordinary depend on the specificity of each religion, the process of estrangement is a constitutive feature of religious experience. A comparative assessment of the ways in which different traditions enact their estrangement from the ordinary is out of the scope of this article but would provide a coherent development.

Methodologically, the processes explored here are particularly suited for empirical approaches, especially for ethnography. Perceptual reconditioning (1), interiorization of new estrangement habits (2) and suspension of previous beliefs (3)

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<sup>44</sup> Schlieter 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Stromberg 2021; Lowe 2021.

are all approachable through qualitative as well as mixed methods research, and abundant evidence has been already gathered, even though not systematized in a comprehensive theory of religious experience. These processes are also particularly suited for biosocial methodologies, including physiological measurements, as pioneered by Seligman.<sup>46</sup> This paves the way for a further integration of religious studies into the global field of human research. Religion, therefore, should be explored as a constitutive part of social life beyond the enclosed space of what is publicly marked as religious. In this sense, the daily practice of subversion of the ordinary is not a matter of participation or creed, but rather an acquired attitude of dismantling and suspending the set of fluctuating expectations and practices that we call “culture” and “society.” This applies in particular to secular societies, but also to religious societies when a religious shift (e.g., conversion, revelation, enlightenment) catalyzes a renegotiation of the ordinary/extraordinary divide. Hence, religious experience can be explored as the process of acquiring an alternative perspective and engaging it to subvert every aspect of social life.

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<sup>46</sup> Seligman 2014.

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Part II: **Societal and Cultural Analyses  
of Intentional Transformative Experiences**





Joseph Azize and Steven J. Sutcliffe

## Chapter 5

# ‘Only This Will Bring Results’: Practising Gurdjieff’s Exercises in a Search Culture

Exercises, exercises, thousands and thousands of times. Only this will bring results.  
*G.I. Gurdjieff*<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Context

This chapter will examine the claim that “individuals actively search for transformative experiences, inducing consciousness-alterations through practices and reflecting critically on the long process as ‘experientialist philosophers’”<sup>2</sup> by focusing on the exercises taught by the Greek-Armenian teacher, G.I. Gurdjieff (1866?–1949), from 1915 until his death. However, Gurdjieff taught that people are metaphorically ‘asleep’ in their waking lives and that ‘consciousness-alteration’ was not possible until the subject first learned how to ‘wake up’. The quotation marks in the title of Gurdjieff’s posthumous collection of talks and essays, *Life is Real only Then, When I Am*,<sup>3</sup> indicate the goal of waking up: to become what Gurdjieff elsewhere calls ‘Real I.’ To achieve this end, Gurdjieff taught a number of exercises to the ‘experientialist philosophers’ who came his way, based in a form of training in proprioceptive sensitivity to the body and its manifold ‘states’. We examine the content of the exercises taught by Gurdjieff within an interwar context (1918–1939) of a search for meaning in an increasingly ‘post-Christian’ culture. This ‘search culture’ included Spiritualist, Theosophical and other proto-‘new age’ subjects and authorities who approached ‘religion’ in a ‘mystically’ and ‘spiritually’ inclined mode, includ-

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1 Gurdjieff, meeting nineteen, Paris, undated [December 1943?] in Anonymous 2009, 100.

2 A preliminary version of this chapter was presented by the second-named author at the conference ‘Intentional Transformative Experiences: Theorising Self-Cultivation in Religion and Philosophy,’ Institute for the Science of Religion, University of Bern, Switzerland, 28/8/21–30/8/21. But the roots go back to a symposium organised by Professor Carole Cusack at the University of Sydney, 3/12/19, under the title ‘Studying G.I. Gurdjieff: Scholars and Practitioners in Conversation’; our thanks to Carole for organizing this event and for introducing the authors in person.

3 Gurdjieff 1978.

ing significant Modernist writers, editors and musicians.<sup>4</sup> This culture was characterized by widespread questioning of truths mandated by established religions, the Christian churches in particular. A habitus of ‘seekership’ emerged in which subjects identified as ‘seekers’ and engaged with the multiple new authorities who were promising a ‘taste for things that are true.’<sup>5</sup>

Gurdjieff was not by any means the sole such authority in interwar search culture, but he is significant due to his contact with literary and artistic elites of the period and his more diffuse and enduring influence on the post-1960s ‘New Age movement.’<sup>6</sup> Many figures in the movement that arose around his work, including Gurdjieff himself as originator, P.D. Ouspensky (1878–1947) as follower, A.R. Orage (1873–1934) as associate, J.G. Bennett (1897–1974) as syncretizer and Jeanne de Salzmann (1889–1990) as anointed successor, self-identified as ‘seekers’ implicitly or explicitly. Such self-identification signaled an appetite to sift the real from the *ersatz*. Seekership as a *modus operandi* resurfaced in the post-1960s period where, in a Gurdjieffian context, the motif was reproduced in *Search: Journey on the Inner Path*<sup>7</sup> edited by Jean Sulzberger (1922–2016), a longstanding member of the Gurdjieff Society in New York. This anthology of writings was introduced by Henri Tracol (1909–1997) of the Gurdjieff Society in Paris in which he writes “Man is born a seeker”:

Equipped as he is by nature for vibrating to a vast range of impressions, is he not predestined to an endless wondering? Bound by necessity to select from these impressions those suitable for conscious assimilation—and thereby to approach a genuine perception of his own identity—is he not singled out for continuous self-interrogation?<sup>8</sup>

But Tracol warns against self-indulgence:

No real knowledge can ever be attained by mere chance [. . .] Letting oneself drift into persuasive ‘visions’ and ‘discoveries’ [. . .] or yielding to the spell of what could be called ‘search for the sake of searching’, is merely to indulge in daydreaming [. . .] Then how is one to set about an authentic quest? Instead of surrendering at once to the call of any partic-

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4 For examples, each of whom eventually found satisfaction in Gurdjieff’s teaching, see the New Zealand short story writer, Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923), the English editor of *The New Age*, A.R. Orage (1873–1934) and the Ukrainian composer, Thomas de Hartmann (1884–1956).

5 To cite the title of a collection of talks by the French Gurdjieffian, Henri Tracol (1994). Seekership is defined by Campbell (2002:15) as the behaviour of ‘persons who have adopted a problem-solving perspective while defining conventional religious institutions and beliefs as inadequate.’

6 Heelas (1996, 47–48) cites Gurdjieff as one of three key ‘context setters’ in New Age pedagogy alongside C.G. Jung and H.P. Blavatsky.

7 Sulzberger 1979.

8 Tracol 1979, xv.

ular 'way,' one should first try with humility to discern some of the prerequisites for setting off on the right foot.<sup>9</sup>

G.I. Gurdjieff (c. 1866?–1949) was born in Gyumri, Armenia, then part of the extensive Russian empire, and first came to public notice as an independent teacher in Moscow and St. Petersburg around 1912.<sup>10</sup> Attracted to Gurdjieff was a group attached to the writer and philosopher, P.D. Ouspensky, author in 1914 of a Russian bestseller later translated into English as *A New Model of the Universe: Principles of the Psychological Method in its Application to Problems of Science, Religion and Art*.<sup>11</sup> In the wake of the Russian revolution in 1917 and resulting civil war, Gurdjieff's group migrated to the Greek-Russian town of Yessentuki and then to Tbilisi in Georgia. In 1922 the group reformed at the Château Le Prieuré at Fontainebleau-Avon near Paris under the name 'The Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man.'<sup>12</sup>

The methodology of 'search' can be seen to begin already at the point where the reader starts to sift the evidence for Gurdjieff's biography and reputation and hence the reliability of his authority in search culture. Since the empirical evidence for much of Gurdjieff's early life is either incomplete or unreliable, the historiography has become colored by highly speculative and normative claims. Many of Gurdjieff's autobiographical assertions are unverifiable or fictionalized although perhaps were never intended to be understood other than metaphorically. This interpretation is implied in the subtitle of the biography by James Moore (1929–2017): 'the anatomy of a myth.'<sup>13</sup> As befits a 'mythic' biography, Gurdjieff's parentage, date and place of birth, and youthful travels are all disputed.<sup>14</sup>

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9 Tracol 1979, xvi.

10 Sutcliffe and Willmet 2020.

11 Ouspensky 1931.

12 Moore 1991; Taylor 2012.

13 Moore 1991.

14 Gurdjieff was probably born in 1866 (possibly later) in Alexandropol, now Gyumri, in Armenia (then under Russian control) to an ethnic Greek father and Armenian mother, and educated in Kars, a Russian stronghold acquired during the 1877–1878 war with Ottoman Turks (Moore 1991). Paul Beekman Taylor argues that Gurdjieff was the son of neighbors and informally adopted when the Gurdjieff family left Kars, assuming the identity of a deceased son (Taylor 2012, 161ff). The implication that Gurdjieff was in effect a 'changeling' enhances the myth through the folkloric motif of the coming of a savior wrapped in mystery and portent (Sutcliffe and Willmet 2020, 546). Scholarship on the wider Gurdjieff movement includes Webb (1980), Needleman and Baker (1996), Rawlinson (1997, 282–313), Cusack and Norman (2012), Cusack and Sutcliffe (2015) and a series of publications by Azize (for example: 2012, 2013, 2020).

The ‘myth’ is further complicated by the stylized narrative of *Meetings with Remarkable Men*,<sup>15</sup> one of three authorized texts in the Gurdjieff canon, which purports to be an account of Gurdjieff’s early life. *Meetings* appears to have been started in Russian in 1927, then translated into English under the direction of A.R. Orage (see above), but only published posthumously. The uncertainty of the length of time taken to compose in Russian, and also to translate into English, as well as the long wait until publication in 1963, means that it is unclear who exactly was able to read and comment on the typescript of *Meetings* and when. More saliently, it makes it difficult to explore the possibility of cross-fertilization between *Meetings*—particularly during the process of translating into English—and the content of a new interwar genre of ‘searches,’ ‘quests’ and ‘adventures.’<sup>16</sup>

In *Meetings* Gurdjieff narrates his travels in Egypt, Persia, Tibet, and Mongolia as part of a group called the ‘seekers of truth.’<sup>17</sup> There is little corroboration for his itinerary and no ‘seekers of truth’ can be reliably identified nor the ‘remarkable men’ whom they meet. The allegorical tone intensifies in Gurdjieff’s meeting with a certain ‘Father Giovanni,’ an ex-Catholic priest now resident in a monastery overseen by a ‘World Brotherhood’ into which “any man could enter, irrespective of the religion to which he had formerly belonged.”<sup>18</sup>

Among the adepts of this monastery there were former Christians, Jews, Mohammedans, Buddhists, Lamaists, and even one Shamanist. All were united by God the Truth [. . .] All the brethren [. . .] lived together in such amity that, in spite of the specific traits and properties of the representatives of the different religions, [we] could never tell to which religion this or that brother had formerly belonged.<sup>19</sup>

This describes a community that has rejected exclusivism and as such forms the ideal group for the sincere seeker. Read in this way, Gurdjieff’s narrative of the interaction between ‘seekers’ and ‘remarkable men’ becomes a metaphor for a normative search for a universal or perennial truth underlying the everyday experience of ethnic and cultural difference(s) in late modernity.

The narrative of *Meetings* also introduces the reader to an “elderly, intelligent Persian” whose intelligence is constituted “not only by knowledge but by *being*.”<sup>20</sup> ‘Being’ is contrasted with the “complete lack of any knowledge of reality and of any genuine understanding” found in contemporary (secular) European literature, which

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15 Gurdjieff [1963] 2015.

16 For example Brunton 1934; Landau 1935; see Sutcliffe 2024.

17 For a synopsis, see Cusack 2011, 78–83.

18 Gurdjieff 2015, 235.

19 Gurdjieff 2015, 236.

20 Gurdjieff 2015, 10; emphasis added.

in turn is compared unfavorably with the content of *The Thousand and One Nights* which “anyone hearing or reading [. . .] feels clearly that everything in it is fantasy, but fantasy *corresponding to truth*.”<sup>21</sup> The testimony to ‘being’ by the Persian elder encourages an interpretation of *Meetings* as a form of ‘reverse mission’ whereby Gurdjieff’s group, serving historically as the envoi of (unidentified) ‘remarkable men,’ brings post-Enlightenment and post-Colonial salvific knowledge back into Europe.

The difficulty of search as method (success is not guaranteed) explains the pignancy of Webb’s claim, in the introduction to *The Harmonious Circle* (his pioneering attempt to understand the Gurdjieff movement in the round) that a “biographer in search of the authentic Gurdjieff begins by suspecting a campaign of mystification” and even “a deliberate policy of obstruction.”<sup>22</sup> Webb probably exaggerates the obstacles due to his sensitivity to researching in a milieu in which Gurdjieff himself had died only twenty-five years earlier, many second-generation practitioners were still alive and active, and the official Gurdjieff Societies in London, Paris, New York and Caracas would be keen to protect their reputation during the popularization of so-called ‘new age’ and ‘esoteric’ teachings.

Access to Gurdjieffian groups and sources is changing slowly. In 2016 members of the Gurdjieff Society attended a research paper at the University of Edinburgh by Dr. John Willmetts about the Scottish-born psychiatrist, Dr. Maurice Nicoll (1884–1953), who began his ‘search’ as an associate of Carl G. Jung before switching allegiance to Gurdjieff and later Ouspensky. These members told Dr. Willmetts that “the [Gurdjieff] Society, though not anxious to invite the interest of those engaged purely in research, was open to those showing an appropriate personal interest.”<sup>23</sup> They put Dr. Willmetts in touch with a former senior member of the Gurdjieff Society in London which led to the acquisition of a private collection of Nicoll’s diaries by Edinburgh University research collections. But when Dr. Willmetts was invited to a gathering to explore conducting his own research within the group, he was politely but firmly rebuffed:

On being asked ‘what do you want?’ he [Willmetts] suggested that he wished to explore the possibility of entering ‘the Work’ [. . .] After further discussion, during which his [Willmetts] articulation of his view of his personal situation in Nicollian terms was dismissed as ‘mere words,’ the group leader concluded that he [Willmetts] would be better pursuing his studies by himself [. . .] When he found himself in unfortunate circumstances would be the correct time to make another approach, since he presently seemed [. . .] not to be in need of anything that the Society felt able to offer.<sup>24</sup>

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21 Gurdjieff 2015, 20; emphasis added.

22 Webb 1980, 11.

23 Willmetts and Sutcliffe 2016, 79.

24 Willmetts and Sutcliffe 2016, 79–80.

The authors were disappointed but in contrast to Webb's paranoia, concluded:

There seems to us no evidence for a 'wall of silence' on the part of current practitioners. As with many 'secret' or 'hidden' or simply 'private' groups, there appears instead to be a practical policy in place to safeguard important knowledge [. . .] This is an understandable position from the perspective of the need to create conditions to support a level of concentration necessary to master a subtle discipline such as 'the Work'.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the problems faced by the 'seekers after truth' in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* are reproduced in current challenges to both seekers and researchers in finding a reliable source.

As noted, Gurdjieff and his associates found themselves amongst numerous other interwar proponents of an ethics and practice of search. Indeed, an argument could be made that search is a ubiquitous historical and cross-cultural method. Walter Burkert has argued that search provides the "deepest deep structure" of some of the earliest known tales such as the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh<sup>26</sup> which also happens to be one of the stories sung by Gurdjieff's *ashok* father.<sup>27</sup> Many teachers promised 'mystical' or 'esoteric' instruction after the carnage of the 1914–1918 war and the search for fresh ideas and 'new starts' was formative for intellectuals, writers and artists in drawing rooms, salons and lecture halls in London, Paris and Berlin. These networks crossed boundaries between literary, political, psychological and religious domains and attracted cultural 'taste makers' as well as curious lay persons. To cite only figures with links to the Gurdjieff circle, in London the poet T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) and the psychiatrist Maurice Nicoll (1884–1953) attended talks by P.D. Ouspensky and lectures at the Quest Society by G.R.S. Mead (1863–1933) who was previously personal secretary to Madame Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society. Writers such as Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923)—who spent the last weeks of her life with Gurdjieff at Fontainebleau—and her husband, John Middleton Murry (1889–1957), and her rival Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), were amongst many literary modernists who agonized over questions of the meaning of the 'inner life.'<sup>28</sup> A.R. Orage began his search with the Theosophical Society, Nietzsche and Guild Socialism, before becoming editor of *The New Age* from 1907, then joining Gurdjieff in Fontainebleau in 1922<sup>29</sup> before finally becoming Gurdjieff's agent in the US.

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25 Willmetts and Sutcliffe 2016, 83.

26 Sutcliffe 2022, 217.

27 Gurdjieff 2015, 35–37.

28 Carswell 1978.

29 Martin 1967; Thatcher 1970.

A colorful picture of interwar search culture is given by Romauld (Rom) Landau in *God is My Adventure: A Book on Modern Mystics, Masters and Teachers*.<sup>30</sup> Landau was a Polish-English sculptor and writer who spoke at the 1936 World Congress of Faiths in London as a 'student of modern mysticism.'<sup>31</sup> *God is My Adventure* records Landau's meetings with various 'mystics, masters and teachers' in European cities in the 1920s and early 1930s including Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986), Meher Baba (1894–1969), Frank Buchman (1878–1961), Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) and—not least—Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. Landau was hostile to Gurdjieff but more positively disposed to Ouspensky and particularly to Steiner. The point here is less Landau's prejudices than the popularity of his narrative enquiry.<sup>32</sup>

Landau describes himself as someone who "since [he] was a boy" was "attracted by those regions of truth that the official religions and sciences are shy of exploring."<sup>33</sup> He describes his book as a personal selection of some of the "most interesting figures in contemporary spiritual life,"<sup>34</sup> whom he proposes to engage "not as the scholar but as the ordinary man who tries to find God in daily life."<sup>35</sup> His narrative is thus "the confession of an adventure [. . .] a search for God."<sup>36</sup> In the 1941 Faber reissue, Landau warms to this theme, attributing its success to the fact that "people are always eager to learn from the spiritual experiences of a *fellow seeker*."<sup>37</sup> Many of his readers, he claims, are "disillusioned by the Churches [and] only too willing to delve into the ways and methods of unorthodox schools of thought, yet without at the same time feeling compelled to accept this or that method as the only valid one."<sup>38</sup> He continues:

The seeker may, and indeed does, demand that those of whose findings he reads, should have a definite viewpoint of their own. But he will draw back as soon as he suspects that he is being pontifically forced by the author into accepting a certain point of view.<sup>39</sup>

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30 Landau 1935.

31 Millard 1936, 484.

32 *God is My Adventure* was reprinted seven times in the late 1930s before transferring in 1941 to the taste-making publisher, Faber and Faber, co-directed by T.S. Eliot. Here it underwent three reprints by 1945 and was still in paperback as late as 1964.

33 Landau 1935, vii.

34 Landau 1935, vii.

35 Landau 1935, viii.

36 Landau 1935, viii.

37 Landau 1943, 7; emphasis added.

38 Landau 1943, 7.

39 Landau 1943, 7.



Furthermore “none of the doctrines [. . .] had the monopoly of the ‘whole’ truth” but should be understood as “complementary to, rather than exclusive of, one another.”<sup>40</sup>

In these remarks Landau summarizes the presenting psychological features of interwar ‘search culture’: introversion, dissatisfaction, independence, exploration. Search culture forms a significant dimension of what the sociologist Colin Campbell later called the ‘cultic milieu’ to denote a sub-culture of heterodox religion from within which individual ‘cults’ were generated, and back into which most sooner or later dissolved. The concept shows that Campbell was less interested in specific ‘cults’ than in the features of the environment (the ‘milieu’) which facilitated their formation. A vital structural role was played in this milieu by seekers, whom he described as persons who have “adopted a problem-solving perspective while defining conventional religious institutions and beliefs as inadequate.”<sup>41</sup> Such persons, and the cultic milieu in which they operated, were “united and identified by the existence of an ideology of seekership and by seekership institutions.”<sup>42</sup> For Campbell, therefore, the activity of ‘seeking,’ captured in the 1930s by *God is My Adventure*, is not an idiosyncratic or aimless project but a socialized form of behavior typical of the ‘local’ cultic milieu, re-defined as a field of multiple co-existing religious authorities.<sup>43</sup>

## 2 Content

So far we have profiled search culture in the interwar period within which Gurdjieff himself, and many of his associates and descendants, positioned themselves and presented their particular ‘goods of salvation’ (*les biens de salud* to cite Bourdieu, following Weber). But how exactly was Gurdjieff’s teaching differentiated within this search culture, and what in particular did he offer that other authorities were perceived to lack? To address this question requires moving from the context of search culture, in which Gurdjieff perforce advertised his teachings, to the content of his practices. Gurdjieff’s ‘movements’ or ‘sacred dances’ formed part of his earliest public presentations in the 1920s and were also excerpted in Peter Brook’s 1979 film of *Meetings with Remarkable Men*,<sup>44</sup> so these practices are relatively well-known. In contrast Sophia Wellbeloved, a member of the Gurdjieff

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<sup>40</sup> Landau 1943, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Campbell 2002, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Campbell 2002, 19.

<sup>43</sup> For a fuller account of Landau and the interwar ‘guru field,’ see Sutcliffe (2024).

<sup>44</sup> Cusack 2011.

Society in London c. 1962–1975, describes the teaching of certain exercises ‘to relax unnecessary tensions’:

These exercises always began with the muscles of the face. Sensing exercises in which attention is transferred from one part of the body to another, exercises in which movements were made in conjunction with moving the attention internally in the body, these exercises could be further complicated through repetition of words and through breathing patterns.<sup>45</sup>

Full details of these and related exercises have since been made public in the work of Joseph Azize<sup>46</sup> and in the publication of transcripts of Gurdjieff’s group meetings between 1935 and 1946.<sup>47</sup> The practical significance of these exercises, only hinted at by Wellbeloved,<sup>48</sup> is becoming clearer. Until recently they were hardly discussed. The obvious exception is the ‘Stop’ exercise which is found in Gurdjieff’s earliest teaching as a ‘special exercise’ for exposing one’s automatism:

At a word or sign, previously agreed upon, from the teacher, all the pupils [. . .] have to arrest their movements at once, no matter what they are doing, and remain stockstill in the posture in which the signal has caught them. Moreover not only do they cease to move, but they must keep their eyes on the same spot at which they were looking at the moment of the signal, retain the smile on their faces [. . .] keep the mouth open [. . .] maintain the facial expression and the tension of all the muscles of the body exactly in the same position in which they were caught by the signal. In this ‘stopped’ state a man must also stop the flow of his thoughts and concentrate the whole of his attention on preserving the tension of the muscles in the various parts of the body [. . .] watching this tension all the time and leading [. . .] his attention from one part of the body to another.<sup>49</sup>

That various other exercises were being taught by Gurdjieff, especially during his mature years, is indicated in the 1949 diaries of visits to Gurdjieff by J.G. Bennett and Elizabeth Bennett, first published in 1980 as *Idiots in Paris*.<sup>50</sup> John Bennett’s entries in particular suggest that exercises tailored to specific individuals, including himself, were being taught by Gurdjieff in his final years. In his first entry, dated July 23, 1949, Bennett notes that he has just completed a “thirty hours’ fast” following which he “spent an hour on my knees.” During this period, after forty minutes he writes: “I found I had the power to reach the Collected State [. . .] [in

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<sup>45</sup> Wellbeloved 2003, 75.

<sup>46</sup> Azize 2013, 2017, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Anonymous 2009, 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Wellbeloved 2003, 75–76.

<sup>49</sup> Ouspensky 1950, 353. The stop exercise was included in Gurdjieff’s public demonstrations of the Movements of Sacred Dances in Paris in 1923 and New York in 1924. For more on the Movements, which are certainly ‘practices’ but not ‘exercises’ in the sense described here, see de Dampierre (1996), Azize (2012) and Van Dullemen (2014).

<sup>50</sup> Bennett 1980.

which] I began to sense my existence differently.” He adds “I am not sure that I am *doing it rightly*, so I hope I shall have a *chance of asking*.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, Bennett is practicing an exercise which, he recognizes, requires subtle proprioceptive correction in person with Gurdjieff to achieve its goal. A week later Bennett describes leading a group reading of the manuscript of *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*<sup>52</sup> during a ‘seminar’ held at Bennett’s center in Coombe Springs near London. The forty participants were evidently following a stern regime:

We started at 8 p.m. on Friday and finish at 8 p.m. on Monday [. . .] We do a 6-hour cycle—4 hours reading, 2 hours for eating, sleeping, etc. Of the two hours, *half an hour is given to Movements*. On the whole everyone is standing up to it very well.<sup>53</sup>

The aim of this ritual reading is, in Gurdjieff’s terminology, to engage all three ‘centers’ or ‘brains’ of the human being—emotional, physical, intellectual—to avoid a merely intellectual engagement with the text. Two days later Bennett records: “The effort of attention for the reading was sometimes almost beyond my power [. . .] my tongue got swollen and I had to keep drinking cold water to prevent it from being cut by my teeth.”<sup>54</sup> On August 5<sup>th</sup> he describes his “intensity of effort” over the past week: “not more than 3 and a half hours’ sleep, exercise\* several times a day.”<sup>55</sup> On the evening of August 22<sup>nd</sup> Bennett describes kneeling “for an hour – 20 minutes with arms out sideways – and the first half hour I made the utmost effort to reach and keep the necessary state. I did not succeed, but I did the exercise better than before.”<sup>56</sup> Here, as with his first entry on the ‘collected state,’ the inference is that Bennett knows what to expect to experience but that he must proprioceptively fine-tune his practice to achieve it.

Between *Idiots in Paris* in 1980 and the publication more than 30 years later of the ‘Four Ideals’ exercise,<sup>57</sup> scant information on Gurdjieff’s exercises has been publicly available. And yet their practice appears to be essential if the practitioner is to realize what Bennett calls “the necessary state.” The epigram to this chapter—“Exercises, exercises, thousands and thousands of times. Only this will bring results”<sup>58</sup>—echoes Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

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51 Bennett 1980, 1; emphasis added.

52 Gurdjieff 1950.

53 Bennett 1980, 11; emphasis added.

54 Bennett 1980, 14.

55 Bennett 1980, 19; the asterisk in the original text indicates “inner or spiritual exercise.”

56 Bennett 1980, 40.

57 Azize 2013.

58 Anonymous 2009, 100.

Gurdjieff’s pedagogy emphasizes the practical realization of different human “states.” The exercises are designed to help achieve what Gurdjieff variously called the state of “self-remembering,” and, in his later years, the “collected state” as described above, in which a person’s many fluctuating “I’s” or “selves” are to be brought under the influence of a more stable and permanent individuality or “I.”<sup>59</sup> To achieve the valued state of ‘being,’ the exercitant must attain to this ‘collected state’ which can be recognized by the ability it confers to take or refrain from appropriate action in any circumstance. The profile Gurdjieff increasingly gave to the ‘collected state’ coincided with the ‘contemplation-like’ exercises<sup>60</sup> which he taught in the last fifteen years of his life to ‘collect’ one’s dispersed attention and energies.<sup>61</sup>

The first phrase Gurdjieff coined for these exercises as a whole was ‘Transformed-Contemplation.’ This umbrella term first appeared in his idiosyncratic publication, *Herald of Coming Good*,<sup>62</sup> but may have been programmatic as there is no evidence Gurdjieff had commenced teaching any such practical exercises.<sup>63</sup> Gurdjieff withdrew this booklet and seems never to have used the phrase otherwise. Rather, he began to refer to ‘exercises’ *simpliciter* and did not distinguish between what Azize finely differentiates as “exercises,” “tasks” and “disciplines.”<sup>64</sup> These exercises were presented as a practical method by means of which to ‘do’ (i.e., to practise) ‘The Work’ as Gurdjieff’s system was known. Using Gurdjieff’s terminology, these methods consist in:

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59 There are intermediate stages in which destructive selves are sloughed off and fewer, more mature selves come to dominate: see the parable of the disordered house “in which there is a multitude of servants but no master and no steward” and where “the servants have all forgotten their duties; no one wants to do what he ought; everyone tries to be a master, if only for a moment”; as a result “the house is threatened with grave danger” (Ouspensky 1950, 60). Eventually, through practice many “very ordinary stupid small ‘I’s’ [ . . . ] became impossible” (Ouspensky 1950, 380; here Ouspensky speaks from his own experience).

60 Azize 2020, 3.

61 Gurdjieff’s meetings in the 1940s contain many references to ‘self-remembering’ and the ‘collected state’ (Anonymous 2009; Gurdjieff 2020), but the latter phrase is not found in the earlier Russian teaching contained in *In Search of the Miraculous* (Ouspensky 1950) or in *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (Gurdjieff 1950).

62 Gurdjieff 1933.

63 For more on Gurdjieff’s comments on ‘Transformed-Contemplation’ in *Herald*, see Azize (2020, 119–24).

64 Azize (2020, 7) differentiates between ‘tasks’ as “occupations for the mind or body that were given on a particular occasion” and ‘disciplines’ as “occupations for the mind or body [ . . . ] to be used over a period of time.”

internal practices designed to shift the exercitant out of a habitual state, using attention and intention to coordinate and develop their three centres, i.e. their faculties of mind, feeling and sensory awareness (including awareness of the breath) [ . . . ] in order to assimilate, transform and coat very fine substances in the exercitant's body.<sup>65</sup>

In *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation and Exercises*, Azize<sup>66</sup> argues that Gurdjieff intended his exercises to function as aids for the 'crystallization of the soul' in the exercitant.<sup>67</sup> Gurdjieff was rarely so theologically explicit and more often averted to the need variously to 'remember oneself,' to collect one's attention, to come to one's own presence, or to have what he called the sense of 'I am.'<sup>68</sup> The American Modernist writer and publisher Jane Heap (1887–1964), a personal pupil of Gurdjieff who taught his system in the US, Paris and London, wrote in her notebook: "Gurdjieff says we have no real consciousness—he saw however that we have states of consciousness." Heap reflected that this "seems contradictory, but it is because we cannot think *in terms of method*. We think in ordinary categories."<sup>69</sup> That is, one can become aware of the variation in consciousness produced by one's varying states when one is able to observe oneself through a practical method. 'Consciousness' and 'state' are not reversible in this equation, for according to Gurdjieff, people have relatively little consciousness in most of their states, as Heap's notes suggest: "Fragments of consciousness not consciousness—but such as we are—can experience very different worlds—Our states similar to climate—When negative we live in quite a particular inner climate, happy mood different climate."<sup>70</sup> According to Heap, the distinctiveness of Gurdjieff's teaching therefore lies in his aim "to attain to a state of self-consciousness which we now assume [ . . . ] that we possess—Gurdjieff does not assume (as do other mystical and occult methods)—that we are self-conscious at all."<sup>71</sup>

In further French transcripts from 1944, Gurdjieff related the affirmation 'I am' both to the aim of his system as a whole and to the exercises for achieving that aim. On 13 February 1944 he said:

I now repeat that it is necessary to pay special attention to the exercise which each group has received, and to use the exercise as often as possible. This is the 'I AM' exercise. Without this exercise, one will never arrive at real 'I AM'.<sup>72</sup>

65 Azize 2020, 6–7.

66 Azize 2020, 69, 297–98.

67 Azize 2020, 298.

68 Azize 2020, 298.

69 Heap 1994, 135; emphasis added.

70 Heap 1994, 135.

71 Heap 1994, 128.

72 Gurdjieff 2020, 102. Translation from the French here and below by Joseph Azize.

Gurdjieff repeatedly emphasises the need to practice for success. On 4 February he said:

There exists a law: no work is accomplished in vain [ . . . ] In the meantime, you have a way, a protector, a saviour: 'I AM.' Each time you have some doubt, an idea (that it is hopeless) or something like that, relax, remember yourself, and say: 'I AM.' These things [doubt, etc.] prevent you from keeping on the straight path, they make you go off to the right or to the left. But 'I AM' will bring you back to the way.<sup>73</sup>

Similarly, on 22 February:

The exercise which we have prepared this evening is very important for the 'I am.' It will help you to enter more deeply still into your present (*présent*). You (now) feel 'I am' only with your head, not yet with all your presence. It is already something to sense it with your head, but when one can sense it with all one's being, there is no greater treasure. You will find a complete (*pleine*) satisfaction when you can really sense yourself with your whole presence.<sup>74</sup>

The 1944 French transcripts further establish the importance of the affirmation 'I am' in Gurdjieff's later teaching. But how to affirm the phrase with 'whole presence' had to be learnt through practice since Gurdjieff insisted that no one use his exercises without making the effort to 'remember themselves'; that is, if affirmed with the intellect alone, the phrase would have no effect.<sup>75</sup> The centrality of 'I am' to Gurdjieff's teaching, and the effort to realize the collected state to which it pertains is shown by the fact that it was being taught by Gurdjieff in his final days.<sup>76</sup>

The constant aim of the exercises is to achieve a state in which one's three main functions (intellect, feeling, and physical sensation), each considered by Gurdjieff to operate with its own "center" or "brain,"<sup>77</sup> are simultaneously consciously embraced, producing a unitive sense of presence and individuality which gives the sense of 'I am.'<sup>78</sup> The 'collected state' is therefore a three-centered, integrated consciousness: hence the name 'Institute for the *Harmonious* Development of Man.'<sup>79</sup> The experience of the sense of 'I am' could also be described as an active, *collecting*

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<sup>73</sup> Gurdjieff 2020, 82–83.

<sup>74</sup> Gurdjieff 2020, 112.

<sup>75</sup> Gurdjieff 2020, 53–54, 95.

<sup>76</sup> Azize 2020, 296–97.

<sup>77</sup> Ouspensky 1950, 54–55.

<sup>78</sup> The prototypical 'I AM' statement is Exodus 3: 14. There is no evidence of connection between Gurdjieff's 'I Am' and the I AM movement of Guy and Edna Ballard in the 1930s. There are I AM references in other (very different) sources such as J. Middleton Murry's *To the Unknown God* (1924) within literary modernism and Eileen Caddy's *God Spoke to Me* (1971) in 'New Age' circles, but with no connection to either Gurdjieff or Ballard.

<sup>79</sup> Ouspensky 1950, 380; emphasis added.

(not merely *collected*) state. This is the implication of Jane Heap's observation that Gurdjieff's method of self-observation, defined as "the *impartial* awareness of the behavior of one's *own* body while it is taking place," is "a catalytic agent towards normality [. . .] *Catalytic because it does not produce direct results but enables more results to be produced.*"<sup>80</sup> There is an intimate connection between the practice of self-observation and the achievement of self-remembering. Gurdjieff described self-observation as "the function of the master"<sup>81</sup> or, in a different formulation but meaning the same, 'real I.'<sup>82</sup>

Interpreting Gurdjieff across some thirty-five years, several languages, complex source types, and fluid terminology is a challenging task. Arguably an underlying metaphysical coherence can be glimpsed in the following lines of poetry cited by Gurdjieff in *Life Is Real, Only Then, When 'I Am'*:

If all men had a soul  
Long ago there would have been no room left on earth  
For poisonous plants or wild beasts,  
And even evil would have ceased to exist.

The poem implies that the aim of Gurdjieff's 'Work' is to create a 'soul,' not as a 'lazy fantasy' or a 'luxury for the indulger in suffering,' but as 'the determiner of personality,' 'the way and the link to the Maker and Creator' and as 'testimony of the merit/Of the essence of eternal Being.' The poem ends:

Leader of the will,  
Its presence is 'I am,'  
It is part of the All-Being,  
It was so and always will be<sup>83</sup>

These 'ancient Persian verses,' whether authentic or coined by Gurdjieff himself, convey the inter-connection between the production of a sense of 'I am' through assiduous practice of the exercises, and the coming into possession of a soul or a 'higher body.' Note the link in the poem between the consciously created soul, the 'Maker and Creator,' and 'All-Being.' Gurdjieff expressed a similar idea to Maurice Nicoll, "Behind real I lies God,"<sup>84</sup> and, from notes at Fontainebleau, "Self-love is 'I.' 'I' is God."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Heap 1994, 128; emphasis in original.

<sup>81</sup> Anonymous 2014, 378.

<sup>82</sup> Anonymous 2014, 250–52.

<sup>83</sup> Gurdjieff 1978, 160.

<sup>84</sup> Nicoll 1997, 14.

<sup>85</sup> Anonymous 2014, 242.

Azize has argued that Gurdjieff developed these exercises because he felt that his earlier methods were not working.<sup>86</sup> This seems in part based in his personal experience: in the (undated) prologue to *Life Is Real Only Then When 'I Am,'* he despairs that he has not been able to “reach a state where the functioning of my psyche in my usual waking state would flow in accordance with the previous instructions of my active consciousness.”<sup>87</sup> Although exercises were alluded to in the earliest years, the evidence suggests that Gurdjieff did not develop them until after 1930.<sup>88</sup> This interpretation is supported by analysis of unpublished correspondence between J.G. Bennett and the American Modernist writer Jean Toomer (1894–1967). Toomer had spent three periods studying with Gurdjieff at Fontainebleau in the 1920s but was not taught any exercises. But on 17 February 1953, he writes to J.G. Bennett (discussed above):

*What I did not know until first you and then J. de S. [Jeanne de Salzmann] said so, is that right in the Gurdjieff work are to be had inner exercises and practices that gradually enable one to relax and to relax down to the deep relaxation. What good news!*<sup>89</sup>

Toomer's letter dwells on the personal impact of these newly revealed exercises. On page three, he eulogizes: “If want [sic. ‘what’] you are receiving now had been available to me, and to others including [A.R.] Orage, ten, fifteen years ago!” On page 4 of a letter of 19 January 1953, Toomer refers explicitly to ‘new practices’ which seem to be the exercises for relaxation, conscious sensation, and feeling ‘I’ described above. In a letter of 16 May 1953, Toomer again expresses his regret—“If only I’d been taught this years ago”—and his postscript attests to their corporeal impact: “Definitely there are more sensations in my body, and definitely I have more ability to make and maintain contact with them.”

The French transcript of a meeting on 25 February 1944 encapsulates the corporeality of Gurdjieff's pedagogy:

The exercise which you are doing will give you real ‘I AM.’ You could say ‘I AM’ for ten years with your head, but not with your whole presence. It is the preparation for an exercise thanks to which you will be able to actualise ‘I AM,’ even during your sleep. Now it does not exist, it is absolutely automatic. But we have a super-consciousness, and with this exercise you will be able to pass the night in this super-consciousness (*super-conscience*). Today

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<sup>86</sup> Azize 2020, 300–5.

<sup>87</sup> Gurdjieff 1978, 20.

<sup>88</sup> Azize 2020, 99–111.

<sup>89</sup> Emphasis added. This and the following citations from Materials Related to Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, Jean Toomer Papers (JWJ Mss 1), Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Jeanne de Salzmann (1889–1990) worked closely with Gurdjieff and established the Gurdjieff Society after his death.



you do not really exist. You are a piece of meat, and bad meat which cannot even be cooked, at that. I received a ham today, and it is worth more than twenty people. This exercise is very difficult at the start, but little by little, it becomes easy. For the last exercise, there will be twenty-one things to do at the same time. For example, I have shown you a picture (*tableau*) where the people are doing forty-nine things at the same time, but we are doing less than half of that.<sup>90</sup>

The significance of this passage is three-fold. First, Gurdjieff speaks of ‘super-consciousness’ where he previously spoke of ‘sub-’ or even ‘un-’ ‘conscious’, indicating his awareness of the fluidity of these terms in contemporary psychological discourse.<sup>91</sup> Second, realizing the state of ‘I am’ can only be achieved through incremental practice which ‘little by little’ transforms the ‘bad meat’ of the human organism. Third, if the subject attempts these exercises within their ordinary state, they will merely reinforce ordinary psychological associations. To realize in practice a ‘three-centered’ consciousness, the exercitant must integrate the ‘super-consciousness (*super-conscience*).’

We can identify three proprioceptive dimensions to the practice of exercises such as ‘I Am’: relaxed sensation of the physical body, active sensation to bring the exercitant’s body into their conscious awareness, and a ‘spiritualized’ sensation related to the assimilation of the breath and the arousal of feeling.<sup>92</sup> To practice these aims, three classes of exercise can be discerned: (1) the collected state exercise given in various forms, as discussed, (2) preparatory and assisting exercises to deepen the experience of the collected state exercise, and (3) advanced exercises which can only be done when ‘in’ the collected state. These correspond to the three exercises published in *Life is Real Only Then, when ‘I Am’*: the ‘Soil Preparing Exercise’ is preparatory, the ‘First Assisting Exercise’ is a simplified form of the Collected State Exercise, and the ‘Second Assisting Exercise’ is a template for advanced exercises. Logically ‘preparatory’ exercises should come first. But it seems that Gurdjieff began with the Collected State so that his students could visualize their aim. The preparatory exercises could then deepen their understanding.

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<sup>90</sup> Gurdjieff 2020, 117. What Gurdjieff refers to by picture (*tableau*) is not clear; it may be a movement recently taught to the group.

<sup>91</sup> On the prevalence of psychology in popular culture and literary-artistic circles in the early twentieth century, see Chapter One, ‘Practical Psychology’ and Chapter Three, ‘After the New Age’ in Thomson (2006).

<sup>92</sup> ‘Spiritualized’ refers to the third force in Gurdjieff’s ‘Law of Three’ which describes the basic laws—affirming, denying and reconciling—which create the real world: “this third independent force is [. . .] the *spiritualizing* and reconciling source of every World formation” (Gurdjieff 1950, 1139; emphasis added).

There are several examples of this latter exercise in Gurdjieff's published texts. As discussed in Azize,<sup>93</sup> the 'Genuine Being Duty Exercise' given by Beelzebub to his grandson Hussein in *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (Gurdjieff 1999 [1950]) counts as a preparatory exercise because, as Beelzebub tells Hussein, it "prepar[es] yourself for the future" as a "responsible three-brained being":

At your age it is indispensably necessary that every day, at sunrise, while watching the reflection of its splendour, you bring about a contact between your consciousness and the various unconscious parts of your general presence. Try to make this state last and to convince the unconscious parts—as if they were conscious—that if they hinder your general functioning, they, in the period of your responsible age, not only cannot fulfil the good that befits them, but your general presence of which they are part will not be able to be a good servant of our COMMON ENDLESS CREATOR and by that will not even be worthy to pay for your arising and existence.<sup>94</sup>

This exercise has an aim (to fulfil one's obligations) and a feeling element (to receive the splendour of dawn) which jointly facilitate contact between one's consciousness and 'various unconscious parts.' In short, attention is simultaneously directed into different but complementary proprioceptive tasks.

The paradigmatic preparatory exercise is 'preparing the soil.' A version of this exercise was described by Gurdjieff in New York probably in December 1930:

First, all one's attention must be divided into approximately three equal parts; each of these parts must be concentrated on one of the three fingers of the right or the left hand, for instance the forefinger, the third and the fourth, *constating* in one finger—the result proceeding in it of the organic process called 'sensing', in another—the result of the process called 'feeling', and with the third—making any rhythmical movement and at the same time automatically conducting with the flowing of mental association a sequential or varied manner of counting.<sup>95</sup>

This exercise teaches how to raise physiological sensation to consciousness. More basic is an exercise designed for those who can 'remember their aim, but have no strength to do it':

Sit for a period of at least one hour alone. Make all muscles relaxed. Allow associations to proceed but do not be absorbed by them. Say to them: 'If you will let me do my business now, I will later grant your wishes'. Look at associations as another being to keep from iden-

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<sup>93</sup> Azize 2020, 132–33.

<sup>94</sup> Gurdjieff 1999, 78. This is the 1950 version; a shorter form already appears in the 1931 manuscript (Azize 2020, 132–33).

<sup>95</sup> Gurdjieff 1978, 113; the term 'constating' is traced in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary to the French *constater* in 1773, meaning 'to establish, ascertain, state' with the sense of establishing a fact.

tifying yourself with them. At the end of an hour take a piece of paper and write your aim on it. Make this paper your God. Everything else is nothing. Take from your pocket and read it constantly everyday. In this way, it becomes part of you. At first theoretically, later actually.<sup>96</sup>

Also preparatory is the exercise called ‘There Are Two Parts to Air.’ Dated 6 February 1931 in New York, Gurdjieff instructs the exercitant to consciously assimilate the ‘higher substances’ available in their in-breath. This ‘good part of air’ is that which ‘gives vivifyingness to “I”’:

The secret of being able to assimilate the involving part of air [the in-breath or inhalation] is to try to realize your own insignificance, and the insignificance of those around you. You are mortal and will die some day [ . . . ] Your neighbour [ . . . ] will also die [ . . . ] At present most of your suffering is ‘suffering in vain’ which comes from a feeling of anger and jealousy towards others [ . . . ] Put yourself in the position of others. They have the same significance as you [ . . . ] Only if you always see this insignificance until it becomes a habit whenever you see anyone, only then, you will be able to assimilate the good part of air and have a real ‘I.’<sup>97</sup>

As for many interwar heterodox teachers, beathing is a crucial component of Gurdjieff’s exercises although, as here, the exercitant is instructed not to interfere with the breath. Breathing practices in contemporary search culture often involved holding or exhaling breath in recondite ways. Gurdjieff taught only observation of breathing. For example, Jean Toomer writes to J.G. Bennett on 16 May 1953 to say that he was told by his teacher, Henriette Lannes (1899–1980), that “G. [Gurdjieff] said breathing must not become shallow, must be and remain normal while doing the exercises, normal relative to the needs [of] one’s organism.” One week later, on 26 May 1953, Toomer writes reflexively: “In my experience when the inner work is done properly, the breathing spontaneously becomes deeper and more rhythmical.”<sup>98</sup>

Gurdjieff improvised various other preparatory exercises for particular students, including exercises for the ‘three centers,’ a ‘filling-up’ exercise, and a counting exercise.<sup>99</sup> An ‘Exercise for Active Reasoning’ to ‘influence yourself through suggestion’ shows the influence of Gurdjieff’s early studies of hypnosis.<sup>100</sup> The ‘Atmosphere Exercise’ of 3 August 1944 is an interesting example:

<sup>96</sup> Anonymous 2014, 407.

<sup>97</sup> Anonymous 2014, 412.

<sup>98</sup> Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library: Materials related to Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, Jean Toomer Papers (JWJ Mss 1).

<sup>99</sup> Azize 2020, 191–93, 199–200, 207.

<sup>100</sup> Azize 2020, 204–5.

You represent to yourself that you are surrounded by an atmosphere. Like the earth, man also has an atmosphere, which surrounds him on all sides, for a metre, more or less [ . . . ] Your atmosphere is displaced in the direction in which your thought moves. [ . . . ] When you do this exercise, you represent to yourself that this atmosphere has limits [ . . . ] Then you concentrate all your attention on preventing your atmosphere from escaping beyond the limit [ . . . ] When you feel your atmosphere quietened, without waves, without movement, then with all your will you suck it into yourself—you conserve yourself in this atmosphere.<sup>101</sup>

Another example is the ‘First Assisting Exercise’ from December 1930 in which the exercitant is enjoined (in elaborate prose) to ‘imagine’ attaining the state of ‘I am’:

If the ordinary man [ . . . ] will, with conscious striving for the formation in himself of the genuine data which should be in the common presence of a real man, correctly and frequently pronounce these same and for him as yet empty words [‘I am’] [ . . . ] he may thereby ultimately through frequent repetition gradually acquire in himself a so to say theoretical ‘beginning’ for the possibility of a real practical forming in himself of these data.<sup>102</sup>

The fullest version of Gurdjieff’s exercises is simply called ‘The Preparation.’ The basic framework consists in consciously sensing one’s body in a relaxed state, being aware of feeling, and holding the intellect poised but not associating with external objects, other than to follow the instructions for each particular exercise.<sup>103</sup> Details and foci might change to meet specific needs of exercitants. For example, the exercise ‘Make Strong! Not Easy Thing’ foregrounds conscious awareness of the breath<sup>104</sup> as does ‘Exercise for Feeling’ taught by Jeanne de Salzmänn (1889–1990) which ends with the words ‘Lord Have Mercy.’<sup>105</sup> In autumn 1979 George Adie taught his Sydney group the ‘Colour Spectrum’ exercise which consists in rotating one’s awareness around the entire body and visualising selected body parts (sometimes the whole body) as suffused with coloured light.<sup>106</sup> The ‘Clear Impressions’ exercise, taught by Adie in 1980, alternated the practise of the ‘Collected State’ with rotation of the head with eyes open, in order to continue to receive visual impressions but refusing to associate with them.<sup>107</sup> Adie described the pedagogical aim as

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**101** Anonymous 2009, 148–49; Azize 2020, 194–96.

**102** Gurdjieff 1978, 133–34; Azize 2020, 151–52.

**103** Azize 2020, 273–76, 279–83.

**104** Anonymous 2014, 413; Azize 2020, 178–79.

**105** De Salzmänn 2010, 73; Azize 2020, 217–18.

**106** Azize 2020, 253–58. The English architect George Adie (1901–1989) visited Gurdjieff in Paris in the late 1940s and became a core member of the Gurdjieff Society in London. He subsequently emigrated to Sydney where he established a group in direct lineage to Gurdjieff (Azize 2015).

**107** Azize 2020, 261–65.

to become “free from thought” with “the windows of my eyes open, receiving impressions without words or explanations.”<sup>108</sup>

Gurdjieff also taught more difficult exercises which assume achievement of the collected state by the exercitant and therefore include not only ‘receiving’ energy (or force) but ‘sending’ it elsewhere. Among these exercises are the ‘Web’ or ‘Network Exercise’ taught in Paris on 25 May 1944<sup>109</sup> and the ‘Help for the Deceased Exercise’, taught perhaps as early as 1939 in New York.<sup>110</sup> Probably the most complex is the ‘Four Ideals,’<sup>111</sup> taught to George Adie on 1 October 1948, in which the exercitant attempts to contact four transcendent ‘ideals’ (named Christ, Buddha, Muhammad and Lama) which are visualised as being located above the exercitant in order to attract into the latter’s body the ‘higher substances’ produced by the prayers of their respective followers.<sup>112</sup> Gurdjieff may have taught an early version of this exercise to Olgivanna Lazovich (1898–1985) who later married the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1920 or 1921. Lazovich reports Gurdjieff’s instruction:

It is good to go to church because the building is filled with pure emanations. Open your circle then let them penetrate into your atmosphere; be completely relaxed; stay within yourself and receive. You will be purified by the inflow of vibrations of higher materiality.<sup>113</sup>

Lazovich duly frequented the Hagia Sophia mosque: “It was always beautiful there. I tried to receive the purity which permeated their temple of worship.”<sup>114</sup> This indicates that Gurdjieff had formulated the key ingredients of the ‘Four Ideals Exercise’ as early as 1920–1921: in particular, the possibility to receive ‘vibrations of higher materiality’ through strategic participation in a traditional religious institution. But it is also significant in how it differs from the ‘Four Ideals’ as later taught to George Adie: for example, there is no indication that Gurdjieff first taught Lazovich the Collected State exercise.

It is difficult to convey the granularity of concentration, stability of proprioceptive focus and sheer stamina required to practice the more advanced exercises taught by Gurdjieff. They require, first, the internal amassing by the exercitant of a ‘fine energy or force’ and, second, the capacity to direct this force externally.

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<sup>108</sup> Azize 2020, 265.

<sup>109</sup> Anonymous 2009, 135; Azize 2020, 200–2.

<sup>110</sup> Azize 2021.

<sup>111</sup> Azize 2020, 231–33.

<sup>112</sup> Adie’s notes, including a diagram of the cosmology, are reproduced in Azize (2013, 200–3).

<sup>113</sup> Fawcett-Yeske and Pfeiffer 2017, 39.

<sup>114</sup> Fawcett-Yeske and Pfeiffer 2017, 40.

The ‘Second Assisting’ exercise from *Life is Real Only Then, When ‘I Am’*<sup>115</sup> is a good example of the demands made. The exercise begins with the exercitant internally sensing a selected body part whilst externally interacting with others as normal. As Gurdjieff narrates:

I am now sitting among you [ . . . ] and although I am looking at Mr L. yet I am intentionally directing all my attention, which you are not able to see, on my foot, and consequently any manifestation Mr L. produces within my organ of vision I see only automatically—my attention, which at the present moment is one whole, being in another place.<sup>116</sup>

Gurdjieff then divides his attention into two parts. Using the first part he becomes aware that some of the air he inhales remains within his body after exhalation “gradually penetrating inward [ . . . ] spreading through my whole organism.” He then directs the second part of his attention to his ‘head brain’ where he detects “the arising of something very fine, almost imperceptible” which is nevertheless a “definite ‘something’ arising from [ . . . ] associations of previously consciously perceived impressions.”<sup>117</sup> The exercitant is thus taught to access a ‘very fine’ substance in the ‘head brain’ which can then be helped to ‘flow directly into [their] solar plexus’, to form the seat of ‘I am.’<sup>118</sup>

### 3 Conclusion

Analyzing the content of Gurdjieff’s exercises as a specific practical method for ‘intentional transformation’ within an interwar search culture can help us to understand how the Gurdjieff movement both differed from, yet was structurally invested in, a ‘cultic milieu’ (Campbell 2002) co-constituted by a *habitus* of seekership and multiple religious authorities. The exercises taught by Gurdjieff—which, in order to ‘bring results,’ should be done “thousands and thousands of times”<sup>119</sup>—offered a practical means in an often nebulous environment through which some form or degree of transformation could be achieved by a determined ‘seeker’. Practicing by means of specific exercises a sense of a ‘collected state’, taught ‘orally’—that is, in person—and often tailored to specific needs, was a distinctive ‘find’ for seekers in interwar search culture and, by extension, formed an invitation for those seekers who came (and continue to come) in subsequent iterations of search culture.

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115 Gurdjieff 1978.

116 Gurdjieff 1978, 140.

117 Gurdjieff 1978, 141.

118 Gurdjieff 1978, 141.

119 Anonymous 2009, 100.

It could also be argued that the achievement of the ‘collected state’ is not an end in itself but a reinterpretation, by Gurdjieff, of the Orthodox Christian method of *theosis*,<sup>120</sup> in the sense that, as Gurdjieff said to Maurice Nicoll, “Behind real I lies God.”<sup>121</sup> Azize has already explored some resonances of Gurdjieff’s teachings with Hesychast traditions although to fully relate Gurdjieff’s system to *theosis* would require a lengthy study.<sup>122</sup>

Gurdjieff consistently said that to understand his approach required a preliminary stage of education or re-education.<sup>123</sup> Arguably this is the rationale for his paucity of ideas and may explain the appearance of a ‘bricolage’ of components in the development of the teaching of ‘The Work.’<sup>124</sup> Perhaps Gurdjieff was experimenting with his materials to find the right form of presentation to catch the attention of distracted seekers in a world of psychological uncertainty and religious crisis. In any case his exercises became a key component of his overall method and while they were never at the forefront of his outreach into search culture, for those who committed to his system, it would appear that they worked.

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120 Coates 2020.

121 Nicoll 1997.

122 Azize 2020, 88–94.

123 “In order to make possible the rounded perfecting of a man, a special corresponding correct education is indispensably necessary for each of these three parts, and not such a treatment as is given nowadays and also called ‘education’” (Gurdjieff 1999,1191). See also ‘Reflexes of Truth’ dated 1914 (Anonymous 2014, 23–25).

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Magdalena Kraler

## Chapter 6

# Two Kinds of Experiences: Modern *Prāṇāyāma* Between the Context of “Science” and “Self-Culture”

*Prāṇāyāma* (lit. “breath control”) as a means to induce transformative experiences has a long-standing history in South Asia.<sup>1</sup> The notion of *prāṇa* (a term to denote both vitality and breath) that includes the life-sustaining act of breathing seems to unveil human relationship to life at large. The idea to control the breath in order to gain extraordinary powers and superhuman capacities is deeply rooted in South Asian traditions. As the fourth limb of Patañjali’s yoga, it is a crucial tool on the yogi’s path to enlightenment. But also in medieval Haṭhayoga its importance is supreme, and some texts even state that *prāṇāyāma* may directly lead to *mokṣa* or final liberation. Clearly endowed with soteriological potential, in its more preliminary stages it is also highly therapeutic in nature: *prāṇāyāma* is said to cleanse the physical and subtle body, and to steady the mind. Today, yoga is one of the most widely spread health-oriented and religious regimen that involves bodily practices, breath-related and meditative techniques, spiritually-inclined awareness practices, and proprioception<sup>2</sup> as a central tool to establish the practitioner’s sense of self. Although modern postural yoga is by far more popular than modern *prāṇāyāma*, breath practices and the cultivation of meditative states through the breath are still conceived as central to yoga in the popular imagination. In general, modern *prāṇāyāma* continues the legacy of premodern practices, but also embraces various influences from Euro-American contexts such as hegemonial discourses of science, the influence of hygienic culture, “American Delsartism,”<sup>3</sup> and New Thought. The idea that *prāṇāyāma* induces

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1 I would like to thank Prof. Karl Baier for his guidance in the process of my *prāṇāyāma* research, and the editors for their helpful comments on this chapter.

2 The term proprioception refers to the sensing of the relative *position* of body parts, the *strength* of muscles as well as the *movement* of the body and limbs (Despopoulos and Silbernagl 2003, 316).

3 In a collaborative research project, Kelly Jean Lynch, Maria Meindl, Selma Landen Odom, Libby Smigel, Carry Streeter, and me discuss why “American Delsartism” is not an apt term for the movement (it does not represent the broadness of the movement in terms of race, gender, or internationality). This will yield a forthcoming publication in *Women’s Innovations in Theatre, Dance, and Performance*, co-edited by Colleen Kim Daniher and Marlis Schweitzer.

transformative experiences can be derived from premodern yoga. But I will argue that the modern developments helped to shape *prāṇāyāma* in a way that two different kinds of contextualising these experiences gained prominence. In this innovative endeavour, I focus on the period between 1850 and 1945, the time-span in which seminal transitions between premodern and modern yoga are evident.

As said, two contexts will bring the ambivalent position of experiences made through *prāṇāyāma* within modern yoga to the fore. The first one is the notion of experience in a kind of (1) pseudo-scientific—or one could also say “basic”—empiricism postulated by Vivekananda and others as the fountainhead of religion (section 3). In the work of Vivekananda, the idea of experience (Skt. *anubhāva*) or “direct perception” is so central that it is considered more important than the authority of sacred scriptures.<sup>4</sup> As a highly influential concept of modern yoga, Vivekananda’s “spiritual empiricism,”<sup>5</sup> also affects the way how *prāṇāyāma* as a means to induce transformative experiences was legitimised in wider contexts of modern yoga, including the evidence-based medical yoga that Swami Kuvalayanaanda tried to establish in Lonavla’s science labs. The second context that I will highlight is (2) the influence of Euro-American hygiene on the developments of modern *prāṇāyāma* (section 4), in which breathing techniques were part of a larger set of “technologies of the self” (in Foucault’s and, by extension, Sarasin’s sense). The form of experience aimed at in these contexts revolves around individual self-development on various human levels. Hygiene, so-called American Delsartism, New Thought, and yoga form an alliance in which technologies of the self—practised by the self for the self—gained prominence. From c. 1900 onwards, the term “self-culture” is applied to Pātañjalayoga, the most prestigious form of yoga at the turn of the century.

The decidedly marked difference between these two kinds of contextualising experiences, is that the science context aims to objectify experience, thus trying to legitimise it as part of scientific discourse, whereas the hygienic context is mainly interested in the transformative effects within the boundaries of the self. However, it should also be made clear that it is not possible to completely disentangle these two kinds of contextualisation of experience from each other: context (1) also acknowledges the importance of individual experience—indeed it is the very base of this form of empiricism; and context (2) is also tied into a larger framework with discursive patterns of legitimising specific practices while dismissing others. In both contexts, *prāṇāyāma* is viewed as a transformative experi-

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4 Rambachan 1994.

5 De Michelis 2004, 168.

ence in the sense that it can bestow magical powers (as in Vivekananda), produce extra-ordinary sense-perceptions (as in Kuvalayananda and Behanan; section 3), or broaden the vision of one's own self-perception (as in Stebbins, Ramacharaka, Sarkar, Yogendra; section 4).

If two ways of contextualising *prāṇāyāma* experience is the main problematising move in this chapter, I also want to highlight two aspects that bring additional tension into this discussion. This is the tension between a particular script of codified outcomes of *prāṇāyāma* found in premodern Haṭhayoga and yoga-related texts that is frequently reiterated in modern yoga; and the individual experiences gained from practice (including their mental, psychological, and proprioceptive levels) that are hardly mentioned within modern yoga in the time span under study. From a discursive perspective, reiterations from Haṭhayoga texts were used to make statements in modern yoga authoritative. Despite Vivekananda's focus on direct perception as the fountainhead of religion, he also rendered practices authoritative through linking them with tradition. In fact, Vivekananda heavily drew on a codified list of magical powers (*siddhis*) to demonstrate *prāṇāyāma's* potency. This tendency also seemed to have eclipsed reports of personal experiences through the practices—which could have appeared rather petty or unimportant compared to the expected miraculous outcomes of premodern times.<sup>6</sup>

It may come as a surprise that *prāṇāyāma* manuals up to the 1940s rarely mention personal accounts of experiences made through the practice. We do not have extensive reports such as Gopi Krishna's experience of *kuṇḍalinī* rising.<sup>7</sup> This makes it somewhat challenging to discuss the notion of experience in this context because it is mainly addressed in the texts on a metalevel (as in Vivekananda and Kuvalayananda) or it is directly converted into *instructions* that presuppose personal experience gained through practice to make them effective (as in Kuvalayananda, Stebbins, Ramacharaka, Yogendra). Despite this ambiguity, I argue that *prāṇāyāma* must also be viewed as a bodily practice that engages and develops a practitioner's self-perception. Various kinds of sense perceptions are part of experiences made through *prāṇāyāma* that also enable the practitioner to learn this intricate practice: one detects subtle shifts in proprioception that often also reflect changes on the mental and psychological levels. From a praxeological point of view, Haṭhayoga texts miss crucial guidelines that address these subtle changes. They were, however, filled in by an oral transmission between teacher and student in premodern practice, whereas, within modern yoga, studying yoga

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<sup>6</sup> See also the interesting case described in Keith Cantú's chapter in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> See the chapter of Marleen Thaler in this volume.

from printed manuals became inflationary.<sup>8</sup> But in the history of modern *prāṇāyāma* it is not before the texts of T.K.V. Desikachar and B.K.S. Iyengar in the 1980s that these kinds of guidelines became part of the *written* material. Given the importance of proprioceptive shifts from a praxeological viewpoint, I will highlight these aspects, wherever mentioned, both in the scientific and hygienic self-culture contexts. I will now briefly expound on premodern *prāṇāyāma* practice followed by a discussion of seminal changes within *prāṇāyāma* in modern yoga.

## 1 Significance of *Prāṇāyāma* in Pātañjalayoga and Haṭhayoga and its Transformative Effects

Though some forms of breath control existed already in Vedic contexts,<sup>9</sup> *prāṇāyāma* gains even more significance in some of the later classical Upaniṣads,<sup>10</sup> and clearly so, in Pātañjalayoga (lit. “the yoga of Patañjali”).<sup>11</sup> As has been noted, breath-related practices are of crucial importance in premodern yoga. In Pātañjalayoga, *prāṇāyāma* is placed rather at the beginning of the eightfold path. After establishing moral standards, i.e., a codex to be followed (*yama* and *niyama*), and a firm seat (*āsana*), *prāṇāyāma* is the next step. It is certainly for a reason that *prāṇāyāma* has often been ascribed a bridging function between the more preliminary “outer” (*bahiraṅga*) limbs and the more advanced “inner” limbs (*antaraṅga*). As Pātañjalayoga attests, it is an effective means to calm the mind and prepare it for higher concentration practices of yoga (*dhāraṇā*).<sup>12</sup> Already here it becomes evident that the breath acts as an intermediary between the body and mind, and it helps to develop both physical and mental capacities.

The focus in Haṭhayoga was mainly on breath retention (*kumbhaka*).<sup>13</sup> Generally, *prāṇāyāma* played a twofold role: it promised mundane benefits, i.e., health-

<sup>8</sup> Green 2008, 287.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the *Atharvaveda* (c. 1500–1000 BCE) describes the joining of two breaths to attain immortality (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 128).

<sup>10</sup> For example, the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* (400–200 BCE; cf. Cohen 2018, 13) includes *prāṇāyāma* into a sixfold (*ṣaḍaṅga*) system of yoga that likely gave rise to later eightfold (*aṣṭaṅga*) systematisations of yoga as in Patañjali (Zysk 1993: 205).

<sup>11</sup> According to Philipp Maas (2013, 61), the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* can roughly be dated to have originated between 325 and 425 CE.

<sup>12</sup> *Yogasūtra* 2.52–2.53; Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 141–42.

<sup>13</sup> The earliest known Haṭhayoga texts date to the eleventh century (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, xl; Mallinson 2020). A codified system of eight types of *prāṇāyāma* was referred to as the

and wellbeing-oriented goals on the one hand and soteriological or liberation-oriented ones on the other. These goals represent various stages on the yogis path, and they should be conceived as a continuum rather than discrete opposites. In its preliminary function, *prāṇāyāma* was therefore utilised to cleanse, purify, and strengthen the physical and subtle body.<sup>14</sup> It was said to bring about *nāḍīsuddhi*, or the purification of *nāḍīs* (subtle “channels” in which *prāṇa* flows). The technique mostly associated with it was alternate-nostril breathing.<sup>15</sup> *Nāḍīsuddhi* was also conceived as a prerequisite to successfully practising breath retention.<sup>16</sup> Even the three Ayurvedic humours (*doṣas*) can be balanced through *prāṇāyāma*.<sup>17</sup> An important feature here is *prāṇāyāma*’s capacity to effectively heat and cool the body to regulate dysfunctional body temperature caused by specific diseases.<sup>18</sup> Besides their effects on health, certain techniques like *bhastrikā*—which involves a controlled form of hyperventilation that is followed by breath retention—promise the rising of *kuṇḍalini*.<sup>19</sup> Mastery of *prāṇāyāma*, which results in a spontaneous breath retention (*kevalakumbhaka*), was a prerequisite for *samādhi*, “the highest state of cognitive refinement” and the final step in eightfold Pātañjalayoga and Haṭhayoga.<sup>20</sup>

The underlying logic of the practices is often explained through concepts that are deeply rooted in the religious history of South Asia. The notion to steady the mind through the breath is ancient and is, among other sources, described in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.2 (c. 800–500 BCE)<sup>21</sup> which states that the “mind is tied to the breath.”<sup>22</sup> The central meaning conveyed is that when the breath moves, the mind is also active, thus, conversely, breath control has a profound effect on the fluctuations of the mind to the point that they come to a temporary halt. This notion was charged with additional potency within Haṭhayoga and became ex-

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eight *sahitakumbhakas* (“accompanied retention”), or simply, eight *kumbhakas*, from the sixteenth-century *Haṭhapradīpikā* onwards (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 131; Mallinson 2011, 777).

14 Mallinson and Singleton (2017, 171) state that various features of the yogic subtle body have “varying levels of empirical existence” and are thus addressed and manipulated either through physical techniques and/or visualisation.

15 Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 129–31.

16 *Haṭhapradīpikā* 2.20; Digambarji and Kokaje 1970, 44.

17 *Yogayājñavalkya* 8.32–35; Mohan 2000, 104–105; Birch 2018, 23; Mallinson 2011, 777.

18 The idea that *prāṇāyāma* produces heat or *tapas* (a notion that is also related to extreme forms of ascetic practice) in the body reaches back to Vedic times, and *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* 2.52 states that *prāṇāyāma* is the best type of *tapas* (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 142).

19 *Haṭhapradīpikā* 2.66; Digambarji and Kokaje 1970, 64; Mallinson 2011, 777.

20 Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 323; Birch and Hargreaves 2015, 18.

21 Dating according to Cohen (2018, 16).

22 Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 138.

tremely influential up to the modern period. *Prāṇāyāma* is also said to bestow *siddhis*—or “signs of successful practice” to the yogi. For example, these *siddhis* imply that the yogi is imparted a beautiful appearance, voice, and pleasant smell.<sup>23</sup> They also include being able to walk through space—i.e., they space-travel or fly—through concentration (*dhāraṇā*) on the *ākāśa tattva* or ether/space element,<sup>24</sup> and many other feats.

All these are reported outcomes of *prāṇāyāma* that are mentioned in premodern texts, and in building on these traditions, also in modern yoga texts.<sup>25</sup> The standardised effects are based on the logic of the *prāṇa*-mind nexus, subtle body schemes and the Sāṃkhya-Yoga ontology that presupposes the cyclical modification of “subtle” and “gross” elements (*tattvas*) constituting material reality (*prakṛti*) as we perceive it.<sup>26</sup> Since, in the modern period, we do not assume to have the same epistemic frameworks that were constitutive for Pātañjalayoga and Haṭhayoga, their actual relevance—and perceivability—may have drifted in the background. Nevertheless, they are frequently referred to. The positive outcomes of quietening the mind, balancing the humours, and equalising the flow of *prāṇa* in the nostrils and the *nāḍīs* are more accessible features that are likely experienced if a practitioner establishes a regular practice. Yet these outcomes of the practices are also codified as evidenced by the many reverberations of these statements in various texts of the modern period. Now, a few general remarks on how *prāṇāyāma* changed in the modern period are due.

## 2 The Shift from Premodern *Prāṇāyāma* to Modern *Prāṇāyāma*

Modern yoga scholarship agrees that there was a shift from premodern to modern practices that started to become evident during the second half of the nineteenth century. It is already around 1850 that new forms of practices derived from Euro-American hygiene, concepts of the physical sciences<sup>27</sup> and biochemistry as well as biomedical knowledge start to trickle in. A prominent example re-

23 *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 2.13; Olivelle 1998, 419; *Yogayājñavalkya* 5.21–22; Mohan 2000, 73–74.

24 *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā* 3.68–81; Vasu 1895, 26–29.

25 E.g., Vivekananda 1896, 224–26; Sivananda [1935] 1962, 43–46, 108.

26 Larson 1987, 53, 86.

27 The physical sciences as well as materialistic and anti-materialistic scientific discourse were important backdrops for how the notion of *prāṇa* was conceived (Zoehrer 2021, 100; Kraler 2021, 374).

garding biomedical influence is *A Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy* by N.C. Paul<sup>28</sup> in which the reduction of carbon dioxide is portrayed to be the central interest of the yogi and his “human hibernation.” In several case studies, Paul tries to show that yogis were able to survive being buried alive for several days or even weeks.<sup>29</sup> In this extraordinary state, the beating of the heart and breath frequency was significantly reduced through inserting the tongue in the mouth cavity (*khecārimudrā*) in combination with advanced *prāṇāyāma* practice.<sup>30</sup> Regarding his theory on the importance of carbon dioxide reduction, Paul drew on the research of Karl von Vierordt’s *Physiologie des Athmens: Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Ausscheidung der Kohlensäure*,<sup>31</sup> whose “Physiology of Respiration” documented self-experiments with breath retention in various times of the day and under varying weather conditions.<sup>32</sup> Paul’s yoga theory revolving around the role of carbon dioxide in the outbreath accounts for the scientification of *prāṇāyāma* from the very outset of its modern developments.<sup>33</sup> Simultaneously, it aims to capture the extra-ordinary—one may call it “magical”—yogic feat of hibernation. The tension between objectifying *prāṇāyāma* through CO<sub>2</sub> measurements to describe and document yogic powers foreshadows the ideas, experiments, and tendencies of twentieth-century yogis like Swami Kuvalayananda, as will be shown (section 3).

Within early modern yoga, understanding the phenomenon of breath and related practices as meaningful starting points for personal (non-objectified) transformative experiences also gained ground. The concept of the link between the breath, emotions, and states of mind by the Swedish seer and scientist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) was easily to be reconciled with the ancient *prāṇa*-mind nexus mentioned above. Already in 1849, Swedenborg’s personal accounts on his intense breath-related experiences were likened to the breath practices of the “Hindoo yogi.”<sup>34</sup> From childhood onwards, Swedenborg’s religious experience was induced by what he called an “internal” or “interior respiration.” A report

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28 Also known as Nobin Chander Paul in Anglicised Bengali, or Navīn Candra Pāl in Hindi.

29 Paul [1851] 1882, iv, 54–57.

30 Paul [1851] 1882, 28.

31 Vierordt 1845.

32 Vierordt 1845, 66–89; cf. Paul 1882, 3, 5, 8–9.

33 Paul had additional sources that cannot be discussed in detail here. Suffice it to say that the Bengali physician grounds parts of his theory of hibernation and the application of biomedical terminology, though inexplicitly, on *Observations on Trance: Or Human Hybernation* (1850) by the Scottish surgeon James Braid (1795–1860) (Baier 2009, 249).

34 Wilkinson 1849, 80.



from Swedenborg's *Spiritual Diary* (written between 1747 and 1765, published in English in 1883) is worth quoting in full:

I was thus during many years, from the period of childhood, introduced into such respirations, especially by means of absorbing speculations, in which the breathing seems to become quiescent, as otherwise the intense study of truth is scarcely possible. Afterwards, when heaven was opened to me, and I was enabled to converse with spirits, I sometimes scarcely breathed by inspiration at all for the space of a short hour, and merely drew in enough of air to keep up the process of thinking. Thus I was introduced by the Lord into interior respirations.<sup>35</sup>

Swedenborg's experience of "interior respiration," "tacit respiration" or "holding his breath" happened both deliberately and involuntarily; it served him to understand the functions of the heart and lungs (which he correlated to the "will" and "intelligence," respectively), and to communicate with "angelic societies."<sup>36</sup> The seer also observed that most human beings do not become aware of the life-sustaining act of breathing.<sup>37</sup> He could therefore be seen as an early advocate of breath awareness practices. The similarities between Swedenborg's "internal breathing" and *prāṇāyāma* as spontaneously occurring breath retention (*kevala-kumbhaka*) can easily be determined. Quieting the breath and bringing it to a contemporary halt to profoundly affect the mind are the deciding factors. However, what Swedenborg added to the already existing idea of the link between the breath and cerebration was highlighting the ever-changing flow of breath in wakefulness as influenced by the *emotional* state of a human being. This is a theme that became highly successful in modern yoga.<sup>38</sup>

Returning to the details of *prāṇāyāma* and various ways to practise it, its importance as breath *retention* was already waning by the late nineteenth century. As has been alluded to, in 1851, N.C. Paul still understood *prāṇāyāma* as controlling respiration *and* circulation, i.e., as a means to reduce the beating of the heart. Notwithstanding the application of medical concepts, his definition of *prāṇāyāma* was basically Haṭhayogic. Soon after, "slow, steady, and synchronous breathing" gains currency.<sup>39</sup> It applies to much of what is taught in modern yoga within the framework of *prāṇāyāma*. A similar concept that was extremely widespread in Euro-American contexts, but also in India, was "deep breathing." It helped to fight pulmonary tuberculosis and, by gradually getting rid of the restrictions of

<sup>35</sup> Swedenborg 1883, 70.

<sup>36</sup> Swedenborg 1883, 23, 70–71.

<sup>37</sup> Swedenborg 1883, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Kraler 2022, 117–19.

<sup>39</sup> Basu [1887] 2004, xlvi.

the corset, women were strongly advised to practise deep breathing.<sup>40</sup> These moderate practices that become part of the *prāṇāyāma* set are often combined with breath awareness and relaxation, and they are employed to enhance health as well as mental and physical poise. Nevertheless, the importance of Haṭhayogic practices like some of the eight *kumbhakas*, *kapālabhāti* or rapid breathing, and alternate-nostril breathing is retained.

As to the expected outcomes of the practices in the modern period, there is, as mentioned, a greater continuity than in the practices itself. Crucial themes like practising *prāṇāyāma* for health benefits persist, although the contexts of the health issues to be tackled may have changed due to modern lifestyles. As mentioned, a highly prevalent theme is the idea that *prāṇāyāma* calms the mind. Though it may be surprising, several modern yogis state that *prāṇāyāma* is an indirect or even direct tool to liberation (*mokṣa*, *kaivalya*) or liberation-in-life (*jīvanmukti*).<sup>41</sup> In general, the way *prāṇāyāma* is presented is never devoid of a spiritual framework, and the practices' religious potential is often brought to the fore when the superiority of *prāṇāyāma* to other breath exercises in Euro-American contexts is stressed.

This section has shown that, at the dawn of early modern *prāṇāyāma*, both Paul and Swedenborg's legacy ushered in a new era of how the practice was conceived. On the one hand, in Paul's case, we see a strong focus on biochemical concepts to explain the efficacy of the practices including yogic "hibernation" through *prāṇāyāma* and related techniques. This is significant since up to then, the efficacy of *prāṇāyāma* was mainly explained through *nāḍī* physiology.<sup>42</sup> Paul's argument ensured constructing *prāṇāyāma* as a practice with *measurable* outcomes that tended to objectify the (magical and transformative) experiences made. The scientification of yoga was further strongly driven by exponents of the Arya and Brahma Samaj as well as the Theosophical Society<sup>43</sup> which further anticipates Vivekananda's yoga as science and Kuvalayananda's yoga experiments. Swedenborg, on the other hand, pointed at the transformative capacities of "internal breathing," and postulated the interrelatedness of respiration and cerebration. In a way, this confirmed what yoga's long-standing history had assumed, but the idea that the mind *and* emotions are affected and can be observed in their specific functions during breath quiescence comes clearer to the fore. Consequently, in Swedenborg and his legacy we see tendencies to advocate for breath awareness practices not documented in premodern yoga. Significant changes

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<sup>40</sup> Summers 2001, 75–77, 107.

<sup>41</sup> Kraler 2022, 27, 442.

<sup>42</sup> Alter 2005, 123.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Nanda 2010.

within modern *prāṇāyāma* also include a decline in the importance of breath retention in favour of more moderate practices, giving ground to concepts such as deep breathing and the spread of Euro-American breathing exercises. We shall now proceed to contextualise the notion of experience within contexts that promoted yoga—and *prāṇāyāma* as one of its crucial techniques—as an ancient science.

### 3 Science: *Prāṇāyāma* as part of Vivekananda’s and Kuvalayananda’s Empiricist Notion of Experience

Born Narendra Nath Datta (1863–1902) to a well-off family in Calcutta, Swami Vivekananda renounced the world and became one of the key figures of modern yoga. In his youth, he was a disciple of the illiterate Bengali saint Paramahansa Ramakrishna (1836–1886) who was known for his spontaneously occurring mystical experiences, which were often referred to as *samādhi*.<sup>44</sup> For Ramakrishna, religious experience was the fountainhead of religion and its defining aspect that transcended doctrinal boundaries. However, before joining Ramakrishna, Vivekananda also followed Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884) who had created the role model of the “yogi-scientist.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Sen who belonged to the Brahma Samaj that promoted a “scientific religion” had already established the idea of direct experience as the focal point of religion to the extent (though paradoxically for a Brahma) that it annihilated rationalism.<sup>46</sup> These personalities and the concepts they represented shaped Vivekananda’s understanding of experience in the context of religion as outlined in his *Rāja Yoga: Or Conquering the Inner Nature* of 1896.

*Rāja Yoga*, for Vivekananda a synonym for Pātañjalayoga,<sup>47</sup> is based on lectures that the swami gave in New York in the winter of 1895–96. The lectures are concerned with an exegesis of and commentary on the *Yogasūtra*, and they highlight *prāṇāyāma* as an outstanding transformative tool. In his overture to *Rāja Yoga*, Vivekananda explains that “all knowledge is based upon experience.”<sup>48</sup>

44 e.g., Abhedananda 1967, 211, 277, 284; Rambachan 1994, 33.

45 Sen [1885] 1899, 30.

46 Rambachan 1994, 39.

47 This equation between Rāja Yoga and Pātañjalayoga goes back to N.C. Paul’s *A Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy* (De Michelis 2004, 178).

48 Vivekananda 1896, 1.

Thus, Rājāyoga (“kingly yoga”), which is viewed as a kind of “science,” also has “experience” (*anubhāva*) as its fundamental building block. This experience, understood here mainly as “direct perception” including sense experience and sense perception, supersedes the categories of belief and dogmatism, and the authority of any sacred scripture is subordinate to it.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Vivekananda contents “that any experience in a particular branch of knowledge must be repeatable.”<sup>50</sup> His idea was that “religious propositions can, and must, be certified by a process of verification not unlike that employed by the physical sciences.”<sup>51</sup> In aiming to establish yoga as science, yogic techniques that highlight “observation” and “concentration” are of key importance. The pivotal point here is the state of *samādhi*—which Vivekananda commonly translates as superconsciousness. This state, often induced by *kuṇḍalinī* rising, enables the “perception of the Self,” “Divine Wisdom,” and “the realisation of the spirit.”<sup>52</sup> But his strong contention of the necessity to realise—and verify—these categories through direct perception disregards the fact that his own experiences and religious positions are dependent on the religious culture he is interpreting.<sup>53</sup> What is more, the analogy to science overlooks the complexity that so-called “experience” and verification has in the scientific process.<sup>54</sup>

In his *Rāja Yoga* lectures, Vivekananda also claims the superiority of yoga as an “internal science” over other forms of hegemonial knowledge such as the physical sciences that are, in his view, purely “external” in nature.<sup>55</sup> According to Wilhelm Halbfass,<sup>56</sup> these claims of superiority are a reaction to subjugation to the overbearing colonial powers. Vivekananda’s notion of experience is indeed rooted in the struggle between colonialism and anti-colonial movements and thus must be read against the backdrop of the encounter between Euro-American and South Asian thought.<sup>57</sup> Another source for Vivekananda highlighting experience and to reframe this as science that employs “self-experiments” was probably William James’s famous *The Principles of Psychology*.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, James’s notion of “radical empiricism” (though formulated after Vivekananda’s death) postulates that “the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things

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49 Rambachan 1994, 2.

50 Rambachan 1994, 96.

51 Rambachan 1994, 95.

52 Vivekananda 1896, 54.

53 Rambachan 1994, 131.

54 Rambachan 1994, 131.

55 Vivekananda 1896, 47.

56 Halbfass 1988, 380.

57 Halbfass 1988, 380. See also Keith Cantú’s chapter in this volume.

58 James 1890.

definable in terms drawn from experience.”<sup>59</sup> This is not dissimilar from Vivekananda’s contentions. An influence is quite likely, as Vivekananda and James gravitated in the same circles in New York and knew each other in person.<sup>60</sup>

Let us now examine how these themes play out in the case of *prāṇāyāma* within his 1896 text. By utilising the *prāṇa*-mind nexus, *prāṇāyāma* is crucial for attaining *samādhi*: once the yogi controls the breath, he will also control the fluctuations of the mind, and this will enable him to progress to all higher mental states of yoga. *Prāṇāyāma* in its perfected form is literally a door to omnipotence for Vivekananda. This is based on the premise that the individual expression of mind (*manas*) and breath (*prāṇa*) has an equivalent on a “cosmic” scale, i.e., “the universal mind” (*puruṣa, brahman*) and “the sum total of all force” (*prāṇa*).<sup>61</sup> Manipulating *prāṇa* through the doorway of one’s breath thus means to potentially rule out the laws of nature:

This opens to us the door to almost unlimited power. Suppose, for instance, a man understood the *Prāṇa* perfectly, and could control it, what power on earth would not be his? He would be able to move the sun and stars out of their places, to control everything in the universe, from the atoms to the biggest suns, because he would control the *Prāṇa*. This is the end and aim of *Prāṇāyāma*.<sup>62</sup>

While this hardly accounts for Vivekananda’s individual experience (after all, the sun and stars still appear to be unaffected), these lines can be interpreted against the backdrop of the *prāṇa*-mind nexus paired with the claims that *prāṇāyāma* induces *siddhis* that is so frequently found in premodern yoga-related texts.

In mastering the science of Rājayoga, Vivekananda holds that it is indispensable to *regularly* practise *prāṇāyāma* and other yogic techniques.<sup>63</sup> If the expected outcomes did not materialise, one probably simply has not practised hard enough. In a way, experience, here linked to the notion of practice, becomes Vivekananda’s wild card to argue for yoga as an objectified and verifiable science—despite, or because of, the unverifiable of his claims what *prāṇāyāma* can do. Indeed, it was hard to either verify or falsify them. Followers of Vivekananda who were initiated into Rājayoga in the United States remained puzzled as to how to achieve the goals posited in the *Rāja Yoga* lectures, yet nobody claimed that Vivekananda was wrong.<sup>64</sup>

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59 James [1909] 1914, xii.

60 De Michelis 2004, 171–73.

61 Vivekananda 1896, 184–85.

62 Vivekananda 1896, 32.

63 Vivekananda 1896, 59.

64 Thomas 1930, 123–27. Experiencing *kuṇḍalīnī* rising seemed to have been one of the more achievable goals, but even that proved to be too difficult for most of his students (Thomas 1930, 123–27).

Bringing the idea of an objectifiable science to a personal level—to the individual yogi who is also an “experimenter”—, Vivekananda’s yoga has been described as a “proprioceptive journey.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Vivekananda utilises breathing to get hold of “gross perceptions”, until the mind becomes capable to penetrate levels in which “subtle perceptions” come about.<sup>66</sup> De Michelis has also extended the notion of “proprioception” to psychological levels perceived within one’s body-mind,<sup>67</sup> and mental as well as psychological shifts through *prāṇāyāma* are actually frequently emphasised in *Rāja Yoga*. In Vivekananda and others, the idea of delving deeper into oneself is often linked to an “involution” in which the material world dims whereas the inner reality receives more prominence. In contrast, “evolution” was conceived to originate in the “subtle” and move to the “gross.”<sup>68</sup>

As overstated the idea of Rājayoga as verifiable science may be, in some ways, Vivekananda pays his toll to the yoga traditions by recalling the potency of *prāṇāyāma*. Comfortably seated on the shoulders of a millennia-long history of *prāṇāyāma* as transformative practice, Vivekananda and others can argue that the potency of *prāṇa* and *prāṇāyāma* is supreme. For them, the claim that it is superior to other competing forms of self-cultivation and to hegemonial expressions of Euro-American sciences seemed to have motivated them to highlight *prāṇāyāma*’s transformative capacities. Sometimes, these motives tend to outweigh the importance of the individual practitioner’s experiences. After all, proponents of modern yoga had anti-colonialising tendencies that sought for an objectified—and probably essentialised—*prāṇāyāma* experience to persuade the world of the overall significance of the practice.

We see both continuation and opposition of Vivekananda’s work in that of Swami Kuvalayananda. Born Jagannatha Ganesha Gune (1883–1966) in Gujarat, Kuvalayananda established a laboratory and clinic, the Kaivalyadhama Yoga Ashram in Lonavla, Maharashtra, for the empirical investigation of the efficacy of yogic techniques in 1924. In his seminal *Prāṇāyāma: Part One*,<sup>69</sup> which is an important reference point for Haṭha-inflected *prāṇāyāma* teachings until today, Kuvalayananda directly refers to Vivekananda’s attempts to frame yoga as science. He states that “although we have adamant faith in the efficacy of [yoga] as a means to spiritual evolution, [ . . . ] we cannot accept the conclusions of the great master as scientific. Evidently Swami Vivekananda never tried these experiments

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65 De Michelis 2004, 153.

66 Vivekananda 1896, 26.

67 De Michelis 2004, 153n5.

68 Nanda 2010, 335.

69 Kuvalayananda 1931.

and had to resort to speculation.”<sup>70</sup> Kuvalayananda makes clear that, in his view, nobody was authorised to make (scientific) claims about *prāṇāyāma* practice, unless they were backed by experiments that met the methodological standards of the natural sciences.<sup>71</sup> In fact, his understanding of science was less speculative than Vivekananda’s, but aimed to explain yogic techniques by applying contemporaneous medical procedures such as x-ray, measurement of changes in blood pressure, intra-oesophageal pressure, and heart rate before and after *kumbhaka*.<sup>72</sup> In all these endeavours, Kuvalayananda continued N.C. Paul’s endeavours to measure CO<sub>2</sub> elimination during exhalation in specific *prāṇāyāma* techniques as opposed to ordinary breathing.<sup>73</sup> Just like Paul in 1851, Kaivalyadhama also tried to research how yogis in the state of *samādhi* could survive in air-tight containers.<sup>74</sup>

But Kuvalayananda is not only indebted to Paul, but also to Vivekananda’s outline of yoga as an empirical science. He dedicated himself to the fulfilment of three ambitious goals, one of them being “to develop the objective character of the Indian philosophy by subjecting the individual spiritual experiences of man to experimentation.”<sup>75</sup> This shows us that (a) “Indian philosophy” was said to have an objective—i.e., “scientific”—character; and that (b) the “individual spiritual experience” is moved in the background in favour of “experimentation.” If we acknowledge that the Greek word *empereia*, the etymological root of the term empiricism, denotes “experience,” Kuvalayananda is a good example to advocate for the importance of experience, that was, however, to be objectified within the labs. In a way, this is Vivekananda’s experientialism-turned-experimentalism par excellence. And, just as in Vivekananda, the nature of the so investigated experiences was transformative. Through *prāṇāyāma*, “[w]orlds subtler and still subtler begin to be opened out in proportion to the consciousness itself getting more and more refined, till at last the individual consciousness merges into the cosmic and the individual becomes one with the Infinite.”<sup>76</sup>

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70 Kuvalayananda 1931, 57–58n3.

71 Kuvalayananda 1931, 57–58n3.

72 For a detailed discussion of Kuvalayananda’s approach to scientific experiments, see also Alter (2004, 73–108).

73 Kuvalayananda 1930.

74 Alter 2004, 95–100.

75 Kuvalayananda 1928, 313–14.

76 Kuvalayananda 1931, 128.

His rigorous focus on objectifiable experimentation notwithstanding,<sup>77</sup> Kuvalayananda is reported to be an experienced and accomplished yogi who went to practice yoga every morning into a nearby cave.<sup>78</sup> It is probably his own yogic experience that makes him hint at a transformative effect of a practice termed *kapālabhāti*. In *kapālabhāti*, one throws out the air through rapid and rhythmic pushes from the lower belly while the air rushes in without any conscious muscular effort.<sup>79</sup> Kuvalayananda holds that one will see a “serene light” in any of the *cakras*,<sup>80</sup> an aspect that is normally not found in comments on *kapālabhāti*. But the hints of the relevance of personal practice are scarce in Kuvalayananda’s work. It was the PhD student Kovoov T. Behanan from Yale university, studying with Kuvalayananda during the years 1932 and 1933, who finally produced one of the rare explicit examples of personal experience made by a *prāṇāyāma* practice termed *ujjāyī*. In *ujjāyī* as understood at Kaivalyadhama, one inhales through a partially closed glottis, producing a uniform low-pitched frictional sound; then, one exhales through the left nostril for double length of the inhalation.<sup>81</sup> In his PhD thesis *Yoga: A Scientific Evaluation*, published in 1937, Behanan relied on autoethnography as a means to evaluate yoga practice, and thus felt scientifically authorised to speak about *ujjāyī* from a personal viewpoint, which reads as follows:

In the first few minutes (approximately 15 to 20) I feel a “physical excitement” [. . .] an activeness which sometimes leads to the erection of hairs in the follicles on the trunk and hands, and this phenomenon is followed by a tingling sensation. Sometimes muffled sounds are heard within the ears and the phenomenon generally known as the “flight of colors”—different colors seen in rapid succession—is not an uncommon occurrence. In the second stage all this excitement dies down and is followed by an extremely pleasant feeling of quietude and relaxation. [. . .] Slowly, but unmistakably, one begins to feel that the mind takes a turn, becoming more and more “centripetal.”<sup>82</sup>

Behanan refers here to the proprioceptive level of *ujjāyī* to include “physical excitement” and “tingling sensations”; he also mentions audio-visual perceptions like “muffled sounds,” and “flight of colors.” He furthermore explains how the practice affects the state of the mind that could then be utilised for higher yogic

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<sup>77</sup> Kuvalayananda stated that “nothing that has not been thoroughly tested by the Western laboratory methods should be given out to the public, is the motto that governs the conduct of this institute” (Kuvalayananda 1928, 314).

<sup>78</sup> Based on my own field data.

<sup>79</sup> Kuvalayananda 1931, 79–100. Haṭha texts usually do not regard *kapālabhāti* as part of *prāṇāyāma*, but it is more commonly grouped under the category of the “six cleansing actions” (*ṣaṭ-karma*) (Birch 2018, 48).

<sup>80</sup> Kuvalayananda 1931, 96.

<sup>81</sup> Kuvalayananda 1931, 69–74.

<sup>82</sup> Behanan 1937, 243.



concentration such as withdrawing the senses (*pratyāhāra*) or fixation (*dhāraṇā*). In conducting this self-experiment, he may have verified some of the yogic experiences mentioned in premodern texts (one of the ambitions of Kaivalyadhama), which, for example mention that one should hold one's breath until one feels the "retention upto the hairs and the tips of the nails."<sup>83</sup> Through his autoethnography, Behanan found a way to legitimise describing his personal transformative experience that involved his own "felt sense"<sup>84</sup> derived from a specific practice.

This section has exemplified how the notion of experience was part of positioning yoga as science. Although yogis like Vivekananda and Kuvalayananda acknowledged the relevance of personal experience made through yoga and *prāṇāyāma*, their focus lay on objectifying it. While Vivekananda's claims that yogic feats are part of an empirical (repeatable and verifiable) "science" had raised Kuvalayananda's eyebrows, they were nevertheless highly influential. Kuvalayananda's more measurable findings, on the other hand, were concerned with "gross" materiality even though his beliefs were rooted in yoga's subtle ontology.<sup>85</sup> This tension could never fully be overcome in his yoga as science. Although the validity of the outcomes of his experiments is debatable,<sup>86</sup> several subsequent yogis reverberated his findings. By highlighting the individual practitioner's felt sense during *prāṇāyāma* practice, Behanan's account is a lesser known but important counterpart to objectifying experience made through yoga.

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83 *Hathapradīpikā* 2.48–49; Digambarji and Kokaje 1970, 56.

84 "Felt sense" is a notion that was coined by the philosopher, psychologist, and psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin (1926–2017) to address the sensation of the lived body in a particular moment. It is a key concept of his "Focusing" technique that involves attentive awareness to bodily sensations in order to access the proprioceptive level of emotional states and what a particular situation *does* to the embodied self. Gendlin explains: "Focusing [. . .] is a way of getting a body sense—I call it a felt sense—of how you are in a particular life situation. There is a way of staying with this feeling and coming back to it over and over again. With practice, there is actually a point at which time slows down. You may think you have stayed with this feeling for an eternity, when in fact only a few seconds on the clock have gone by. And there is also a point at which space changes. You were at first quite literally in your chair and now there is this new space" (Gendlin 1999, 85). I hold that Gendlin's concept of the felt sense is a useful tool to attend to bodily sensation that moreover—just as in Behanan's account of *ujjāyī* practice—can help to describe an actual bodily experience that potentially involves a transformation of one's body sensations. This may include extraordinary sense-perceptions (as in Behanan's account) or the subjective perception of time and space (as in Gendlin's), and several other features not mentioned in these two examples.

85 Alter 2004, 91.

86 Goldberg 2016, 106–8.

## 4 Self-Culture: Transforming Oneself through Hygiene, Yoga, and *Prāṇāyāma*

In the shadow of the legacy of modern yoga’s “empirical” and “scientific” approach to *prāṇāyāma* experiences, another less prominent strand of contextualising the practices evolved from c. 1900 onwards. This is the theme of yoga and *prāṇāyāma* as self-culture. The concept enabled a focus on self-development that was not linked, in the first place, to a form of “science,” nor was it an epistemological tool that needed to be verified or repeated by others to be valid. As mentioned, yoga as science remained influential and cannot be completely disentangled from what developed under the umbrella of self-culture. But this section will highlight some discursive structures revolving around the notion of self-culture that developed quite independently from the more dominant “science” strand. It is, for example, in the contexts of self-culture—initially associated with Pātañjalayoga—that Swedenborg’s notion of the interrelation of the breath, mind, and emotions becomes again relevant. Before delving into these examples, I will briefly expound on the roots of self-cultivation within Euro-American hygienic culture and American New Thought including some theoretical considerations of the topic.

Since Michel Foucault (1926–1984) has developed a well-known theoretical framework for analysing various forms of self-cultivation a few remarks on the approach of the philosopher-historian are due. In a lecture series on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, held at the Collège de France in 1981–82, Foucault outlines the idea of the care of the self within Greco-Roman antiquity. Being one of the central postulations of these lectures, Foucault argues that the Platonic idea of the “care of the self” (*epimeleia heautou*) was conceived as a prerequisite to the better-known imperative of the Delphic “know thyself” (*gnothi sauthon*).<sup>87</sup> In other words, practices of the self which foregrounded the care of oneself were preliminary to and allowed for an epistemological reframing of the self. Foucault holds that these practices imply “actions exercised on the self by the self, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself.”<sup>88</sup> The notion of the “technologies of the self” implies a wider theoretical frame of social subjugation, in which the self aims to “gain the upper hand” (*technē*) against a field-of-forces of governmentality.<sup>89</sup>

It may be useful to give an example of how Foucault’s analysis is relevant to modern yoga. Regarding the interdependence of the “care of the self” and “know-

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<sup>87</sup> Foucault [2001] 2005, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Foucault [2001] 2005, 11.

<sup>89</sup> Foucault 1988, 24.

ing oneself”, the idea that the former leads to knowledge of the self is also found in modern yoga, for example in the Vedāntic concept of *ātmanjñāna* (lit. “knowledge of self”) the attainment of which is preceded by yogic techniques.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, practising *prāṇāyāma* in modern yoga means to acquire experiences on various human levels that are mutually interlinked. In recurrence to Foucault, Nikolas Rose holds that practices of the self “require one to relate to oneself epistemologically (know yourself), despotically (master yourself) or in other ways (care for yourself).”<sup>91</sup> In our contexts, it is helpful to include “mastery of the self” into these aspects of self-cultivation because it is a notion applicable to *prāṇāyāma* techniques, which is, moreover, often addressed by modern yogis. In works like Vivekananda’s *Rāja Yoga*, the subtitle revealing that it deals with “conquering” one’s “internal nature,” it is evident that Vivekananda’s idea of transforming—and mastering—oneself through the breath could also relevantly be described within the framework of self-cultivation.<sup>92</sup>

In Foucault’s work it is not the transformative aspect that is highlighted throughout, but rather the notion of governmentality and the self’s struggle to gain the upper hand. Nevertheless, I argue that the theory of technologies of the self or, briefly, “self-cultivation”<sup>93</sup> provides a framework for practices aimed at transformative experiences. As mentioned, in modern yoga, the notion of “self-culture” has holistic leanings that target the development of the self and its various faculties. This holistic self-development that includes experiences on physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual levels has important precedents in nineteenth-century hygiene, American Delsartism and New Thought.<sup>94</sup>

To get a clearer grasp on these influences on modern yoga, it is helpful to briefly visit another historical work that has expounded on the history of nineteenth-century hygiene. In partly following Michel Foucault’s notion of the technologies of the self, Philipp Sarasin’s *Reizbare Maschinen: Eine Geschichte des Körpers, 1765–1914*<sup>95</sup> offers a history of the body by analysing discourses of hygiene, material vitalism, and the premises of an emerging field of modern medi-

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90 Abhedananda 1905.

91 Rose 1996, 135.

92 Consequently, one can certainly extend the theory of the “technologies of the self” to all practices of modern yoga. There is, however, a clearer historical link to Foucault and hygienic culture (as he was partly influenced by it; Sarasin 2001, 28, 463–64) than to yoga.

93 The notion of self-cultivation as an interface category within transcultural religion and philosophy has been fruitfully studied in the edited volume *Dimensionen der Selbstkultivierung* (2013) by Schmücker and Heubel. However, their discussion mainly refers to East Asian philosophies, particularly Confucianism, which is a cultural context that cannot be considered here.

94 Stebbins 1892; Ramacharaka 1904.

95 Sarasin 2001.

cine during the long nineteenth-century.<sup>96</sup> Hygienic practices of the self included gymnastics, diet, rules for a balanced sexual life, choice of work, clothing, housing, and living in environments that engender health.<sup>97</sup> In fact, one of the most important objectives of it was gaining and maintaining health through self-help manuals. These forms of self-cultivation were ways of “listening” and attuning to the self that required regularity, attention, observation, and self-corrective actions. Deep breathing hailing from these contexts is but one example that became highly influential for *prāṇāyāma* discourses. Others are the importance of “nerve culture,” sexual hygiene, and the Galenic concept of “light and air”<sup>98</sup> that suggested to frequently ventilate rooms, take (nude) sun and air baths, and to utilise the preventive capacities of breath practices.

It is in American Delsartism and New Thought, both influenced by the hygienic movement, that these technologies of the self also gained religious implications. For example, the “psycho-physical culture” of Genevieve Stebbins (1857–1934) offered breathing techniques (e.g., “dynamic breathing,” “rhythmic breathing”) as a means to overall self-development.<sup>99</sup> However, her system of self-cultivation did not stop at mundane goals, but aspires to “always express the true self; to elevate the soul to its highest aspiration and the mind to express its highest possible plane of thought.”<sup>100</sup> Similarly, William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932) who published *The Hindu-Yogi Science of Breath*<sup>101</sup> under the pseudonym Yogi Ramacharaka held that “will-power coupled with rhythmic breathing” can “develop spiritual faculties.”<sup>102</sup> The adept can then delve into becoming aware of “the consciousness of the identity of the Soul” and “the connection of the Soul with the Universal Life.”<sup>103</sup> Notably this was also induced by “meditation upon

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**96** The title of the book *Reizbare Maschinen* (“Irritable Machines”) alludes to how the body was conceived by materialist vitalists like Albrecht von Haller and his experiments of human and animal muscles and tissue that could be “irritated” (Sarasin 2001, 54–56). Haller intended to show that there was no metaphysical vital principle responsible for life, but that organic tissue reacted to purely mechanical irritations or stimulations. This was one philosophical strand among other forms of vitalism that influenced the discourses of how the body was conceived in the nineteenth century.

**97** It is only in the late nineteenth-century through the developments in the field of bacteriology that the term hygiene was narrowed down to alert cleanliness and provision of sterile conditions within hospitals and clinical environments.

**98** Light and air was one of the six non-naturals of Galenic medicine (second century CE) to which one should be regularly exposed for general health (Sarasin 2001, 36).

**99** For an in-depth discussion of Stebbins’s influential work, see Ruyter (1999); Mullan (2020).

**100** Stebbins 1892, 70.

**101** Atkinson 1904.

**102** Ramacharaka 1904, 69.

**103** Ramacharaka 1904, 69–70.

the real Self or Soul, accompanied by rhythmic breathing.”<sup>104</sup> Rhythmic breathing meant to make the phases of inhalation and exhalation the same length by counting one’s heartbeats, as well as pausing in between breaths for the same amount of time.<sup>105</sup>

Hygienic culture with its various sub-strands reached India already by the 1880s. It is thus not surprising that the term “self-culture”—used, for example, in the work of Joseph Rhodes Buchanan<sup>106</sup> and in various journals of the New Thought movement<sup>107</sup>—as a kind of “holistic hygiene” is also found in yoga. The term self-culture is applied to refer to reinterpretations of Pātañjalayoga as well as to modern interpretations of *prāṇāyāma*. The earliest reference to yoga as self-culture that I have encountered appears in Kishori Lal Sarkar’s *The Hindu System of Self-Culture: The Patanjala Yoga Shastra*,<sup>108</sup> printed in Calcutta. Soon after, the influential North-Indian theosophist Rama Prasad published *Self-Culture, or The Yoga of Patanjali*,<sup>109</sup> likely inspired by the almost homonymous work of Sarkar. Considering their contributions, we may ask why Pātañjalayoga came to be associated with self-culture. Here, the Euro-American concept of self-culture is linked to the notion of “experience” in South Asian Neo-Hindu contexts. But different than in Vivekananda, it is not predominantly associated with “science” but with the soteriological goals of Pātañjalayoga.

The “self” in Pātañjalayoga, which assumes the philosophical doctrine of Sāṃkhya philosophy, was certainly conceived differently than the self in New Thought. But what they have in common is the notion of a transcendent self that is different from the self in its ordinary everyday contexts. Within Pātañjalayoga, the ultimate goal is *kaivalya*, or the gnoseological insight that the self (*puruṣa*) is ontologically *different* from the phenomenological world (*prakṛti*).<sup>110</sup> In the above-mentioned text by Sarkar, the “self,” or *puruṣa*, is termed the “experiencer” who is, in its ordinary human condition, “in the state of bondage.”<sup>111</sup> By *prāṇāyāma* and other yogic techniques, i.e., “self-culture,” it was to be freed from bondage by re-

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104 Ramacharaka 1904, 70.

105 Stebbins 1892, 83; Ramacharaka 1904, 53–54. For example, the rhythm 4-2-4-2 (inhale-retain-exhale-retain) (Stebbins 1892, 83).

106 Buchanan Rhodes 1891, 397.

107 The New Thought movement revolved around the notion of “self-culture.” The journal *Nautilus* edited by Elizabeth Towne from 1898 onwards featured the subtitle “self-knowledge through self-help.” The September 1906 issue of the *Nautilus* has a section of recommended books that includes “Self-help by Self-Culture” by Earnest Yates Loomis (1863–1929).

108 Sarkar 1902.

109 Prasad 1907.

110 Larson 2012, 76.

111 Sarkar 1902, 41.

vealing its true nature. But even in the context of the above-mentioned practice by Yogi Ramacharaka, the “real Self” is to be meditated upon as a “drop from the Divine Ocean, [. . .] eternal and indestructible,”<sup>112</sup> which points at its transcendent nature. I am not suggesting that the texts by Stebbins, Ramacharaka, and Sarkar describe the same experiences or represent an identical notion of the “self,” but a certain overlap in the use of ideas of self-cultivation is at least noteworthy. In all these cases, the everyday self is transformed, and the “real self” is either “freed” (Sarkar), “expressed” (Stebbins) or “realised” (Ramacharaka).<sup>113</sup> As Yogi Ramacharaka concludes, the encounter with the true Self is “the gist of the Yogi meditative breathing methods.”<sup>114</sup>

It is no coincidence that all these authors use the breath for overall self-development. The breath seemed to be capable of connecting different levels of being and to develop one’s physical as well as spiritual capacities. As a phenomenon often described as “psycho-physical,” it could indeed penetrate different layers of the human being, linking body and mind, transforming the inner landscape and felt sense, and providing insight into one’s “true nature.” Serving as a hinge between individual embodiment and its more foundational vitalistic meanings (e.g., “the breath of life,” “force,” “energy”), breath/*prāṇa* enables experiences made within the boundaries of the self, while illuminating one’s embeddedness into life at large. By mastering the breath, one can tap into a “cosmic” experience just as a “drop in the Divine Ocean.”

As a final example of how *prāṇāyāma* is conceived as part of self-culture, we will now turn to Shri Yogendra (1897–1989). The Bombay-based yogi integrated the threads of (Pātañjala)yoga, Swedenborg, and Stebbins in a rather surprising way that nevertheless builds on his precedents. To give a full account of Yogendra’s influential work, it would be necessary to also refer to his project of yoga as science,<sup>115</sup> yet we will focus here on his idea of yoga as hygiene and self-culture. In *Breathing Methods*,<sup>116</sup> Yogendra makes it clear that yogis have “always emphasized the value of deep breathing as a great spiritual aid to self-culture.”<sup>117</sup> Well-aligned with Sarkar and Prasad, he also equates this specific form of self-culture with Pātañjalayoga—although it heavily borrows from an exponent of American Delsartism: Genevieve Stebbins.<sup>118</sup>

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112 Ramacharaka 1904, 70.

113 In Ramacharaka, influence by Vivekananda is evident (cf. Kraler 2022, 300).

114 Ramacharaka 1904, 70–71.

115 Yogendra was also engaged in establishing yoga as science (cf. Alter 2013, 66–67; 2004, 250n24).

116 Yogendra 1932.

117 Yogendra 1932, 24.

118 Yogendra 1934, 4; Yogendra 1936, 47; Stebbins 1892, 57; Kraler 2022, 338.

Yogendra refers to Stebbins several times,<sup>119</sup> highlighting the theme of relaxation and the breath as a seismograph for otherwise unexpressed emotions as well as a trigger for transformative states. In our context, a particularly interesting passage is a full quotation of Stebbins that refers to an “ecstatic state” and extraordinary capacities evoked through reduced breathing:

When the thought-vibrations awoken into action the higher intellectual powers of the mind, the respirations sink lower and become slower and slower until in the ecstatic state of abstraction we almost cease to breathe.<sup>120</sup>

Stebbins’s state of “abstraction” resembles the outcomes of “internal breathing” as described by Swedenborg. Yogendra, for his part, is also aware of Swedenborg’s legacy to link mind, emotions, and breath, so as to “*feel your thoughts*” through the breath.<sup>121</sup> This could be described as a proprioceptive act of determining the quality of one’s breath to become aware of one’s emotions from moment to moment. Indeed, Yogendra argues that “an expert psychologist” can easily “tell you the state of your mind from the state of your respiration.”<sup>122</sup> Why not be the expert yourself through yoga? His conclusion, then is, that “harmony in breathing” is the best means to establish “mental equipoise”, which was certainly attained by the “ancient self-culture enthusiasts,” the yogis.<sup>123</sup> Breath is portrayed here as an important tool to stabilise and tranquilise the mind as a prerequisite for all higher experiences; and a mind so qualified will certainly affect the way the breath flows.

But in this example, close observation of the breath and the experiences so induced as part of an open-ended self-development is just one important point that I want to stress. I would argue that Swedenborg’s ideas as transmitted via Stebbins seemed to have inspired Yogendra to *name, describe, and document* these experiences. There are few examples by yogis, if any, that do so before him. Indeed, he advises to attend to “the volume, force and rhythm of respiration”<sup>124</sup> to link one’s attention more intimately to the current sense of self through proprioception. In this and other examples, hygienic culture had a major impact on modern yoga and additionally helped to develop a language of self-cultivation that affected various levels of the human being. The holistic endeavour of hygiene coupled with the spiritual aspirations of American Delsartism, New Thought and

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119 Foxen 2020, 241–42.

120 Yogendra 1932, 69; cf. Stebbins 1892, 14–15.

121 Yogendra 1932, 70, emphasis in original; cf. Wilkinson 1849, 55.

122 Yogendra 1932, 71.

123 Yogendra 1932, 71.

124 Yogendra 1932, 68.

yoga pushed *prāṇāyāma* towards recognising the importance of experience made by the self for the self as opposed to the objectifying tendencies that are predominant in yoga as science and evidence-based yoga experiments.

## 5 Conclusion

From the very outset, modern *prāṇāyāma* discourses have oscillated between two kinds of contextualising transformative experiences: yoga's objectifying tendencies versus the more intimate focus on individual self-culture. This chapter has explored these approaches which are equally relevant and ultimately cannot be completely separated. Personalities like N.C. Paul, Vivekananda, and Kuvalayana advocate for the scientification of practices that have their starting point in the individual's experience. Since these authors also indicate that the practices induce superhuman powers and final liberation, their *promise* of *prāṇāyāma*'s capacities places their endeavour into the realm of religion,<sup>125</sup> despite its "scientific" and empirical outlook. In decidedly drawing on exponents of Euro-American hygiene, Yogendra and others have framed (Pātañjala)yoga as self-culture. This chapter also addressed the question of how *prāṇāyāma* developed in the tension between experiences made by individuals and the codified outcomes "documented" in the Haṭhayoga texts. As Swedenborg's notion of "internal breathing" was adopted within modern yoga, the concept of breath awareness and a close observation of emotional states linked to the breath gained prominence. Thus, in the advanced states of modern *prāṇāyāma*'s "proprioceptive journey" we see richer descriptions of individual experiences made through the practices than in its initial stages. These developments start to fill the gap between repetitive *prāṇāyāma* instructions and expected outcomes of Haṭhayoga texts, and they allow practitioners to attend to their proprioceptive, psychological, and mental states that fluctuate like the ever-changing flow of water.

The pattern of either emphasising self-cultivation or objectifying the experiences made may be relevant for other practices that evolved in the rupture of a certain tradition encountering the impact of modernity. In the case of modern *prāṇāyāma*, this includes the driving forces of modern science, political upheavals, and rapid exchange of ideas through print media and increased travel opportunities. Thus, science discourses within modern yoga must be read against the backdrop of Euro-American hegemonial science and India's attempt to rid itself from colonial forces. Yoga had as much a political as a spiritual agenda. It is in

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<sup>125</sup> Cf. Riesebrodt [2007] 2010.



this climate that individual practitioners and their experience became an intersecting point of the personal, the political, the colonial, and the “indigenous.” As this chapter has shown, transformative experiences can be read within concentric circles—by moving from “inside out”—starting with the body-mind of the individual, moving through the social body, and finally ending with “science” as part of political agendas. Equally relevant is the analysis from “outside in” by exploring how the pursuit of objectification and validation through science discourses and related ones affects negotiations about the effects of practices experienced within.

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Part III: **Analyses of Individuals' Intentional  
Transformative Experiences**



Wouter J. Hanegraaff

## Chapter 7

# A Suggestive Inquiry into Hermetic Rebirth: Nondual Noēsis and Bodily Fluids in Victorian England

Could any transformative experience be more radical than *being born again*, not after death but already during one's lifetime on earth? Just imagine what it would be like to start your life all over from scratch, but now in a state of full awareness while inhabiting a brand-new body that functions perfectly and is immune to suffering or decay—a body that cannot die and is endowed with superhuman powers, the vehicle of a fully enlightened consciousness immune to delusion, one that sees the whole of reality as it truly is.

Such a vision was at the heart of a mysterious treatise published anonymously in 1850: *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery, with a Dissertation on the More Celebrated Alchemical Philosophers; being an Attempt towards the Recovery of the Ancient Experiment of Nature*. Its author was a young English woman, Mary Anne South (1817–1910), who after her marriage in 1859 to Rev. Alban Thomas Atwood (1813/14–1883) would become known as Mrs. Atwood.<sup>1</sup> Until very recently, *A Suggestive Inquiry* was seen as the very earliest historical instance of a purely “spiritual” interpretation of alchemy, defined by its claim that the Great Work was all about radical transmutation *not* of natural substances but of the human psyche. Such views became popular in occultist circles during the later nineteenth century, led eventually to “a massive transformation in the general perception of alchemy,” and finally culminated in the extremely influential work of Carl Gustav Jung.<sup>2</sup> But such spiritual interpretations were rejected sharply by the New Historiography of Alchemy that emerged during the 1990s. Its leading representatives William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe insisted that early modern alchemy had been neither just pseudo-scientific superstition, nor a form of psychology or spiritual practice, but a genuine laboratory science

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1 On South's life, work, and context see Wilmshurst (1918, 1919); Godwin (1992, 1994); Archer (2013); Koitzsch (2015); and Zuber (2017, 2021).

2 Principe and Newman 2001, 388 and *passim*. Important authors in between *A Suggestive Inquiry* and Jung were Ethan Allen Hitchcock, Julius Evola, and Mircea Eliade.

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grounded in the best natural philosophy of the time.<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Atwood's spiritual alchemy was dismissed as little more than the private fantasy of an occultist amateur who had profoundly misunderstood her topic and her sources.<sup>4</sup>

But this perspective was recently overturned as well, in a groundbreaking study by Mike A. Zuber that has considerable implications for the historiography of alchemy.<sup>5</sup> Based on meticulous archival researches,<sup>6</sup> Zuber shows that far from being just a modern occultist fantasy, the spiritual alchemy of *A Suggestive Inquiry* was rooted in a heterodox Protestant tradition that can be traced back to two anonymous pseudo-Weigelian treatises written by the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Its central concern was with a Christian-theosophical doctrine of spiritual rebirth that came to full development in the writings of Jacob Böhme (1575–1624) and Abraham von Franckenberg (1593–1652). Having spread widely through heterodox networks and clandestine spiritual communities, this line of speculation was brought to England by Dionysius Andreas Freher (1649–1728) in 1695. Around the mid-nineteenth century, some of Freher's voluminous writings were getting printed by Christopher Walton (1809–1877), who was in correspondence with Thomas South and his daughter Mary Anne, the author of *A Suggestive Inquiry*.<sup>8</sup>

On the following pages, I want to expand on Zuber's work by making two additional points. Firstly, as the author of *A Suggestive Inquiry* developed her doctrine of Hermetic rebirth, she was drawing not just on this early-modern tradition of spiritual alchemy with Christian-theosophical foundations, but at least as strongly on the original Hermetic literature from late antiquity. Secondly, this doctrine was never just a matter of theoretical speculation alone. On the contrary, the focus was always on transformative *practices* intended to actually achieve rebirth.<sup>9</sup> Thus the sum of my argument is that not just one, but two central Hermetic traditions come

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive introduction to alchemy from the perspective of the New Historiography, see Principe (2001). Further discussed in Hanegraaff (2012, 177–207, esp. 196–97); and Zuber (2017, 21–44, which is condensed to a much shorter discussion in Zuber 2021, 2–6).

<sup>4</sup> Principe and Newman 2001, 389–91.

<sup>5</sup> See Zuber's delightful and extremely apposite metaphor of a “tug of war” between the “alchemy is scientific” and “alchemy is religious” teams, neither of which will ever pull its opponents across the line because, in fact, alchemy *is* the rope (Zuber 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Full quotations of all relevant passages in their original languages can be found in the original Ph.D. version (Zuber 2017) that was published in a revised, partly reduced and partly expanded edition (Zuber 2021).

<sup>7</sup> *Azoth et Ignis* (composed between the mid-1580s and 1599; first printed in 1701; discussed in Zuber 2021, 19–25); *Ad dialogum de morte* (1584; printed in 1614; discussed in Zuber 2021, 25–29).

<sup>8</sup> Zuber 2021, 48–159.

<sup>9</sup> This also holds true for the traditions studied by Zuber; but in spite of the evident centrality of “fits, trances and visions” (see Taves 1999) to Behmenist practice in communities such as the An-

together in *A Suggestive Inquiry*: early modern spiritual alchemy grounded in Christian-theosophical speculation *and* a spiritual practice that had its origins in the Hermetic literature of Roman Egypt.

## 1 Hermetic Rebirth

This Hermetic literature was focused not on theory for theory's sake, as has often been assumed, but on a spiritual training program that was meant to culminate in a radical experience of rebirth (*palingenesia*).<sup>10</sup> Practitioners believed that at the very moment the soul descends into a human body, the newborn infant is violently invaded and completely overwhelmed by powerful daimonic forces that preside over the exact astrological moment and location of birth. These “torment (or)s” (*timōriōn*, *timōrous*) bind the human soul to the *heimarmenē*, the rule of cosmic fate, while bringing its consciousness under the spell of harmful delusions and exposing it to destructive passionate desires. But it was possible—although exceedingly difficult, and only after long preparation—for these dark energies to be exorcized from a person's body by inviting the superior divine forces of noetic Light to come down and take their place. This process of spiritual healing and purification caused the human soul to be literally *reborn* in a perfect spiritual body, made entirely of noetic light and endowed with a cosmic consciousness unrestricted by time and space.<sup>11</sup> This was known as “becoming the *aion*.” Thus while the first birth trapped our soul in a limiting condition of profound ignorance, the second birth entailed a radical liberation from cosmic dominion that enabled the soul to achieve *gnōsis*.

The first fourteen treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* were translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino during the 1460s, and published in 1471 as *Liber de Potestate et Sapientia Dei* or *Pimander*. But only its second translator, who added the

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gelic Brethren in Amsterdam or the Philadelphian Community in England (e.g., Faivre 2011; Gibbons 1996), I am not aware of any in-depth analysis of precisely what was being *done* in these contexts.

**10** This is my core argument in Hanegraaff (2022). It seems relevant that the Hermetic terminology of rebirth is somewhat different from its Biblical equivalents central to both the Christian-theosophical tradition and modern evangelicals. A key reference for the latter is John 3:3, 7–8 (*gennētei anōthen*, *gennēthēnai anōthen*; see Zuber 2019, 253), whereas the exact term *palingenesia* appears in Titus 3:5 but clearly referred there to baptism (253). For a detailed analysis of the Titus reference and its contemporary religious and philosophical contexts, including the Hermetica, see Dey (1937).

**11** The key source for Hermetic rebirth is CH XIII; see discussion in Hanegraaff (2022, 235–63).



final three treatises (CH XVI–XVIII) as well, a fascinating but forgotten Humanist and poet named Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500), grasped the centrality of rebirth to the Hermetic message.<sup>12</sup> He believed that the supreme noetic Light of divinity had first appeared to Hermes Trismegistus as an entity named Poimandres, had later been incarnated as the divine Logos in Jesus Christ, and had now been born once again in his own time as a contemporary preacher—Lazzarelli’s own spiritual master Giovanni “Mercurio” da Correggio (1451?–after 1503). Correggio was heralded as the agent of Lazzarelli’s own rebirth: “you have begotten me anew by ethereal seed.”<sup>13</sup> All those who had been reborn as “true men” thereby gained the power to pass the rebirth on to others in turn, resulting in a potentially ongoing palingenetic succession.

A few decades after Lazzarelli’s death, his unique doctrine of Hermetic rebirth was discovered by the much more famous Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535/36), who came to see it as nothing less than the central mystery of Christian salvation.<sup>14</sup> Like Lazzarelli, he insisted that “being born again” was not just a metaphor but must be taken literally: “this is the power, given form by the mind, of the Word rightly received in a well-disposed subject, like semen in the womb for generation and giving birth.”<sup>15</sup> For Christian Hermetists like Lazzarelli and Agrippa (and their later successors in Christian Theosophy), the all-important point about rebirth was that the new palingenetic body was free from the effects of the Fall: it would enjoy the perfection of Adam’s prelapsarian condition and even allow human beings to participate in God’s own powers of creation, that of “making souls.” They would be literally deified and live like gods on Earth—superhumans endowed with the power to “do anything.”<sup>16</sup>

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12 Detailed discussion in Hanegraaff (2005, esp. 53–96). For a shorter summary, see Hanegraaff (2005). Edition and annotated English translations of all the relevant sources in Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn (2005, 165–335).

13 Lazzarelli, “Ad Ioannem Mercurium de Corigio” (= 2<sup>nd</sup> Preface), in Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn (2005, 158–59) (“Aetereo tu me genuisti semine rursus”). Idem: “Look, I send you the sacred books of Hermes. / He begat you, and behold, as a father you have made me new. / You are my father, so I should call him grandfather” (“Hermetis sacros en tibi mitto libros. / Hic te progenuit, tu me pater ecce reformas, / tu pater, ille mihi est ergo vocandus avus”).

14 Analysis in Hanegraaff (2009).

15 Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia* III: 36 (Hanegraaff 2009, 11–12); for this doctrine *de univocamentis generatione*, see also below, note 100. Such sexual literalism was taken directly from the Hermetic literature as well: see notably CH XIII 2. The drastic description in NH<sup>8</sup> 65 (see Hanegraaff 2022, 56) was toned down in the Latin version accessible to Agrippa, *Ascl.* 20–21. Discussion in Hanegraaff (2022, esp. 285–86, 323–25).

16 Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia* II 50 (Hanegraaff 2009, 24). In 1916, in the midst of the Great War, Mary Anne South’s friend and pupil Isabelle De Steiger took up this theme of rebirth as a Hermetic *Übermensch* in a volume of muddled prose about the need for some kind of eugenic

The importance of rebirth to the alchemical literature and Christian Theosophy is rather well known, but its centrality to the *Corpus Hermeticum* and to Christian interpreters such as Lazzarelli and Agrippa has been overlooked almost completely. Yet it was recognized, with uncanny intuition, by an isolated young woman without formal academic training but endowed with remarkable intelligence and hermeneutical skills: Mary Anne South.

## 2 Magnetic Gnōsis

The story begins with Mary Anne’s father, Thomas South (c. 1785–1858), “a gentleman of leisure and certain means”<sup>17</sup> who lived the secluded life of a private scholar in Bury House, Gosport (Hampshire). He had acquired a remarkable collection of rare and ancient books about philosophical and arcane subjects, a veritable *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica*, and devoted his life to researching the mysteries of the human soul and its potential for spiritual reintegration. While we never hear about his wife, Thomas had two daughters: Mary Anne and her virtually unknown sister Louisa. Therefore, the author of *A Suggestive Inquiry* grew up essentially in a private library that breathed an atmosphere of pious learning, and clearly began following in her father’s footsteps at an early age. From around 1840, when she was twenty-three years old, she also seems to have been participating in a Christian-theosophical community that met in “a country house in Kent” and followed the teachings of James Pierrepont Greaves (1777–1842).<sup>18</sup> This Christian Theosopher and self-described “sacred socialist” may well have been an early source for Mary Anne’s fascination with spiritual rebirth.<sup>19</sup>

When Mary Anne was twenty-nine years old, she and her father published a small book titled *Early Magnetism in its Higher Relations to Humanity, as veiled in the Poets and the Prophets* (henceforth quoted as EM) under the pseudonym ΘΥΟΣ ΜΑΘΟΣ, an anagram in Greek of “Thomas South.” It is here that we see the first indication of a rather troubling fact about the relation between father and daughter.

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program to save humanity; it had the telling title *Superhumanity* and was subtitled as another “Suggestive Inquiry.”

<sup>17</sup> Wilmshurst 1918, 1–3. South’s year and day of death (7 June 1858) was established definitely by Zuber (2021, 177).

<sup>18</sup> De Steiger 1913, 234–36. For Greaves, see Latham (1999) and short discussion in Godwin (1992, 49–53; 1994, 228–32). Although De Steiger believed this circle had “died naturally and peacefully” after Greaves’ death in 1842, she also claimed that its members were meeting in Kent “about 1840 to 1860 or 1870” (Godwin 1992, 52–53).

<sup>19</sup> Godwin 1992, 49–53; Zuber 2021, 162.

ter. In a letter to her friend Isabelle De Steiger, toward the end of her life, Mary Anne makes reference to *Early Magnetism* and remarks “you know I wrote the first part of that little book.”<sup>20</sup> It so happens that these sixty-one pages are by far its most important and interesting part, as will be seen below. They are followed by eight pages of anonymous poetry illustrated with pictures of owls, after which thirty-four of the remaining fifty pages (pp. 70–120) are filled with lengthy Biblical quotations (Psalms, Isaiah, Proverbs, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus). The final seventeen pages of ponderous prose are devoted to praising the staggering, but otherwise unspecified, miracles of “phreno-magnetism”—a combination of Franz Joseph Gall’s phrenology and Franz Anton Mesmer’s animal magnetism that became popular during the 1840s.<sup>21</sup> There is a dramatic contrast in style, content, and sheer intellectual quality between parts I and II, leading to an embarrassing conclusion. *Early Magnetism* may be attributed officially to ΘΥΟΣ ΜΑΘΟΣ, Thomas South; but as a writer at least, he clearly was no match for the brilliance of his daughter, who remains unnamed and whose primary authorship is never acknowledged.<sup>22</sup> I assume that the poems may have been written by Thomas; but for the rest, he contributed little more than this passionate outburst of enthusiasm about phreno-magnetism. Nevertheless, this final part does contain one passage that will prove important for understanding the “Hermetic Mystery”:

Finally let me once more with a warning voice recur, as expressed in sacred allegory, to the holy ground we tread on. And should it yet be asked by any what is the meaning of that phrase? Let me say, it is what only and alone the trance presents, the sabbath of the senses; deep inner retirement from the every day routine of worldly thoughts and occupations, for central self-communion; to feel, to see and know the yet unstirred, unapproached, unappreciated, unbelieved, unrevered *Divinity* within us; to waken up the buried Conscience like a Guardian Spirit, starting in beautiful relief from out the flat, dull, unprofitable, monotonous picture common life presents; to pass into a freer state of being imagined only by the high aspiring minds glancing at the shadow, but well described and dwelt upon by those who verily and in truth have rested on this ground.<sup>23</sup>

The author concluded that “this *terram incognitam* to the many, but *firmissimam* to the happier few,” the great secret that can only be accessed in a deeply en-

20 Atwood papers (Brown University, Providence; BU-JHL: A54785), no. 698, p. 2. This important remark was discovered by Zuber (2017, 414; 2021, 166).

21 See e.g., Podmore 1963, 111–31 (esp. 121–23, 128–30), 154–57; Winter 1998, 117–19, 154–55; Pels 2015, 15–22.

22 Gilbert’s reading of the anagram as “Ma. [&] Thos. South” (2009, 56 note 23) seems too generous, since the reading “Thomas” results in a correct match.

23 EM, 118–19.

tranced “sabbath of the senses,” had been known by all the great spiritual masters “from Adam to this hour.”

It fell to Mary Anne to explain the rationale for such an assertion, in the fascinating first part of *Early Magnetism*. A first point of great importance is that, in sharp contrast to what we find in the second part, her argument rests not on Biblical quotations but entirely on Greek and Latin sources (interspersed with classical and modern verse quotations).<sup>24</sup> To show the utter superiority of Ancient Wisdom over modern science and philosophy, she relies on a standard macrohistorical framework that can be referred to as *Platonic Orientalism*: the true spiritual wisdom can be found in the works of the Platonists but has its ultimate source in the ancient Orient.<sup>25</sup> More specifically, it originated in Egypt, whence it spread to the “Hebrew mysteries” and imparted itself to “the master minds of Greece,” until finally it was “frittered away in those peripatetic abstractions” of medieval scholasticism, not to mention its total neglect by modern philosophers.<sup>26</sup> As a second step in her argument, Mary Anne then identifies the true “living light” of the ancient Egyptian priests and sages as identical with the spiritual and healing power (re)discovered by Mesmer and developed into a science of trance-induction by his pupil De Puysegur.<sup>27</sup> This argument was central to the new genre of *Magnetic Historiography* that had emerged in a context of German-Romantic *Naturphilosophie* during the first decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Mary Anne South would have readily agreed with its key author, Joseph Ennemoser, that the true magic of the ancients lay “in the most secret and innermost powers of the mind” that had been rediscovered by Mesmer and De Puysegur.<sup>29</sup> Mesmeric

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24 Proclus as quoted by Marinus, according to Thomas Taylor’s introduction to *The Six Books of Proclus*, xlix–l (EM, 14); Ovid, *Fasti* (EM, 14); Ovid, *Heroides* (EM, 15); James Beattie, *The Minstrel*, Bd. 2:20 (EM, 21); the Aesopian Fables (EM, 27); the Greek poet Nonnus, probably quoted from Augustin Calmet’s *Great Dictionary of the Holy Bible*, vol. 4, 496 (EM, 29–30); Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (EM, 31); Aurelius Prudentius (EM, 38); Marcellus Palingenius (Marcello Stellato), *Zodiacus Vitae* (1537) (EM, 40); *Chymica Vannus* (1666), 237, 203 (EM, 43, 44); Horace, *Odes* (EM 43); Milton, *Paradise Lost* (EM, 56); Pope, *An Essay on Man* (EM, 57); Margaret Fuller’s papers “On Literature and Art” (EM, 60); Thomas Moore, *Lalla Rookh* (EM, 61); Callimachus, “Hymn to Apollo” (EM, 61).

25 For the modern concept of Platonic Orientalism (coined by John Walbridge in 2001 and unrelated to Edward Said’s more famous work), see Hanegraaff (2012, 5–76, esp. 12–17). Note that South adopts neither the common “Mosaic” variant nor its “Zoroastrian” alternative but the specific “Hermetic” one.

26 EM, 1–4, 26–27.

27 EM, 6–7, 27–29 (with special attention to the “Dactyli Idaei” mentioned by Diodorus Siculus, who Mary Anne associates with the manual practices central to phrenology and phrenomagnetism).

28 Hanegraaff 2012, 266–77.

29 Ennemoser 1844, xxvii; Hanegraaff 2012, 267–68.

trance had the potential to heal human consciousness from delusionary phantasms and allow it access to a supreme *gnōsis*:<sup>30</sup>

Whilst applying our energies for internal experience, passing behind the murky media of sense and fantasy, we may find it no presumption to anticipate the day, when we shall behold reflected in the brightened mirror of our own intelligence, the pure truth: not as it may appear individually, or arbitrarily, but in its characteristic necessity and universality.<sup>31</sup>

So that is the “Early Magnetism” of the book’s title: nothing less than the ancient “magnetic” practice of healing the mind from sensual delusion and harmful phantasms, and restoring its capacity for direct noetic perception of *ta onta*, “the things that really are.” Mary Anne believed that its historical origins lay in the wisdom of ancient pre-pharaonic Egypt that had been preserved in the writings of Hermes Trismegistus.

Relying heavily on Thomas Taylor’s translations, especially of Proclus and his biographer Marianus,<sup>32</sup> Mary Anne then embarks on a short description of Neoplatonic theurgy followed by some initial, indirect allusions to the Hermetic Literature.<sup>33</sup> From there, she returns to a more precise discussion of magnetic practice, its great potentials, but also its dangers for the unwary and uninstructed: “beware lest with the keys of Heaven, we unlock the easier gates of Hell.”<sup>34</sup> The human mind is a seething chaos of “passing follies and base passions” more numerous than all the gods of the Greek pantheon,<sup>35</sup> and they may overwhelm our consciousness when rational control is relinquished in the state of magnetic trance. But although these risks of mental disturbance are real, the rediscovery and wide dissemination of mesmeric trance means that today, “the flood-gates are irreversibly opened” and therefore “we must, with all faith in humanity, encourage the stream to flow freely onward, so that all may become instructed as fully and quickly as possible; and increased knowledge be thus made to direct a power which no external coercion can secure or suppress.”<sup>36</sup> It is imperative for us to recover the wisdom of the ancients, because only they possessed superior knowledge of these potent forces and knew how to channel them safely for the benefit of hu-

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<sup>30</sup> On “magnetic gnosis” in the context of Mesmerism, see Hanegraaff (2010).

<sup>31</sup> EM, 9–10.

<sup>32</sup> [Proclus] 1816.

<sup>33</sup> E.g., EM, 16 “all is changed and transmuted outwardly in this world, but nothing is destroyed or lost”; see discussion with Hermetic references listed in Hanegraaff 2022, 271–72, 17 (“the Magnet of the Mind,” see CH IV 11). South’s close association of Hermetic spirituality with Neoplatonic theurgy is historically convincing, as argued in Hanegraaff (2022, esp. 99–118).

<sup>34</sup> EM, 20.

<sup>35</sup> EM, 21.

<sup>36</sup> EM, 32.

manity. Moreover (and crucially), true *gnōsis* can be found not just in such ancient authors and their writings, but in our innermost selves as well:

The protective power and beneficial impulse are implanted within us; where they are dormant they must be aroused, and obvious interest every where prevent abuse, for man holds a power that forbids him to be the enemy of his fellow, and the facts now unfolding must moralize the world.<sup>37</sup>

Thus the beneficial knowledge *and* power that we need is readily available; but we are blinded to its presence by the influence of modern science and philosophy, which are simply incapable of perceiving anything else than just “outward qualities and accidents.”<sup>38</sup> Because “the more refined operations of nature are hidden from our obtuser senses,” they require much more subtle modalities of consciousness in order to reveal themselves at all.<sup>39</sup> Having established these foundations, Mary Anne South then presents a classic (neo)platonian argument to the effect that the highest *and* most potent reality can only be accessed in an altered state of *mania* or trance:

that which is gross affects outward sense, that which is mental, cerebral sense; and so on even to the finest projections of reason towards Intelligibles; by which we are mentally carried back to the *superstantial* in all things. The less grossly palpable any body is, the more simple and essentially potent does it become. [ . . . ] Now it is believed, on no light evidence, that the magnetic trance affords, nay, is itself, when justly and perseveringly ordered for that end, THE METAPHYSICAL CONDITION, pre-eminently perfect. It removes the sensible obscuration, and presents a clearer glass before the mind than it can ever regard in the natural state.<sup>40</sup>

This superior magnetic condition of consciousness is the one “esoteric root” common to the Pythagoreans, the Platonists, and all other thinkers to whom Fénélon referred as the “internal school” (EM, 43–45).

And with that, Mary Anne South has reached the domain of her true strength—that of metaphysics. The second section of *Early Magnetism* part I runs from pages 45 to 55 and contains the most sophisticated and eloquent exposition she would ever provide of her essential creed. If the Absolute is beyond the sphere of possible knowledge, she points out, this implies that even philosophy itself must be “a mere phenomenal and delusive pursuit.”<sup>41</sup> Because individual thought is a *transitive* activity predicated on the subject-object duality, it is excluded from immediate positive knowledge of the Absolute in its essential oneness. In other words:

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37 EM, 33.

38 EM, 33.

39 EM, 37.

40 EM, 37–38, 42.

41 EM, 45.

The Absolute, being but one, and its knowledge consequently but one, can be truly known only *in* itself, the fountain of thought ineffable, subverting all expression. Its shadow, in us, recedes constantly behind the *secondary* unity of our intelligence; by endeavouring to convey we instantly dismiss it, and by reflecting while yet on the verge of its conception, we annihilate the inspiration.<sup>42</sup>

Still, such radical *différance* does not mean that the Absolute is utterly beyond our comprehension. As suggested by Schelling, there exists a higher faculty of “Intellectual Intuition” beyond the dualistic consciousness of the thinking mind, which affords “a state in which all difference of subject and object become merged, the Unconditioned is known absolutely in itself.”<sup>43</sup> This is what Mary Anne refers to as “*the true knowledge*” that, by definition, can neither be subject to the relativity and subjectivity of normal thought nor “take place in our *personal* consciousness.”<sup>44</sup>

Reflective reason rests in the pure abstraction of all relative existence, unable to pass the infinite abyss which opens upon the extreme verge of thought betwixt it and the one: hence though it is very requisite, as a preliminary aid to relationship, and the right perception of intelligibles, yet it is not, as has been alleged, the bridge by which we can immediately pass from Psychology [sic] to Ontology, but rather contrariwise; its self-activity is the last intervening barrier between them. [ . . . ] This is the work, this its object, and its end; the line returns to form the circle into its beginning; and they join not in time, for their union is eternity.<sup>45</sup>

Such a “universalised consciousness” of radical nonduality is clearly beyond the reach of reflective reason, and yet it is “attainable by man in ecstatic relationship and collapsed personality”—that is to say, in a supreme state of ecstatic trance. Intellectual contemplation may lead us to *believe* in its object, but true conviction about its reality can only come from direct experience and must remain forever “incommunicable and arcane.”<sup>46</sup>

Having drawn these conclusions about ultimate reality, Mary Anne then provides her readers with several pages of direct quotation taken entirely from the

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42 EM, 46–47. As regard this “fountain of thought ineffable,” see also the “fountain of divine life and light” mentioned on page 29. For the actual centrality of this supreme Fountain or Source (*pégè*) to the original Hermetic message, see Hanegraaff (2022).

43 EM, 47.

44 EM, 48–49, emphasis in original.

45 EM, 49–50. As suggested by my deliberate allusion to Derrida’s *différance*, it is remarkable how precisely Mary Anne South’s argument coincides with my analysis of radical nonduality in the original Hermetica: see Hanegraaff (2022, 311–18, 320; “If *nous* is in fact the exclusive universal reality of Life and Light emanating from the Source, then the only bridge that our *nous* needs to cross and leave behind consists in the dualistic illusion that there is a bridge”).

46 EM, 51 (for exactly the same argument, cf. CH IX 10).

Hermetic literature, in slightly adapted versions of the 1650 English translation by John Everard.<sup>47</sup> These are by far the longest passages from primary sources quoted in *Early Magnetism*, and they show clearly that Mary Anne South saw the *Corpus Hermeticum* (known to her as the *Poemander* or *Pymander*) as the ultimate testimony of ancient divine wisdom. The first quotation comes from CH X 5 and describes the ultimate state of *gnōsis* as “a most *Divine Silence*, and a rest of all the senses” (clearly equivalent to the “sabbath of the senses” mentioned by Thomas South), requiring a condition of radical ecstasy in which the body is immobile while the sensory faculties are on standby.<sup>48</sup> This is followed by several famous poetic passages from CH XI 20–22, evoking the state of “cosmic consciousness” beyond space and time that is the true condition of rebirth.<sup>49</sup> A close paraphrase of CH I 30 once again emphasizes that such experiences require a state of ecstatic trance: “For the sleep of the senses is the sober watchfulness of the Mind, and the shutting of the eyes, the true Sight.”<sup>50</sup> However, when we come down from such conditions of ecstasy to a normal state of consciousness, we also lose our capacity for immediate *gnōsis*:

“We awaken, from the Intellectual Intuition,” says Schelling, “as from a state of death;” and we awaken by reflection into that created personality, wherein, it is impossible any longer to *know* Him. The vision, graven in hallowed memory, is all that remains to us; for the object of human reason is the limit of its power; and the pure zero of all relative conception waits before the throne of God.<sup>51</sup>

These conclusions are remarkably perceptive. Not only did Mary Anne perceive the radical nonduality at the heart of the Hermetic literature, like few later readers have done; but amazingly, it just so happens that even this radical comparison between pure noetic perception and an ecstatic “state of death” is confirmed di-

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47 Everard 1650. This first English translation of the Hermetica was based on Patrizi’s *Nova de universis philosophia* and adopted the latter’s re-ordering of the treatises (Everard 1 = SH IIB+11; 2 = CH I; 3 = CH III; 4 = CH X; 5 = CH V; 6 = CH VI; 7 = CH XIII; 8 = CH VII; 9 = CH II; 10 = CH XI; 11 = CH XII; 12 = CH IV; 13 = CH IX; 14 = SH IV; 15 = SH IIA; 16 = CH VIII; 17 = CH XIV; see van Lamoen 1990, 113–15).

48 EM, 51; Everard 1650, 44. See Hanegraaff (2022, 208).

49 EM, 52–54; Everard 1650, 134–37. See Hanegraaff (2022, 214–19).

50 EM, 54; see Everard 1650, 33. See Hanegraaff (2022, 184). Followed by another short passage, from CH XI 22.

51 EM, 54–55. The quotation comes from the 8<sup>th</sup> letter of Schelling’s *Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus* (1795–1796) (*Wir erwachen aus der intellektuellen Anschauung, wie aus dem Zustande des Todes*); see discussion in Bruno 2016.



rectly in a Hermetic passage of which she could not possibly be aware.<sup>52</sup> She also understood that direct noetic perception in its radical alterity could *not* be maintained in our normal state of consciousness but would remain there only as a secondary reflection, a fleeting memory imprinted on the plastic medium of our imagination: “Nothing is truly imagined in this world any more than we are ourselves, who do but look and dream on its falsified circumference.”<sup>53</sup>

Human beings, Mary Anne concluded, find themselves “immured” within the confines of the Platonic cave, and “[t]he Spirit is full wearied of the long Sabbath, which she has kept in silence, through so many circles of ages.” This is why “the inner mind struggles for a new birth.”<sup>54</sup> However, “to expect or even wish for felicity whilst we continue to falsify our susceptibilities and submit to the degrading tyranny of our passions is mere imbecility,”<sup>55</sup> and it is here that we see the danger of just playing around with the powers of magnetic trance. The vanity of pursuing our selfish desires should have taught us wisdom already a long time ago, but in actual fact:

It would seem, that as it becomes more obvious, our folly increases, as if to hide itself in the gloom that deepens at every step of departure from the simplicity of truth. And it is this, which has most to be guarded against in the application of Magnetism, where, so specifically, the intention carries and immediately images its principle in act. Springing directly from ourselves, this highly effective agent flows forth, as the mind directs, to good or evil [ . . . ].<sup>56</sup>

Again, Mary Anne’s formulations are very precise and to the point. She says that our human *intention* truly guides and directs the magnetic power, and immediately impresses its image on our *phantasia*, the powerful force of imagination or “third kind” through which the mind is able to affect the world of matter and the body.<sup>57</sup> Unless our intentions are pure and our *phantasia* has been purified as well,<sup>58</sup> the magnetic effects can therefore only be harmful. What we really need is

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52 The passage appears in the Coptic treatise on *The Ogdoad and the Ennead* discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945: NH VI<sup>6</sup> 59, 19–20 (“Return to the death-state”). See discussion in Hanegraaff (2022, 291, 300, 304 with note 154).

53 EM, 55; see discussion of memory as an “imprint” on the plastic medium of *phantasia*, in Hanegraaff (2022, 326–27).

54 EM, 55.

55 EM, 57. Again, the analysis is confirmed with remarkable precision by the Hermetic literature: for the central importance of how the “passions” keep the soul in chains by means of the imagination, see Hanegraaff (2022, e.g., 148–55).

56 EM, 57–58.

57 On the Hermetic *phantasia* as equivalent to the “third kind” known as the *chōra* in Plato, see Hanegraaff (2022, 209–19).

58 On the need to purify the *ochēma*, the soul’s vehicle, from negative images, see SI (189–200).

“that internal renovation” known as rebirth, which can be found not in the pursuit of “passing excitements” but only by “with steadfast perseverance looking within.”<sup>59</sup>

### 3 Anima Naturaliter Platonica

The theoretical argument of *Early Magnetism* was based neither on alchemy nor on Christian Theosophy but on ancient Greek and Latin sources, with the *Corpus Hermeticum* at its very center. But as the book was being written, Thomas South had begun corresponding with Christopher Walton (1809–1877), who gave him access to manuscripts that would eventually be integrated in his enormous volume *Notes and Materials*.<sup>60</sup> As Mike Zuber has described in detail, South developed a deep fascination for Freher’s writings with their focus on the alchemical tradition of spiritual rebirth, trying to convince Walton to give them preference over those of William Law. Most importantly, South believed that he had personally discovered “the Key” to what Christian Theosophy was really all about. He alluded to “an art (not a trick remember) most holy, most divine [ . . . ] a practice in common with Behmen, which and *which only* raised them where they were not regenerate but on the road to be so.” This great secret of rebirth had been known to just one person in each theosophical generation, and “no one ever dared to reveal it openly, never in print never in writing, and never personally but after long experience of character, particularly as to one point, reticence.”<sup>61</sup> But although Thomas South had not been subjecting himself to such a long discipline of spiritual *ascesis* or taken any vow of silence, still he had been blessed with a supreme illumination:

The light burst on me as it has rarely burst on others. I tell you as my honest friend this holy light, has surely beamed on my unworthy self, after a long course of intense worldly suffering mental and bodily, that beam that kindled Behmen [and] Freher also fell on the humble head that now directs this pen.<sup>62</sup>

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59 EM, 59–60.

60 Zuber emphasizes that the official publication date of 1854 for Walton’s *Notes and Materials* is “thoroughly misleading,” because parts of it were printed already during the 1840s, and “[a] considerable body of Freher’s writings, including all of ‘The Process in the Philosophical Work,’ thus would have gradually become available to South from 1848 onwards” (Zuber 2021, 164).

61 South, letters to Walton; see Zuber 2021, 163–65, with reference to the manuscript sources in notes 19, 30–31.

62 South, letter to Walton, 19 September (1853?). See Godwin 1992, 57; Zuber 2021, 165.

We do not know exactly what happened to Thomas, or under which circumstances.<sup>63</sup> As for Mary Anne, Wilmshurst claims that she “undoubtedly experienced an interior ‘opening,’ a spiritual *coup d’oeil*,”<sup>64</sup> but apart from her eloquent description of such a state in *Early Magnetism*, again we have no direct testimony. However, it is clear from the South-Walton correspondence that the “fast track” to theosophical *gnōsis* was believed to involve some form of magnetic trance. So what was it, exactly, that Thomas and Mary Anne were *doing* in the isolation of Gosport House, apart from reading ancient books and modern accounts of mesmeric practice?<sup>65</sup> Joscelyn Godwin has tentatively suggested that Thomas’s language of “awed discretion” may suggest some kind of sexual practice reminiscent of Tantra or “certain Cabalist schools.”<sup>66</sup> Initially, it might seem far-fetched to imagine a father and his unmarried daughter in Victorian England experimenting with sexual practices; but keeping in mind Thomas’s emphasis on the importance of “reticence,” we will see that Godwin’s suggestion has some merit. Contrary to common perceptions, the nineteenth century “witnessed an unprecedented explosion of discourse about sex,”<sup>67</sup> as widely reflected in popular literature; and in this particular case, sexual symbolism and gendered dynamics were unquestionably central to precisely the alchemical and Christian-theosophical literature that the Souths were reading.<sup>68</sup> We will return to this dimension below.

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63 However, in light of an excellent discussion by Christopher Partridge (2018, 60–87), and taking into account South’s mention of “mental and bodily” suffering, I would consider the distinct possibility that this illumination was induced by a medical anesthetic like nitrous oxide, which could have precisely such effects.

64 Wilmshurst 1918, 4.

65 Mary Anne herself asks the question in SI (225), but responds only with an indirect allusion to the cult of Asclepius at Epidaurus: “But, perhaps, inquisitive reader, you will very anxiously ask, what was said and done? I would tell you, replies the Epidaurian, if it could be lawfully told. But both the ears and tongue are guilty of indiscretion.” Instead, she alludes not to what was “said and done” but to what was *experienced*, by referring to Apuleius’s famous vision of the “sun at midnight” during his mystery initiation at Eleusis (*Metamorphoses* XI: 20–23).

66 Godwin 1992, 56–57. Godwin adds that even if Thomas South might perhaps have been dabbling in some kind of sexual alchemy, he sees “no reason to believe that Mary Anne South was a party to it.” I will be drawing the contrary conclusion, suggesting that Thomas must have been shocked by the importance attributed to semen, menstrual blood, and even urine in some of the alchemical sources that his daughter was studying. The role of these bodily fluids, including urine, in tantric traditions is well attested (e.g., Mallinson 2007, 221–23; Kiss 2020), but the relevant sources would have been unavailable to the Souths.

67 Urban 2006, 58. See also several contributions to Hanegraaff and Kripal (2011).

68 On sexuality and gender in alchemy, see Principe 2002; for Christian Theosophy, see e.g., Gibbons 1996; Dohm 2002; Temme 1998; Faivre 2011.

On 2 November 1848, Thomas told Walton by letter that both his daughters were now staying in London and would be able to introduce him into “the magnetic world.”<sup>69</sup> He assured him that a single week of mesmeric practice would shed more light on Bohemian Theosophy than he would get from a lifetime of studying books.<sup>70</sup> Walton did indeed write to Mary Anne; but interestingly, she tried to tone down his expectations considerably. Contrary to what her father had been suggesting, she wrote “I do not believe that the verification of true science is in the power of any sleepwalker or mesmerize[d] Clairvoyant now living certainly not any of those I am, or have been, acquainted with hitherto.”<sup>71</sup> The most likely explanation is that her initial enthusiasm had been based mostly, perhaps even exclusively, on the abundant popular *literature* about Mesmerism and its supposed historical backgrounds in the ancient mysteries. As is evident from *Early Magnetism*, her expectations must have been extremely high, as she believed that Mesmeric trance could afford the supreme experience of mystical unity from which all true spiritual traditions had flown. But when she and her sister traveled to London, she must have been disappointed by the humdrum realities of magnetism that she got to witness in the séance rooms. This was not the divine Theurgy that she had been expecting.<sup>72</sup>

I suspect that these winter months of 1848–1849 must have been a turning point after which the paths of father and daughter definitely began to diverge. Mary Anne seems to have begun her systematic studies of the alchemical literature in Thomas’s library only after the mid-1840s; and as Zuber has shown, the Christian-theosophical tradition of rebirth that her father was discussing with Walton became an integral part of *A Suggestive Inquiry*. But while Thomas put all his chips on the direct experience of ecstatic trance that he saw as the heart of Bohemian Theosophy, Mary Anne for her part embarked on a path of deep textual scholarship for which her father seems to have had neither much interest

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69 South, letter to Walton, 2 November 1848; see Zuber 2021, 167 with note 52.

70 Zuber 2021, 167. For Mesmerism as the “fast track to mystical and theosophical insights,” see also Zuber (2021, 165) about Walton traveling slowly by rail while “our school passes you in the electric telegraph.”

71 Mary Anne South, undated letter to Walton; see Zuber 2021, 168 with note 53.

72 For Mary Anne’s reservations about modern mesmeric practice, see e.g., SI, 186–87 (“the best effects of mesmerism, if we connect it with the ancients’ Sacred Art, appear as trifles in comparison” [. . .] “Our sleepwalkers are little better than dreamers, for the most part, or resemble children born into a new world, without a guide [. . .]”). Still, she was “not ashamed, but grateful to acknowledge the neglected Door-keeper [i.e. Mesmerism] that gave us first introduction to the vestibule of antique science” (SI, 427). Note also her explicit rejection of narcotic or hallucinogenic substances as means to induce trance: SI, 194 (“the druggist’s gas”), 264 (“narcotic liquors”), 454 (“ether and chloroform”).

nor sufficient talent and stamina. The official story (as told by Walter Leslie Wilmshurst in 1918) is that Thomas decided to express his insights about the Hermetic mystery by means of a large metrical poem, while Mary Anne would independently write a prose treatise on the same topic. “My dear father,” she wrote in a letter, “was poetical in his turn of mind and did not trouble about prose writing.”<sup>73</sup> But while Thomas’s poem was never finished, his daughter duly completed her thoroughly impressive volume of around 550 dense pages that was published as *A Suggestive Inquiry* in 1850.

We now come to a second embarrassing moment in the relation between father and daughter. The dramatic story of what happened next was told by Walter Leslie Wilmshurst in 1918:

A few copies [ . . . ] had been either sent to public libraries or sold to purchasers, when the further issue of the book was abruptly stopped by Mr. South. The entire residue of the edition was called in, under considerable protest from the publisher and at a cost of £250 to Mr. South, and was brought from London to Gosport. There, upon the lawn of Bury House, the volumes along with the uncompleted manuscript of Mr. South’s poem were stacked and a bonfire was made of them.<sup>74</sup>

According to Wilmshurst, the reason was that “Mr. South and, *though perhaps in a less degree*, his daughter [ . . . ] were seized by a moral panic” (my emphasis) about having revealed supremely sacred and potentially dangerous mysteries that should have been preserved just for true initiates.<sup>75</sup> Wilmshurst was clearly trying to be discreet, but he tells us just enough to contextualize the human drama a bit more precisely. Thomas South’s new enthusiasm for Theosophy seems to have been part of a Christian-pietist “conversion experience” congenial to the evangelical revival that (in parallel to the American “First Great Awakening”) was sweeping England at the time; and this prompted him “to re-consider the Hermetic subject in its relation to Christian soteriology.”<sup>76</sup> But did Mary Anne follow him in that development?

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73 Wilmshurst 1918, 5.

74 Wilmshurst 1918, 6. The veracity of this account has been doubted on the basis of a letter in which South tells Walton that “the whole Edition of the Book is now withdrawn into my own hands for private circulation only” (Godwin 1992, 56; 1994, 235; Gilbert 2009, 57–58), but I do not think the two accounts are mutually exclusive. I assume that the larger part may have been destroyed while a small number of copies were preserved. Somewhat incongruously, Gilbert thinks that while Thomas did not destroy *A Suggestive Inquiry*, he *did* burn his own poem (59); but I find it more likely that he never succeeded in finishing it. About the print-run, financial aspects, possible fraud on the publisher’s part, and the dissemination history of *A Suggestive Inquiry*, see Gilbert (2009, 57–60), Zuber (2017, 427–37; 2021, 175–80).

75 Wilmshurst 1918, 7.

76 Wilmshurst 1918, 9.

Most commentators after Wilmshurst have imagined an idyllic family scene, with father and daughter collaborating in perfect harmony on their parallel Hermetic projects; but in fact, it seems that Thomas had not “trouble[d] to look at her manuscript or even the proofprints” prior to publication.<sup>77</sup> I suspect that when he finally read the published version, or glanced through it, the ancient traditions that remained front and center in Mary Anne’s project must have struck him as far too deeply and exclusively “pagan” compared to the deeply Protestant piety of Böhme and Freher. While Mary Anne relied very heavily on the entire standard corpus of early-modern alchemical literature written by Christian authors and readily available in her father’s library, in her published writings she never shows any deep interest or genuine enthusiasm for Christian theology or biblical exegesis but always traces their basic concepts straight back to the Platonic tradition. Her true heroes were the Neoplatonists, especially Iamblichus and Proclus, or such texts as the Chaldaean Oracles and the Hermetic literature. By sharp contrast, the surviving fragment of Thomas South’s poem, “The Enigma of Alchemy,” relies almost wholly on biblical references to highlight magnetic trance as the true secret of alchemical rebirth.<sup>78</sup>

Behind Wilmshurst’s reference to a “moral panic,” I therefore suspect a domestic conflict between father and daughter. The recent “born-again” convert to a Christian Theosophy grounded deeply in Biblical exegesis could no longer ignore the *anima naturaliter platonica*,<sup>79</sup> the essentially “pagan” sensitivity, of his classically minded daughter. It is evident that Mary Anne did not stand a chance to win such a battle. While Thomas was endowed with an “active and creative nature,” she was a typical introvert, “innately of an inert and extremely modest, retiring temperament.”<sup>80</sup> For a young woman of her disposition in the Victorian age, it would have been all but impossible to stand up against her father when he decided that this book full of pagan learning must be destroyed, literally at all costs. Wilmshurst notes that in actual fact, it was “a crushing sorrow to her and [. . .] left her in a sense a broken woman.”<sup>81</sup> For the remainder of her long life, she would never publish another book.

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77 Wilmshurst 1918, 6.

78 South, “The Fragment,” with short introduction by Wilmshurst (2019). For the full title, see Gilbert 2009, 56.

79 Wilmshurst 1919, 491.

80 Wilmshurst 1918, 9.

81 Wilmshurst 1918, 10.

## 4 The Hermetic Mystery

*A Suggestive Inquiry* (henceforth abbreviated as SI) is a long, difficult, often obscure, but thoroughly impressive book. After writing *Early Magnetism*, Mary Anne South must have spent several years reading systematically through her father's entire library devoted to alchemy, the "occult sciences," and their origins in late antiquity. As virtually no reliable scholarly literature was available that could have guided her through this labyrinth of "rejected knowledge," she can hardly be blamed for sometimes losing her way, getting overwhelmed by the complexity of her materials, or being "naïve" in her historiographical assumptions.<sup>82</sup> On the contrary, she deserves considerable respect for this valiant and pioneering attempt to reconstruct "the Hermetic Mystery" in its entirety and more or less from scratch, by going straight to the primary sources rather than just copying information at second hand.

On the very title page of the original version (but omitted from the new 1918 edition that almost everybody uses!), we find a key quotation from the Hermetic *Asclepius* that culminates in a famous line: *sed omnium mirabilium vincit admirationem, quod homo Divinam potuit invenire Naturam, eamque efficere* ("But more admirable than all other wonders is the fact that man has been able to discover the divine nature and make it manifest").<sup>83</sup> As will be seen, for Mary Anne this was a covert reference to the central mystery of rebirth that her book was designed to reveal *and* conceal. Her argument was organized in four parts. Part One discussed material transmutation as the "exoteric" side of alchemy and finished with the transcript of a complete medieval treatise. In Part Two, Mary Anne proceeded to a "more esoteric" discussion focused on "the true subject of the Hermetic art." She discussed the universal "Light of Nature" as central to both the ancient Mysteries and the modern practice of mesmerism, the many "ordeals and

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<sup>82</sup> Pace Principe's and Newman's harshly dismissive remarks about *A Suggestive Inquiry* as an "often incoherent hodgepodge" (2001, 390–91). It is the world of academic scholarship that must carry the blame for largely abandoning these traditions, thus leaving a scholarly "waste land" to be exploited by amateur scholars and commercial entrepreneurs (Hanegraaff 2012, 191–256). See Gershom Scholem's sharp remarks about the parallel case of kabbalah scholarship (Scholem 1946, 2, 212; discussion in Hanegraaff 2018, 165–66).

<sup>83</sup> *Ascl.* 37. For the crucial translation of *efficere* not as "making" but as "making manifest," see Hanegraaff (2022, 68 with note 90). Mary Anne South seems to have this distinction in mind for instance in *A Suggestive Inquiry*, 90: "nature alone engenders it; it is not possible to *make* it by art; for to create is proper to God alone; but to make things that are not perceived, but which lie in the shadow, to appear, and to take from them their veil, is granted to an intelligent philosopher by God, through nature." Other references to this key Hermetic passage appear in SI, xv, 286, 354.

disciplines” that were necessary to achieve “physical regeneration,” and finally the “ultimate object” of the Great Work—that by a process of “divine assimilation,” the human spirit could come “in vital contact with its Source” and thereby gain a condition of “perfection, purity, and integral efficiency.” We have seen that this very same objective was already at the center of *Early Magnetism*; but now it was described explicitly in terms of *physical* regeneration, or rebirth. Part Three went into further detail about the “laws and vital conditions” that were needed for success, including the “mental requisites” that initiates would have to cultivate and the “impediments” they must avoid or overcome. Finally, Part Four subdivided Hermetic practice into “the gross work” and “the philosophic or subtle work” that would finally lead to “a practical understanding of the most abstruse secret of the Hermetic philosophy.” This fourth part, and the book as a whole, concluded with another complete textual transcript and a summary conclusion.

So what was the mystery all about? Already on the first pages, Mary Anne puts emphasis on the Hermetica and describes them as “theosophic and ultimate” treatises concerned with “our divine capabilities and promise of regeneration.”<sup>84</sup> But as already foreseen in the famous “lament” over Egypt from the *Asclepius* (which is quoted at length in Thomas Taylor’s translation<sup>85</sup>), after the rise of Christianity, this supreme theurgic art had been tragically forgotten and actively suppressed. Still, it managed to survive in the writings of the great Neoplatonic philosophers and in the alchemical literature. The Protestant Reformers, too, “mistaking these things for superstitions, and since they had ceased to have any meaning, turned them all out of doors; retaining, indeed, little more of the mystery of regeneration than a traditional faith.”<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, the writings of Jacob Böhme and the “enthusiasts” that followed in his wake, “of the Pordage and Lead school,” should not be “undervalued,” for they were “all on the same original track.” Böhme in particular (but not, presumably, the later Behmenists!) “would seem to have attained something better even than a view of the Promised Land.”<sup>87</sup> If these observations about Christian Theosophy sound less than fully enthusiastic, that impression is confirmed by Mary Anne’s commentary on a short poetic fragment by the Irish Böhme-admirer Henry Brooke (1703–1783), which she inserts immediately after these descriptions:

What’er the Eastern Magi sought,  
Or Orpheus sung, or Hermes taught,

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<sup>84</sup> SI, 6–7 (with explicit reference to Everard’s translation).

<sup>85</sup> *Ascl.* 24–25; SI, 9–10; taken from a long footnote to Synesius, in Taylor (1817, 550–55); see also the “Religion of Intellect” [i.e. of *nous*, see *Ascl.* 25] in SI, 24.

<sup>86</sup> SI, 21.

<sup>87</sup> SI, 56–57.



Whatever Confucius would inspire,  
 Or Zoroaster's mystic fire;  
 The symbols that Pythagoras drew,  
 The wisdom godlike Plato knew,  
 What Socrates debating proved,  
 Or Epictetus lived and loved;  
 The sacred fire of saint and sage,  
 Thro' every clime in every age,  
 In Böhme's wondrous page we view,  
 Discover'd and revealed anew, &c.<sup>88</sup>

To which Mary Anne responds as follows:

Revealed anew, it will be observed, theosophically, but not intellectually. Nothing, since the Greeks, has been found to approach their doctrine of Wisdom in perspicuity, grace of utterance, and scientific explication of the divine source. Of all the successors on the same road, none have exceeded their authority, and very few have attained to the perfect veracity and ideality of their ground [ . . . ].<sup>89</sup>

This is further evidence for the diverging perspectives of daughter and father. Whereas Thomas believed that anything valuable in the ancient wisdom could also be found in Böhme, thus rendering the former strictly superfluous, Mary Anne states that nobody “since the Greeks,” including these Christian Theosophers, had ever come close to the Egyptian wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus. However, while the *Asclepius* and the *Pimander* were concerned with the ultimate experience of metaphysical truth (as already explained in *Early Magnetism*), they did not discuss “the physical ground” and “practical method” of alchemical re-birth<sup>90</sup>—to find out what to *do*, indeed, you had to turn to the alchemical literature. Its basic axiom is that “there abides in nature a certain pure matter, which, being discovered and brought by art to perfection, converts to itself proportion-

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<sup>88</sup> SI, 57. Wilmshurst (1918, 6) mistakenly states that these lines come from Thomas South's poem, for Mary Anne had found them in the important 1815 compilation *Lives of Alchemistical Philosophers* (65), which states (in her formulation) that they were “copied from a manuscript found in a volume of [Böhme's] works.” William Walton quotes the same lines and tells us that they were written in 1769 by “Henry Brooke, of Dublin” (*Notes and Materials*, xxviii). This Irish writer, best known for his novel *The Fool of Quality* (1765–1770; see Donlan 2009) was an admirer of Böhme and clearly well-known to Walton, who quotes him repeatedly. A book of letters by Brooke, from 1776 to 1792, is preserved in the Walton collection of Dr. Williams's Library (Ms. Walton I.1.43), and would deserve to be published (Paul Kléber Monod, personal communication 13 December 2004).

<sup>89</sup> SI, 58.

<sup>90</sup> SI, 6–7.

ally all imperfect bodies that it touches.”<sup>91</sup> This pure substance is in fact the true clear Light of Nature that “fills with true virtue every mind that has once perceived it.” It is known by many names, and is equivalent to the universal Spirit or Ether that is central to magnetic practice as well.<sup>92</sup> While universally present in nature, only in Man does it manifest as

an Image that is Divine and more potent than all the rest: which is in this life yet an embryo, but when unfolded through a new birth in universal intelligence, transcends the limits of this nether sphere, and passes into communion with the highest life, power, science, and most perfect felicity.<sup>93</sup>

The rebirth begins with this embryonic “image” of divinity that is latent in every human being and has the power to draw the soul upward like a magnet. Mary Anne is clearly alluding here to CH IV 9–11 about the “Image” (orig. *eikōn*) of “the Unity, Beginning, and Root of all things” that can be seen “by the eyes of thy minde, and heart” as a “spectacle of light” that “holds fast and draws unto it, as they say, the Loadstone doth Iron” (formulations by Everard, on whose translation she depended).<sup>94</sup> Of course, this Hermetic passage was bound to strike enthusiasts of Mesmer’s “animal magnetism” as particularly significant.

In order for the “germ” to grow and reach maturity, a “vessel” is required.<sup>95</sup> What is it? Mary Anne states that this secret was kept silent by all the ancient philosophers; but modern authors such as Agrippa, the disciples of Paracelsus, and Jacob Böhme have begun speaking more openly. With remarkable perspicuity, she then picks out precisely the chapters in Agrippa that speak about ecstatic trance and Lazzarelli’s doctrine of Hermetic rebirth. When the reins of the body are released, the soul is set free as from a close prison; and thus “stirred by a divine spirit” it “comprehends all things.”<sup>96</sup> This is because “as God knoweth all things, so man, knowing Him, also can know all things” and the reverse, for “Whosoever, therefore, shall *know himself*, shall know all things in himself; but especially he shall know God.”<sup>97</sup>

In the second key passage from Agrippa, to which Mary Anne alludes here *without* quoting it directly, we read explicitly that such a state of boundless

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91 SI, 72 (italicized quotation referenced to Arnaldo Villanova).

92 SI, Chapter II, e.g., 75, 80, 89, 96; see also e.g., 354.

93 SI, 97.

94 Everard 1650, 12: 44, 51–52 [pp. 166–67]; see discussion of the original passage in Hanegraaff 2022, 206–9).

95 SI, 145–46; for the “germ,” see SI, xiv, 108, 164, 216, 379, 415.

96 SI, 148; see Agrippa, *De Occulta Philosophia* III 46.

97 SI, 148.

knowledge is the result of a “literal generation” in which the true “sons of God [. . .] are born not from the will of the flesh, nor from the will of a man or of a menstruating woman, but from God.”<sup>98</sup> But such things, Agrippa concluded, “belong to the most recondite secrets of nature, which should not be publicly discussed any further.”<sup>99</sup> We get a precious glimpse here of Mary Anne South’s strategy as an author. She had read Agrippa and knew that the passage was precisely “about the literal rebirth of the *nous*” (*de univoca mentis generatione*).<sup>100</sup> But following Agrippa’s own advice, she did not quote the key passage directly; rather than spilling the true secret, she was leaving a small trail of breadcrumbs so that only the most diligent readers might discover it for themselves in the original source. Moreover, the pages just discussed contain several hidden quotations: formulations taken from the *Hermetica* without attribution, which would only be recognized by readers who knew them very well. The implication is unavoidable. Only a professional critical edition of *A Suggestive Inquiry*, in which all such explicit and implicit references are identified and traced back to their original sources, will be able to reveal the *arcana* that its author believed should be concealed.

In some manner, the noetic rebirth was *physical*, for its mysterious “vessel” (the womb containing the “germ” from which the embryo would be born) was indeed the human body, described in a later passage as a “multiform distillatory apparatus, of nerves, veins, and alembics.”<sup>101</sup> And in fact, on the pages that follow we encounter a string of tantalizing references to bodily fluids that are circulating through this “Laboratory.”<sup>102</sup> The “seed” of nature<sup>103</sup> is again identified as the “magnet” of CH IV 9–11; it is also described as a fire that “burns more than all glorious in [man] erect”<sup>104</sup>; and later on we are told that this fire of life “is bound in man, shut up as it may be milk, within the hard and solid nut.”<sup>105</sup> Clearly these

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<sup>98</sup> Agrippa, *De Occulta Philosophia* III 36; translation in Hanegraaff (2009, 12; with explanation of how the passage is concocted from Lazzarelli’s *Crater Hermetis* in the version of Lefèvre d’Étapes that Agrippa was reading).

<sup>99</sup> Agrippa, *De Occulta Philosophia* III 36.

<sup>100</sup> Agrippa’s *univoca generatio* (*ibid.*) is taken directly from Lazzarelli, *Crater Hermetis* 25:4 (see Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn 2005, 246–47, cf. 71). I use the word “*nous*” rather than “mind” for reasons explained at length in Hanegraaff 2022, e.g., 12–14.

<sup>101</sup> SI, 442.

<sup>102</sup> SI, 162.

<sup>103</sup> SI, e.g., 149, 216.

<sup>104</sup> SI, 151–52 (with reference to the 1696 English translation of *Centrum Naturae Concentratum*, 80–81); see also a later note in the Appendix, “The fire of life in us is capable of burning erect, it becomes a magnet! Wonderful!”

<sup>105</sup> SI, 277. To be precise, the Paracelsian “true medicine” shut up like milk in the nut is immediately identified, in this passage, as “our fire of life” which “can effect nothing comparatively ex-

are veiled references to the male semen. According to standard Aristotelian theory, sexual generation required the female menstrual blood (vehicle of the nutritive soul) to be inseminated by the male seed (vehicle of the sentient soul),<sup>106</sup> and in fact we find several references in this same section to the “true blood,” followed by discussions of “circulation” and elective affinities (“attraction”/“repulsion”) between male and female.<sup>107</sup> What exactly could be meant by “true blood”? On page 156, we read a quotation in Latin from a source that was actually known to Mary Anne in English but that she preferred to keep untranslated, for rather obvious reasons. The English version says:

Nature gives us both Blood and Urine; and from the Nature of these Pyrotechny gives us a Salt which Art circulates into the circulated Salt of *Paracelsus*. [ . . . ] I will add this: the Salt of Blood ought so to be transmuted by the Urinaceous ferment that it may lose its last Life, preserve its middle Life, and retain its Saltness.<sup>108</sup>

Putting these pieces of information together, we arrive at a rather clear scenario. The spiritual principle required for rebirth was believed to reside in the semen, representing the masculine “seed” of noetic Light.<sup>109</sup> It had to be brought into contact with a purified form of menstrual blood as its feminine counterpart: the “true blood” that resulted from prior transmutation by means of urine. Out of these ingredients, or their spiritual energies, the body of light would be born. All of this leads up to the key statement that “Man then [ . . . ] is the true Laboratory of the Hermetic art.”<sup>110</sup> It is from the materials of the earthly human body that the subtle spiritual body must be born.<sup>111</sup> Having completed this delicate section,

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cellent whilst it is immured. When, however, by a due purgation, the pure life is separated . . . it will flow forth, as is declared, ‘a pure panacea from the god of Light.’ Clearly the allusion is to testicles, not coconuts!

**106** Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium* I.1–2.

**107** SI, 150–56, see also 161. In natural generation, the centrifugal force of repulsion towards the exterior is predominant over the centripetal force of “interior attraction,” so that life is drawn outward “to a debilitated consciousness away from its First Cause.” In spiritual regeneration (rebirth), this power dynamics is reversed so that the inward power dominates its outward counterpart (SI, 156).

**108** Eirenaeus Philalethus, *Arcanum Liquoris Immortalis Ignis-Aquae; seu Alkahest*, 76, 78 (*Collectanea Chymica*, 20; Latin and English in parallel). For the central role of urine in this treatise, see Newman (1994, 181–88); for further backgrounds in Van Helmont, see also Newman and Principe (2002, 72–73, 202–3, 277–78).

**109** Such associations of semen with spiritual (or noetic) Light are rather common in quite some religious traditions (for a convenient overview, see Eliade 1976) and are supported by the Hermetic literature as well (see Hanegraaff 2022, Index under “Semen”).

**110** SI, 162.

**111** SI, e.g., 252, 295, 305.

the chapter moves on to the safer terrain of general metaphysics; but it concludes by once again emphasizing the physical foundations of rebirth. An important quotation from Psellus' commentary on the *Chaldaean Oracles* makes clear that we are dealing with a form of theurgy: the "vehicle of the soul" (the Platonic *ochēma*, here understood as the luminous body of rebirth) must be "strengthened by material rites" that uses "materials here on earth."<sup>112</sup>

Mary Anne states explicitly that the basic process of rebirth can be captured by the famous alchemical formula *solve et coagula*, understood simultaneously on the levels of soul and body. In terms of phreno-magnetic trance induction, it appears that specific *manual operations* were required to "dissolve the sensible medium and convert it to the experience of another life [ . . . ] that the compact earthly body of sense may be rarified and flow as a passive watery spirit," after which the fluid substance must then be fixed or coagulated into a new and superior substance.<sup>113</sup> From the contemporary literature, it is well attested that mesmeric trance was understood as "loosening" or "dissolving" the rigid structures of rational control and domination by the external physical senses, allowing both body and mind to "let go" and melt like ice.<sup>114</sup> Likewise, rebirth would require the fixed and rigid matter of the human body to be dissolved into fluids from which the new spiritual body could be born. To have any chance at success, the entire operation must be accompanied by prayer.<sup>115</sup> Thus it seems clear that the physical procedures for achieving rebirth would either require a state of trance or result in one; and indeed, Mary Anne concludes her section on physical procedures with another reference to Agrippa to precisely that effect:

by a certain mysterious recreation and appeasing, the human mind, especially that which is simple and pure, may be converted and laid asleep from its present life so utterly as to be brought into its divine nature, and become enlightened with the divine light [ . . . ].<sup>116</sup>

Throughout *A Suggestive Inquiry*, we find many implicit or explicit references to the Hermetica; but the most important quotations appear in Part III, chapter III

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112 SI, 178; cf. 251, 265.

113 SI, 203 with note 2 (see also e.g., SI, 222, 459). It is easy to overlook Mary Anne's precise formulation: "our hands, which are able to dissolve." The importance of manual practice is emphasized notably in SI (453–56). See also Isabelle De Steiger's explicit statement that "the first work" or "the 'first gate'" was "to unfix the body" (1913, 23).

114 For a particularly eloquent description by Justinus Kerner, the famous author of *Die Seherin von Prevorst*, see his letter to Uhland, 26 November 1812 (Kerner 1897, 339–43; discussion in Hanegraaff 2004, Pt 2, 257–58).

115 SI, 440.

116 SI, 161 (paraphrase of a passage in Agrippa, *De Occulta Philosophia* III 48, clearly based on James Freake's 1651 English translation).

about “the manifestation of the Philosophic Matter.” This very title hints at the key quotation from *Ascl.* 37 on the original title page (see above), about how to “discover the divine nature and make it manifest”—that is to say, in Mary Anne’s narrative, about how to cause the hidden divine “germ” of Light to be born as a new organism. In a difficult passage on pages 392–93, she explains once again that at the center of every (human) being resides a “spirit from the original of the world.” This pure divine matter or substance of Light keeps being split off by means of sexual generation, so that all children inherit a portion of it from their parents. But its presence gets obscured by the dominant influence of the corporeal senses, which cause it to be “separated off from the consciousness” so that we are normally unaware of its presence. Still, every individual is in fact “a distinct self-spiration [sic], severation, or outbirth, as it were, from that Fontal Reason whence it springs” (that is, in Hermetic terms, from the ultimate divine Source of noetic Life and Light). What happens in the rebirth is that the interior Light manifests its presence again to an individual’s conscious awareness. As testimony for that experience, we then get a quotation running to no fewer than four and a half pages<sup>117</sup> from CH I, in a slightly adapted version of the Everard translation, where Poimandres (the divine Light of the *Nous*) appears to Hermes in a luminous vision. A bit further on, Mary Anne refers to the “tormentors” of CH XIII as the soul’s “household enemies” that are resisting the Light and must be conquered by every human being who strives to be reborn.<sup>118</sup> And finally, the long poetic passage from CH XI 20–22 that already appeared in *Early Magnetism* is quoted once again,<sup>119</sup> to show the nature of cosmic consciousness that results from the rebirth.

Still, there is a strange gap at the heart of *A Suggestive Inquiry*. Mary Anne South perceived the centrality of *palingenesia* and its connection with “becoming the *aiōn*” far more sharply than almost all modern scholars of the Hermetica have done; and yet, somehow, it would seem as if she missed the true nature of the rebirth process as described explicitly in CH XIII. This is surprising, because the Everard translation that she was using is perfectly clear in its references to “regeneration,” in conveying Hermes’ statement that he has “gone out of [his] self, into an immortal body” and “begotten in Minde” in a manner that “is not taught,” or in stating that the body of “Essential Generation” is immortal so that Tat is “born a God, and the Son of the One.”<sup>120</sup> One would have expected all this to be front and center in Mary Anne’s exposition. Given the importance of the

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117 SI, 393–97.

118 SI, 408–9.

119 SI, 413–24.

120 Everard 1650, chapters 7:14–15, 57 (pages 83, 91–92).

Hermetica to *A Suggestive Inquiry* and the considerable hermeneutic skills of its author, I do not find it credible to assume that she simply overlooked those passages. Much more likely, we see here another example of her strategy as a mystery writer. For more than 550 pages, she always keeps circling around the true secret without ever pointing it out directly; but meanwhile, she keeps referring to sources where diligent readers will be able to discover it by themselves, if they care to follow the trail of breadcrumbs that she has left for them in her text.

We have no direct evidence that Mary Anne or her father ever actually experimented with the physical procedures that she was trying so hard to reveal and conceal at the same time. I have been arguing that what she had in mind must have been a (phreno)magnetic method of trance induction combined with some kind of alchemical transmutation of bodily fluids. From a theoretical perspective, this should not be surprising: after all, since physical *birth* results from sexual fermentation, it was no more than logical to assume that Hermetic *rebirth* must have something to do with the spiritual powers of procreation that were released by the sexual organs. But what would it all have looked like in actual practice? We have no reason to doubt that in Mary Anne's mind, these supremely sacred mysteries had nothing to do with physical sex or bodily pleasure—any such suggestion she would have indignantly dismissed, as vulgar and ignorant. Still, it is not so easy (to say the least) for us to imagine a father and his unmarried daughter even just discussing such matters in the prudish atmosphere of Victorian England—not to mention putting them into practice. Perhaps the solution is much more simple. If Thomas South decided that *A Suggestive Inquiry* must be destroyed, I suspect, this may have been not just because of its blatantly “pagan” contents, but also because the physical realities of the Great Work were so shocking to his Christian sensitivities that he did not want his daughter to pursue them any further—or be seen as doing so. He must have felt, quite correctly, that she was playing with alchemical fire.

## 5 Postscript

Mary Anne lived another sixty years after the publication and suppression of *A Suggestive Inquiry*. Her intellectual development during those years, and her interactions with like-minded esotericists such as Anne Judith Penny and Isabelle the de Steiger would deserve a separate treatment. The most detailed discussion so far was published by Wilmshurst,<sup>121</sup> and the 1918 edition of *A Suggestive Inquiry*

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<sup>121</sup> Wilmshurst 1919, 1920.

contains a long Appendix “Table Talk and Memorabilia” with textual fragments scribbled down between 1850 and 1910. Mary Anne Atwood also published occasional short pieces in the spiritualist journal *Light*, under the pseudonym “Old Inquirer,” crossing swords notably with Arthur Edward Waite.<sup>122</sup> Most importantly, the Atwood Papers preserved at Brown University and available online await further study.<sup>123</sup> But as I have suggested, Mary Anne South’s “Hermetic Mystery” will never be fully resolved without a professional critical edition of *A Suggestive Inquiry* combined with detailed analysis of all these manuscript sources. Given the remarkable authority of “Mrs. Atwood” in esoteric and occultist circles since the late nineteenth century, and her crucial importance to how alchemy came to be perceived since that period, much more work remains to be done.

## List of Abbreviations

CH	<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i>
EM	ΘΥΟΣ ΜΑΘΟΣ [Mary Anne South & Thomas South]. 1846. <i>Early Magnetism</i> [ . . . ]
SI	[South, Mary Anne]. 1850. <i>A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery</i> [ . . . ]

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<sup>122</sup> Appendix to SI, 561–97.

<sup>123</sup> <https://www.riamco.org/render?eadid=US-RPB-msatwood&view=title>. The first modern scholar to have explored these manuscripts seriously is Mike Zuber, see Zuber (2021, 160–96).



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Marleen Thaler

## Chapter 8

# Approaching a Universal Pattern? Gopi Krishna's Transformational Kuṇḍalinī Experience within the Frame of Universalism and Religious Scientism

I was witnessing in my own body the immensely accelerated activity of an energy not yet known to science, which is carrying all mankind towards the heights of superconsciousness, provided that by its thought and deed it allows this evolutionary force full opportunity to perform unhindered the work of transformation. *Gopi Krishna*<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

On an early December morning in 1937, the Indian Pandit Gopi Krishna (1903–1984) sat down for his meditation practice<sup>2</sup>. Sitting in his usual cross-legged posture, he breathed slowly and rhythmically, and focussed on the crown of his head, as was his daily routine. After years of meditation, he was able to remain seated without discomfort, consciously observing his position in the room, his posture, his breath, and his steady mind. On that momentous morning of 1937, however, his meditation practice took an unexpected turn. A physical sensation at the lower part of the back caught the meditator's attention, led to increasing physical and mental irritations, and culminated in what the protagonist perceived as an out-of-body experience. Many years later, Krishna would describe

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<sup>1</sup> Krishna 1967, 104.

<sup>2</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support of the Austrian Science fund (FWF, project number: P 32232-G, project name: Imagining Energy–The Practice of Energy Healing between Sense-Experience and Sense-Making) and of the Marietta Blau grant, which both made the research for this paper possible.

that extraordinary event as his initial activation of the so-called *kuṇḍalinī śakti*<sup>3</sup> or *kuṇḍalinī* energy.<sup>4</sup>

This intended, and yet unexpected and deeply disturbing experience marked a turning point in Krishna's life. The energy activation led not only to an altered perception of reality but also to years of trauma. Krishna's systematic and reflective examination of this decisive event culminated in the publication of his autobiographical book *Kundalini. The Evolutionary Energy in Man*, in 1967, where he expounded his experience.<sup>5</sup> This book was the point of departure for a series of autobiographical approaches by others describing their (assumed) *kuṇḍalinī* awakenings, which have not ceased ever since. Descriptions of experiences of the rising *kuṇḍalinī* are thus commonly enshrined in autobiographical books reminiscent of Krishna's model.

The overall goal of this paper is two-fold: On the one hand, it aims to outline Krishna's claim of *kuṇḍalinī*'s universalism as a biological mechanism, and at the other hand, it pleads for Krishna's influence among ensuing non-Indian experience reports. The paper is composed of three sections. First, it discusses Krishna's experience report, his sources, and premises. The account of Krishna's personal experience and explanatory model is followed by an elaboration on his claim of universalism. Finally, the paper takes Krishna's impact upon subsequent experience reports among non-Indians into account. This final part of the paper poses examples of biographical narratives and presents one such report in more detail.

Besides Krishna's position as role model among writers on *kuṇḍalinī*, he influenced, as mentioned, the modern interpretation of *kuṇḍalinī*. Until that point, *kuṇḍalinī*'s liberating implications had dominated the Anglo-American discourse on *kuṇḍalinī*. However, in consideration of his severe sufferings in the wake of the experience described below, Krishna's concept of *kuṇḍalinī* was no longer

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3 The concept of *kuṇḍalinī śakti* traces back to tantric texts, where the goddess *kuṇḍalinī* was portrayed as Śiva's feminine counterpart. The c. tenth century *Kubjikāmatatantra* counts among the first texts to introduce the idea of *kuṇḍalinī* as a key feature of the subtle body. The text describes how *kuṇḍalinī* latently resides at the base of the spine. Upon activation (through visualization or yoga practices), she will rise towards the crown of the head, to reunite with Śiva. *Kuṇḍalinī* literally means 'she who is coiled' and is hence commonly depicted through an image of a coiled serpent. While the initial description of *kuṇḍalinī śakti* has been subject to change, it has nonetheless maintained an authoritative status. For a thorough discussion of *kuṇḍalinī śakti* in its South Asian context, see, e.g., Mallinson and Singleton (2017, 227–29). For a detailed examination of the history of *kuṇḍalinī* as experience, see Borkataky-Varma and Foxen (forthcoming).

4 Krishna [1967] 1970, 11–13.

5 Leslie Shepard republished Krishna's (1967) autobiography *Kundalini. The Evolutionary Energy in Man* as an extended and reorganized edition under the title *Living with Kundalini. The Autobiography of Gopi Krishna* (Krishna 1993).

confined to its assumed life-enhancing character. On the contrary, he portrayed *kuṇḍalinī* as a bearer of crisis and thus laid a special focus on its dangerous implications. Accordingly, the greater part of his book underlines his agony and reports of his almost unbearable efforts to succeed in averting his own demise. These extensive descriptions of the drawbacks of his *kuṇḍalinī* awakening thus triggered a reevaluation of *kuṇḍalinī* inasmuch as potential risks of *kuṇḍalinī* awakenings were increasingly addressed.<sup>6</sup> Ever since, *kuṇḍalinī* has been discussed equally in terms of spiritual perfection and spiritual emergency. Krishna's book and his emphasis on *kuṇḍalinī*'s pitfalls thenceforward permeated the alternative religious milieu in the second half of the twentieth century. Especially Transpersonal Psychology picked up on that topic. Major Transpersonal pioneers of the notion of 'spiritual emergency' were Christina (1941–2014) and Stanislav Grof (b. 1931).<sup>7</sup> The renowned couple assumed a similar stance and agreed with Krishna's accentuation of *kuṇḍalinī*'s danger.<sup>8</sup>

Krishna further aimed to unveil the secrets of *kuṇḍalinī* along the lines of scientific methods and language. According to Krishna, the transformation triggered by *kuṇḍalinī*'s activation followed a universal pattern—pertaining to both the process proper and its results. With his endeavour to determine *kuṇḍalinī*'s universal quality, he significantly contributed to the 'scientification'<sup>9</sup> of *kuṇḍalinī*. The notion of the scientification of the religious sphere among Hindu nationalists, Theosophists, and exponents of modern yoga<sup>10</sup> traces back to the late nineteenth

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6 Throughout the paper I am also going to discuss how Krishna managed to reframe these dreadful periods of his life as meaningful and positive.

7 The Grofs published widely on 'spiritual emergency' (also labelled as 'spiritual crisis') and thereby entrenched the topic to the transpersonal psychological agenda. Ever since the 1980s, when the topic gained ground, significant research has been carried out. Further notable protagonists include the Scottish psychiatrist Ronald D. Laing (1927–1989) and the Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagiolo (1888–1974). The most comprehensive publications on spiritual emergency are by Grof and Grof (1989), who argue with a transpersonal psychological stance, and Hofmann and Heise (2017), who aim to cover theoretical and practical approaches from a scholarly perspective.

8 This paper is too short to discuss the complex relationship between Krishna and protagonists of Transpersonal Psychology. While both parties shared similar interests and collaborated to a certain extent, the relation was mainly defined by competition and suspicion (Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.10., Zentralbibliothek Zürich).

9 Following von Stuckrad, the term 'scientification' means the discursive entanglement of religion and science (von Stuckrad 2014, 180).

10 Mallinson and Singleton (2017) provide the best historical overview of yoga. While the academic discipline of modern yoga already evolved in the 1990s, only in recent years, scholarship on modern yoga has increasingly gained ground in academia. In spite of its contestation, the term 'modern yoga' (alternative terms are, e.g., 'contemporary yoga' or 'transnational yoga') has nonetheless achieved the status of an umbrella term for theories, practices, and discourses linked to modern

century in Colonial India. Various religious protagonists have thereafter used science as an epistemological strategy to legitimize their theories, dogmas, and practices.<sup>11</sup> This endeavour might be labelled religious scientism.<sup>12</sup> In his recent publication *Global Tantra*, Julian Strube points out, that “[i]n the nineteenth century, the notion of *science* was central to formations of religious identities.”<sup>13</sup> A notable example of an early representative of religious scientism was Narendranath Datta, better known as Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902).<sup>14</sup> Against the backdrop of Hindu nationalists’ emphasis of ‘Vedic science,’<sup>15</sup> Vivekananda “construed Hinduism to be a scientific religion consonant with modern sciences.”<sup>16</sup> His seminal book *Raja Yoga*<sup>17</sup> remains a classic in the attempt of reconciling science and religion.<sup>18</sup> Other important Indian pioneers of religious scientism were the Indian Sanskrit scholar and active member of the Theosophical Society Srish Chandra

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examinations of yoga. Important studies appeared from the 1990s onwards and involve works by Karl Baier (1998), Joseph Alter (2004), Elizabeth De Michelis (2004), Mark Singleton (2010), and Suzanne Newcombe (2019). For extensive compilations of contemporary scholarship on modern yoga see especially Karl Baier, Philipp A. Maas, and Karin Preisendanz (2018), and Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O’Brien-Kop (2020).

11 Hammer 2004, 201–303.

12 Hammer provides a useful definition for the religious appropriation of science: “Scientism is the active positioning of one’s own claims in relation to the manifestations of any academic scientific discipline, including, but not limited to, the use of technical devices, scientific terminology, mathematical calculations, theories, references and stylistic features—without, however, the use of methods generally approved within the scientific community, and without subsequent social acceptance of these manifestations by the mainstream of the scientific community through e.g. peer reviewed publication in academic journals” (Hammer 2004, 206). Related terms in use are “scientific religion” (Baier 2019, 246) and “scientific spirituality” (Strube 2021, 135). Elaborated studies on the entanglement of science and religion are made by, e.g., von Stuckrad (2014), Baier (2019), and Hammer and Lewis (2010).

13 Strube 2022, 22, emphasis in original.

14 See Kraler’s insightful chapter in this volume, where she discusses Vivekananda’s use of science and pranayama.

15 The term ‘Vedic science’ denotes the interpretation of Vedic literature, philosophy, and practices, such as Vedic astrology or Ayurveda, as converging with modern science. Hindu nationalists (e.g., the Hindutva movement) and Hindu reformers (e.g., Brāhmo Samāj) used ‘Vedic science’ to stress the primacy of ‘Hinduism.’ The interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ as a monolithic and superior religion was thus based on religious scientism (Nanda 2003, 65–122).

16 Baier 2019, 246.

17 Vivekananda 1896.

18 ‘Religion’ is a complex and multifaceted system, which has been defined differently according to time, place, and the groups involved. In this paper I am applying the notion of ‘religion’ as a dynamic denominator for a set of cultural methods and beliefs, which must be ever reconsidered depending on its historical and geographical context. See Bergunder (2016) for a thorough discussion on the dynamic nature of religion and its link to science.

Basu<sup>19</sup> (1861–1918) and the Theosophist and learned physician Vasant Rele (n.d.a.). Among Basu’s many writings, his 1887 translation and interpretation of the *Śiva-saṃhitā* (complemented with the title *The Esoteric Philosophy of the Tantras*) counts among the most influential ones.<sup>20</sup> He thereby contributed to the effort to reconcile science and religion on the part of the Theosophical Society.<sup>21</sup> These protagonists represent but a selective example of the vivid discourse that evolved on religious scientism. As Mark Singleton has pointed out, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards a “scientific imperative [. . .] represents a new departure for yoga and tantra along scientific, rational lines and sets the agenda for the scientific study of yogic phenomena throughout the twentieth century.”<sup>22</sup> Following Singleton, this paper therefore suggests that Krishna operated in the tradition of earlier Indian and non-Indian protagonists that laid the foundation for understandings of religion and yoga along the premises of science.

Krishna’s main contribution to the ensuing discourse thus equally relates to *kuṇḍalinī*’s potential threats and to her<sup>23</sup> assumed categorization as an empirically verifiable component in the human body, independent of cultural or religious boundaries. In the present paper I am especially interested in the second aspect. I will argue that Krishna’s universal approach to the transformative power of *kuṇḍalinī*’s activation yielded significant impact among non-Indian *kuṇḍalinī* aficionados; some of them implementing his concept of universalism even in their own narrative reports.

Religious universalism pertains to the belief that certain concepts, ideas, or theories enjoy universal application throughout the religious spectrum. Religious universalism further includes the notion of a universal or perennial truth. Significant examples of religious universalism are the fundamental Christian notion of universal reconciliation (humanity shall receive salvation in its entirety), the reli-

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<sup>19</sup> The spelling of Basu’s name varies. At times he is also written as Vasu.

<sup>20</sup> Basu’s *Shiva Samhita* was the first Tantric work to be translated into English (Bose 1932, 236). Initially, it was published in 1883 serially in *The Arya Journal* (which was associated with the reform movement Ārya Samāj), before it was published in 1887 as a book. In 1893 and 1914 the book was re-published, and especially the last edition of 1914 yielded significant influence among scholars and practitioners. However, as James Mallinson has pointed out, it suffers from certain deficiencies (2007, xi). The book’s dedication to Colonel Olcott, the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, clearly indicates Basu’s devotion to the Theosophical cause.

<sup>21</sup> Singleton 2010, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Singleton 2010, 53.

<sup>23</sup> As already mentioned, the *Kubjikāmatatantra* and subsequent tantric texts portrayed *kuṇḍalinī* as Śiva’s feminine counterpart. Most Indian and non-Indian protagonists of modern *kuṇḍalinī* discourses have accepted this fundamental tenet and have thus continued addressing the goddess *kuṇḍalinī* with a feminine pronoun (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 22).



gious inclusivism of Unitarian universalism, or the Neo-Vedāntic essentialist view on religion.<sup>24</sup> In India, the concept of religious universalism probably appears in its clearest form in the shape of Neo-Vedānta<sup>25</sup> as expounded and popularized by Vivekananda.<sup>26</sup> He attempted to nominate Neo-Vedānta as universal religion that underlies in principle any other religion. In his *Raja Yoga* he writes: “I must tell you that there is a basis of universal belief in religion, governing all these different theories, and all the varying ideas of different sects of men in different countries. Going to the basis of them we find that they also are based upon universal experiences.”<sup>27</sup> Vivekananda’s ideas on universal religion had a significant impact upon subsequent writers and thinkers in India. Another influential writer who considered universal religion was Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), mostly known as Sri Aurobindo.<sup>28</sup> Educated in England, Aurobindo developed into an Indian nationalist upon his return to India. Against the backdrop of Aurobindo’s increasing ‘Indianization,’ his initial understanding of universal religion revolved around Hindu religion. As his theory evolved, however, the concept of evolution<sup>29</sup> occupied a predominant role. Accordingly, Sharma describes his approach as “universal evolution” or as “cosmic evolution,”<sup>30</sup> and argues that:

The concept of universal religion achieves an unexpected extension in the thought of Śrī Aurobindo. The incorporation of the process of evolution imparts to the term universal a significance which extends far beyond its usual association, and identifies it as the locus of a religious evolution, which involves the transformation of the entire universe, that is, cosmos. In this transformation all the individuals have their own role to play.<sup>31</sup>

Intriguingly, Aurobindo suggested the necessity of transcending religion for the sake of “a sustained and all-comprehending effort at spiritual self-evolution.”<sup>32</sup> His understanding of spiritual evolution thus relates to individual efforts and

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24 King [1999] 2009, 139–40.

25 For a thorough discussion of Neo-Vedānta, the colonial impact on its revival, and its widespread interpretation as the core of a homogenized ‘Hinduism,’ see King [1999] 2009, 118–42, and Sharma 1998 for an in-depth study of universal religion within modern Hindu thought.

26 Other significant proponents of Hindu universalism in the shape of Neo-Vedānta were the Hindu reformer and co-founder of the Brāhmo Samāj Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) (King 2009 [1999], 69).

27 Vivekananda [1897] 1920, 2.

28 For Aurobindo’s specific understanding of universal religion, see Sharma 1998, 117–23.

29 Borkatky-Varma (2020, 377) has pointed out that evolutionary biology has been vital for Aurobindo’s understanding of *kuṇḍalīnī*.

30 Sharma 1998, 121.

31 Sharma 1998, 122.

32 Ghose 1916, 20.

spiritual experiences. Krishna, I argue, followed Vivekananda's notions of a universal religion, and was at the same time inspired by Aurobindo's universal evolution.<sup>33</sup>

Krishna drafted and published plenty of literature. In-depth scholarship on his person and theories, however, has been surprisingly scarce.<sup>34</sup> While Krishna is addressed in many *kuṇḍalinī* related publications,<sup>35</sup> he hardly receives the attention he deserves. Notable exceptions are Sravana Borkataky-Varma, who dedicated parts of her PhD dissertation to Krishna and his exchange with Aurobindo;<sup>36</sup> Dimitry Okropiridze's paper on *kuṇḍalinī*'s discursive production within Orientalist dichotomies;<sup>37</sup> and Mary Scott's *The Kundalini Concept. Its Origin and Value*.<sup>38</sup> The findings of this paper therefore aim to contribute to the scholarship on Krishna.

## 2 Gopi Krishna's Kuṇḍalinī Experience

Krishna entered the international stage in 1967 when he published his book *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man*. It was Krishna's second book of a total of seventeen, which in one way or the other all originated from that initial extraordinary event described at the beginning of this chapter. He decided to compose this book as a first-person autobiographical account.<sup>39</sup> He thus narrated his own transforma-

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**33** Aurobindo's impact on Krishna's concept has been first detected by Borkataky-Varma (e.g., Borkataky-Varma 2020, 377). William I. Thompson, who was a close collaborator (yet also a critic) of Krishna, in contrast, stressed in his book *Passages about Earth* (1973) how Krishna had lost his interest into Aurobindo after the latter had confirmed Krishna's experience as the rise of *kuṇḍalinī*, but recommended Krishna to look for another (i.e., tantric) source of support: "Now because Sri Aurobindo did not serve Gopi Krishna as a Tantric guru, Gopi Krishna concluded that Aurobindo was merely a writer of books" (Thompson 1973, 107).

**34** Krishna's collaborator Teri Degler (2023) published a detailed biography of Krishna's life.

**35** The psychiatrist Lee Sannella considered Krishna's account as consistent with his understanding of *kuṇḍalinī* in his 1976 publication *Kundalini. Psychosis or Transcendence* (Sannella [1976] 1978, 4). This notwithstanding, Sannella barely portrays Krishna's perspective. Kurt Leland's (2016) comprehensive account *Rainbow Body. A History of the Western Chakra System from Blavatsky to Brennan* includes a significant amount on *kuṇḍalinī*. However, the 500-page book mentions Krishna only once (Leland 2016, 320).

**36** Borkataky-Varma 2016.

**37** Okropiridze 2017.

**38** Scott 1983.

**39** Initially, Krishna intended to write his second book not as an autobiography but rather as a general treatise on *kuṇḍalinī*. At the recommendation of his early collaborators James Hillman (1926–2011) and Frederik J. Hopman (n.d.a.), Krishna decided against his original idea (Degler 2023, 98).

tional story, which was not only confined to the experience proper, but also to his individual response thenceforth. Anglophone autobiographies were a rather uncommon literary genre for an Indian writer at that time.<sup>40</sup> Probably the best-known autobiography by an Indian yogi is the influential work by Paramhansa Yogananda *Autobiography of a Yogi*, which was published in 1946. It may be argued that Yogananda's autobiography rather belongs to the genre of hagiography—or, as Anya Foxen argues convincingly, of “auto-hagiography”.<sup>41,42</sup> Yogananda's book was but the beginning of similar accounts by yogis, which likewise tended to be written in a hagiographical manner. Notable examples are Swami Narayananda's autobiography *The Primal Power in Man or the Kundalini Shakti*,<sup>43</sup> Swami Sivananda's *Autobiography of Swami Sivananda*,<sup>44</sup> or Swami Muktananda's *Play of Consciousness*.<sup>45</sup> Krishna's autobiography, in contrast, was not intended as an auto-hagiography—although his supporters partly transfigured it as such.

Krishna's autobiographical book *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* revolves around religious concepts,<sup>46</sup> just as the above-mentioned auto-hagiographical accounts. However, Krishna aimed to dissociate himself from Hindu tradition and to assume a scientific stance. He thereby left the auto-hagiographical stage in favour of religious scientism. To reinforce his aspired credibility, Krishna's account was supplemented by psychological commentaries by the US-American psychologist James Hillman. While Frederick Spiegelberg claims in the introduction to the first edition that “Gopi Krishna's approach appears as a great surprise because in his book,” there is “no mention of spirituality, religion and metaphysics,”<sup>47</sup> indeed the book is full of references to religion, clad in modern, scientific terms. As I have already outlined in the introduction, Krishna thus stood in line with exponents of reli-

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40 Early exceptions were written by Indian politicians, such as Bhimrao R. Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa* (1935), India's former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who wrote *An Autobiography* (1936), or Mohandas K. Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1948, Gujarati original published in 1927).

41 The term ‘auto-hagiography’ was coined by Robin Rinehart 1999. The major difference between an (auto)biography and an (auto)hagiography lies in the latter's amalgamation of history and myth, whereas the former claims to confine its contents to historical facts (Rinehart 1999, 2).

42 Foxen 2017, 18.

43 Narayananda 1950.

44 Sivananda 1958.

45 Muktananda 1978.

46 Religious concepts that are particularly evident within the book are, e.g., notions of subtle physiology as related to yoga and meditation; the belief in *kuṇḍalīnī* resulting in a rebirth (Krishna 1967, 132); or revelations of divine truth in the wake of a supposed *kuṇḍalīnī* awakening (256).

47 Spiegelberg, in Krishna 1967, 2.

gious scientism. In contrast to the physician Vasant Rele,<sup>48</sup> Krishna was not a learned scientist, nor was he a member of any yogic school or promulgated a religious agenda, as Vivekananda did. This notwithstanding, Krishna joined these men in their objective to reconcile religious and scientific elements. I will elaborate on Krishna's scientific reading of *kuṇḍalīnī* below. Let me first outline Krishna's life and the reported experience.

Krishna was born in 1903 in a small Kashmiri village and spent the first years of his life mostly in Srinagar, then capital of the princely state Jammu and Kashmir,<sup>49</sup> and the Punjabi capital Lahore. On several occasions Krishna described his childhood, praising his mother's diligence and devotion, and his father's generosity and faith. From an early age, Krishna was confronted with yogis and saints, who were regular visitors in his family's house. While both of his parents were firm believers and reared their children in a religious atmosphere, his father's belief left a lasting impression on Krishna. Accordingly, he described his father as a man "with a deep mystical vein in him, [ . . . ] always on the look-out for Yogis and ascetics reputed to possess occult powers."<sup>50</sup> At times, Krishna even attributed psychic and clairvoyant powers to his father, recollecting him in a hagiographic manner. After the early death of Krishna's elder brother, his father increasingly refrained from mundane tasks and worldly activities. His extreme asceticism further resulted in a lack of vitality and a major health crisis. Later in his life Krishna interpreted his father's crisis as an uncontrolled activation of *kuṇḍalīnī*: "He was clearly passing through the upward and downward phases of a now active kundalini sending streams of impure prana (vital energy) into the brain."<sup>51</sup> Thenceforth, his much younger mother carried all the responsibility of the household and set all her expectations on her only son.<sup>52</sup> Despite his father's unsteady condition and his mother's sorrow and strain, Krishna held both his parents in high esteem and considered his upbringing as the lifeline in the challenges he would face later in his life:

I am convinced that it was this conjugation of a highly intelligent father with exceptional, noble traits of character, and a strong, able-bodied mother, with a deep religious bent, endowed with all the virtues of a simple unpretentious character, that helped me to brave,

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<sup>48</sup> I am going to discuss Rele's role in the scientification of *kuṇḍalīnī* below.

<sup>49</sup> The unsteady history of the most northwestern region of India, nowadays known as the union territory Jammu and Kashmir (since 2019), has led to innumerable religious and ethnic conflicts. For a thorough account on the religious and political challenges this region has witnessed, see, e.g., Schofield (2003).

<sup>50</sup> Krishna [1967] 1970, 17–18.

<sup>51</sup> Krishna 1993, 19.

<sup>52</sup> Krishna 1993, 8–24.

without succumbing, the psychic storm released in my body on the arousal of kundalini, the Serpent Fire.<sup>53</sup>

Throughout his youth, Krishna spent much energy on intellectual pursuits and read any available book related to mind control, development of personality, yoga, occultism, spiritualism, and was further well versed in Hindu scriptures, such as the Bhagavad Gita. Besides these intellectual examinations, Krishna also started practising yoga at the age of seventeen.<sup>54</sup> Thus, while he claimed no affiliation with any specific yogic school,<sup>55</sup> he had acquired a significant knowledge about yoga and associated topics. Despite his religious knowledge and involvement, Krishna emphasized that until the age of thirty-four, he was “leading the normal life of a householder without any previous indoctrination, religious bias, or monastic mental discipline.”<sup>56</sup> He was then married, had three kids, considered himself an agnostic, and was serving as a clerk under the Director of Education in Srinagar and Jammu. And still, his interest into yoga nonetheless outweighed his interest in his career.<sup>57</sup>

On the fateful morning in December 1937, Krishna experienced a bodily sensation while meditating, which led to various psychosomatic effects that would utterly change his life. He described the experience with the following words:

I suddenly felt a strange sensation below the base of my spine. [ . . . ] The sensation was so extraordinary and so pleasing that my attention was forcefully drawn towards it. [ . . . ] Suddenly, with a roar like that of a waterfall, I felt a stream of liquid light entering my brain through the spinal cord. [ . . . ] The illumination grew brighter and brighter, the roaring louder, I experienced a rocking sensation and then felt myself slipping out of my body, entirely enveloped in a halo of light.<sup>58</sup>

In the beginning, Krishna did not indicate his changed condition and his internal transformation to anyone. He suffered silently and blamed himself “for having

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53 Krishna 1993, 15.

54 Krishna described his daily practice either as yoga or as meditation. From his descriptions, however, it appears that his yogic exercises were limited to calmly sitting cross-legged and concentrating on easing his mind. He did not include any further mention of postural yoga (Krishna [1967] 1970, 23). Therefore, when referring to Krishna’s practice, I use meditation and yoga interchangeably.

55 In his autobiography, Krishna frequently referred to haṭha yoga. This notwithstanding, he emphasized that there was no authoritative school or teacher that had influenced or directed his practice. It was only when he witnessed his psycho-somatic crisis that he contacted several yogis in his quest for support (Krishna [1967] 1970, 92–93).

56 Krishna [1967] 1970, 227.

57 Krishna [1967] 1970, 26.

58 Krishna [1967] 1970, 12–13.

delved into the supernatural without first acquiring a fuller knowledge of the subject.”<sup>59</sup> In the course of time and with the help of relatives, friends, and self-proclaimed experts, he interpreted this extraordinary experience as the activation of an energy stream, traditionally associated with *kuṇḍalinī śakti*.<sup>60</sup> Despite his far-reaching research on yoga and associated topics, Krishna claimed previous ignorance about the concept in question. He merely recalled that he had come across some books on yoga, which dealt with “a vital mechanism called Kundalini.”<sup>61</sup> This, however, had been long time ago, wherefore he was not especially familiar with the topic. Moreover, these “books on Yoga, both of the East and the West” rather concerned “the development of psychic powers.”<sup>62</sup> He further claimed that in his practice he had not come across a similar sensation or experience so far. By then, Krishna had already practised meditation for seventeen years on a regular basis. As part of his strict self-imposed routine, he had increasingly prolonged the duration of his practice from age seventeen onwards, until after a few years he was able to remain seated and focused for several hours a day without a break. Krishna considered the advanced level of his regular practice as the lifeline to sanity after his supposed activation of *kuṇḍalinī*.<sup>63</sup>

The peculiarity of Krishna’s experience report pertains not so much to his description of the ascension of the energy stream. This description differs only marginally from other accounts. What is striking, is rather his endeavour to integrate and contextualize the transformative experience along universal premises detached from any cultural tie. Moreover, the described transformational process extends over a period of more than twenty-five years. The greater part of his description thus focuses on his condition in the wake of his initial *kuṇḍalinī* experience and on long-term transformations. During these years Krishna went through different phases. Some years passed without any internal reaction, and then again, he reports of severe psychosomatic crises, which had a major impact on his physical and mental health to the point where he feared for his life. A very vivid description of such a supposedly lethal period is the following:

Suffering the most excruciating torture, I clenched my hands and bit my lips to stop myself from leaping out of bed and crying at the top of my voice. The throbbing of my heart grew more and more terrific, acquiring such a spasmodic violence that I thought it must either stop beating or burst. [ . . . ] I knew I was dying and that my heart could not stand the re-

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59 Krishna [1967] 1970, 55.

60 Krishna 1967, 94–109.

61 Krishna 1967, 14.

62 Krishna 1967, 37.

63 Krishna 1967, 23.

mendous strain for long [. . .] every part of my body flaming and burning, but I could do nothing to alleviate the dreadful suffering.<sup>64</sup>

In other phases, Krishna was tormented by major doubts on the plausibility of his assumption. Many years passed without any sign of him gaining psychic powers or related supernatural abilities, as his consulted books on *kunḍalinī* predicted. At times he thus despaired over his situation:

I had undergone a singular experience, but how could I be sure that I was not the victim of an abnormal pathological condition, peculiar to me alone? How could I be sure that I was not suffering from a continuous hallucinatory affliction [. . .], the unexpected result, in my case, of prolonged concentration and too much absorption in the occult?<sup>65</sup>

In the final phase, however, Krishna eventually overcame his doubts. With a sense of certainty, he perceived his condition as a “superconscious<sup>66</sup> state”,<sup>67</sup> witnessing psychic powers and divine grace: “After years of acute suffering I had at last been given a glimpse into the supersensible and at the same time made the fortunate recipient of divine grace, which all fitted admirably with the traditional concepts of Kundalini.”<sup>68</sup> The claimed special abilities involved automatic writing in for him unknown languages, access to “an inexpressible fount of all knowledge,”<sup>69</sup> and clairvoyance. Moreover, Krishna perceived that he emitted an all-encompassing brilliant light of his internal radiance. He thus concluded that the glowing light of his visualized lotus had diffused throughout his body and environment as a result of his supersensible state.<sup>70</sup> To Krishna, however, these extraordinary events were only of secondary interest.

His superconscious condition, as Krishna claimed, did not arise at once. Instead, it was the culmination of a transformational process, triggered by a biological mechanism. He insisted that the transformation towards a higher state of consciousness was therefore not engendered by a spiritual agency or practice, but rather by a biological process intrinsic to every human being. Based on his

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64 Krishna [1967] 1970, 64–65.

65 Krishna [1967] 1970, 137.

66 Scholars of modern yoga commonly trace the term ‘superconscious’ or ‘superconsciousness’ back to Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga*, where it constitutes a key concept to describe the sublime state of samadhi (e.g., De Michelis 2004, 171). However, as Jacobs and Kraler have shown in their study, the term was introduced by the German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann in 1873. The term was thereafter in common use by Theosophists, exponents of psychology, and early promoters of yoga. For a thorough discussion, see Jacobs and Kraler (forthcoming).

67 Krishna [1967] 1970, 14.

68 Krishna [1967] 1970, 209.

69 Krishna [1967] 1970, 212.

70 Krishna [1967] 1970, 211–13.

physical and mental alterations and his claimed achievement of psychic powers, Krishna further suggested that *kuṇḍalinī* was the underlying force of any genius, prophet, or saint in human history:

The awakening of Kundalini is a perfectly natural biological phenomenon of an uncommon kind. [ . . . ] The only peculiarity which gives it a semblance of the bizarre and the uncanny is the biological process which, set afoot, leads to the emergence of a conscious personality so superior [ . . . ] as to make the whole phenomenon appear to be the performance of a supernatural agency rather than the outcome of [ . . . ] natural though as yet unknown biological laws.<sup>71</sup>

I would like to briefly discuss Krishna's preceding meditative practice, that he had followed for many years. On the one hand, he considered the practice as the primal cause for his *kuṇḍalinī* awakening, and on the other hand, he believed that devoid of his yearlong meditative experience and knowledge, he would not have mastered the severe crises in the wake of his initial *kuṇḍalinī* awakening. The meditation practice, as Krishna described it, confined to the concentration on the symbol of the lotus: "I steadied my wandering thoughts, and fixing my attention on the crown, tried to visualize a lotus in full bloom as was my custom."<sup>72</sup> The lotus as his target of concentration was located "at the top of his head,"<sup>73</sup> and was "of brilliant colour, emitting rays of light."<sup>74</sup> Intriguingly, after Krishna's acquaintance with *kuṇḍalinī*, the symbol of the lotus was totally replaced by various metaphors of *kuṇḍalinī*. His concentration accordingly shifted from the crown of the head towards the lower end of his spine.<sup>75</sup> It is not clear from Krishna's description, however, whether initially he associated the targeted lotus with a *cakra*, or whether he dissociated it from concepts of subtle physiology and used it as a mere meditative visualization. It is most likely that he had received this basic instruction from Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga*, where he writes: "Imagine a lotus upon the top of the head, several inches up [ . . . ] surrounded with effulgent light."<sup>76</sup> Vivekananda's teachings of yoga and meditation were then (as now) widely spread and kept in high esteem. Leland argued

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71 Krishna [1967] 1970, 167.

72 Krishna [1967] 1970, 16.

73 Krishna [1967] 1970, 12.

74 Krishna [1967] 1970, 11.

75 As indicated above, the lower end of the spine is traditionally associated with the resting point of *kuṇḍalinī*. As the alleged point of departure for his experience, Krishna laid special focus on this region of his body. This notwithstanding, he also claimed that he noticed the activation of a "high-powered conscious centre" (Krishna [1967] 1970, 163) at the crown of his head in the wake of the movement of *kuṇḍalinī*. The lower end of the spine and the top of his head (and thus the first and the last *cakra*) both developed into major centers of concentration for Krishna.

76 Vivekananda [1897] 1920, 90–91.



that Vivekananda's manual of *cakra* development was not merely among the first English publications on meditative practices linked to the *cakras* but also clearly and concisely expressed.<sup>77,78</sup>

Another source that possibly yielded influence on Krishna's meditative visualization was Sir John Woodroffe's highly influential book *The Serpent Power*,<sup>79</sup> which was published under the pen name Arthur Avalon.<sup>80</sup> In the book Woodroffe wrote that the "Sahasrāra or thousand-petalled lotus [is located] at the top of the brain, [ . . . ] which is the state of pure Consciousness."<sup>81</sup> Woodroffe described each of the lotuses in great detail in his introduction, however, he did not link the *cakras* with 'rays of light' or the like, but rather with sound.<sup>82</sup> Woodroffe's major opponent, the Theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater (1847–1934), on the contrary, described the *cakras* akin to Vivekananda's account. Both in *The Inner Life*<sup>83</sup> and *The Chakras*,<sup>84</sup> he described the activated force centres (as he called the *cakras*) as being "of blinding brilliancy, and [ . . . ] coruscating like miniature suns"<sup>85</sup> or as being "radiant, throwing out brilliant golden rays,"<sup>86</sup> respectively.<sup>87</sup> At the time of the publication of Krishna's book, Theosophy's determining influence had already ceased and they no longer acted as role models for practices and patterns of individual experiences. This notwithstanding, it is reasonable to assume that Theosophical books have provided most of the preliminaries for Krish-

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77 Leland 2016, 156.

78 An even earlier, if far less known English publication on related matters was *Om. A Treatise on Vedantic Raj Yoga Philosophy* (1880) by the Tamil yogi Sri Sabhapaty Swami (ca. 1828–1923/4). Unlike Vivekananda, Sabhapaty Swami has remained largely forgotten. For this reason, it is rather doubtful that his manual yielded any influence on Krishna's meditative practice. For a thorough discussion on Sabhapaty Swami, his work, context, and legacy, see the excellent study by Cantú (2021), as well as his illuminating chapter in this volume.

79 Woodroffe 1919.

80 Behind the pseudonym Arthur Avalon stood the collaboration of John Woodroffe and several Indian intellectuals. Kathleen Taylor was the first to underline this fact in her well-received 2001 study *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: An Indian Soul in a European Body?* However, Woodroffe himself also openly admitted such a collaboration (Strube 2021, 133). For a thorough discussion on the Arthur Avalon team, see Strube (2022).

81 Woodroffe [1919] 1974, 103.

82 Woodroffe [1919] 1974, 1–16.

83 Leadbeater 1922.

84 Leadbeater 1927.

85 Leadbeater 1922, 289.

86 Leadbeater [1927] 2013, 7.

87 Other Theosophists, e.g., Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891) or George S. Arundale (1878–1945), likewise considered the *cakras*. Leadbeater, however, has been most famously associated with the topic.

na's and others' re-invention of *kuṇḍalinī*.<sup>88</sup> Thus, while Krishna remained vague about precise sources and inspirations for his meditation practice and subsequently for his understanding of *kuṇḍalinī*, Woodroffe's *The Serpent Power* represents the most secure source, which he frequently mentioned in later works. The intention of his initial secrecy runs along the common line of highlighting his experience as original and unaffected, and of emphasizing its independency from Indian religious tradition. Accordingly, Krishna was credited by Frederick Spiegelberg as "a self-taught prophet of an original kind."<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, Krishna's secrecy led to his classification as a practitioner rather than a theorist. An unwelcome reputation, which persisted, no matter how much Krishna stressed the opposite.<sup>90</sup>

We may conclude that Krishna interpreted *kuṇḍalinī* as a biological process, whose activation results in a change of consciousness. This corresponds with his understanding of a transformational experience, which he clearly defined in his account. According to his empirical knowledge, such experiences involve physical and mental alterations brought about by the vital current of *kuṇḍalinī*. These alterations may engender a complete metamorphosis of consciousness and personality. Transformation for Krishna thus involved mutually defining physical and psychological planes.<sup>91,92</sup> Moreover, he underlined how any single person at any time and any place might experience this process. Against this backdrop, Krishna further interpreted *kuṇḍalinī* as a universal force, which will be outlined in the next section.

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**88** Some of the earliest books on *kuṇḍalinī* in English language were composed by Theosophists (and associates) and thus underline this claim. This includes, i.e., Woodroffe's (1919) *The Serpent Power*, Rele's (1927) *The Mysterious Kundalini*, and Arundale's (1938) *Kundalini. An Occult Experience*. Another Theosophical book related to the topic in question was Richard M. Bucke's (1901) *Cosmic Consciousness*. Much of Krishna's descriptions of the transformation of the mind and related shifts in consciousness are reminiscent of Bucke's statements (Bucke [1901] 1905, 51–68). Intriguingly, however, Krishna did not possess a copy of Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* before 1971, when he received the book by his friend and collaborator Karl Basedow: "Many thanks for the book 'Cosmic Consciousness' which I was very keen to have. It is an important book on the subject, and I am grateful to you for having sent it to me in time" (Krishna to Basedow, 25 April 1971, Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.2.).

**89** Spiegelberg, in Krishna 1967, 2.

**90** Okropiridze 2017, 352.

**91** Intriguingly, Krishna referred to Woodroffe's *The Serpent Power* to underline this claim (Krishna 1993, 354–55).

**92** Krishna [1967] 1970, 14; Krishna 1993, 354.

### 3 Kuṇḍalinī Within the Frame of Religious Universalism and Religious Scientism

Krishna's primary agenda revolved around his objective to promote *kuṇḍalinī* as a universal pattern both in religion and science. Indeed, Krishna was convinced that the "basis of universal belief in religion"<sup>93</sup> pertains to *kuṇḍalinī*. I already outlined how Vivekananda and Aurobindo assumedly served as sources of inspiration for Krishna's understanding of universalist traits of consciousness. Different from Vivekananda and Aurobindo, however, Krishna did not take Neo-Vedānta or Hindu religions as point of departure for his claim in question. Instead of religious doctrines, Krishna underpinned his theories with what he perceived as objectivity, rationality, and empirical science. He thus applied scientism as a language of faith that served his claim of universalism.<sup>94</sup> Along these lines, Krishna argued that by means of science, the fundamental truth of *kuṇḍalinī*'s universal existence could be empirically demonstrated and should thus be generally accepted.<sup>95</sup> Krishna hoped that this acceptance of *kuṇḍalinī* as a biological mechanism of the human body would finally reveal its real essence as an evolutionary law of nature. Moreover, he claimed that the scientific demonstration of *kuṇḍalinī* "will have such an effect on the world as to succeed in creating the mental climate that will [. . .] usher in an era favourable to the establishment of a universal religion."<sup>96</sup> Krishna thus fused scientific and religious claims within his system.

As underlined in the introduction of this paper, similar approaches were already laid out by Theosophists, who used scientism to underpin the claim of religious truth. This agenda experienced increasing popularity from the early 1880s

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93 Vivekananda [1897] 1920, 2.

94 Hammer 2004, 227.

95 Ever since Krishna had published his book, he aimed to collaborate with like-minded scholars, politicians, activists, and believers. Among this multifaceted crowd, several individuals set themselves the task to empirically prove *kuṇḍalinī* and other elements of the subtle body. The Japanese parapsychologist Hiroshi Motoyama (1925–2015) and the Israeli American inventor and self-proclaimed scientist Itzhak Bentov (1923–1979) represent important examples. While the former was directly in contact with Krishna (Krishna to Hopman, 29 October 1969, Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.1.), the latter was rather considered a competitive force (Kieffer to Krishna, 3 June 1975, Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.5.). Moreover, from 1982 onwards, Krishna and his team, e.g., supporters from the United States, Canada, and Europe, promoted their own 'experimental center.' Located at Dehra Dun, India. The 'Kundalini-Yoga Experimental Project' was meant as an open laboratory to empirically demonstrate the claim of *kuṇḍalinī*'s existence within the human body by guiding and tracing its activation among participants. Due to Krishna's death in 1984, the 'Kundalini-Yoga Experimental Project' was never officially inaugurated (Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.7.).

96 Krishna 1976a, 206.

onwards, when yogic texts and phenomena were interpreted along scientific and medical lines.<sup>97</sup> Against this backdrop, Theosophists also attempted to address the subtle body and its components along medical and scientific lines. This “scientific emphasis”<sup>98</sup> captured the interest of several Theosophists that laid the foundation for a scientific reading of *kuṇḍalinī*.<sup>99</sup> Among the more important ones count the Tamil Theosophist and translator Narayana Swami Aiyer (1854–1918) and the above-mentioned Vasant Rele.

Aiyer’s article *Occult Physiology* (1891)<sup>100</sup> mainly aimed to “reconcile his findings from the Yoga Upaniṣads with theosophical doctrine.”<sup>101</sup> Aiyer provided a Theosophical coloured description of *kuṇḍalinī*. Not only did he link *kuṇḍalinī* to magnetic currents, the etheric double, and *fohat*<sup>102</sup>—all very common Theosophical terms—but he also interpreted *kuṇḍalinī* along the lines of a destructive, dangerous force, which “is able to create as well as undo the things of the world, that

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97 Foremost representatives of this episode were the above-mentioned Indian Sanskrit scholar Sri Chandra Basu, his brother (and publisher) Baman Das Basu, and N.C. Paul (born Navīna Candra Pāla). Another significant period of reconciling science and religion occurred during the 1920s and 1930s, with Sri Yogendra (1897–1918) and Swami Kuvalayananda (1883–1966) emerging as key figures. (Singleton 2010, 50–52).

98 Singleton 2010, 53.

99 Singleton 2010, 49–53.

100 Little is known of Narayana Swami Aiyer, whose surname indicates his affiliation to the caste of Tamil Brahmins. He was an active and esteemed member of the Theosophical Society of Kumbakonam, a town in Tamil Nadu, and was a frequent contributor to *The Theosophist*. Aiyer delivered his lecture on *Occult Physiology* at the Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in Adyar on December 29, 1890. At the time of his lecture, Aiyer had already earned a reputation as a proficient translator of some of the Yoga-Upaniṣads (Kraler 2022, 128–29).

101 Kraler 2022, 129.

102 The term ‘fohat’ or ‘fohatic-power’ traces back to the Theosophical Society. In the *Theosophical Glossary* (1892), Madam Blavatsky defines *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” (Blavatsky 1892, 120–21). In other words, the Theosophical term *fohat* corresponds to Blavatsky’s understanding of the eternal life force. According to Blavatsky, *kuṇḍalinī* assumes the shape of this very life force. In her *The Voice of the Silence* (1889), Blavatsky expressed that implicit relation between *kuṇḍalinī* and *fohat* more clearly: “Kundalini is [ . . . ] an electric fiery occult or Fohatic power, the great pristine force, which underlies all organic and inorganic matter” (Blavatsky [1889] 1973, 14–15; emphasis in original). However, Blavatsky’s association of *kuṇḍalinī* with *fohat* drew on the article “The Aryan-Arhat Esoteric Tenets on the sevenfold principle in man” (1882), published in *The Theosophist* by the Indian Theosophist T.S. Row. There Row writes: “Śakti, that mysterious energy or force [ . . . ] is called by the Buddhist Arahats of Tibet—FO-HAT” (Row 1882, 94). Ayer was thus neither the first nor the only one applying the term *fohat* in relation to *kuṇḍalinī*.

is it will either kill man or give him power if properly controlled.”<sup>103</sup> This quote is most reminiscent of Blavatsky’s own wordings in her *The Voice of Silence*, where she uttered an urgent warning that “when aroused into action [*kuṇḍalinī*] can as easily kill as it can create.”<sup>104</sup> These ambiguous descriptions of Blavatsky and Aiyer resemble Krishna’s account of his experiences with *kuṇḍalinī*.<sup>105</sup> Finally, Aiyer also applied a scientific reading and interpretation of the subtle body and its components, according to the Theosophical vogue.<sup>106</sup> Accordingly, he claimed that *kuṇḍalinī* “contains the latent quality of magnetic oxygen which preserves the body even when the [ . . . ] breath is stopped.”<sup>107</sup>

Aiyer’s significance for the ensuing discourse notwithstanding,<sup>108</sup> Vasant Rele’s importance as a forerunner to *kuṇḍalinī*’s scientification outweighs Aiyer. I have already presented this protagonist as a general representative of religious scientism. His major work *The Mysterious Kundalini*<sup>109</sup> was initially delivered as a paper at the Bombay Medical Union in 1926. The following year, Rele extended the paper and published it as a book with a dedication “to those interested in the science of yoga.”<sup>110</sup> The book revolves around the anatomy of the yogic body, its associated practices and theories, and may be classified a paradigm of religious scientism. As the title of his book suggests, the ‘mysterious’ *kuṇḍalinī* took a prominent position in this account. His major objective thus targeted the explanation of yogic phenomena, such as the activation of *kuṇḍalinī* or the achievement of siddhis, through the language and laws of non-Indian anatomy and physiology. Accordingly, Rele described within his ‘Tantric anatomy of nerves’ the *cakras* as the plexuses of the body, the *Vāyu-nādis* as the nerves of impulse, and the *kuṇḍalinī* as a distinctive cranial nerve, the (right) Vagus nerve.<sup>111</sup> He wrote: “To my mind, Kundalini or the serpent power as it is called is the Vagus nerve of modern times, which supplies

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103 Aiyer 1891, 357.

104 Blavatsky [1889] 1973, 84.

105 It may be argued that members of the Theosophical Society anticipated Krishna’s stress of *kuṇḍalinī*’s dangers. This notwithstanding, Theosophical references to *kuṇḍalinī*’s negative effects were rather scarce (with the notable exceptions mentioned in the text) and therefore did not play a major role for the elaboration of Krishna’s position.

106 See, e.g., Aiyer 1891, 352–54.

107 Aiyer 1891, 358.

108 Aiyer’s translations of the Yoga-Upaniṣads formed the basis for any further examination of these Sanskrit texts. John Woodroffe, e.g., used Aiyer’s translation when referring to the Yoga-Upaniṣads, which is attested in a footnote of his *The Serpent Power* (Woodroffe [1919] 1974, 263).

109 Rele 1927.

110 Rele [1927] 1929, 5.

111 Rele [1927] 1929, 20–21.

and controls all the important vital organs.”<sup>112</sup> *Kuṇḍalinī* thus takes the position of an anatomical rather than a subtle component. Accordingly, *kuṇḍalinī*’s awakening would ultimately lead to the “control over the autonomic nervous system over which we have normally no control.”<sup>113</sup> Rele continued by tracing “[a]ll the miracles of a Yogi, such as stopping the beats of the heart and pulse”<sup>114</sup> back to the scientific exposition of the *kuṇḍalinī* phenomenon. John Woodroffe, who contributed to the book with a foreword, expressed an ambivalent attitude to Rele’s theory of the physiological basis of the phenomena associated with *kuṇḍalinī* yoga.<sup>115</sup> This critical response notwithstanding, throughout his treatise Rele merged physiological with yogic terms and thereby aimed to undermine *kuṇḍalinī*’s esoteric character. As I have already stressed, such a scientific reading had become prevalent among Theosophist writers. Although Rele’s book lacks any such references, he probably relied on earlier publications when attributing subtle components with anatomical terms.<sup>116</sup> *The Mysterious Kundalini* and similar publications must therefore be contextualized within Theosophical readings of Tantric anatomy.

In the same trajectory, Krishna’s argument revolved around *kuṇḍalinī*’s universal existence within the human body, the universal pattern of her arousal, and her universal application in the course of a global shift of consciousness. This implies an individual and a global layer of transformation.

But how does the universal pattern of *kuṇḍalinī*, as developed by Krishna, pertain to what Krishna perceived as transformational experience, i.e., the claimed awakening of the energy and its ensuing physical and mental process? Most importantly, according to Krishna, this transformation comes at a price: physical suffering. The bodily discomfort endures until the organism got accustomed to the new biological mechanism. Krishna thus interpreted physical and mental suffering as

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112 Rele [1927] 1929, 46.

113 Rele [1927] 1929, 87.

114 Rele [1927] 1929, 87.

115 Woodroffe cherished the innovative scientific findings of Rele, while rejecting Rele’s identification of *kuṇḍalinī* with the Vagus nerve. Woodroffe stressed how *kuṇḍalinī* was “the Grand Potential. As such she cannot [ . . . ] be identified with any of the products which she becomes” (Woodroffe, in Rele [1927] 1929, x).

116 The above-mentioned Baman Das Basu and his article *The Anatomy of the Tantras* (1888) initially suggested a correspondence between components of the subtle and the physical body. Furthermore, his brother Sri Chandra Basu included in his highly influential translation of the *Shiva Samhita* (1887) subheadings, which indicated his understanding of the subtle body and its components as nerves and nerve centers. Moreover, James Morgan Pryse provided in his *The Apocalypse Unsealed* (1910), a graphic representation of the *cakras* as plexuses in the physical body (Leland 2016, 101).

indispensable parts of a *kuṇḍalinī*-induced transformation and accordingly as parts of the claimed universal pattern of this experience. The manner, intensity, and time frame of such sufferings may vary. However, once the distress has ceased, the individual might accomplish a radical change of mental and physical abilities. Krishna insisted how the basic procedure remains unaltered with any individual witnessing *kuṇḍalinī*, owing to its evolutionary character. Accordingly, Krishna claimed that while his experience was genuine, it was by no means a “special divine favour, vouchsafed to me in particular or earned by me as a reward for merit.”<sup>117</sup> Instead, he underlined how the experience was:

an ever-present possibility, existing in all human beings, by virtue of the evolutionary process still at work in the race, tending to create a condition of the brain and nervous system that can enable one to transcend the existing boundaries of the mind and acquire a state of consciousness far above that which is the normal heritage of mankind at present.<sup>118</sup>

Krishna thus pled for *kuṇḍalinī* as a biological, evolutionary process, slumbering in each human being, and holding the potential for the attainment of higher states of consciousness.

The second layer relates to *kuṇḍalinī* as triggering a global transformation. While the first layer involved a biological and mental plane, the global level targets the transformation of ‘collective consciousness.’ Based on his own experience and the claim of its universal character, Krishna thus suggested that *kuṇḍalinī* has the capability to inaugurate a new phase of consciousness. Crucially, however, *kuṇḍalinī* as a transformative trigger will not merely shape future generations but has rather played a significant role from time immemorial: “The highest products of civilization, prophets, mystics, men of genius, clearly indicate the goal of human evolution. [ . . . ] they will all be found to have common characteristics. The motive and guiding power behind them in all cases without exception is *Kuṇḍalinī*.”<sup>119</sup> This involves that *kuṇḍalinī*-induced alterations of consciousness have caused spiritual transformation throughout history. *Kuṇḍalinī* thus represents (and has always represented) the driving force for this asserted universal ascent of humanity’s collective consciousness towards a superconscious state. Krishna considered it his task to spread the knowledge which he had gained access to, and thus to support the transformation of as many as possible. Considering Krishna’s definition of *kuṇḍalinī* as a universal experience, he was certain that the greater the amount of people who had awakened their *kuṇḍalinī*, the greater the

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117 Krishna [1967] 1970, 226.

118 Krishna [1967] 1970, 226.

119 Krishna [1967] 1970, 242.

global impact: *Kuṇḍalinī* as the only possible solution for an all-encompassing shift of consciousness.<sup>120</sup>

Both layers are deeply intertwined. Following Krishna, devoid of the universal mechanism of *kuṇḍalinī*'s physical activation, no individual transformation of consciousness would ever be achieved, save on a global scale. This implies that the (individual) biological mechanism constitutes the precondition for a collective shift in consciousness. The transformation in question thus depends on Krishna's understanding of a universal experience. Thus, Krishna believed that the *kuṇḍalinī* pattern, in its individual and collective dimension, entails liberating, transformational, and universal qualities. These qualities notwithstanding, the process, even when intended, potentially provokes loss of control as well as physically and mentally lethal risks. Each exponent of the "cult of Kundalini"<sup>121</sup> must nonetheless endure risks as such for the sake of collective transformation. The new era of transformed consciousness must ultimately culminate in a universal religion with *kuṇḍalinī* as its spiritual underpinning. *Kuṇḍalinī* thus fuses both transformational and universal experiences.

Corresponding to Krishna's increasing success, a growing number of people required his advice in the wake of their own *kuṇḍalinī* experiences. While Krishna had emphasized that he did not wish to become a guru of *kuṇḍalinī*, nor to take any disciples,<sup>122</sup> he nonetheless aimed to satisfy such requests. He did so in several ways: Through personal correspondences, e.g., with the Indian professor Dr. Asrani,<sup>123</sup> through general essays published in journals, e.g., Krishna's "Meditation: Is It Always Beneficial? Some Positive and Negative Views,"<sup>124</sup> or through workshops/seminars held at international events, e.g., Gopi Krishna's lakeside workshop in Canada (July / August 1979, Northern Ontario). First and foremost, however, he wished to support his fellow sufferers by exclusively dedicating his time to writing about the matter. As thoroughly outlined above, Krishna interpreted *kuṇḍalinī* as a biological mechanism, engendering a meaningful transformation. Based on this premise, this paper argues that Krishna's scientific interpretations eased his initial experience of pain and torture. His increasing research and writing endeavours

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120 Krishna [1967] 1970, 241–42.

121 Krishna 1976a, 62.

122 "I am not having disciples for the reason that then I take a moral responsibility upon myself which I cannot discharge satisfactorily, as I wish to devote my whole time to the research of this subject" (Krishna 1976b, 29).

123 Dr. Asrani required help from Krishna concerning his daughter's spontaneous ascent of *kuṇḍalinī*: "Out of several so called 'Kundalini Yogis', I know, you are the only one, who can give a scientific or atleast [sic] dependable advice" (Asrani to Krishna, 15 July 1975, Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.2.).

124 Krishna 1975.



therefore resemble a form of therapy: His total immersion in theories on consciousness and related matters helped him to reframe his experience in a positive manner. Krishna thus considered it his duty to publish widely on his ‘discovery,’ i.e., the claimed biological basis of *kuṇḍalinī*, and thereby assuring others of the universal value of their experience in spite of its potentially distressing nature.

These innovative theories left a lasting impression on several of Krishna’s readers. Therefore, I would like to address the impact of Krishna’s claim of universalism in the final part of this paper.

## 4 Impact on Subsequent Examinations and Narrations

Krishna’s account was a milestone in *kuṇḍalinī*’s transmission to non-Indians. His book *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* has enjoyed great popularity ever since its initial publication in 1967. Designated groups on social media still praise his merits and continue to keep his heritage alive.<sup>125</sup>

When Krishna published his book in 1967, Indian swamis had already disseminated some of their teachings overseas and *kuṇḍalinī* had consequently developed into a vogue concept among US-American alternative religious seekers. Krishna’s biographical account nonetheless filled an open gap: At the end of the 1960s, there were no experience reports about *kuṇḍalinī*, neither in India, nor beyond, that were narrated from a personal perspective, independent of a particular spiritual practice, and devoid of traditional or religious ties.<sup>126</sup> While Krishna’s readership was quite diverse,<sup>127</sup> most consultants of Krishna’s books and his distinctive inter-

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**125** A notable example pertains to the private Facebook group *KUNDALINI AWAKENING Guidance & Support*. It counts more than 72.000 members and has around seventy new contributions per month (as of September 2023). The group discusses various topics associated with *kuṇḍalinī*, whom they consider as “the inexhaustible source of philosophy, art and sciences, and the fountainhead of all religious faiths” (Kapur 2022). The group clearly follows Krishna when writing: “In every human being there is a biological mechanism for enlightenment which is also responsible for the evolution of the species towards a higher consciousness” (Kapur 2022). Numerous contributions mention, praise, or discuss Krishna.

**126** I have already shown above how Krishna’s book was propagated as a non-religious account, while in fact religion played a major part.

**127** His readership has ranged from transpersonal psychologists, yoga practitioners, occultists, to Christian mystics. The Californian based *Yoga Journal* (est. 1975), the work of White (1979), and the above-mentioned Facebook group constitute useful sources for Krishna’s readership.

pretation of *kuṇḍalinī* were non-Indians who did not associate themselves with Hindu religions. Moreover, those who believed to have experienced an uncontrolled or accidental rise of *kuṇḍalinī*, possibly even attended by negative effects likely turned to Krishna's books. For those, on the contrary, who experienced *kuṇḍalinī* through the guidance of a guru or as a result of spiritual exercises, Krishna's approach was usually not the first choice and at times even rejected. Krishna thus polarized the debate: Opinions about his credibility varied and his explanatory model was not unanimously approved. Some praised his interpretation of *kuṇḍalinī* as "the most important discovery in scientific history,"<sup>128</sup> or as "the only literature [ . . . ] on kundalini that is absolutely true."<sup>129</sup> Others dismissed his autodidactic lay approach to science and denied his claim of universalism: "Gopi Krishna's autobiography appears to be an honest representation of his experiences, but it is only one extreme datapoint in the panorama of experience on kundalini yoga. It represents dangers in forceful unguided practice, but it is not representative of a typical practitioner's experience."<sup>130</sup> This polarity notwithstanding, Krishna has become a significant authority in the field of *kuṇḍalinī* research—a fact which was even acknowledged by his critics. Krishna initiated and inspired research endeavours on the part of individuals and organizations, such as Lee Sannella and his Kundalini Clinic or international *kuṇḍalinī* research organisations, some of them existing until today.<sup>131</sup>

Innumerable books were published in reference to Krishna's experience.<sup>132</sup> I will discuss, as an example of Krishna's impact, one book which I consider paramount: W. Thomas Wolfe's *And the Sun is Up: Kundalini Rises in the West*.<sup>133</sup>

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128 Kundalini Research Foundation, n.d.a.

129 Scudder 1979, 196.

130 Kreutzer 1996.

131 The most important still existing research association is the Institute for Consciousness Research (ICR). Some of its active members (e.g., Michael Bradford) have already worked with Krishna in his Central Institute for Kundalini Research (located in Kashmir, India), a preceding organization dedicated to the research of *kuṇḍalinī*. For further information, see <https://www.icrcanada.org/about>.

132 See, e.g., Lee Sannella's (1976) *Kundalini. Psychosis or Transcendence*; Christopher Hills's (1977) *Nuclear Evolution: Discovery of the Rainbow Body*; W. Thomas Wolfe's (1978) *And the Sun is Up: Kundalini Rises in the West*; and John White's (1979) *Kundalini. Evolution and Enlightenment*. White's edited volume was the most important *kuṇḍalinī* handbook of the 1970s written for and by US-American exponents of alternative religion. It comprises experience reports, immersions into US-American occulture and Indian perspectives, and an entire chapter on warnings and suggestions on how to overcome *kuṇḍalinī*'s difficulties. Most articles within the book refer to Krishna and even the title is reminiscent of Krishna's autobiographical account.

133 Wolfe 1978.

Wolfe's book consists of four major parts: *Kundalini Them*, which introduces what the author classified as traditional Hindu and Christian perspectives of *kuṇḍalinī* in scripture and experience; *Kundalini Me*, which deals with the author's personal experience and lays special attention towards his dreams; *Kundalini You*, which provides information on how to prepare for a *kuṇḍalinī* experience; and *Kundalini We*, which considers millenarian and collective aspects of *kuṇḍalinī*. *Kundalini Me* and *Kundalini We* are of paramount importance when analysing to what extent Krishna's account yielded impact upon Wolfe's book.

The structure of Wolfe's experience report is reminiscent of Krishna's, inasmuch as he highlights several phases in his *kuṇḍalinī* experience and lays a greater focus on the aftermath of the experience than the experience itself. Unlike Krishna, however, he also associated the months prior to his activation as belonging to his *kuṇḍalinī* experience. Accordingly, he reported how extraordinary feelings and "psychic events" had begun "to build up in intensity and frequency—a direct result of the growing Kundalini fires within."<sup>134</sup> In these preceding months, as Wolfe underlined, the importance of meditating, dreaming, and experimenting with a biofeedback machine had grown.<sup>135</sup> In contrast, the description of his initial *kuṇḍalinī* experience appears almost trivial: "The Kundalini event was quite spectacular, but I was able to pass through it rather quickly."<sup>136</sup> Wolfe's initial activation thus differed fundamentally from Krishna's traumatic experience. Some of Wolfe's ensuing phases, however, involved crises and severe health problems reminiscent of Krishna's, which he interpreted as "yogic problems."<sup>137</sup> He described the physical and mental changes that he had undergone in the wake of his activation with religious terms, such as "the descent of the white light"<sup>138</sup> or "the baptism by fire,"<sup>139</sup> and at

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134 Wolfe 1978, 67.

135 Wolfe 1978, 67–71. By means of a biofeedback machine Wolfe aimed to train his 'cerebral muscles' and to practice 'mental gymnastics.' Wolfe interpreted his experiments with the biofeedback machine as spiritual practices that might have a beneficial effect on one's spiritual path. For a thorough discussion on the employment of biofeedback within energy healing discourses, see Endler (2016). The above-mentioned Itzhak Bentov approached *kuṇḍalinī* in a similar manner. He aimed to trigger the mechanism with a so-called ballistocardiograph, thereby developing empirical evidence (Bentov, in Sannella [1976] 1978, 71). Wolfe added Bentov's (1977) most important publication *Stalking the Wild Pendulum* to his reference section and discussed it in *Kundalini We*.

136 Wolfe 1978, 93.

137 Wolfe 1978, 126.

138 Wolfe 1978, 99.

139 Wolfe 1978, 142.

the same time referred to the modification of his brain by pondering on the “reintegration of the left- and right-brain functions.”<sup>140</sup>

While Wolfe’s experience appeared less traumatic, he still articulated his urge to explain it through similar rhetorical strategies as Krishna had done. Religious scientism thus also appealed to Wolfe as a useful explanatory model. This is especially evident in his appreciation of biofeedback to unfold *kuṇḍalinī*’s full potential:<sup>141</sup>

Biofeedback may be *the* key to unlocking the Western door to the Kundalini event. [. . .] Remember that biofeedback concentrates the physiological effects of meditation into a shorter time period. You don’t want to arouse the Kundalini before you are ready. Use the machine sensibly and your risk will be minimal.<sup>142</sup>

Another parallel runs along the authors’ dreams. Both Krishna and Wolfe discussed their dreams in relation to their transformational experiences. They suggested that changes in their waking state of consciousness must have corresponding effects on their dreams and interpreted them accordingly. Wolfe had kept a dream diary from a young age onwards. After a hiatus of several years, he resumed this practice a few months prior to his initial *kuṇḍalinī* experience. This resumption correlated with his increasing meditation practice, his biofeedback experiments, and with what he labelled “attainment dreams”:<sup>143</sup> “These dreams [. . .] reflected internal changes that were caused by meditation, biofeedback training, and the consequent approach of the Kundalini event.”<sup>144</sup> He thus believed that these attainment dreams had heralded his *kuṇḍalinī* experience. In the aftermath, they underpinned the categorization of his perceived transformation along scientific and mythological lines: “The first dream I had after the morning of the Kundalini experience [. . .] informed me that right-brain (represented by anima symbology) had been modified, and perhaps even hurt [. . .]. It is evident from this dream that my internal body mechanism had been confounded.”<sup>145</sup> Wolfe thus claimed a mutual link between

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140 Wolfe 1978, 129.

141 Krishna likewise took an interest in biofeedback. He collected articles related to the topic and wrote several contributions himself. Moreover, Krishna was in contact with leading biofeedback experts, such as Elmer E. Green (1917–2017) and Erik Peper (n.d.a.) (Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.10.). However, Krishna cherished biofeedback machines exclusively as a therapeutic means and clearly distanced himself from the belief that they may engender an experience similar to *kuṇḍalinī* (Krishna 1975, 41).

142 Wolfe 1978, 160, emphasis in original.

143 Wolfe 1978, 71.

144 Wolfe 1978, 67.

145 Wolfe 1978, 93.

his (preceding and successive) dreams and what he perceived as his initial *kuṇḍalīnī* experience.

For Krishna dreams likewise played an important role to make sense of the experience. He noticed how his dreams had altered as a result of his *kuṇḍalīnī* activation: “I became aware of an alteration in my dream consciousness.”<sup>146</sup> Both protagonists speak of their dreams as being accompanied with images of light and luster: “The bright luster in my head, always present during wakefulness, continued undiminished during sleep”,<sup>147</sup> and “I had an attainment dream that was almost classic in its symbolic offering of Grace, an event that is said to be a prerequisite to the Kundalini awakening. [ . . . ] *I see hundreds of pinpoints of light in the sky.*”<sup>148</sup>

Among the most intriguing aspects of Wolfe’s report count his speculations on the growth of a collective *kuṇḍalīnī*. These speculative claims relate most evidently to Krishna’s notion of universalism. In *Kundalini We*, Wolfe proclaimed the expected re-appearance of the so-called ‘Christ Consciousness.’ According to Wolfe, Christ Consciousness is directly associated with *kuṇḍalīnī*, inasmuch as both may trigger a collective shift of consciousness and consequently launch a spiritual era. “The coming of the Kundalini, Christ Consciousness, the second coming [ . . . ] are all slightly different views of the same phenomenon: mankind is moving into an age of spirit, an age in which the universe takes a giant, mutational step in its evolutionary path.”<sup>149</sup> The individual experience of the rising of *kuṇḍalīnī* is thus interpreted as the first step of a new evolutionary phase in human history. Wolfe’s claim of *kuṇḍalīnī*’s quality as a millenarian force strongly resembles Krishna’s confidence in the emergence of a spiritual revolution caused by the evolutionary mechanism of *kuṇḍalīnī*.

Their approach, however, differ in a crucial aspect. While Krishna emphasized how *kuṇḍalīnī* would ultimately transcend any religious or traditional link, Wolfe, on the contrary, took Christianity as point of departure and illustrated his assumptions by means of the Bible and Christ’s Passion.<sup>150</sup>

Wolfe’s book is imbued with Krishna’s unambiguous, if subtle influence. The final chapter, in particular, was inspired by Krishna’s universal approach. Wolfe’s

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146 Krishna [1967] 1970, 147.

147 Krishna [1967] 1970, 147.

148 Wolfe 1978, 81, emphasis in original.

149 Wolfe 1978, 164.

150 “The Bible illustrates that the individual Kundalini event is but the **start** of the spiritual process. [ . . . ] Christ’s first coming was a great gift to mankind. It was a collective baptism by water. The second coming of the Christ Consciousness will be on an even grander scale: it will be a baptism by fire that will catch up all humanity” (Wolfe 1978, 166–67; emphasis in original).

final words of the book clearly draw on Krishna's—and Theosophy's—claim of the dawn of a new era of transformed consciousness in the wake of increasing *kuṇḍalinī* activations: “And from our new-found individualism we will form a new collective universe—[. . .] one in which the spiritual man [. . .] will live in peace with himself and with other men, for those of other nature will be no more. The age of the Kundalini man is dawning.”<sup>151</sup> Wolfe's account thus perfectly shows how Krishna's claims had become common-sense among non-Indian spiritual seekers witnessing their supposed activation of *kuṇḍalinī*.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Innumerable protagonists have addressed the experience of *kuṇḍalinī* and aimed to adorn the mysterious serpent with their particular interpretation. The influential metaphor of the serpent winds its way through uncountable interpretative endeavours: A dormant serpent that patiently awaits the right moment to rise and alter the spiritual seeker's consciousness. This metaphor has also attended *kuṇḍalinī*'s modern transition from an individually perceived inner experience to a collectively shared transcultural mechanism. Crucially, however, *kuṇḍalinī*'s modern re-imagination was not confined to a single interpretative model. The view of a biological mechanism and transformational experience, which will ultimately change the entire course of humanity, discussed above, is just one prominent pathway.

Initially, *kuṇḍalinī* pertained to those aspects of a spiritual life, which were too precious or too dangerous to be shared. However, the twentieth century witnessed willingly shared personal narrations of such inner experiences, embracing delights and dreads. Narratives of experiences thenceforward emphasized the primacy of personal experiences. Over and above, such autobiographical (or auto-hagiographical) accounts provided spiritual seekers with insights into teachings and insights on “privileged experience,”<sup>152</sup> previously unavailable to the reader. This “democratization of experience”<sup>153</sup> resulted in an increase of experience reports and allowed the readership to reinterpret their experiences as belonging to the occult. Krishna's seminal position among the growing number of experience reports rested on his endeavour to detach *kuṇḍalinī* from its religious and traditional boundaries. He portrayed *kuṇḍalinī* as a universal mechanism,

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<sup>151</sup> Wolfe 1978, 173.

<sup>152</sup> Hammer 2004, 435.

<sup>153</sup> Hammer 2004, 435.

which is easier understood and approached through scientific than religious metaphors and language. He further believed that *kuṇḍalinī* followed a designated universal pattern: As a biological mechanism transforming the physical body and as an evolutionary force altering the individual and collective consciousness independent of any cultural or religious ties.

The accompanying psychological commentaries by James Hillman leave no doubt how Krishna's narration was to be interpreted from a psychological stance: As an archetypal story comprising of several determined stages. Against this backdrop, Krishna's *kuṇḍalinī* represented an archetypal manifestation of a perennial experience, which has re-occurred at times of crises and vast changes. *Kuṇḍalinī* was thus not confined to a mere biological mechanism enabling an alteration of consciousness. Krishna firmly believed that "before her time [*kuṇḍalinī*] was acclaimed a Vira, meaning a hero, and the practice itself designated as Vira Sadhana, or heroic undertaking."<sup>154</sup> This seemingly incidental link of *kuṇḍalinī* and her activation with the monomyth underlines the essence of Krishna's claim: The activation of this evolutionary, potentially threatening mechanism corresponds to a universal pattern that unfolds a transformational scheme. The serpent power had indeed stimulated Krishna's transformational journey.

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154 Krishna [1967] 1970, 165.

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Bastiaan van Rijn

## Chapter 9

# Building a Typology for Intentional Transformative Experiences: Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet's Experiments with Magnetic Somnambulism and Hashish

I wished to see with my own eyes, and to be able to say to mankind, I have seen that; you may see it as well as I; such a thing has been revealed to me; ascertain if the reply is the same to you. Experience is the soul of faith. *Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet*<sup>1</sup>

The above words of Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet (1809–1885), a French animal magnetizer, were written in a book that dealt with the spiritual nature of hashish experiences.<sup>2</sup> Cahagnet spent most of his writing career trying to investigate life after death. Originally, he did this through putting others into the state of magnetic somnambulism—a phenomenon akin to hypnosis, which Cahagnet deemed to be a sacred experience. He believed magnetic somnambulists could be put into contact with angels and spirits, or even travel in spirit to heaven.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Cahagnet's original spiritual research consisted of comparative interviews with magnetic somnambulists, whose answers were carefully verified. The approach changed when after writing two books, Cahagnet had failed to harvest more than a handful of direct followers and various negative book reviews.<sup>4</sup> Hashish was his new method to build a spiritual science, as it promised to completely remove the necessity of somnambulist intermediaries; it was in this context that the opening quotation was written. Yet it did not take long for Cahagnet to return his focus on somnambulist interviews. It turned out hashish experiences brought

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1 Cahagnet 1851c, 63. Translation by M. Flinders Pearson. Translations in this chapter are by myself, unless stated otherwise.

2 I want to thank Markus Altena Davidsen, Sarah Perez, Piotr Sobkowiak, and several members of the Leiden Working Group on Fundamental Problems and Methods in the Study of Religion (Sarah Cramsey, Albert de Jong, Tom-Eric Krijger, and Arjan Sterken) for valuable comments on this chapter. The research on which this chapter is based was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

3 When writing about the thoughts of Cahagnet or animal magnetizers more generally, I portray *their* positions and beliefs; yet for stylistic reasons, I use qualifiers such as 'allegedly' sparingly.

4 Despite Cahagnet's lack of following, several of his books were internationally relatively well read within Spiritualist and occultist circles.

their own set of problems with them, and Cahagnet deemed them harder to use to convince his readers than the somnambulist state. Hashish still played a role, but at least in his written work much less than before.

The case study of Cahagnet is interesting because he, throughout his career as spiritual researcher, had recourse to two distinct intentional transformative experiences: magnetic somnambulism and hashish-induced states. Three interrelated research topics will structure this chapter. First, historically, I will analyze Cahagnet's works from his early somnambulist research, through his hashish investigations, back to his later work focusing once more mostly on somnambulism. In doing so, I will explain why Cahagnet initially thought his somnambulist research would convince a wide audience that he could scientifically prove life after death, how he subsequently saw hashish as a better way of doing this, and finally how problems with hashish narratives forced him to return to somnambulism research. Second, theoretically, I take up the somnambulist state and hashish experiences and posit them as the central tools around which Cahagnet built two different paradigms of spiritual science. Whereas magnetic somnambulism lent itself well to comparison, repetition, regulation, and verification, and could therefore be put into an (in Cahagnet's eyes) scientific and experimental frame, hashish proved to be particularly effective in convincing users because it allowed for personal experience. Third, conceptually, I will show how the two research paradigms of Cahagnet can be divorced from their context in order to form the basis of a useful subdivision of the broader concept 'intentional transformative experience.' *Intentionally induced self-transformative experiences* will represent those experiences that are done by oneself, on oneself, and for oneself, as they have transformational qualities that are not extractable from the experience itself and are persuasive exactly because they are personally experienced. Opposed to this are the *intentionally induced states of knowledge*,<sup>5</sup> which represent those experiences that provide knowledge that is valuable first and foremost to *others*, rather than to the experiencer, and which must subsequently be verified—often in (what the practitioners deem to be) a scientific framework. This typology is then shown to add new insights to our understanding of intentional transformative experiences.

The chapter is built up as follows: after the introduction, a general overview of animal magnetism is given. Then, biographical information on Cahagnet himself is presented. After that, the three periods in Cahagnet's writing—from som-

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5 The term 'states of knowledge' is derived from Wouter Hanegraaff's (2022, 3n6) use of state-specific knowledge, which he took from Charles T. Tart. See the penultimate section of this chapter for further elaboration on the term. Hanegraaff (forthcoming) further develops this concept elsewhere with regard to a different type of psychoactive agent: ayahuasca.

nambulism, to hashish, to a somnambulism-focused synthesis—are described based on an analysis of five of his books. In the following theoretical discussion, the aforementioned somnambulism and hashish centered paradigms are built up using concepts from various other authors in philosophy, history, and the study of religion. Lastly, the conclusion will draw up the abovementioned typology and draw out what the case study of Cahagnet can teach us about intentional transformative experiences.

## 1 Animal Magnetism: From Fluids to Spirits

Animal magnetism refers in its broadest sense to a healing technique originally developed by the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815). Initially, it did not include the aspect of somnambulism so important to Cahagnet, nor was it supposed by Mesmer to have anything to do with religious elements such as angels, spirits, or the afterlife. Instead, the treatment and underlying theory of animal magnetism was rooted in an iatrophysical<sup>6</sup> and purely material framework.<sup>7</sup> The name ‘animal magnetism’ refers to a subtle fluid—that is to say, an invisible and weightless substance—that Mesmer theorized to be spread out throughout the universe. He believed it analogous to mineral magnetism, from which it derived half of its name. Yet as this magnetism was also theorized to be present in living beings, Mesmer designated it as *animal* magnetism. The correct circulation of the animal magnetic fluid corresponded to health, while a lack of this fluid would result in illness. In the early years of the practice, physicians utilizing animal magnetism primarily used their hands and gaze to transmit the animal magnetic fluid towards the patient. The fluid should then overcome disharmony by correcting the inner movement of the body.<sup>8</sup> The basis of the treatment goes back to Mesmer’s dissertation on the influence of the planets on the harmony and health of humanity due to the effect of the former’s gravitational forces on the fluids (e.g., the nervous fluid) in the bodies of humans.<sup>9</sup> Yet it was in 1775, while

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6 Iatrophysics was a branch of medicine that interpreted body and health in physics-based principles (Eckart 2015). This school of thinking was prominent in Vienna, where Mesmer studied, due to the presence of Gerard van Swieten (1700–1772), who in turn was a staunch follower of the famous iatrophycisist Herman Boerhaave (1668–1738).

7 Baier 2019.

8 The exact nature of the animal magnetic fluid and its workings evolved during Mesmer’s career. The overview given here is a simplified depiction from various of his writings (Mesmer [1775] 1778a; [1775] 1778b; 1798–1799; 1814).

9 Mesmer 1766; cf. Pattie 1956.

Mesmer worked as a physician in Vienna, that his first full theory on the matter was published.<sup>10</sup>

Mesmer had originally tried to propagate his new healing method in Vienna, but he left for Paris in 1778 after various controversies surrounding himself and animal magnetism.<sup>11</sup> There, animal magnetism found support among the wider populace in the city,<sup>12</sup> but not with the scientific or the medical elite Mesmer had hoped to impress.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, until 1784 Mesmer steadily increased his popularity within the city while also teaching others to become animal magnetizers. It was in that year that two events happened in France that changed animal magnetism drastically. These changes eventually enabled the spiritual use of animal magnetism by magnetizers such as Cahagnet.

The first event that shaped animal magnetism's future in 1784 was the appearance of a report by a French commission of scientists and physicians set up by King Louis XVI. The commission included illustrious names such as Antoine Lavoisier, Benjamin Franklin, and Joseph-Ignace Guillotin. After multiple series of experiments, the commission was content to announce in its report that the animal magnetic fluid did not exist and that its apparent effects were instead due to imagination, imitation, and normal touch.<sup>14</sup> From the appearance of the report onwards, animal magnetizers have had to respond to its method. One way was to downplay the importance of experiments.<sup>15</sup> However, the larger response was that animal magnetism could be defended through the same method of experimentation.<sup>16</sup> A continuous theme of experimentation therefore runs through the history of animal magnetism.<sup>17</sup> Cahagnet, too, would inherit this drive for experimental verification, as shall be seen below.

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**10** Mesmer [1775] 1778a.

**11** For Mesmer's side of his pre-Paris controversies, see Mesmer (1779). These events are also amply related in the many biographies of Mesmer, such as Pattie (1994), and Florey (1995).

**12** Cf. Darnton 2015, 40: "Mesmerism corresponded so well to the attitudes of literate Frenchmen that it probably inspired more interest than any other topic or fashion during the decade before the edict of July 5, 1788, concerning the convocation of the Estates General."

**13** Mesmer described his Parisian debates in detail in Mesmer (1781). See also his biographies (footnote 11).

**14** [Bailly] 1784. See Riskin (2002) for the most elaborate review of the commission's work.

**15** Especially the highly influential magnetizer Joseph Philippe François Deleuze downplayed the importance of experiments ([1819] 1836, e.g., 22; 60–61; 114). Yet even Deleuze had to allow for certain types of experimentation: e.g., Deleuze 1813, 53–80.

**16** Van Rijn 2023.

**17** Even though experiments are not particularly emphasized in this account, see especially Méheust (1999, 1:351–469) for the situation in France.

The second crucial event in 1784 was a discovery by one of Mesmer's own students: Amand Marc Jacques Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825, henceforth: Puységur). At his estate in Buzancy, Puységur magnetized one of his servants. As a result, the servant fell into a state between wakefulness and sleep akin to sleepwalking. This state was therefore called magnetic somnambulism, and it was quickly believed to only affect certain persons. So-called somnambulists often did not just talk during their state, but also allegedly acquired extraordinary abilities such as seeing without their eyes, the ability to read the thoughts of their magnetizer, clairvoyance, and more. Particularly interesting for Puységur and his followers was the ability of some somnambulists to see the insides of their own bodies, as well as those of others, thereby allowing them to diagnose illnesses and prescribe treatments for them. Even the personalities of the somnambulists suddenly changed as they were often described as being more eloquent and wise. However, the changes to the somnambulists were temporary: once they woke up, somnambulists no longer had their abilities or their changed personality, and most could not recollect anything that happened during their sleep. It did not take long for Puységur's somnambulism focused animal magnetism to eclipse Mesmer's fluid focused version. As animal magnetism spread throughout Europe and to the United States, different countries developed different focal points, yet all were fascinated with somnambulism.<sup>18</sup>

Most importantly for present purposes, some somnambulists quickly started claiming to be in contact with spirits of the dead, as well as with angels.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, animal magnetism was perceived by some to be a bridge between Heaven and Earth; this group will be designated as spiritual animal magnetizers, as opposed to medical animal magnetizers who opposed spiritual interpretations.<sup>20</sup> As a spiritual animal magnetizer, Cahagnet combined his belief in the spiritual impli-

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**18** Monographs—to say nothing of articles, book chapters, and edited volumes—can be found on the development of animal magnetism in France (Méheust 1999), the Netherlands (Vijselaar 2001), the United Kingdom (Winter 1998), and the United States of America (Fuller 1982; Ogden 2018). See Gauld (1992), Crabtree (1993), and Vijselaar (2001) for explicit comparisons between various countries.

**19** The first phase of spiritual animal magnetism was in France prior to the French Revolution; Bergé (1995, 13–53) and Edelman (1995, 19–39). Afterwards, influenced by Romantic interests, spiritual animal magnetism became important for certain German animal magnetizers in the first half of the nineteenth century; cf. Gauld (1992, 141–62); Hanegraaff (2001). In the 1830s, spiritual animal magnetism once more became a topic in France; Viatte (1935); Crockford (2013); Jeanson (2023).

**20** Spiritual [animal] magnetism was a self-designation. Medical animal magnetism is my analytical counterpart.



cations of Puységurian somnambulism with the post-commission mentality of experimental verification.

## 2 The Life and Work of Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet

Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet was born in Caen in 1809. Not much is known about his life, except for what he himself wrote down in his books.<sup>21</sup> What is known is that Cahagnet took up various manual labour professions such as chair turning and collar cutting, and throughout his life he would call himself ‘a simple workman’ [*ouvrier*]<sup>22</sup>—a fact that featured in his calls for an accessible and democratic science as will be discussed below. In 1848, Cahagnet’s first book was published: *Magnétisme. Arcanes de la Vie Future Dévoilés* [*Magnetism. Mysteries of the Future Life Revealed*; henceforth, *Arcanes I*].<sup>23</sup> In this book, the topic was already centrally on proving the existence and content of the afterlife,<sup>23</sup> a trend that continued in Cahagnet’s further writings. During the rest of his career, Cahagnet kept writing on spiritual and animal magnetic topics. In doing so, he gathered a humble following of like-minded individuals,<sup>24</sup> won the bronze medal of the French magnetic society<sup>25</sup> and received the title of honorary member of the Theosophical Society.<sup>26</sup> Cahagnet died in 1885, but his followers kept in contact with his spirit, a practice that has continued up until today.<sup>27</sup>

For the purpose of this chapter, five books of Cahagnet are of importance. Chronologically, these are the *Arcanes I* of 1848; its follow-up, the second volume of the *Arcanes*<sup>28</sup> (henceforth *Arcanes II*) of 1849; *Sanctuaire du Spiritualisme*<sup>29</sup>

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21 See for the most comprehensive overviews of Cahagnet’s life Pierssens (1993) and Hanegraaff (2016).

22 Cahagnet 1848.

23 Cahagnet’s view of the afterlife followed generally the ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), but with notable divergences as well. The afterlife, for Cahagnet, is a progressive place in which souls continue to develop spiritually to get closer to God. Hell does not exist, rather, souls punish themselves due to their own mindsets for a given time. The inhabitants of heaven spend their time doing what they love, forming communities of like-minded individuals, as well as guiding still-living humans.

24 Pierssens 1993, 357–62.

25 De Malherbe 1856, 272.

26 Theosophist 1881, 104–6.

27 For his historical appearances to his immediate followers, see Pierssens (1992, 358). For a contemporary medium that alleges to be in contact with Cahagnet, see Emmanuela (2018).

28 Cahagnet 1849.

29 Cahagnet 1850.

[*Sanctuary of Spiritualism*, henceforth *Sanctuaire*] of 1850, which contained the hashish experience of Cahagnet and others; the third volume of the *Arcanes*<sup>30</sup> (henceforth *Arcanes III*) in 1854; and finally the unofficial fourth volume of the *Arcanes* entitled *Révélation d'outre-Tombe*<sup>31</sup> [*Revelations from Beyond the Grave*; henceforth *Révélation*] of 1856. *Arcanes I* and *II* will form the corpus of the 'somnambulism period,' *Sanctuaire* that of the 'hashish period,' and *Arcanes III* and *Révélation* that of the 'synthesis period' (see Table 9.1). The reason for this selection of books is that Cahagnet took the reader through his complete process of investigations, reasonings, and interpretations. They therefore function well to gain insight in how he thought correct investigation into the afterlife should function.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the *Arcanes* and *Sanctuaire* were also Cahagnet's most popular works, perhaps exactly for the fact that he involved his readers earnestly.<sup>33</sup>

**Table 9.1:** Cahagnet's research periods.

Periods	Years	Works
Somnambulism period	1848–1849	<i>Arcanes I</i> <i>Arcanes II</i>
Hashish period	Ca. 1850	<i>Sanctuaire</i>
Synthesis period	1853–1856	<i>Arcanes III</i> <i>Révélation</i>

The magnetizing career of Cahagnet should be seen in the larger context of French animal magnetism, especially with regards to the importance of experimenting and the prominence of somnambulism discussed above. When Cahagnet took up the practice—which was according to himself around the latter half of the 1830s<sup>34</sup>—animal magnetism's fate within the medical establishment was still undecided, and experiments played a crucial role in the debate.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore,

<sup>30</sup> Cahagnet 1854a.

<sup>31</sup> Cahagnet 1856.

<sup>32</sup> Works of the same period in which Cahagnet does not reflect on his knowledge production have more of an encyclopaedical style (e.g., Cahagnet 1851a; 1854b).

<sup>33</sup> The general importance of experimenters involving readers is highlighted by historians Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, who use the term 'virtual witnessing' (Shapin and Schaffer 1985, 60–65; coined in Shapin 1984). This term will be taken up in more detail in the discussion below.

<sup>34</sup> Cahagnet 1848, 82.

<sup>35</sup> Méheust 1999, 1:351–469. It was in 1842 that animal magnetism was decidedly rejected by the medical establishment. Shortly summarized, after various attempts by physicians sympathetic to animal magnetism in the 1830s to formally recognize the practice as efficacious, opponents of the

the magnetizing community itself was torn between a majority of medical animal magnetizers and a minority of spiritual animal magnetizers. The medically inclined magnetizers often accepted somnambulistic abilities, but drew the line at contact with otherworldly entities, while the spiritual magnetizers saw a purely medical interest in animal magnetism as narrowminded and instead wanted to explore religious topics through the phenomenon.<sup>36</sup>

Cahagnet had started practicing animal magnetism so that he could reach the state of magnetic somnambulism. However, he soon learned that he did not seem to be susceptible to it. In the meantime, he had used his abilities as a magnetizer to heal people and as a result had a circle of somnambulists available to him. Originally these somnambulists were used to diagnose the illnesses of others, but when one of them—Bruno Binet—reported that he had come into contact with his guardian angel, Cahagnet gradually focused his research on questions surrounding life after death.<sup>37</sup> Cahagnet thought his work could convince his readers (including the more materialistic medical animal magnetizers) to accept a spiritual view of life and death. So, although his research was conducted with the direct aim of gaining knowledge of the afterlife in a scientific manner, this knowledge was itself primarily useful to teach others to see life and death in a new and more positive way. The following quote is one of many that makes this goal abundantly clear:

I write these lines, to teach you how to die, to calm the fear that gains upon you. If I succeed in gaining this victory by the experiments I recommend you to make, you will not treat me as a madman; you will believe in God, in a better life, and you will know how to prepare for this departure with calm and courage—ay, more—with joy!<sup>38</sup>

To truly understand Cahagnet's work, this goal needs to be kept in mind. The experiments of the above quotation were replications of his guided interviews with somnambulists; these are key to Cahagnet's original somnambulist period research.

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practice were able to capitalize on various negative (semi-)official verdicts from commissions and voted to ban any further official investigation into the practice by the Royal Academy of Medicine in 1842.

<sup>36</sup> See for the medical versus spiritual animal magnetism debate especially Monroe (2008, 64–94), although he focuses on a slightly later period.

<sup>37</sup> Of course, the account given is Cahagnet's version of events. He also portrayed himself as a staunch materialist that only through the evidence of his somnambulists became a spiritualist. However, this was (and still is) a widely used rhetorical technique which should be taken with a healthy amount of scepticism.

<sup>38</sup> Cahagnet 1851b, 2:152. Translator unknown.

### 3 The Research Logic of Cahagnet's Somnambulism Period

Cahagnet was keenly aware that his type of spiritual animal magnetism was under close scrutiny from both non-spiritual magnetizers and enemies of animal magnetism altogether. That, combined with his wish to unearth the *true* truths of life after death—unfettered by religious dogma—made him resort to various verification practices that would ensure, in his eyes, the veracity of his information.<sup>39</sup> Only then, as opposed to using historical and religious sources, he said in the introduction of *Arcanes I*, could he hope to be trusted by his readers: “in a century where proof is needed to believe, and not stories more or less tainted by political or religious speculation, I would consider myself the most despicable man on earth if I speculated on lies!”<sup>40</sup>

In order to understand the logic of the verification practices Cahagnet used, a closer look is warranted at the alleged abilities of the somnambulists with whom Cahagnet worked. It was their capability to get into the somnambulistic state that rendered them useful for his research; a state that Cahagnet described as “sacred and divine.”<sup>41</sup> These somnambulists had three ways through which they could use their divine state to get their information. First and most frequent, they talked to spirits of the dead and to angels: somnambulists communicated the questions from Cahagnet to the spirits, and reported the answers back to him. Second and more rarely, somnambulists were able to travel in spirit to heaven and observe it directly. Third and more generally, the somnambulist state elevated the mind, thereby making it possible for somnambulists to comprehend some truths directly. These three ways may be compared to scholar of esotericism Antoine Faivre's categorization of ‘kinds of clairvoyance.’<sup>42</sup> Faivre makes a distinction between three levels of clairvoyance. The first level is extra-sensory perception as it pertains to this world; this level was well integrated into somnambulism from the time of Puy-ségur. The second level is contact with spiritual entities such as angels or spirits; this, in the case of animal magnetism, was only endorsed by spiritual animal mag-

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<sup>39</sup> For a complementary analysis of Cahagnet's work based on concepts that I together have called ‘the experimental culture of afterlife research,’ see Van Rijn (2023, chap. 5). The main difference is that the current analysis focuses on the value of transformative experiences in Cahagnet's work, while the aforementioned other analysis looks at how Cahagnet's view on scientific and experimental practice changed over time and formed a link in the chain of a larger experimental culture focussed on proving the existence and content of life after death.

<sup>40</sup> Cahagnet 1848, vi.

<sup>41</sup> Cahagnet 1849, 78.

<sup>42</sup> Faivre 2008, 192–93.

netizers such as Cahagnet. The third level is a direct access to ultimate realities; this level, too, was mostly reserved for spiritual animal magnetism, as somnambulists were able to travel to elevated places such as heaven.<sup>43</sup>

Cahagnet made use of the various abilities of somnambulism in his attempts of verification. The cornerstone of his approach was to compare his findings in as many ways as possible. First, he did not rely on just one somnambulist. He took the accounts of many different ones, to be able to compare their answers on spiritual questions<sup>44</sup>—but also to be able to test his somnambulists in very concrete ways: for example, by having them describe at the same time a spirit who was supposed to be present.<sup>45</sup> Second, the spirits and angels talked to were also frequently swapped out. Therefore, answers between spirits—who sometimes were more ambiguous than one would hope—could be compared.<sup>46</sup> However, Cahagnet knew that because all of these somnambulists were under his care, others would object and argue that they were influenced by him, either generally or through thought transference, and therefore not truly independent.<sup>47</sup> This is why he resorted to various other kinds of comparison as well.

Being a follower of Emanuel Swedenborg, Cahagnet often called upon Swedenborg's spirit to obtain answers to especially difficult questions. But more than that, Cahagnet also compared the earthly writings of Swedenborg with the revelations of his somnambulists. If somnambulists who had never read Swedenborg before, would come to the same conclusions as he, that should be further independent proof of their observations according to Cahagnet.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Cahagnet also compared what he found with the utterances of somnambulists of other magnetizers. Here, there would be no possibility of an influence from him

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<sup>43</sup> The third level of Faivre could possibly be split up into a strong and a weak version. The strong version would be ultimate realities such as heaven; while a weak version might entail ultimate truths on a 'this-worldly' scale, such as seeing the mathematical order in everything. In this case, somnambulists' elevated minds could be construed as the weak version of the third level; which then would have been present from Puysegur already as well. For my purposes, however, it will suffice to speak only of the 'strong' version of the third level.

<sup>44</sup> Cahagnet's use of comparison for verification already becomes clear in the title of *Arcanes I*, which mentions eight somnambulists and thirty-six spirits as the basis of the book's claims on "the existence, the form, the occupations of the soul after its separation from the body."

<sup>45</sup> Cahagnet 1848, 62–65.

<sup>46</sup> Cahagnet 1848, 122–40.

<sup>47</sup> Thought transference was considered as an established fact by both spiritual and medical animal magnetizers. It therefore served as an important argument against claims of otherworldly contact by the medical animal magnetizers (Van Rijn 2023). This was a point of contestation that would continue to haunt spiritually-inclined spiritualists, psychical researchers and parapsychologists for generations to come.

<sup>48</sup> Cahagnet 1848, 210, 238–44.

towards them, further solidifying for Cahagnet the chance that the results were actually true.<sup>49</sup>

All of these sources together painted a convincing picture for Cahagnet. At the end of his first book (*Arcanes I*), he was convinced he had found out that there was no hell, and that spirits remained individuals with the option to do whatever they pleased in heaven while eternally progressing closer to God. More radically, Cahagnet also claimed that astronomy was wrong to think the sun a physical object, as it was actually the rays of a spiritual sun—God—bursting through into the material world. All of this was the result of an—in his eyes—careful comparison between many informants and different sources that independently of each other had glimpsed the truth about what comes after death.<sup>50</sup>

Yet even though some of Cahagnet's sources were outside the scope of his influence, he was still anxious to prove that his main source of information, his somnambulists, were also unaffected by him. Especially with the somnambulist ability to read thoughts, Cahagnet had to show that this was not where they got their information from. This is why he attempted to verify his somnambulists as well: he wanted to heighten the trustworthiness of them by testing their claims on a level where direct, empirical verification of facts was still possible in order to strengthen their indirect, superempirical claims. (Scientific) predictions were one way to do this. A salient example from his later work is when Cahagnet described his favorite somnambulist Adèle Maginot's journey to the moon and her description of the landscape and people there. He did this explicitly with the aim of making scientific predictions. If these turned out to be correct, then it would imply that his somnambulists were a scientific force to be reckoned with—also on other matters. In Cahagnet's words, he did this “in order to put science in a position one day to control our assertions and finally to pronounce how we were able to know these still unknown places, if not by the incomprehensible power of the spirit.”<sup>51</sup>

Another kind of proof to verify the trustworthiness of Cahagnet's somnambulists was to talk to spirits and have them give information that not even the still-living family members of the spirit themselves could verify until after the information was given. Multiple anecdotes had Adèle describe deceased family members to surviving relatives in ways that those present did not remember, for example with respect to a certain birthmark or scar. Only after gathering addi-

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<sup>49</sup> Cahagnet 1848, 226–29.

<sup>50</sup> Cahagnet 1848, 208, 229–30. For a list of truths all Cahagnet's somnambulists allegedly agreed on, see Cahagnet (1849, 29–31).

<sup>51</sup> Cahagnet 1854a, 5–6. Even though this example is from Cahagnet's synthesis period, it follows his somnambulist period logic.

tional witnesses, or even procuring old portraits of the deceased, was the somnambulist's account validated—making thought transference impossible and luck highly unlikely according to Cahagnet.<sup>52</sup> Such verifications of somnambulists could then be used as rationale for accepting their claims about afterlife matters as well—especially when those claims were already verified through comparison.

These methods of verification, together with procedures to exclude error, bad or uncooperative spirits, and imagination, had Cahagnet convinced that he had written down in *Arcanes I* and *Arcanes II* the surest information one could get about heaven and a great many other things. It was from this position that he urged everyone to themselves consult with somnambulists to corroborate the truths Cahagnet had found out on a personally convincing level; giving them instructions on how to interview and what questions to ask.<sup>53</sup> This was another type of verification that might not add new data (it being an act of replication), but would reverberate due to the involvement of the reader turning into an experimenter themselves. In this way, Cahagnet believed himself to have created a spiritual science that proclaimed a positive view of life after death, and one that was open for everyone, as when he proclaimed against his religious and materialist opponents: “Remain, I say, clad in doctoral ornaments, seigneurial or royal ones, in your niches, which are the emblems of the *status quo*; we will practice science without you, and a more consoling science than yours.”<sup>54</sup>

## 4 The Research Logic of Cahagnet's Hashish Period

Cahagnet's proposal for a spiritual science as formulated in his *Arcanes I* and *II* soon encountered a substantial setback. The influential animal magnetizer Denis Dupotet (1796–1881), founder of the equally influential *Journal du magnétisme* (1845–1861), wrote a scathing review of volume one of the *Arcanes*, with one of the main objections being that “first of all, it is an intermediary who sees.”<sup>55</sup> After the first review of *Arcanes I*—which had even been dedicated to Dupotet—Cahag-

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<sup>52</sup> Cahagnet 1848, 143–47.

<sup>53</sup> Cahagnet, for example, set up a list of 75 questions to ask somnambulists and informed about proper etiquette when dealing with spirits as to keep them cooperative, as well as to test whether they were not bad spirits with the intention to deceive (1848, 282–96).

<sup>54</sup> Cahagnet 1851b, 2:12. Translator unknown.

<sup>55</sup> Dupotet 1848, 89.

net had hoped to convince Dupotet and others by introducing even stricter measures of verification. This had not worked, as became obvious from Dupotet's even worse review of the second volume of the *Arcanes*. To add injury to (Dupotet's) insult, Cahagnet had learned first-hand that somnambulists might not always be cooperative or truthful. For example, at one point, the aforementioned somnambulist Adèle had lied to Cahagnet because she was annoyed by the tests she had to undergo (i.e., in that case she was supposed to transmit a question to a spirit in Latin, a language she did not understand).

Criticism from others,<sup>56</sup> imperfect experiences with somnambulists, as well as Cahagnet's original drive to personally reach an ecstatic state together made him turn to hashish. Early on in *Sanctuaire*, his book on hashish experiences, Cahagnet was clear about his reasons. Parts of the quotation were already used in the opening of the chapter, but it is nonetheless worth repeating in full:

The statements, nevertheless, of a third party, are never so positive as one's own; the questions that are submitted to spirits by the intervention of [somnambulists] may be badly reproduced, and their responses altered [ . . . ] I wished to see with my own eyes, and to be able to say to mankind, I have seen that; you may see it as well as I; such a thing has been revealed to me; ascertain if the reply is the same to you. Experience is the soul of faith.<sup>57</sup>

This was quite the shift. *Arcanes I* and *II* were predicated on the implicit (and at times explicit) role of Cahagnet as impartial observer and experimenter who was professionally distanced from the tools (i.e., somnambulists) that he used to get his results. But now it seemed that the evidence produced by somnambulists was not as good as evidence *experienced* by oneself. Hashish had, according to Cahagnet, the benefit that it avoided the problem of imprecise data collection, while it also seemed to just inherently be more convincing to experience something directly, unmediated by others.

Therefore, the main part of Cahagnet's *Sanctuaire*—after a lengthy theological overview of his beliefs in the form of a dialogue between a spiritualist and a materialist—was the narrative of his own hashish experience, and those of ten others who had taken hashish in the company of Cahagnet (their reports in many

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<sup>56</sup> The review of Dupotet only appeared in print after Cahagnet started experimenting with hashish. It should therefore only be seen as an additional motive, rather than the only one, for Cahagnet to turn towards hashish.

<sup>57</sup> Cahagnet 1851c, 63. Translation by M. Flinders Pearson slightly altered: Flinders Pearson used the word 'clairvoyants,' whereas I opt for somnambulists. The original *lucides*—those who are lucid—was up until that point only used by Cahagnet to refer to somnambulists. Only in *Sanctuaire* did Cahagnet expand the meaning to include hashish experiencers too.



cases written down by the experiencers themselves).<sup>58</sup> These experiences proved helpful for Cahagnet, who compared them to a light “by which I could perceive and resolve a thousand and one phenomena of somnambulism which until then had not been explained.”<sup>59</sup> Just like in the *Arcanes*, Cahagnet in this book urged others to follow in his footsteps, among others by giving the address of his hashish seller in Paris, as well as giving recommendations on how to prepare the substance (e.g., in coffee), and how to prepare the environment (e.g., keeping it dry and warm; absolutely no doctors allowed). After all, Cahagnet reasoned: “[it is] a duty on my part to reveal nothing that I cannot prove by experiments within the comprehension of every one.”<sup>60</sup>

Compared to the somnambulist interviews, there now no longer was an intermediary. Cahagnet and other investigators became direct experiencers. Additionally, unlike the temporary transformations of the somnambulist state, hashish led to consciously experienced and well-remembered states. Consequently, changes in knowledge or worldview could be retained. The reader also would now read about the experience from a second-hand (rather than a third-hand) perspective; and if the advice of Cahagnet was heeded, the reader would turn into a first-hand experiencer as well. Furthermore, Cahagnet assumed the hashish induced state to be one and the same state as that reached by somnambulists.<sup>61</sup> It therefore seems that Cahagnet’s hashish experiences were a definite improvement: they cut out the intermediary and gave spiritual experiences with long-lasting effects to whoever wanted them.

However, Cahagnet’s *Arcanes III* and *Révélations* once again returned to the use of somnambulists as experiencers, and hashish would play but a small role in them; this begs the question of why. After all, Cahagnet had made a big point out of the improvements of this new approach—and implicitly this approach also refuted arguments made against Cahagnet’s *Arcanes* by Dupotet and others. Returning to less optimal circumstances through more indirect means hardly seemed to be in Cahagnet’s interest. I believe at least four factors contributed to his decision to depend once again mostly on somnambulists, rather than hashish experiences.

First, when comparing the fifteen accounts of hashish experiences by eleven experiencers to the dialogues Cahagnet had and continued to have with his numerous magnetic somnambulists, big differences appear. Returning to Faivre’s three levels of clairvoyance—this-worldly extrasensory perception; contact with

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58 For secondary literature on Cahagnet’s hashish use, see first and foremost Hanegraaff (2016), but also Partridge (2018, 126–35).

59 Cahagnet 1851c, 133. Translation by M. Flinders Pearson.

60 Cahagnet 1851c, 2. Translation by M. Flinders Pearson.

61 Cahagnet 1850, 354.

spiritual entities; and access to ultimate realities—the contact with spiritual entities almost completely disappeared with hashish experiences: only one hashish drinker was able to talk to spirits at all. This left out an immense source of authoritative information for Cahagnet, as well as a major variable for comparison; no longer could impressive figures such as the spirit of Swedenborg be called upon, nor could spirits in general be compared to one another, or be identified (and thereby verified) by living relatives.

Second, and closely related to the first point, was the type of description given by hashish experiencers. Compared to the somnambulists, the content of hashish experience narratives in general was much more confused. Descriptions were filled with puzzling analogies that, according to the various experiencers, could only be understood within the state itself—the message therefore was in large parts no longer understandable by readers unfamiliar with similar experiences. Take the following statement of Lecocq, a friend of Cahagnet, who wrote: “I understood myself—I comprehended God! Why? I know not; but I had this conviction, which I still perfectly retain, that we may arrive at a knowledge of God [. . .] I then understood the happiness reserved for humanity after its spiritual purification.”<sup>62</sup> The past tense of the quote signifies that Lecocq only had the knowledge *during* the experience, while its significance stayed after the event as well. But for readers that had not taken hashish, it would be difficult to take such vague statements for comforting truths. While somnambulists also occasionally would report that the experience had to be underwent in order to truly accept their messages, this was rarer and accompanied with more understandable language in general.

Third, there were issues with repetitive use of hashish as well. Cahagnet thought it fit to use it only three to four times a year.<sup>63</sup> A well trained somnambulist, on the other hand, was available daily. Therefore, it was hard to get a continued dialogue going with any specific hashish user, as well as to get a large enough number of experiencers in general whose messages could be compared with one another. Combined with the above observation on the incomprehensible nature of the messages, this makes it understandable that Cahagnet would value the continued service of certain somnambulists.

Fourth, while Cahagnet valued diversity, he also valued discipline. Somnambulists could for example be selected on their inability to read thoughts or remember past episodes.<sup>64</sup> Adèle was a good example of such as ‘trained’ somnambulist who

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<sup>62</sup> Cahagnet 1851c, 122–23. Translation by M. Flinders Pearson.

<sup>63</sup> Cahagnet 1850, 369.

<sup>64</sup> Cahagnet 1848, 85, 91–94.

over time had built up a working relationship with Cahagnet that both seemed happy with—aside from the occasional professional disagreement.<sup>65</sup> This disciplining was not possible to the same degree with the hashish drinkers; not only was using hashish not conducive to disciplined behavior, there also was no time for a working relationship to be built up due to the aforementioned limited times one was allowed to use it.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, certain control measures such as a somnambulist's inability to remember what had happened simply were not possible with hashish experiencers.

Summarized, the main problems were the general lack of hashish users due to limits on its use; the lower level of information gotten from them due to the lack of spirits and disciplinary measures; and, perhaps most importantly, the bad translation from experiencer to non-experiencers. The relatively private nature of the knowledge obtained through hashish made it harder for readers to accept the message and apply it to their own lives, which was the aim of Cahagnet in the first place. It seems that in his hashish period, Cahagnet had overvalued the personal gain of hashish, and had underestimated the problems the substance brought with it.

## 5 The Research Logic of Cahagnet's Synthesis Period

Cahagnet wanted to transform society: to change how people thought about life and death. That goal led him in his somnambulist period to set up a democratic, spiritual science open for anyone able to read his books. Yet the problems of communication that hashish experiences brought with them were a major obstacle to that dream. I believe that Cahagnet was practical enough to understand that he had little hope of convincing everyone to take hashish. Therefore, his

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<sup>65</sup> At one point, Cahagnet (1848, 119, 294) believed Adèle attempted to commit suicide by staying in heaven for too long, after which he created a rule stating that no somnambulist was to visit heaven for more than ten minutes at a time. On another occasion, Adèle had attempted to throw herself out of a high-story window as the result of Cahagnet's ill-advised attempt to subdue her with a gift of magnetically-comfortable stockings—only the spirit of Swedenborg could return her to a state of reason, according to Cahagnet (1849, 103–11). On the whole, however, the two worked well together.

<sup>66</sup> Of course, in the intermittent periods between hashish use, Cahagnet could hypothetically try to train the users. However, this would still seriously hamper the speed at which he would do research compared to the daily availability of certain somnambulists.

hashish research was simply not as pragmatic as his somnambulist research. After all, the pool of potentially changed minds would drop from anyone able to read books, to those willing to take poorly understood substances such as hashish.

Therefore, Cahagnet's *Arcanes III*, as well as his *Révélations*, once again followed mainly the research logic of the somnambulist phase. Magnetic somnambulists were once more the preferred tools through which spirits were contacted. Cahagnet in his synthesis period put the emphasis on verification again. Sending Adèle to the moon was one novel way of doing this, as has been mentioned above. Another prediction that would have proven the abilities of his somnambulists pertained to Franklin's lost expedition—the famous disappearance in 1845 of a British Arctic exploration voyage. Here, too, Cahagnet sent Adèle in spirit to find the crew, and he reported that she had conversations with the spirit of the still-living captain, Sir John Franklin.<sup>67</sup> Cahagnet also once more leaned on the authority of famous spirits, as *Révélations* as a book was mainly built on the conversations of one of his somnambulists with the spirits of Benjamin Franklin, Hippocrates, and Galileo Galilei.

Yet hashish had not vanished completely, although its role had diminished greatly—at least in Cahagnet's written works. Sporadic references were made to experiences induced by the substance.<sup>68</sup> I believe Cahagnet still had his uses for hashish experiences. In his own hands, hashish accounts were one more type of narrative to use for comparison. The various drug experiences of his reporters were—according to his interpretation—in perfect accord with the outcomes of his earlier work.<sup>69</sup> The experiencers were, moreover, not magnetized by him and therefore not under his influence. Subsequently, Cahagnet could use them as evidence against the thesis of thought transference—the notion which had already shaped much of his somnambulist period research but was nonetheless raised against Cahagnet's works from that period. On themselves, single hashish reports might not have much persuasion power, but as part of the larger whole, they could still add another level of independent verification through comparison.

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<sup>67</sup> By the time Adèle allegedly had her conversation with Franklin, he had already perished. Cahagnet was not the only one who used magnetic somnambulism to try and locate the expedition, but as far as I am aware, he was the only French animal magnetizer to do so (cf. McCorristine 2018, chap. 3, for similar attempts within the British Empire).

<sup>68</sup> E.g., Cahagnet 1854a, 261–68.

<sup>69</sup> E.g., Cahagnet 1850, 174.

Furthermore, in the hands of Cahagnet's readers, hashish could be a more effective tool than recruiting somnambulists to replicate results. The spiritual experience resulting from hashish would directly show them that Cahagnet's method was efficacious. It would turn them from second-hand non-experiencers into first-hand experiencers. Even more so than the somnambulist method, it was a very intimate type of personal verification that could potentially lead to an opening up to the whole corpus of Cahagnet's teachings, even if the experience was only of value to the experiencer.<sup>70</sup> Hashish therefore had a niche role in Cahagnet's synthesis period's research logic, even if the main focus of his written work was once again magnetic somnambulism.<sup>71</sup>

## 6 Magnetic Somnambulism and Hashish as Two Distinct Research Paradigms

Ultimately, Cahagnet's transition through his somnambulist, hashish, and synthesis periods was predicated on a simple—yet difficult—choice between two research paradigms.<sup>72</sup> On the one hand was the use of magnetic somnambulists to interview spirits about the afterlife and verify the answers. On the other hand, there was the direct experience induced by hashish, thereby removing the intermediary altogether, but also the consistency, communicability, and verifiability that magnetic somnambulism brought with it. Both somnambulism and hashish amounted to transformative experiences, and both were intentionally sought after by Cahagnet. In this section, I want to use concepts from various authors in

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<sup>70</sup> Cahagnet's hope that hashish would provide the same experience for all was tempered by the fact that he acknowledged that not everyone interpreted the drug's effects as spiritual. Nevertheless, he found this a matter of interpretation; the fault of the consumer rather than the substance.

<sup>71</sup> It might seem that this analysis assumes a too favorable stance on Cahagnet's part towards hashish, given the few references to hashish after *Sanctuaire*. This is so because the corpus of the current chapter consists of written works only. There are reasons to believe Cahagnet continued using hashish more prominently outside of his writings: Hanegraaff shows that it was during what I call the synthesis period, that Paschal Beverly Randolph and Emma Hardinge Britten—two influential figures within nineteenth century esotericism—were likely introduced to hashish by Cahagnet (Hanegraaff 2016, 117).

<sup>72</sup> The word paradigm is chosen because of its association with the notion of incommensurability (Kuhn 1996). As the historical overview of Cahagnet made clear, and as will be emphasized in the current section, the differences between hashish use and magnetic somnambulism were fundamental enough to not truly fit well together, despite Cahagnet's attempt to do so.

order to draw out even more clearly what was at stake in this decision for Cahagnet. It will be shown that within his system, hashish research can be seen as a paradigm resting on the legitimizing power of personal experience, while somnambulism research can be seen as a paradigm relying on the legitimizing power of scientific measures such as comparison and verification. Both paradigms were used to investigate spiritual matters such as what comes after death, but their differing qualities made them eventually take on different places within Cahagnet's democratic, spiritual science.

Originally, both the use of hashish and magnetic somnambulism were only of instrumental value to Cahagnet. The knowledge and perspective these tools provided was meant to change the attitudes of some experiencers long after the immediate experience ended, as well as readers who had never even had the immediate experience in the first place.<sup>73</sup> In using hashish and magnetic somnambulism, the goal of Cahagnet was therefore to induce 'state-specific knowledge.' This term, recently introduced into the study of religion and esotericism by Wouter Hanegraaff, denotes the idea that "different modalities of consciousness imply different types of knowledge."<sup>74</sup> In the specific case of Cahagnet, he believed that the material state enabled the study of matter, while the spiritual state (through somnambulism or hashish) enabled the study of spiritual topics: "man must divest himself of his envelope, and render himself homogeneous to the state of the thing with which he desires to become acquainted [. . .] we can explain laws only in the state in which we are."<sup>75</sup> Hashish and magnetic somnambulism can therefore be described as *states of knowledge* for those who interpret them spiritually.<sup>76</sup> As a subdivision of immediate experiences more generally, such states of knowledge can be seen as revolving around the acquisition of information unique to those states. In the case of Cahagnet, the term helps to keep in mind his view that the experiences were tools to obtain information only.

Yet even though they were strictly a means to an end, the hashish- and somnambulism-induced states of knowledge were crucial to obtaining the relevant information exactly because of their transformative character. It is useful at this

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<sup>73</sup> The term immediate experience is used here to denote a specific, time-limited experience with a clear beginning and ending. The analytic counterpart would be the long-term experience, which takes place over a long period and is in itself the accumulation of many smaller, immediate experiences. See also the introduction to this volume.

<sup>74</sup> Hanegraaff 2022, 3n6.

<sup>75</sup> Cahagnet 1851b, 1:7. Translator unknown.

<sup>76</sup> A spiritual interpretational framework is decisive, otherwise hashish experiences could simply be seen as drug-induced hallucinations and magnetic somnambulism as hypnosis with a heavy component of hypnotic suggestion. It is therefore crucial to posit immediate experiences within a longer frame; see the chapter of Sarah Perez within this volume for more on this issue.

point to introduce a distinction made by Laurie A. Paul on two different levels in which an experience can be considered transformative in order to see where the differences between hashish and somnambulism as inducers of states of knowledge emerged.<sup>77</sup> L.A. Paul distinguishes between epistemically transformative experiences, which give new information that might only be received through the experience, and personally transformative experiences, which change one's core preferences and self-identification. She denotes experiences that have both the epistemic and personal elements as 'transformative experiences' in the full sense of the word.

Cahagnet believed magnetic somnambulists could talk to spirits, apprehend truths more generally, and potentially even travel to heaven (including all levels of Faivre's 'kinds of clairvoyance' as discussed earlier). Furthermore, such magnetic somnambulists had a different understanding of themselves while in that state of knowledge; they realized their different opinions on matters, their heightened knowledge, and they saw themselves more directly interwoven with others and with the various levels of existence (i.e., Earth and Heaven). Likewise, hashish users under Cahagnet's care—including himself—reported new ways of apprehending cosmic and religious truths and noted new ways of seeing their place in the grand scheme of things (including levels I and III of Faivre). Following L.A. Paul's division, then, both magnetic somnambulism and hashish enabled for Cahagnet epistemic and personal transformations. Yet where L.A. Paul's argument hinges on the idea that the experiential nature of such transformations makes rational decision making extremely hard—after all, one can only truly know whether a potentially transformative process will be positive or negative *after* having personally undergone it—Cahagnet believed the implications of the hashish- and somnambulism-induced transformations could change the worldviews of his *readers* too.

To understand Cahagnet's point of view, I will elaborate on L.A. Paul's distinction between epistemic and personal transformations. As mentioned above, she argues that for certain decisions, no outside evidence can prepare the decision maker for the actual impact of the outcome.<sup>78</sup> The transformative experience, for L.A. Paul, is not communicable to others. I will designate the uncommunicable

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<sup>77</sup> Paul 2014. See for a larger introduction of her ideas the introduction to this volume. For other analyses that directly integrate L.A. Paul's terms in this volume, see again the chapter of Perez.

<sup>78</sup> To illustrate L.A. Paul's argument further: she starts her book with the evocative thought-experiment of having the choice to be turned into a vampire. Neither thinking about how it will be to be able to fly or having to drink blood will actually enable one to appreciate how that would really be. Likewise, the opinions of other vampires would be ambiguous at best. Lastly, even if one were to go through with it and enjoy being a vampire, that would not necessarily entail that it was the best choice for the decision maker pre-transformation; they might have been horrified by what their post-transformational self enjoys (Paul 2014, 1–4).

aspects of experiences as belonging to the *private* domain of such experiences. Cahagnet, however, had a different epistemology. All the books analyzed in this chapter share the fact that they were filled with statements by magnetic somnambulists and hashish users exactly because Cahagnet believed their knowledge to be transferable. At least parts of somnambulist and hashish experiences, therefore, were open to communication according to Cahagnet. I will designate these communicable aspects of experiences as belonging to the *public* domain of such experiences.

As Cahagnet's spiritual research relied on states of knowledge, it should not come as a surprise that he valued the *epistemic* transformations inherent in magnetic somnambulism and hashish experiences as more important than the *personal* transformations. After all, interviews with spirits and descriptions of heaven could be written down and the (allegedly) objective information retained after the experience ended, subjective reinterpretations of an experiencer's self-view less so. To put it concretely: personal transformations were private, whereas epistemic transformations were public. Communicable (i.e., publicly available) information could be detached from the specific experiential context in which it was received and written down in Cahagnet's books. From there, readers could potentially become convinced by the outcomes of the experience narratives and the verification strategies of Cahagnet. In technical terms, Cahagnet aimed to enable a 'virtual witnessing' of his research. Virtual witnessing, coined by historian Steven Shapin, denotes the important strategy to convince readers that written down experiments were truly done the way they were described, by virtue of being retraceable step-by-step in the imagination.<sup>79</sup> After becoming persuaded by the information on life after death through such virtual witnessing, Cahagnet's readers should then start to see matters such as life and death in a less materialistic—and for Cahagnet more optimistic—manner, including their own role in this world. Readers could even take up Cahagnet's invitation to replicate his results by themselves, but that was hardly to be expected of everyone. It was therefore primarily the publicly communicable knowledge gained mostly through the epistemic transformations of magnetic somnambulists and hashish users, that should change how persons saw matters closely interwoven with their worldview and their specific place within it. Consequently, there was a reversal in hierarchy: whereas Cahagnet valued the epistemic transformation of his subjects more than the personal, this was only so because these epi-

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<sup>79</sup> Shapin 1984; Shapin and Schaffer 1985. Virtual witnessing became especially important in circumstances where replication was improbable (e.g., due to expensive or delicate machinery) and where direct witnessing was limited (e.g., due to an international audience). Virtual witnessing is still a cornerstone of academic writing as replication remains an ideal rather than common practice in many branches of academia (cf. Collins 1992, 19).



stemic transformations would ultimately lead to non-experiential (personally transformative) changes in the self-understanding of others—the readers. Cahagnet therefore intentionally induced temporary transformative experiences in his subjects (and himself) in order to change the perspectives of his readers.

The above analysis might seem to apply well to Cahagnet's somnambulism and synthesis periods, but less so to his hashish period. After all, a large part of the current chapter has been spent on explaining the problems Cahagnet had in making the results of hashish experiences valuable to others. While he originally saw hashish as a direct improvement over somnambulism, it was only when Cahagnet realized the trade-offs inherent in hashish, that he faced the difficult choice between a hashish-based or a somnambulist-based paradigm. Therefore, a translation of the advantages and disadvantages of hashish experiences (as described in earlier sections) into the conceptual scheme developed here will show the fundamental differences between the two paradigms.

The state of knowledge that hashish brought about was less communicable to others—i.e., it was more private—and therefore had less epistemic value to non-experiencers than the magnetic somnambulist state of knowledge. Furthermore, the through hashish generated knowledge seemed to have been tied up with the private personal transformation inherent in the experience: unlike with somnambulists, there were no spirits to deliver information in a clear conversational style. Rather, the knowledge seemed imprinted onto the experiencers in a non-linguistic or ineffable manner, which was exactly why communication was so difficult. Therefore, information was not detachable from the direct experience and thus never became truly publicly accessible. As a result, virtual witnessing was much less possible with regard to hashish narratives as compared to somnambulist ones. Yet similarly unlike somnambulists, hashish users did *not* forget their immediate experiences. Consequently, the epistemic *and* personal transformations that hashish brought with it could potentially immediately convert the users to Cahagnet's cause, without the further intervention of intermediaries such as somnambulists. That hashish proved capable of such a result can be shown beyond Cahagnet's own writings, such as when the famous occultist Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875), after likely being introduced to the substance by Cahagnet, wrote that his hashish experiences convinced him of the immortality of the soul.<sup>80</sup> Concisely put: whereas magnetic somnambulism only provided useful (and verifiable) knowledge for *others*, hashish experiences seemed to only provide useful knowledge for the experiencers *themselves*.

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. Hanegraaff 2016, 177; and footnote 71 of the current chapter.

The two states of knowledge central to Cahagnet's work—hashish experience and magnetic somnambulism—therefore led to vastly different results. On the one hand, there was the scientific promise inherent in the repeatable, comparable, verifiable, and publicly available information given through spirit interviews (and sporadic otherworldly visits) as performed by magnetic somnambulists. On the other hand, there was the promise of the overwhelmingly persuasive power of personally experiencing the hashish-induced state of knowledge. Science and personal experience are, I argue, the key terms to differentiate the somnambulist and hashish paradigms of Cahagnet. Olav Hammer has shown that personal experience and science, together with tradition, have been the three major ways through which the epistemologies of religious movements in late modernity could be legitimized.<sup>81</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Cahagnet initially tried to combine the (in his eyes) scientific strength of somnambulism research with the personally convincing nature of hashish research. Only when the problems of hashish research became clear, could Cahagnet try to make a synthesis in a new way. His solution was to focus in his writing on the virtually witnessable science-based paradigm of somnambulist research, as that could reach the widest possible audience. The experience-based hashish paradigm was still utilized for the strongest manner of personal verification in specific cases such as with friends and acquaintances, but it understandably fitted less well in the medium of the written book.

Table 9.2 summarizes the differences between the two states of knowledge central to Cahagnet's two paradigms: magnetic somnambulism and hashish experience. The bottom two rows show the outcome of the qualities described in the other lines of the table.

**Table 9.2:** The differences between magnetic somnambulism and hashish experience in the work of Cahagnet.

<b>State of knowledge</b>	<b>Magnetic somnambulism</b>	<b>Hashish experience</b>
<b>Types of knowledge</b>	Faivre's levels I, II, and III	Faivre's levels I and III
<b>Intermediary</b>	Somnambulist (second-hand)	None (first-hand)
<b>Type of transformation</b>	Personal & epistemic	Personal & epistemic
<b>Retention of experience</b>	None	Partial through memory
<b>Communicability of knowledge</b>	High (public; virtual witnessing possible)	Low (private; no virtual witnessing possible)

<sup>81</sup> Hammer 2004.

Table 9.2 (continued)

Verifiability of knowledge	High	Low
Repeatability of State	High (Daily)	Low (Few times per year)
Useful for:	Others only	Experiencer only
Legitimizing factor:	Science	Personal experience

## 7 Conclusion: Intentionality, Transformation, and Experience in the Two Paradigms

The case study of Cahagnet was used to build up two different paradigms of using transformative experiences for spiritual research, aided by various concepts borrowed from others. However, the scheme can be divorced from the specific states of knowledge Cahagnet used—hashish and magnetic somnambulism—in order to serve as a more general framework in which to place similar phenomena outside of spiritual animal magnetism. After generalizing the two research paradigms, it will be shown that they have a direct bearing on how we can analyze intentionality, transformation, and experience from new perspectives.

The personal experience-based hashish paradigm Cahagnet utilized contains many similarities to the more abstract and widely known ‘mystical experience’ term. Despite lacking a clear consensus on its usefulness, the term mystical experience usually denotes an ineffable and incommunicable religious experience that changes how one sees the world—often through direct union with the divine. In this sense, the hashish experiences described by Cahagnet are intentionally induced mystical experiences that (reportedly) transformed those who took it. Whether such a mystical state is sought through drugs, meditation, sensory deprivation, prayer, or otherwise does not make much difference, as the logic stays the same: an experiencer deliberately seeks out a transformative experience that holds relevance only to those who have reached the desired state. Furthermore, the experience is inherently persuasive precisely because it happens directly and unmediated to the practitioners themselves. I believe a useful term to give to such experiences, as a subdivision of the more general intentional transformative experience, would be *intentionally induced self-transformative experiences*. The emphasis is thereby rightly placed on the goal (and simultaneously the limit) of a transformation of the experiencer only.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Most of the experiences discussed in this volume would fall under the category of intentionally induced self-transformative experiences.

The science-based somnambulism paradigm that was so important to Cahagnet in most of the books under consideration in this chapter, was an attempt to subjugate experience to science. Cahagnet hoped to turn somnambulists and their states of knowledge into tools to compare and verify spiritual truths in a way that was convincing for everyone, rather than just the experiencers. Such an instrumental use of transformative experiences has been less emphasized in scholarly literature, yet there are other instances to be found. For example, near-death researchers have tried to operationalize the out-of-body experience in such a way that can prove consciousness to exist independently from the body; trance mediumship and channeling has likewise been used to obtain information that is useful primarily for others, rather than for the experiencers themselves; and even older divinatory techniques such as the purportedly ecstatic states of the Pythia at Delphi were only valuable to the requesters.<sup>83</sup> The logic here is that experiencers are used to obtain certain information that is of relevance (also) to those who did not reach similar states, and the experience itself is indeed only of instrumental value. Such experiences are only persuasive when the information obtained can reliably be verified, often—but not exclusively—through what the practitioners deem to be scientific means. In order to stress the extrinsic value of the transformative experience, I propose to give this subdivision the name *intentionally induced states of knowledge*.

The two subdivisions can be used as a start to form a typology of the wider concept of intentional transformative experiences. Important to note is that intentionally induced self-transformative experiences still give access to state-specific knowledge, while intentionally induced states of knowledge are still (often temporary) transformative experiences. (After all, Cahagnet too initially attempted to use hashish research following the logic of intentionally induced states of knowledge.) The choice of terminology is purely one of emphasis. I believe that many more instances can be found of both subtypes,<sup>84</sup> which can schematically be represented as follows:

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**83** Of course, the fact that some experiences are thought to provide valuable information only to non-experiencers does not mean that the experiences themselves were without value to the experiencers. Often, such practices are structured as economical exchanges, where information is traded for money.

**84** A next step would be to hypothesize which types of contextual factors would make one opt for one subtype or the other. For example, I would expect that path cultures as Karl Baier describes them in his chapter in this volume would value the individual nature of intentionally induced self-transformative experiences due to their focus on self-cultivation in general. On the other hand, groups that want to scientifically investigate spiritual matters—such as certain subsets of psychical research, parapsychology and near-death experience research—can be expected to prefer intentionally induced states of knowledge, coupled with methods of verification.

**Table 9.3:** Intentionally induced self-transformative experiences and states of knowledge.

	<b>Intentionally induced self-transformative experiences</b>	<b>Intentionally induced states of knowledge</b>
<b>Nature of Knowledge</b>	Private	Public
<b>Type of Value</b>	Intrinsic	Instrumental
<b>Basis of Legitimacy</b>	Personal Experience	Verification / Science

From the basic typology presented above (table 9.3), various concerns that are at the core of the edited volume can be discussed from a different perspective. If one takes the constellation ‘intentional transformative experience,’ the adjective ‘intentional’ implies rather straightforwardly a wish for a certain transformative experience. Yet if the different aims of intentionally induced self-transformative experiences and intentionally induced states of knowledge are taken into account, it becomes clear that further questioning is necessary. The sought-after experiences can themselves be either intrinsically valuable and persuasive, as in the case of self-transformative experiences, or they can merely be tools to get at knowledge that is useful beyond the immediate experiencer, such as with states of knowledge. Intentionality, following this typology, goes beyond the first divide of induced versus ‘random’ transformative experiences and includes a second level of looking for the *goal* of the intentionally induced transformative experience.

Similarly, the typology has consequences for the category of transformation as well. The common understanding of terms such as ‘religious experience,’ ‘mystical experience,’ or even ‘intentional transformative experience’ will be that the experience is induced *by* as well as *for* the experiencers themselves. This will generally be found to be true for intentionally induced self-transformative experiences, as they are often done by individual practitioners for their own spiritual growth.<sup>85</sup> However, intentionally induced states of knowledge might very well be induced by others than the experiencers. Cahagnet, for example, was the inducer

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<sup>85</sup> One exception to the self-inducibility and private nature of intentionally induced transformative experiences would be therapies focusing on regression or hypnosis. There, while the aim is to help the practitioner, the experience is induced by the therapist. However, the retrieved information is still of a rather public nature as the therapist would otherwise have a hard time to incorporate the findings in subsequent sessions. It is therefore more productive to see this type of experience as having characteristics of both intentionally induced self-transformations *and* states of knowledge. Similarly, when Cahagnet gave hashish to others to write down their experiences, he was operating under the logic of intentionally induced states of knowledge, which broke down exactly because Cahagnet could not extract enough useful information out of the hashish experiencers.

of the somnambulist state in his magnetic somnambulists—although other examples of this category, such as trance mediums, do not need outside help. Furthermore, it could be hypothesized that intentionally induced states of knowledge often do not have any long-term effects attached to them (e.g., somnambulists forgot what happened to them afterwards; likewise, trance mediums have no post-experiential transformations), while the transformation inherent in intentionally induced self-transformative experiences is predicated on the wish that the transformation is permanent. The typology created here therefore allows us to ask who the intentional agent is (the experiencer or someone else) and whether the transformation is supposed to be temporary or permanent.

Finally, the difference between intentionally induced self-transformative experiences and intentionally induced states of knowledge can be used to investigate the conceptual role experiences play in the whole. L.A. Paul's differentiation between epistemic and personal transformations paved the way to investigate how practitioners evaluate the communicability of experiences. Many intentional transformative experiences will have elements in them that are deemed communicable and publicly useful, as well as elements that are deemed incommunicable and therefore only privately useful. Yet the focus will be laid upon either the private or the public parts—and it is that choice that decides whether the experience is mostly intrinsically valuable (as in intentionally induced self-transformative experiences), or mostly instrumentally valuable (as in intentionally induced states of knowledge). The typology in this sense adds a dynamic level of analysis to intentional transformative experiences, by helping to ask the question precisely which parts of the experience the practitioners are interested in, potentially at the expense of other parts.

The French spiritual animal magnetizer Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet has proven a fruitful subject to use in the investigation of intentional transformative experiences. His evolving thoughts on whether to induce transformative experiences in intermediaries in order to objectively verify their sayings, or to have persons experience spiritual states directly, has formed the basis of a typology of intentional transformative experiences. The typology, in turn, can be used to further analyze similar phenomena with new conceptual terms, as well as from new perspectives and with new questions. Cahagnet himself had hoped to transform the way society sees death—as a gateway to a better, eternal life. He soon realized that achieving this goal was harder than it seemed, and he did not gain many converts to his cause. However, Cahagnet's creative and ever-evolving system is a useful lens through which the concept of intentional transformative experiences can be studied.

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Part IV: **Conceptual Analyses of Intentional  
Transformative Experiences**



Karl Baier

# Chapter 10

## Intentionality and Non-Intentionality in Jung's Active Imagination

This chapter examines the relationship between intentionality and non-intentionality in transformative practices of the self<sup>1</sup> using the example of active imagination.<sup>2</sup> This form of meditation was invented by C.G. Jung (1875–1961) and became a cornerstone of his psychotherapeutic method. The first section presents the theoretical framework applied to explore the topic. Then, I argue for interpreting the discovery of active imagination as the ritualization of a conversion-like experience. This is followed by a look at representative post-Jungian approaches to formalize the technique. Finally, the problematic transition from the mode of being-in-the-world governed by willful thought and intentional action to an attunement to the world based on undirected openness is discussed. Jung's statements about this change in the practice of active imagination are especially juxtaposed to Heidegger's reflections on the cross-over from will-directed representational thought ("vorstellendes Denken") to contemplative thought ("besinnliches Denken") and releasement ("Gelassenheit").

### 1 The Path of Active Imagination from a 'Margalogical' Perspective

For lack of a more appropriate term, I suggest the neologism margalogy (from Skt. *mārga*: pathway, road, proper course, inquiry, path to salvation) for the academic study of what one could call path cultures.<sup>3</sup> I derived the ideal type of path culture from my study of pre-modern and modern meditation instructions and manuals<sup>4</sup> and my explorations in the fields of modern yoga, Buddhist traditions, spirituality research, and psychotherapy. This notion has helped me to better conceptualize the commonalities and specific differences of these diverse fields and currents. It gave me a better understanding of what they have to offer their par-

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1 Foucault 2005.

2 I would like to thank Jens Schlieter, Bastiaan van Rijn and Sarah Perez for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

3 Baier 2012.

4 Baier 2009.

ticipants and what fascinates me about them. Perhaps it could be helpful for other scholars as well. With the image of “path” I take up a metaphor that is known in the Near East, Europe, and other cultural areas but is especially common in East and South Asia (see terms such as *dao*, *do*, or the said *mārga*). Meanwhile, the image of the path spread worldwide due to the global popularization of Asian concepts and practices of self-cultivation.<sup>5</sup>

Path cultures focus on inventing and propagating transformative lifestyles and practices that aim to shape the way people relate to themselves and the world they live in, and often refer to what Tillich called “the ground of being and meaning.” These “schools of life” usually include at least some of the following typical elements: first, a set of practices—shaping life according to rules of conduct/ethical guidelines, meditation techniques, rituals, prayers; second, descriptions and interpretations of significant changes, insights, experiences, or states of mind that are said to emerge during the practices or outside of them, and are considered significant for the path; third, advice concerning the obstacles on the path and how to overcome them; fourth, the embedding of these practical teachings within cosmological, anthropological, or soteriological frameworks; and of course, interpersonal relationships in which path knowledge is transmitted (guru/chela, teacher/student, therapist/client, spiritual guide/directee, certain forms of community life and so forth).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, path cultures form social institutions from small, informal groups to large organizations to develop and preserve their respective path, and to create and maintain social spaces that enable personal transformation.

Within the path cultures I have studied, transformative experiences “that change what it is like for you to live your life, and perhaps even change what it is like to *be* you, deeply and fundamentally”<sup>7</sup> are thematized in three major ways. I mention them here because all three occur in Jung’s practice of active imagination. First, as involvement in short and intense disclosure situations, game-changing moments or “peak-experiences” to use Abraham Maslow’s famous term; second, conversions or similar transformative mid-length processes often triggered by the first way; and third, walking the path as a whole with all its lightful heights, frustrating downs, and neutral plains can be conceived of as transformative experience. The exploration of the functions and modes of experience within path cultures plays an

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5 On the different concepts of *mārga* in Buddhism see Buswell and Gimello (1992), Pecchia and Eltschinger (2020); for the early spread of the concept of *dao* within all schools of Chinese philosophy see Graham (1989).

6 Bastiaan van Rijn’s contribution to this volume drew my attention to the fact that with regard to path cultures several forms of path-related knowledge are relevant, which should be differentiated in future research.

7 Paul 2014, 3, emphasis in original.

important role within my margalogical research, which I cannot go into further detail here.

I conceive margalogy as exploration of path cultures using methods and theories of the relevant human sciences: cultural studies, social sciences, historiography, psychology, cognitive science, theology, philosophy and, last but not least, religious studies. The field of religions as conceptualized and popularized primarily by nineteenth-century scholarship, is an object for margalogical research insofar as “religions” as a whole can be interpreted as path cultures or contain such cultures as subsets. However, margalogy is not limited to the study of “religions.” Its subjects also include e. g., ancient European philosophical as well as modern psychotherapeutic schools, self-help organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous, the practices, intellectual and institutional frames of MBSR or Sensory Awareness trainings, the Feldenkrais method and Autogenes Training, schools of martial arts and modern yoga, dance and other forms of art, provided these disciplines are taught and practiced with the aspiration of contributing to the self-awareness of the practitioner and the practical care of the self in the sense of the Greek *epimeleia heautou*.

Using a very broad functionalist concept of religion, many of these and similar disciplines could of course be called “religious” or labeled as “invisible religion.” A handsome number of them could be brought under the umbrella “spirituality.” This term originally refers to path cultures within Christian and other traditional religions. Today it also stands for highly individualized care of the self, ethical attitudes and path cultures that draw on various worldviews and practices of different origin and are only loosely, if at all, tied to specific religious symbol systems and organizations. I am not sure if it makes sense to extend the meaning of the term religion or the adjective “religious” to such a degree that it covers this whole fluid area. But it is quite obvious, that path cultures are structuring and stabilizing it. This is one of the reasons why I think that margalogical research is relevant to understanding contemporary culture.

C.G. Jung's psychotherapy can be described as a modern psychological path culture that was influenced by the comparative study of myths and religions. Jung received inspiration from Christian and several Asian *mārga*-s, from spiritualism, psychiatric sources and psychoanalysis. He believed that his path of individuation was particularly close to early modern spiritual alchemy. Yet he did not preach a new religion (although being criticized from various sides for having done so) but situated his path in the field of psychology. Accordingly, active imagination became an essential part of his psychotherapeutical practice. More precisely, it forms a rather independent “small” path within the broader Jungian

path culture, a practice which in principle could be integrated into other contexts without major changes.

## 2 Intentionality, Grace, and the Pathless Path

In the following discussion, “intentionality” denotes the realm of everything “deliberate, done on purpose.” It includes voluntary bodily actions as well as mental acts performed of one’s own free will. The term “non-intentionality” refers to a receptive but not necessarily passive openness towards what is ultimately beyond the control of the experiencing self. In his remarks on active imagination, Jung time and again addresses and problematizes the relation between intentionality and non-intentionality, without, however, using these terms. He is by far not the first path-oriented thinker to do so. The role of intentionality and non-intentionality, their entanglement or incompatibility, has long been disputed in various path cultures. The pan-Asian Buddhist discourse on sudden or gradual awakening is a good example for this.<sup>8</sup> The Pelagian controversy in late antiquity and its repercussions throughout the ages kept the topic alive within Christianity until the present day.<sup>9</sup>

On the one hand, intentionality in the form of exercising self-discipline through compliance with certain ethical principles, the deliberate practice of prayer or meditation and e. g. the regular attendance of therapy sessions, are constitutive for path cultures.<sup>10</sup> But not only actions, also deliberately refraining from doing something falls under the category of intentional behavior, e.g., the voluntary acceptance of austerities such as fasting, sexual abstinence or sleep deprivation.

On the other hand, some schools assume that the soteriological goal of their practices is already present within the practitioner, albeit more or less veiled. From this point of view a practice that understands the path as road to a remote goal achievable only step by step through intentional practice is at most a thing for beginners and of limited use. Examples for this position are found in several Zen

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<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Carmen Meinert for pointing this out to me in an email exchange.

<sup>9</sup> Pelagianism, the theological marginality of the fourth century British monk Pelagius and his followers, affirmed human kind’s good nature and the God given ability of human beings to become righteous through their own efforts. The most influential opponent of Pelagius was his contemporary Augustine of Hippo. Pelagianism was condemned at the Council of Carthage in 418.

<sup>10</sup> A good example of a strong emphasis on intentionality is the emerging path culture of reality shifting analyzed by Sarah Perez in her contribution to this volume. The future will show in which direction the practice of the shifters will develop and what role the experience of non-intentional content will play in their fantasy journeys into other worlds. At the moment, total immersion into the desired world, seems to be the crucial non-intentional element.

schools as well as in rDzogs chen, or in Advaita Vedānta and in Master Eckhart's teaching of the pathless path beyond will and images.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, concepts of salvation that are based on pure grace and assume that man's will is too corrupt to approach the redeeming reality by its own power attribute a subordinate, if not counterproductive role to intentionality. One could mention here Augustin's theology of grace and strict interpretations of the Protestant principle of *sola gratia*, as well as the soteriology of Jōdo-Shinshū. Frits Staal<sup>12</sup> once compared the debates about such "easy ways" and "no-effort doctrines" in Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism with the then very heated discussion whether psychedelic experiences are real "mystical" experiences, since nothing is needed for them but to take a pill (which is already a low level intentional effort) and then wait. In psychedelia, however, it was assumed that the drug experience depends on set and setting. Deliberate preparation and ritual framing were therefore considered useful.

Of course, even schools that adhere to "no-effort doctrines" frequently emphasize the importance of practice. In this case, the exercises are often designed in a way that strongly relativizes the intentional moment or dissolves it in the course of the practice. Master Dōgen should be mentioned in this regard. He does not view *zazen* (seated meditation) as a gradual purification of the mind, but rather as a manifestation of awakening from the very beginning.

In this chapter, I will try to show that following a path consists of intentional and often ritualized behavior with built-in openings that allow non-intended disclosure situations to happen.<sup>13</sup> This duality applies exemplarily to the case of active imagination, but can also be shown for other forms of self-cultivation. There are path cultures in which renunciation of intentionality is a crucial element and those that emphasize the importance of intentional effort in progressing on the path. However, both are in fact inseparably linked.

### 3 Jung's Invention of Active Imagination: A Conversion-like Experience and Its Ritualization

Jung began to develop the method that he later called active imagination during the autumn of 1913 as he went through a life crisis after completing his book

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<sup>11</sup> See the contributions of Geisshüsler and Canna on rDzogs chen and Advaita Vedānta in the present volume.

<sup>12</sup> Staal 1975, 123–34.

<sup>13</sup> For my understanding of the term "disclosure situation" see Baier (2008, 193–94).



*Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*, a phase when he also broke with Freud.<sup>14</sup> He describes this time as a period of disorientation, uncertainty, and stagnation. He did not enjoy his work anymore and gave up his teaching position at the university of Zürich. After distancing himself publicly from several basic assumptions of Freud's psychoanalysis, the need to lay the foundations for his own psychology and psychotherapy became urgent. He had some confusing dreams at the time that neither he nor Freud were able to interpret. The self-analytical review of his biography and especially of his childhood memories also brought no clarifying insight into his situation. "Thereupon I said to myself, 'Since I know nothing at all, I shall simply do whatever occurs to me.' Thus, I consciously submitted myself to the impulses of the unconscious."<sup>15</sup> If his autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, co-authored by Aniela Jaffé, is to be believed in this matter, that was the initial event which led to the development of active imagination.

Already at this point, both intentional and unintentional elements intertwine in Jung's description. After all other conscious efforts to end his crisis had been unsuccessful, Jung admits to himself that he does not know how to get out of his mess. In accordance with an idea that arose unintended, he decides voluntarily to abstain from all further attempts controlled by will power, and to do whatever comes to his mind next. This implies an obligation to take what spontaneously occurs to him seriously, and to follow the clues it offers. In the quoted passage, Jung interprets this new attitude as submission to the unconscious. I will return to this and to the problem of purposeful transition from the intentional to the non-intentional realm below.

The first thing that popped up in Jung's mind was a childhood memory he had not yet thought of. He remembered how, as a little boy, he had enthusiastically built houses and castles out of building blocks, a game he continued in his later childhood using stones and clay. Jung felt that the boy he had once been had the vitality and creativity he now lacked, and that somehow this boy was still alive. He realized that the only way to get back to his original vitality was to start playing like a child again. "This moment," he writes, "was a turning point in my fate, but I gave in only after endless resistances, and with a sense of recognition. For it was a painful humiliating experience to realize that there was nothing to be done except play childish games."<sup>16</sup> He started to collect stones, pieces of wood and other things that had washed up on the lakeshore of Lake Zürich in front of his house and gradually built a whole miniature village from them. Even in the

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<sup>14</sup> See for this period of Jung's life Jung (1995, 194–225) and Bair (2003, 344–63).

<sup>15</sup> Jung 1995, 197.

<sup>16</sup> Jung 1995, 198.

time of his crisis, Jung stuck to his regular daily routine and the playful work on his village became a fixed part of it. He occupied himself with it every day after lunch until about two or three o'clock in the afternoon. Then he worked with his patients. If there was still time afterwards, he continued building his village until nightfall.<sup>17</sup>

Jung describes the creation of a church as the climax of his building activity. "The church was still missing, so I made a square building with a hexagonal drum on top of it, and a dome. A church also requires an altar, but I hesitated to build that."<sup>18</sup> Preoccupied with the question of how to design the altar, one day he was walking along the lakeshore collecting stones when a pyramid-shaped red stone caught his eye, and he immediately knew that this was the altar. "I placed it in the middle under the dome, and as I did so, I recalled the underground phallus of my childhood dream. This connection gave me a feeling of satisfaction."<sup>19</sup>

In this final phase of his work on the miniature village, again intentional and unintentional moments interweave in the creation of a meaningful result. Deliberate search is followed by a chance discovery, which he immediately knows to be the solution to the altar problem, without knowing why. While finally placing the stone intentionally in the small church, the spontaneous memory of the childhood dream emerges, and the altar is thus given the meaning of a repetition and appreciation of his early key experience.

Jung had the dream he mentions here, when he was a three- to four-year-old child. He dreamt of a giant phallus on a golden throne in a subterranean room. Jung later said that this dream had been his "original revelation"<sup>20</sup> and that it had been an initiation into the mysteries of the earth and the realm of darkness.<sup>21</sup> According to him sexuality in general—and in this case the phallus—has a numinous quality because it is an expression of the "chthonic spirit," the other face of God, i.e., the dark side of our image of God.<sup>22</sup>

He says nothing about why the placement of the phallic stone in the miniature church made him feel satisfied. The context of Jung's autobiography suggests that in doing so he was giving a dark manifestation of God, which he had already experienced as a child, its rightful place in the microcosm of his village and thus of his world. With this conclusion of his village project, he found the appropriate articulation of his personal phallicist religiosity that he had been searching for.

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<sup>17</sup> Bair 2003, 350.

<sup>18</sup> Jung 1995, 198.

<sup>19</sup> Jung 1995, 198.

<sup>20</sup> Jung 1995, 33.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Jung 1995, 30.

<sup>22</sup> Jung 1995, 192.

From the *Red Book* to his *Answer to Job*, the notion that in God coincide the opposites of darkness and light, good and evil remained a central theme of his life.

The building of the miniature settlement was only a beginning. It triggered a stream of fantasies that Jung carefully wrote down. This eventually led him to the form of practice that he preferred in the following years. As Shamdasani points out: “From December 1913 onward, he carried on in the same procedure: deliberately evoking a fantasy in a waking state, and then entering into it as into a drama.”<sup>23</sup>

The initial, path-opening intuition led to a cascade of further unintended flashes of inspiration, and their conscious, intended repetition and elaboration. He repeated the childhood game that he had initially remembered spontaneously every day for a longer period of time in order to build up his village. Since the spontaneously arising fantasies did not stop, he also returned to the original act of opening up and ritualized the surrender to the unconscious by making an exercise out of it.

He practiced this regularly for several years, usually at night before he went to sleep and while lying on a couch in his library. He recorded what he experienced during his fantasy journeys and carefully edited his notes. In addition, he created paintings that responded to his imaginations. The notes and paintings eventually flowed into the composition of his famous *Red Book*. In later years, he resumed this kind of exercise whenever he got into similar troubles as in 1913. “This sort of thing has been consistent with me,” Jung writes, “and at any time in my later life when I came up against a blank wall, I painted a picture or hewed stone. Each such experience proved to be a *rite d’entrée* for the ideas and works that followed hard upon it.”<sup>24</sup> Through conscious repetition, a spontaneous idea and action became a pattern of behavior for overcoming deadlocked situations.

Jung’s description of his invention of active imagination uses *topoi* well known from conversion narratives.<sup>25</sup> He did not undergo a change of religious affiliation including the admission to a new religious organization, but a change of his personal religious attitude. We have a defining moment with a before and after: Jung speaks of a turning point in his fate. The time before is depicted as a period of stagnation and crisis in which all known means to get out of it fail. At the climax of the crisis, the inner resistance is overcome. Jung abandons his self-will and leaves his known identity behind. Comparable to conversion narratives

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<sup>23</sup> Shamdasani 2009, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Jung 1995, 199, emphasis in original.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Hindmarsh 2014.

this process has painful sides to it. At least in the beginning, it brings up several negative emotions. The whole process of Jung's village-building culminates in the creation of a church, which suggests that at its core it is about a religious reorientation. As a result, a new life is given to him.

When conversion leads to membership in a particular religious community, the decisive turning point is usually followed by ritual acceptance into the new community and full participation in the community's rites. It supports the converts in deepening their faith and consolidating their new lives. In Jung's case, he developed his own ritual that in a similar fashion stabilized his new life, helped him to further unfold his personal myth, and to strengthen his faith in it. In this way, active imagination became the process of an ongoing revelation.

Similar to Jung's autobiographical accounts, dreams and visions often play an eminent role in conversion narratives. And, finally, Jung's narrative, like many other examples of this genre, serves an apologetic purpose. By telling his story, Jung offers his patients and readers the model of a transformative experience and wants to motivate them to engage in a similar experiment and use active imagination to change their lives, as he has successfully done himself. An important aspect of Jung's experiments with imagination is that by way of their ritualization he turned them into practices that can and should be repeated by others. Thus, active imagination became an integral part of the Jungian psychotherapeutic path culture:

Jung's self-experimentation also heralded a change in his analytic work. He encouraged his patients to embark on similar processes of self-experimentation. Patients were instructed on how to conduct active imagination, to hold inner dialogues and to paint their fantasies. He took his own experiences as paradigmatic.<sup>26</sup>

If he did not convert to the path to salvation of a particular religious community, then where did he convert to? It may sound a bit strange, but I think he converted above all to faith in the wisdom of the unconscious. In the 1958/59 preface to his essay *The Transcendent Function* from 1916, he claims that the question of how to give due practical regard to the unconscious would be "posed by the philosophy of India, and particularly by Buddhism and Zen. Indirectly, it is the fundamental practical question of all religions and philosophies. For the unconscious is not this thing or that; it is the Unknown as it immediately affects us."<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere, he explicitly

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<sup>26</sup> Shandasani 2009, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 8:68.

says, “I prefer the term ‘the unconscious,’ knowing that I might equally well speak of ‘God’ or ‘daimon’ if I wished to express myself in mythical language.”<sup>28</sup>

In his conversion, he surrendered his conscious will and knowledge to “the Unknown” and entrusted himself to the healing potential of the unconscious. This resembles the surrender to the hidden god, the *Deus absconditus*, to receive the unexpected revelations the godhead might grant. At least the passages just quoted suggest that Jung treats the term “the unconscious” as a psychological category that functions as a placeholder for a transcendent ultimate reality. However, often in his writings it is unclear who is speaking when the unconscious manifests. Often his formulations are less theological such as in a passage from *The Transcendent Function*, according to which it is “the anthropoid and archaic man” with “on the one hand his [ . . . ] world of instinct, and on the other, his [ . . . ] world of spiritual ideas,” who “compensating and correcting our one-sidedness, emerges from the darkness and shows us how and where we have deviated from the basic pattern and crippled ourselves psychically.”<sup>29</sup> One could interpret this in a strict naturalistic way, in terms of an inheritance of archaic behavioral patterns that are activated when psychological imbalances occur. But Jung probably mixed a Lamarckian biological approach with the idea of primal revelation. Then the natural archaic human being, who is still alive via the genome in the unconsciousness of modern man and not corrupted by civilization, would represent an archetype of wholeness and freedom, which is a pure image of God and therefore a divine revelation. If this is the case, the establishment of a balance between the conscious and the unconscious would be a renewal of the *imago Dei*, the God-likeness of man.<sup>30</sup>

Be this as it may, the interpretation of Jung’s accounts of the discovery of active imagination as a conversion narrative and of active imagination as the central ritual of the born-again Jung is supported by the Swiss psychologist himself. Commenting on his age when he finished his book *Transformations and Symbols of the Libido* and entered his life crisis he says, “This book was written in 1911, in my thirty-sixth year. The time is a critical one, for it marks the beginning of the second half of life, when a metanoia, a mental transformation, not infrequently occurs.”<sup>31</sup>

Metanoia, as is well known, is a Greek term used in the Bible for a radical change of mind and repentance that are seen as necessary to become a follower of Christ. In this text, and in his autobiography written a little later, he further

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<sup>28</sup> Jung 1995, 369.

<sup>29</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 8:90.

<sup>30</sup> Baier 2009, 636–41.

<sup>31</sup> Jung 1953–1983, xxvi.

states that the study of historical myths during the writing of *Transformations and Symbols of the Libido* led him to ask which myth is ordering the life of contemporary man and which myth in particular he, Jung, himself is living.<sup>32</sup> He tells us that he could not answer this question. The only thing he knew was that the Christian myth was no longer his. So, he set out to discover his own personal myth. Jung presents himself as a post-Protestant religious seeker who, like many of his contemporaries, strives to find his own religious truth.<sup>33</sup> In his opinion, active imagination serves this quest, as can be seen from the following statement which also underlines the ritual character of it: "Of course, I thought about the meaning of my playing, and asked myself: 'What are you actually doing? You are building a small settlement and performing it like a rite!' I didn't know the answer, but I possessed the inner certainty that I was on the way to my myth."<sup>34</sup>

The passage just quoted also indicates that Jung's conversion was linked from an early stage to a theoretical reflection on the process in which he found himself. In my understanding of experience, this process of cognitive clarification is an essential part of the unfolding of the experience itself, not something separate or posterior. A central concern of his theorizing was the interpretation of the practice he had found to communicate with the unconscious.

Seminal to Jung's understanding of active imagination is the 1916 essay *The Transcendent Function*, written while he was still in the midst of his intense self-explorations and published only in 1958.<sup>35</sup> In this paper, Jung explains why and how imaginations can become the source of cognition of unconscious contents and their integration into consciousness. He explains the significance of the intentional induction of unconscious contents within a psychotherapeutic treatment and for the time afterwards. Jung also compares it with the function of transference within the therapist-patient-relationship and with the analysis of dreams. *The Transcendent Function* can be read as a reflection on the relationship between intentionality and non-intentionality. Jung argues that the ability to focus one's will, and behave purposefully, are extremely important human achievements. "Without them science, technology, and civilization would be impossible, for they all presuppose the reliable continuity and directedness of the conscious process."<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, intentional consciousness would involve the danger to exclude everything that is not compatible with its intentions. The directedness of the conscious ego is necessarily one-sided as

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<sup>32</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 5:xxiv–xxv; Jung 1995, 174–75.

<sup>33</sup> Another example of this kind of modern seekership is presented in the chapter by Steven Sutcliffe and Joseph Azize on Gurdjieff in the present volume.

<sup>34</sup> Jung 1995, 198–99, translation slightly altered by the author.

<sup>35</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 8:131–93, for a detailed interpretation see Miller 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 8:135.

every direction one takes will exclude others. Jung conceptualizes the psyche as “a self-regulating system”<sup>37</sup> that usually reacts to this one-sidedness with unconscious complementary tendencies.

There would not be anything problematic in this constant interplay of opposites if the psychic state of modern man was not chronically unbalanced due to a hypertrophy of intentionality. This imbalance tends to cut off the connection with the unconscious completely and thus destroys the self-regulation of the psyche:

If the conscious attitude were only to a slight degree ‘directed,’ the unconscious could flow in quite of its own accord. This is what does in fact happen with all those people who have a low level of consciousness tension, as for instance primitives. Among primitives, no special measures are required to bring up the unconscious.<sup>38</sup>

Jung compares the psyche of modern civilized man to “a machine whose speed-regulation is so insensitive that it can continue to function to the point of self-injury.”<sup>39</sup> To cure its extreme will-orientation and the resulting dissociation of the psyche into two separate systems, he recommends the invocation of fantasies as an antidote. Through the interaction of the ego and the emerging fantasies, the transcendent function, i.e., the balance between conscious intention and involuntary unconscious psychic processes, could be restored.

To summarize this biographical section, it can be said that Jung’s practice of active imagination encompassed all three meanings of transformative experience mentioned in the first section of this chapter. It included peaks such as the initial opening and surrender to the unconscious or the creation of the altar for the church of his miniature village. It was also at the heart of Jung’s conversion experience, which took place over several years and involved an intense cognitive effort to become clear about the meaning of the meditation technique he had invented and the fantasies that arose in the process. Finally, Jung continued to delve into active imagination for decades, practicing it himself and engaging with it through the experiences of his patients and students. This made him an experienced practitioner in the third sense of transformative experience within path cultures.

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37 Jung 1953–1983, 8:159.

38 Jung 1953–1983, 8:158.

39 Jung 1953–1983, 8:159.

## 4 The Practice of Active Imagination

The essential components of the practice of active imagination are already mentioned in *The Transcendent Function*. They are found there between reflections on the psychological theory of the unconscious and cultural-critical reflections on the rationalism and will-fixation of European modernity. In a nutshell, the following phases of practice are mentioned:

The first stage consists in finding emotional unconscious contents. This is done primarily through the exercise of emptying the consciousness, which should lead to their spontaneous appearance. If this procedure does not have the desired success, there is the possibility to resort to an “artificial aid,”<sup>40</sup> for instance, to concentrate on a bad mood or a disturbed state of mind for which there is no apparent reason.<sup>41</sup> By immersing oneself in this state, fantasies and associations related to it can unfold. An alternative to this would be to pick up a motif from a dream and continue to dream it in a day-dreaming mode.<sup>42</sup> What should be done with the material obtained in this way? In *The Transcendent Function*, Jung states that the answer to this question differs from case to case, but that there are two main options.<sup>43</sup> Either it is creatively expressed through a medium that suits the person in question, for example, by writing it down, painting, dancing, etc., or the focus is put on the intellectual deciphering of the unconscious productions. Both expression and interpretation of the unconscious contents would ultimately be closely related and interdependent.

The most important move, however, is that one enters the imagined scene, and thus a confrontation takes place between the individual ego as the “continuous centre of consciousness”<sup>44</sup> and the unconscious, leading to a transformation of the whole personality. Jung speaks of a serious “inner dialogue”<sup>45</sup> in which not only the ego but also the unconscious has its say.<sup>46</sup> “In this way you can not only analyze your unconscious,” Jung writes in a 1947 letter, “but you give the unconscious a chance to analyze you.”<sup>47</sup> Only this kind of confrontation would lead to a convergence and finally to a unity of both systems of the psyche: the intentional-

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<sup>40</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 8:166.

<sup>41</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 8:166.

<sup>42</sup> Over the years, Jung has recommended a number of similar methods to his students which cannot be discussed here.

<sup>43</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 8:172–78.

<sup>44</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 8:182.

<sup>45</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 8:187.

<sup>46</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 8:185.

<sup>47</sup> Jung 1972, 76.



ity of consciousness and the dark unconscious beyond the spotlight of the will-driven ego.

## 5 The Formalization of Active Imagination within Post-Jungian Analytical Psychology

Apparently, Jung was not interested in a systematic exposition and formalized practice of active imagination. As a reason for publishing so little about his invention and talking about it mainly in his seminars, he states that it would be too difficult a subject “to be presented to a purely intellectual audience.”<sup>48</sup> He preferred to share his insights in group talks and letters with patients and psychotherapists who were really working with his technique or whom he thought should use it, adapting his teaching to their particular situation. It is not uncommon for path cultures to make certain practices scarcely public, if at all, because they are reserved for direct instruction and serious practitioners. Of course, this kind of knowledge transfer prevents the widespread dissemination of the respective practice.

Jung’s pragmatic and flexible use of active imagination was used by several of his students as some published case studies show.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, active imagination played only a marginal role within the Jung school during the post-war period and after his death in 1961. Not even the publication of *The Transcendental Function* in 1958 could sustainably increase attention to this important element of his therapeutic practice. At the beginning of the 1970s, the French Jungian therapist, Élie G. Humbert wrote:

The form of psychological work called active imagination occupied a considerable place in Jung’s life and in the lives of most of his students. Today this seems to be no longer the case. The method is little used and is presented only occasionally in terms which render it either banal or esoteric. Can it be, one may ask, that the school which calls itself Jungian is in this way manifesting a profound resistance to the unconscious?<sup>50</sup>

Over the next decades several attempts were made to change this situation, of which only a few significant ones can be highlighted here. An important factor that contributed to the renewed attention paid to active imagination by protago-

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<sup>48</sup> Jung 1972, 76; letter to Mr. O., May 2, 1947.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Chodorow’s afterword in Jung (1997, 177–79: 177).

<sup>50</sup> Humbert 1971, 101.

nists of Jungian therapy was the emergence and spread of an alternative religious milieu (Human Potential Movement, New Age, Transpersonal Psychology) with a strong therapeutic component. There, structured meditation rituals of Buddhist and Hindu provenance boomed, and also non-Jungian forms of psychotherapy spread in which imaginative experiences and methods of producing them were as significant as they were, for example, in psychedelic and neo-shamanic contexts. The Jungians were aware of this cultural shift, which involved a reassessment of the therapeutic value of meditation and imagination. In a significant 1978 article, Marie-Louise von Franz (1915–1998), a close associate of C.G. Jung, responds to the new religio-therapeutic scene and relates active imagination to the practices currently in vogue. She divides active imagination into four to five stages or steps treated below and thus takes an important step in the formalization of the practice.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, she discusses the psychotherapeutic imagination techniques of Leuner, Desoille, Happich and Schultz in relation to Jungian active imagination. She also draws on Zen Buddhism, yoga exercises and Daoist meditation for comparison and discusses the psychedelic classic *The Invisible Landscape* (1975) by Terence and Denis McKenna, as well as the imagination practice described as “dreaming” in the books of Carlos Castaneda. Her discussion of these authors and the currents they represent attempts to prove the superiority of Jung's method.<sup>52</sup>

In a modified form, Robert A. Johnson (1921–2018) gave von Franz's classification of different levels of active imagination a broader impact. The Jungian therapist from the United States wrote a series of bestsellers that popularized Jung's psychology in a contemporary and innovative form. One of these was *Inner Work. Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth* (1986). As the title suggests, it is a self-help book to promote personal growth, thus picking up a buzzword of the Human Potential Movement.<sup>53</sup> In the following, I focus on

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51 Von Franz 1978.

52 In 1969, Charles Tart had published the reader *Altered States of Consciousness* (Tart 1969), which was an important contribution to the identity formation of transpersonal psychology. In this book, an English translation of a German-language essay by Wolfgang Kretschmer from 1951 was republished (Kretschmer 1969). It discusses the authors mentioned by von Franz as pioneers of therapeutic meditation. C.G. Jung is not mentioned by Kretschmer as a pioneer of this genre (probably simply because of lack of information) and Jung's concept of the collective unconscious does not come off well in comparison with Desoille. This may have also motivated von Franz to recall Jung's contribution and present active imagination as superior meditation technique.

53 Johnson had become acquainted with von Franz's systematization through a lecture given by her in Los Angeles in 1979 (Johnson [1986] 1989, 161). He quotes her designations of the stages and their sequence, but they do not correspond exactly to her 1978 publication on this topic. Maybe she changed the scheme somewhat for her lecture or Johnson did not remember them correctly. His account is much more detailed than that of the Swiss Jungian therapist and is embellished

Johnson with the aim to highlight the differences of his understanding with Franz's model in order to show the dynamics of formalization and ritualization within the Jungian school (See Table 10.1).

**Table 10.1:** The formalization of active imagination by von Franz and Johnson.

	von Franz 1978	von Franz 1979 (according to Johnson 1989)	Johnson 1989
<b>Stage 1</b>	Empty the Ego-Consciousness	Empty the Ego-Mind	Invite the unconsciousness
<b>Stage 2</b>	Allow the unconscious contents to flow in	Let the unconscious flow into the vacuum	Dialogue and experience (plus recording)
<b>Stage 3</b>	Give external form to the fantasies		
<b>Stage 4</b>	Moral confrontation with the fantasies produced	Add the ethical element	Add the ethical element of values
<b>Stage 5</b>	Apply in everyday life	Integrate the imagination back into daily life	Make it concrete by means of physical ritual

Johnson conceives of active imagination as a ritual for individuals who want to work on themselves. Thus, it is not necessary to be in therapy in order to practice it. But one should at least know a therapist or an experienced lay person who is familiar with the art of imagination and to whom one can turn when overwhelming images occur, especially if the practitioner is in danger of becoming obsessed with them in daily life. In preparation for the practice, one should choose a method of documenting the imagination (mainly through writing, secondarily through other media such as dance or painting) and find a place that is free of disturbance during the time of practice.

According to Johnson, the theme of the first stage is to invite the unconscious to manifest itself. While von Franz identifies this stage with the “emptying of the mind of the thought processes of the ego,” for Johnson this emptying is only one way among others to begin active imagination. He values the technique of emptying as “perhaps the purest form of Active Imagination.” It consists of clearing the mind of all thoughts of the outer world and simply waiting, with an alert and attentive attitude, for who or what will appear. Nevertheless, according to the American psychotherapist this method has the disadvantage that many people are not able to

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with many examples. He formalizes the practice relatively independently and does not strictly follow the steps of von Franz.

set in motion the flow of imagination in this way. Similar to Jung he suggests using certain imaginations to start in such cases, such as a daydream one had, a character from a recent dream, or the image of a significant place, for example a seashore. One could also address a momentary feeling as if it were a person.

With his second step, Johnson follows von Franz by taking up her main point and integrating it into his expanded framework. Like von Franz and Jung, he emphasizes that it is crucial in this phase to give up one's own intentions. "Making dialogue is mostly a matter of giving yourself over to the imagination and letting it flow. There are various principles we can follow, but moving the experience ahead consists, more than anything else, in letting the inner figures have a life of their own."<sup>54</sup> This requires a willingness to listen and a serious emotional participation in the imagination. One should stay with the imagined situation and participate in its development until some kind of solution is reached. "Active Imagination is a complete experience, one that has a beginning, a middle, and an end."<sup>55</sup> Obviously, Johnson understands this experience as a process of problem solving. The imagined situation and its unfolding usually revolves around a problem, or an inner conflict, the confrontation with it from different perspectives, and finally the finding of a solution. The result cannot be forced. Dialogue with the figures of the imagination involves giving up desires for control and manipulation. "You don't know what is going to happen until it happens."<sup>56</sup> However, one should not only let the imaginations appear, but also learn to respond to what the inner figures show, to ask them questions and to articulate one's own feelings towards them.

According to Johnson, what has happened should be recorded right from the start. One should immediately note what the inner figures do or say, and one's own response to it. "It is extremely important to write down everything as it happens and everything that is said."<sup>57</sup> Writing helps to avoid getting lost in passive fantasies, to stay focused and to deepen the experience. Letting imaginary figures rise from the unconscious and entering into a conversation to better understand them is not enough. "It is the conscious ego, guided by a sense of ethics, that must set limits in order to protect the imaginative process from becoming inhuman or destructive or going into the extremes."<sup>58</sup> The moral values of the practitioner are to be set against the involuntary impulses that appear as *dramatis personae* in active imagination. For Johnson, this is part of a dialogue among equals: "You can say: 'Look there are some human values here that are very important for me. I

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54 Johnson [1986] 1989, 178.

55 Johnson [1986] 1989, 180.

56 Johnson [1986] 1989, 185.

57 Johnson [1986] 1989, 180.

58 Johnson [1986] 1989, 189.

will not give up the love and relatedness that I have with my family and friends. I do not want to pursue some idealized goals to the exclusion of everyone and everything else.”<sup>59</sup> This confrontation already heralds the final step, integration into daily life.

Already in Franz’s approach, the moral confrontation with the contents of active imagination, if taken seriously, leads to consequences in everyday life. Johnson deals with this step in more detail. He emphasizes that implementation in real life is not identical with simply acting out one’s imaginations. “To incarnate your imagination, during the fourth step, does not mean to act out your fantasies in a literal way. It means, rather, to take the *essence*, that you have distilled from it—the meaning, insight, or basic principle that you have derived from the experience—and incarnate it doing physical ritual or by integrating it into your practical life.”<sup>60</sup> According to him, the imaginations (and also dreams) should be honored in real life in two ways: first, through concrete behavioral changes that affirm the results of active imagination, and second, through a ceremony invented by the practitioner that expresses the new inner situation.

Von Franz and Johnson were not the only ones in Jungian legacy who began to structure active imagination more accurately at this time. Rudolf Müller, for example, chose a relatively orthodox approach that adheres closely to Jung’s texts. However, he cautiously corrects Jung and recommends a more ritualized practice. Müller advocates relaxation exercises in the initial phase as well as a ritualized return from imagination to reality.

And when Jung says that this theory is less programmatic than other meditative methods and does not require a relaxation exercise and guidance, this is only partly true. A guidance and thus an embedding in a ritual is given in the therapeutic situation anyway, which Jung presupposes as a matter of course. And even in the therapeutic setting, one will cautiously apply a ‘rite d’entrée’, e.g. in the form of an invitation to a certain body or lying posture and physical relaxation. Equally necessary is a certain ‘rite de sortie’ to bring the analysand back into the real situation.<sup>61</sup>

Four years later, Verena Kast also integrates relaxation exercises at the beginning of active imagination and describes them in detail in her monograph on imagination (feeling the ground and the feet, letting go of the shoulders, deepening the breath).<sup>62</sup> In doing so, she explicitly borrowed practices from Sensory Relaxation Training as well as from behavioral therapy and followed a trend that can generally be observed in modern meditation.

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<sup>59</sup> Johnson [1986] 1989, 193.

<sup>60</sup> Johnson [1986] 1989, 197, emphasis in original.

<sup>61</sup> Müller 1985, translated by KB.

<sup>62</sup> Kast 1988, 26.

Moreover, Kast describes a ritualized group practice of active imagination.<sup>63</sup> After joint relaxation exercises in a seated position, participants were asked to tune into seeing the inner flow of their images. In Jungian tradition, it is important for Kast to allow timewise the images and the emotions associated to develop, and then to express and communicate them in speech or by other means. “In a group, I proceed in such a way that we tell each other the imaginations, then paint them, write them down or enact them in the manner of a psychodrama play.”<sup>64</sup> It is typical of Kast and more recent Jungian studies on active imagination that they increasingly combine it with other therapeutic and theoretical approaches involving imagination than has been the case in the more orthodox Jungian ritualizations presented by von Franz and Johnson. The latest developments concerning active imagination within post-Jungian analytical psychology cannot be covered in this chapter.

## 6 The Transition from Will-Guided Thought to Non-intentional Awareness

As we have seen, active imagination, especially in its initial stages, involves a shift from volitional perceptions and thoughts to a non-intentional openness that allows visions, auditions, and similar phenomena to emerge. The following section explores what Jung and others have to say about this change in mental state. The transition from the intentional to the non-intentional is not a peculiarity of Jung's active imagination. It is also discussed in other path cultures and thus forms an important subject of margalogical research.

In his book *The Ascetic Self*, Gavin Flood explores Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian ascetic lifestyles. He aims at reconstructing what it means to lead an ascetic life from the perspective of practitioners who made such a way of life their own. One of the features of ascetic life, he argues, is the ambiguity of the ascetic self. When performing activities such as fasting, ascetics are caught within a dichotomy between the general intention to extinguish the will, or in a certain sense even the self, on the one hand, and the conscious, volitional efforts made to this end on the other hand. How can one willfully achieve something that is beyond the will? Is it possible to successfully intend not to intend? As far as I understand him, Flood argues that there is no convincing solution to this problem. Ascetics

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<sup>63</sup> Kast 1988, 30–31, 33.

<sup>64</sup> Kast 1988, 33, translated by KB.

must somehow learn to live with the unresolvable tension between intentionality and non-intentionality. “It is this ambiguity of the self,” he says, “that goes to the heart of ascetic performance, expressed as practice through the body and as discourse in language.”<sup>65</sup>

The psychiatrist and mindfulness teacher Michael Huppertz addresses the same problem against the backdrop of mindfulness meditation and proposes a solution.

The ‘non-intentionality’ (‘Absichtslosigkeit’) of mindfulness regularly leads to discussions. After all, mindfulness is an intentional endeavor. The problem can be solved relatively easy if you realize that you can take different perspectives in a situation. If one decides to go for a walk and then puts this into action, one does not have to be incessantly intentional during the walk. We do not carry the intention with us in our jacket pocket, but we switch to this perspective if necessary, and decide again for or against continuing on our way.<sup>66</sup>

Huppertz rightly points out that the decision to do something does not have to be constantly repeated during execution. Once the framework “bicycle tour” is set by a decision, there is no need for repeated intentional acts to maintain it. The mind is free to engage with anything that happens on this tour (the beauty of the landscape, the headwind, spontaneous thoughts, etc.) as long as the basic decision to go cycling is not questioned. Nevertheless, the cyclist who proceeds from decision-making to the actual tour does not leave the realm of everyday volitional action and thought. Active imagination and other meditation techniques including mindfulness practices aim at a more radical abandonment of the realm of intentionality. It requires at least a slight alteration of the state of mind. Therefore, the shift to the new attitude is not as easy as the example given by Huppertz suggests. The intended transformation is not just a matter of deciding on a perspective that can be determined by the will.

In the first of his *Feldweg-Gespräche*,<sup>67</sup> the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) discusses the transition from intentional cognitive thought and will-driven behavior to a mode of awareness that is introduced as “non-willing” (Nicht-Wollen), a phrase that corresponds to the term “non-intentionality” used in this chapter. When Heidegger speaks of non-willing, he does not mean, as Huppertz apparently does, the ephemeral suspension of an intention because nothing stands in the way of its realization and one is absorbed in its execution. By will, he means a basic attitude towards the world through which one seeks to be master and to preserve and increase one’s own power. This includes a way of think-

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<sup>65</sup> Flood 2004, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Huppertz 2009, 26, translated by KB.

<sup>67</sup> “Country Path Conversations,” English translation Heidegger 2016, 1–105.

ing that he calls objectifying thought (*vorstellendes Denken*), which subjects the world to man's will to rule.<sup>68</sup> He outlines a transition from such a relationship to the world, which for him, as for Jung, characterizes modern man, to an alternative way of being in and understanding the world.

This crossing becomes an important theme of Heidegger's first *Feldweg-Gespräch* because this fictional conversation is not only taking place on a country path. It is meant as an exercise in philosophizing as a life-changing *mārga*, and thus as a path that in itself is a transformative experience. "Non-willing" is a name temporarily bestowed and which is later dropped in favor of more appropriate terms as the conversation progresses.<sup>69</sup> At this early stage of their joint contemplative walk, the interlocutors discuss the question how one can intentionally create a non-intentional state of mind. "Can one then will non-willing? With such a willing, after all, willing is only increased. And thus this willing works precisely and ever more decisively counter to that which it wills, namely, non-willing."<sup>70</sup> This line of questioning equals Flood's reflections on the ambiguity of the ascetic self. But Heidegger's conversation does not end with the statement of an irresolvable dilemma. The interlocutors briefly consider mediating the two opposites in a dialectical manner, but ultimately reject this option. Finally, they conceive the transition in a two-fold way: first, as an abstention exercise, and second, as a matter of retuning through the awakening of a certain basic mood ("Grundstimmung").

Regarding the first aspect, there exists an area of practice between intentional cognitive thought and its complete transcendence characterized by "a willing to renounce willing" that bridges the gap between intentionality and non-intentionality from the side of volitional behavior.<sup>71</sup> The traces of willing required for this exercise in the beginning would vanish while becoming acquainted with the practice of letting go of will-centeredness. "A willing that renounces willing would ultimately twist free into a released engagement with that which lies beyond the domain of the will."<sup>72</sup> If I understand Heidegger correctly, he conceives this phase as a path of exercise. One repeatedly renounces volitional thought and action and engages more and more in non-willing. You wean yourself from the will, just as an addict weans himself off a drug by practicing not to take it until his addiction is overcome and no effort of the will is necessary to keep sober. This kind of abstention exercise, or "learning by not doing," is the counterpart, so to speak, to "learning by doing," the training of the skill of doing something by doing it. Apparently, Heidegger

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68 Davis 2007, 3–24.

69 Heidegger 2016, 48–50.

70 Heidegger 2016, 33.

71 See Davis 2007, 202–4.

72 Davis 2007, 203.



draws here on the Aristotelian theory of exercise, a classical way of mediating between volitional action and non-intentional spontaneity. This theory assumes that through intentional practice the practitioner acquires habitualization, that is, a kind of second nature through which what is laboriously learned becomes easy and natural. The abstention exercise of non-willing that still contains an element of will finally merges into the spontaneous experience of a no longer will-centered way of being in the world.

As to the second aspect, non-willing is not achievable by a mere decision, not only because it needs such kind of accustoming and growth of understanding achieved through practice. It also requires a retuning via the awakening of a specific fundamental attunement or mood that Heidegger calls releasement (“Gelassenheit”). “Gelassenheit,” a word coined by the late medieval philosopher and theologian Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), is difficult to translate. Letting-be, letting-go, serenity, surrender, detachment, poise, calm composure; all these are shades of its meaning, without fully matching the term. I follow the standard translation of “Gelassenheit” by “releasement,” which Davis also chose in his translation of the *Feldweg-Gespräche*.<sup>73</sup> Once the three interlocutors have found “releasement” to be a more appropriate term for what is meant by non-willing, their conversation turns to the issue of how to switch from will to releasement. As one of them says: “The transition out of willing into releasement is what seems to me to be the genuine difficulty.”<sup>74</sup> The transition from intentional cognitive thought to a non-intentional awareness of the world and contemplative thinking (“besinnliches Denken”) as a way of thought that corresponds to this mode of being in the world is at the same time an exercise to let go of the will and to cultivate the basic mood of releasement.

A basic attunement or mood cannot be intentionally produced but one can engage in it, let it come to the fore, and remain awake for it.<sup>75</sup> To let oneself be tuned to releasement, one has to learn to wait, without thinking or imagining an expected object.<sup>76</sup> For Heidegger, releasement is nothing else than this kind of un-specific waiting without representing anything. It serves as the entry gate to what he calls the open-region (“Gegnet,” an old German word out of use today but still echoing in the word “Gegend,” area, landscape), the open (“das Offene”) or the free expanse (“freie Weite”) which lets all things be.<sup>77</sup> To be taken into this open region through pure, objectless waiting that is tuned by the mood of releasement turns out to be what was initially sought under the notion of “non-willing.”

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73 Cf. Heidegger 2016, xii–xv, 70.

74 Heidegger 2016, 70.

75 Heidegger 2016, 70.

76 Heidegger 2016, 76.

77 Heidegger 2016, 81–82.

In Heidegger's *Feldweg-Gespräche*, the cultivation of releasement does not aim at the spontaneous emergence of imaginations that figuratively articulate the unconscious psyche vis-à-vis the will-dominated ego-consciousness. The conversations are philosophical meditations that approach the experience of an imageless "healing vastness."<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, there are remarkable similarities to Heidegger in Jung's understanding of overcoming the dominance of intentional ego-consciousness through the practice of active imagination. Like the German philosopher, he refers to Meister Eckhart's releasement and occasionally to Daoism. The abandonment of self-will, as well as the topics of unintentional objectless openness and pure waiting are fundamental to both.

Why they both refer to Daoism and Meister Eckhart, can be partially explained by their shared cultural background. Editions and translations of Daoist texts by Martin Buber, Richard Wilhelm and others, as well as reprints and translations of Meister Eckhart's writings from Medieval to Modern German, were both very much present in Jung's and Heidegger's generation of German speaking intellectuals. This was especially the case for those who supported the widespread criticism of modern Western culture in the style of the Life Reform Movement. Buber, Jung, and Heidegger accused Western modernity of being dominated by an instrumental, means-oriented rationality and driven by the will for power over nature and non-European cultures. Meister Eckhart's writings, the *Daodejing*, and *Zhuangzi* helped them to develop models of a non-coercive, responsive relation to the world, and to develop forms of religiosity that fit to this attitude.<sup>79</sup>

Let us take a closer look at how Jung describes the transition from will to non-intentionality. In his preface to Richard Wilhelm's translation of the Daoist text *Tai Yi Jin Hua Zong Zhi*, published as *Das Geheimnis der Goldenen Blüte* ("The Secret of the Golden Flower") in 1929, Jung writes that the task would actually be very simple. It would consist in nothing else than observing how a fragment of imagination develops by itself. And yet, the difficulties would start right here, because consciousness would always intervene and try to evaluate and manipulate the process.<sup>80</sup> "Apparently one has no fantasy fragments—or yes, there's one, but it's too stupid. Dozens of good reasons are brought against it. One cannot concentrate on it—it is too boring—what would come of it anyway—it is 'nothing but' this or that, and so on."<sup>81</sup> In order for uncontrolled fantasies to unfold, the tight grasp of the conscious mind has to be relaxed. "The art of letting things happen, action through non-action [reference to the Daoist *wuwei*, KB], letting go of oneself

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<sup>78</sup> Heidegger 2016, 133.

<sup>79</sup> Nelson 2014, 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 13:16.

<sup>81</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 13:16.

as taught by Meister Eckhart [reference to Eckhart's *Gelassenheit*, KB], became for me the key to open the way. *We must be able to let things happen in the psyche.*"<sup>82</sup>

Similar to Heidegger's twofold transition, the attitude required for this has two sides to it: an abstention from intentional cognitive and volitional activities on the one hand, and the awakening of a mood on the other hand. Both can be cultivated through practice. "The training consists first of all in systematic exercises for eliminating critical attention, thus producing a vacuum in consciousness. This encourages the emergence of any fantasies that are lying in readiness."<sup>83</sup> In the *Red Book*, the emptying of consciousness is described as the abandonment of conscious will and mental reflections. "Do you still not know that the path to truth stands open only to those without intention?"<sup>84</sup> And in a later passage it says: "Whoever wants to see will see badly. It was my will that deceived me."<sup>85</sup> The emptying of consciousness can be further complicated by the fear of relinquishing cognitive control and judgment. "I understand, I must not think either, I should give myself completely into your hands – but who are you? I must learn to love you. Should I also set aside self-judgement? I am afraid."<sup>86</sup>

The last quotation already mentions the second element which, according to Jung, is important for the emergence of non-intentional imaginative processes in the waking state. In a seminar on analytical psychology held in 1925, when Jung first described his meditation practice to a circle of twenty-seven listeners, most of them Jungian analysts and writers from Jung's circle of acquaintances, he explains this point:

The mind of a thinking man is directed during the day [. . .], but dreams cannot be kept in this state. By adopting a passive attitude at night and at the same time directing into the unconscious the same current of libido that one directed towards work during the day, dreams can be kept and the activities of the unconscious can be observed. But this cannot be done by simply lying down on a couch and relaxing; it requires the unconditional surrender of the whole libido to the unconscious. I have practiced doing this.<sup>87</sup>

Here again, intentional and non-intentional elements are interwoven. The practitioners of active imagination should purposely adopt a receptive attitude, supported by a relaxed body posture. But this practice should not lead to an aimless drifting in a half-awake state. Full attention has to be given to the unconscious. It

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<sup>82</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 13:17, emphasis in original.

<sup>83</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 8:155.

<sup>84</sup> Jung 2009, 144.

<sup>85</sup> Jung 2009, 202.

<sup>86</sup> Jung 2009, 138. Jung is addressing his "soul" here.

<sup>87</sup> Jung 2012, 35, translation slightly altered by KB.

must be taken as serious as the work to which one dedicates oneself in the waking state. Furthermore, the sphere of the unconscious should not only be given mere attention and concentration, but “unconditional surrender.” What remains to be done in this mood is to wait patiently, which is anything but easy and again requires practice. Not everybody is suited to endure the wait.

Nobody can spare themselves the waiting and most will be unable to bear this torment, but will throw themselves with greed back at men, things, and thoughts, whose slaves they will become from then on. Since then it will have been clearly proved that this man is incapable of enduring beyond things, men, and thoughts, and they will hence become his master and he will become their fool, since he cannot be without them, not until even his soul has become a fruitful field.<sup>88</sup>

Similar to Heidegger, Jung appreciates the ability to wait without expecting anything in particular as a liberating power. In active imagination, the openness into which one is finally let in while waiting calmly allows fantasies to emerge that convey hidden truths about one's own psyche. Like Heidegger's meditative *Feldweggespräche*, this is an exercise to accustom oneself with a certain way of thinking that is different from usual thought. In Jung's case, it is fantasy thinking from which spontaneous imaginations, dreams, myth, and poetry emerge.

Jung emphasizes the creativity of waiting with patience combined with surrender to the unconscious. It makes imaginary figures or landscapes appear before the eye of fantasy. If one then continues to wait patiently and rest one's mind on the content presented with dedication, it eventually begins to change. A story emerges. Active imagination is thus fueled by the creative principle of the libido, which flows to one's own unconscious. Jung calls this an “incubating gaze.” I quote from the *Red Book*:

Thus do not speak and do not show the God, but sit in a solitary place and sing incantations  
In the ancient manner:  
Set the egg before you, the God in his beginning  
And behold it.  
And incubate it with the magical warmth of your gaze.<sup>89</sup>

Jung's ‘magical’ or ‘enchanted warmth’ [“zauberische Wärme”] is derived from the Sanskrit term *tapas* that literally means ‘heat’ and refers to strenuous practices such as fasting, sitting silently in a remote place, or tiring efforts in preparing a sacrifice. In the Vedic writings, *tapas* is practiced to gain paranormal powers

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<sup>88</sup> Jung 2009, 142.

<sup>89</sup> Jung 2009, 298.

(*siddhi*-s) or the protection of the gods.<sup>90</sup> The Vedic idea of self-incubation fascinated Jung. Already in *Psychological Types* he refers to *tapas* as “self-brooding” and interprets it as “withdrawal of the libido from all contents, resulting in a complete introversion.”<sup>91</sup> In this book he also quotes Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 2.2.4, a passage also mentioned in the *Red Book* where the creator god Prajāpati begets the world out of himself by practicing *tapas*. In his 1925 seminar he identifies *tapas* with the surrender to the unconscious in active imagination.<sup>92</sup> The metaphor of brooding again connects intentionality and non-intentionality, active care and receptive letting be.

## 7 Conclusion

In this contribution, the relationship between intentionality and non-intentionality often thematized in path cultures, was discussed by using the example of Jung’s active imagination. It was shown how in Jung’s case the two modes of mind are closely connected. Already in the early stages of the development of active imagination, the opening up to non-intended insights and experiences goes hand in hand with intended behavior and ritualizations. Their interplay must be regarded as path-generating. I assume that this result is generalizable, but, however, should be substantiated by additional case studies and justified by further anthropological and marginal considerations. The post-Jungian formalization of active imagination is partly due to historical circumstances. But beyond that, it is a phenomenon that has counterparts in other path cultures. The tendency towards more structured methods probably has something to do with the mechanisms of tradition formation, which would have to be verified through comparative studies. Finally, the transition from intentionality to non-intentionality was problematized. Jung’s comments on this were compared with Heidegger’s transition from will-determined thinking to releasement. The investigation revealed that abstention exercises and attunement to an appropriate mood fulfil a bridging function in both authors.

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<sup>90</sup> Mallinson and Singleton 2017, iv.

<sup>91</sup> Jung 1953–1983, 6:118.

<sup>92</sup> Jung 2012, 37, see also Jung 1953–1983, 13:25–26. where Jung defines *tapas* as “self-knowledge by means of self-brooding.”

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Jens Schlieter

## Chapter 11

# Intentional Transformative Experiences and the Concept of Religious Experience

It is said that human transformation was the only miracle the Buddha recognized as such.  
*Ralph Metzner*

Often, “transformative experiences” such as near-death experiences, awakenings, revelations, and conversions have been declared to be life-changing in the deepest sense. With new meaning found, the world and the individual do not stay the same, both by the experiencing individuals and scholars studying those experiences say. While revelatory experiences are often considered to be “passive” (as, for example, by William James in his depiction of “mystical experiences” and conversion), it is well-attested fact that in the spiritual and religious field, individuals often actively search for transformative experiences. How to harmonize these elements of intentionally *sought* and at the same time—in terms of their time, locale, and transformative quality—*unforeseeable* experiential events? How to evaluate the experiencer’s account that often denies any comparability in regard to *this* specific experience?

- (1) Applying cognitive metaphor theory and narratology, I will argue subsequently that (1) intentionally sought transformative experiences are paradigmatically *life-changing* in those cases in which religious life orientations as a whole change—from the non-religious, or conventionally religious to a form of full, self-conscious religiosity. New spiritual orientations imply an epistemic transformation (in the sense of Laurie A. Paul): Usually, through the transformative experience the individual will understand the finite, mortal, fragmented existence as ultimately infinite, immortal, or part of a meaningful whole. Such experiences are intentionally willed but can only be said to have been transformative after they have happened and actually changed the individual from his own, first-person point of view. They alter the view of one’s own life and existence, so that one has to have the experience in order to know how one’s views are changed through the experience, and how they are consolidated in the post-experiential state. In this chapter, I will aim to demonstrate,
- (2) that such transformative experiences, which can be designated as spiritual or religious (to be defined below), are often *intentionally sought*, and practitioners already know what they are finally looking for—or, at least, expect



an outcome within a certain range of possibilities. Somewhat paradoxically, though, life-changing experiences are rarely singular experiences. Usually, individuals relate that they had cognate experiences earlier in their lives, which—seen from the accomplished experience—foreshadowed and anticipated the fully transformative experiential event.

- (3) I will finally argue that the central underlying epistemic object of transformative religious experience is the autobiographical self which retrospectively evaluates a process of successful transformation with almost always one central insight: that the individual no longer experiences their own existence to be finite, mortal, limited. This insight, however, that I hold to be the *religious* element of such experiences, appears to be part of various different narratives: emerging from an encounter with the “naked real,” or with God, or having gained the certainty of being essentially an immortal “soul,” or being pure, unbound self or egoless consciousness.

For developing the argument, I will use a somewhat eclectic collection of sources, based on sometimes more, and sometimes less-known examples of “spiritually transformed” individuals. However, I am convinced that the observations can be repeated and shown in many more, though probably not all examples of intentional transformative experiences.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Cognitive Metaphors of Intentionally Transformative Experiences

Using the term “intentional transformative experiences” in the systematic study of religion rests on programmatic assumptions, encapsulated in each of the three terms: I am looking at *experiences*, I am searching for descriptions of *transformation*, and I am particularly interested in those transformative experiences that are *intentional*, that is, experiences explicitly searched on purpose. The central bridge that connects such special experiences with religion/s is without doubt provided by the word “transformative,” which is less scholarly concept, but a concept used by the spiritually interested and the practitioners themselves. In his book *The Unfolding Self: Varieties of Transformative Experience*<sup>2</sup> Ralph Metzner, a

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful for comments by Polina Lukicheva, Laurie A. Paul, Sarah Perez, Marleen Thaler, Bastiaan van Rijn, and anonymous reviewers.

<sup>2</sup> Metzner 1986, 1997.

psychologist and psychotherapist probably best known for his early 1960s psychedelic research at Harvard University (with Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert/Ram Dass), defines as “transformative experience” those inner processes that lead to psychospiritual growth. They do not come forth as external life-changing events such as marriage, illnesses, or births, but are “a radical restructuring of the entire psyche that has been variously referred to as mystical experience, ecstasy, cosmic consciousness, oceanic feeling, oneness, transcendence, union with God, nirvana, satori, liberation, peak experience, and by other names.”<sup>3</sup> With the subtitle “varieties of transformative experiences,” Metzner alludes to William James’ famous work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>4</sup> He declares, as James had done a century ago, religious conversion to be a prominent form of a “transformative experience.”<sup>5</sup> And, in the trajectory of James’ approach, Metzner argues that “psycho-spiritual transformation” should be evaluated with its long-term effects, the “persistent quality of consciousness that we are expressing.”<sup>6</sup>

To me, the most relevant aspect of Metzner’s otherwise somewhat old-school collection and comparison of unusual experiences consist in his idea to approach transformative experiences by way of the metaphors used to describe them. In the world’s major religious and philosophical traditions, Metzner holds, we meet only a limited number of around ten metaphors for—and of—transformative experiences.<sup>7</sup> Referring to cognitive metaphor theory by Lakoff and Johnson he argues that these metaphors do not only help to express such experiences. They possess a much stronger agency. Transformative experiences *and* “transformative metaphors”<sup>8</sup> serve as a link between ordinary and extraordinary levels, and ordinary and altered states of consciousness experienced by the individual. The metaphors themselves can be used to trigger the memory of the “deeply moving transformative experiences.” They may even point to a “totally new” but already “subtly sensed dimension of experience.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, they are equally potent as “symbols” are if conceptualized in a Jungian perspective. In sum, they help to make the unconscious visible and conscious.<sup>10</sup>

However, it will not be necessary to discuss all ten types of transformative experience here in depth, because a considerable number of Metzner’s meta-

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3 Metzner 1997, 1.

4 James 1902.

5 Metzner 1997, 10.

6 Metzner 1997, 15.

7 See already Metzner 1980.

8 Metzner 1997, 5.

9 Metzner 1997, 8–9.

10 Metzner 1997, 8, 118, etc.

phors lack what I consider to be crucial in our context: being specific metaphors for the intentional and self-reflective quality of transformative experiences. I will discuss this lack in a moment, taking the butterfly metamorphosis as an example. Metzner's list of metaphors<sup>11</sup> includes processes from. . .

- (1) dreaming to awakening,
- (2) illusion to reality,
- (3) captivity to liberation,
- (4) fire to purification,
- (5) darkness to light/enlightenment,
- (6) fragmentation to wholeness, or: separation to oneness,<sup>12</sup>
- (7) being on a journey to arriving at the destination (places of wisdom and power),
- (8) exile to home, or: returning to the source,
- (9) death to rebirth,
- (10) seed to flowering/unfolding tree of life.<sup>13</sup>

The caterpillar to butterfly metamorphosis, not included as a category on its own in the list, serves also for Metzner as a prominent "symbol" or "analogy" of human transformation. For him, it seems to belong to the category of metaphors highlighting "captivity to liberation" and "darkness to light."<sup>14</sup> The general problem of animal imagery is, of course, its lack of human intentionality and human consciousness. This becomes immediately obvious reading Metzner's enactment of the metamorphic cycle. By analogy it should imply, he says, "that human beings are in a kind of larval stage and that a change is possible that would make us as different from the way we are now as butterflies are from caterpillars. The caterpillar lives in a different world from the butterfly. Can it know anything about its 'higher' world [. . .]? Can we humans know anything about the world of the ultrahuman, the transformed human? This question challenges us to explore and understand the sometimes tan-

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11 Metzner 1980, 1997; cf. Rothberg 1997, 171–72, 200.

12 'From Fragment to wholeness' (William James) seems to be a subtle cognitive metaphor, combining "the whole" with "healing" (German *heil/ganz*, *hale/whole*), but what does it exactly mean referring to consciousness?

13 I should mention that this list details various variants. For example, imagery of transformative processes of "fire" includes other metaphors of purging, e.g., consuming the "false" self (Metzner 1997, 83). A variant is "calcination," the heating of a solid chemical compound in limited supply of oxygen, for the purpose of burning of liquid or volatile substances judged as "impurities." Another variant are the subtle energies in the body, for example, the uncontrolled, raging fires of Gopi Krishna (see below, and cf. Metzner 1997, 88).

14 Metzner 1986, 8–11; 1997, 9.

talizingly obscure symbols and metaphors. Perhaps those who have made it to ‘butterfly’ are trying to tell us ‘larvae’ something.”<sup>15</sup>

Without question, a certain phase of—or the full—butterfly metamorphosis (. . . egg – caterpillar – chrysalis/larva – butterfly – egg . . .) figures from antiquity onwards as a very prominent example for human transformation. Extremely compelling in its imagery is the radical discontinuity between the different stages of metamorphic development, the unpredictable “quantum leaps” of its appearances from the caterpillar to the butterfly.<sup>16</sup>

However, it is not that easy to let go the essential ontological dimension and to transfer the imagery to human consciousness and its specific epistemic position. This can be sensed in Metzner’s open questions above: What the larva may know of the butterfly’s knowledge, and so forth. Surely, to understand the ontological transformation of the butterfly in terms of human consciousness would mean to read the metaphor as pertaining to an epistemic transformation. The attempt to insert an anthropomorphic intention into insect metamorphosis, present in Metzner, is elsewhere in full blossom. See, for example, William Denton’s spiritualist manifest, *Is Spiritualism True?*<sup>17</sup> Here, two larvae in their cocoons debate on a future life. One larva says, it will certainly fly and flit from flower to flower in a future existence as a beautiful butterfly. The other larva, of course, does not believe it. But so it happens.<sup>18</sup> And John C. Lilly, who had a life-changing experience under LSD, refers in his autobiography to the latter with the butterfly imagery again.<sup>19</sup>

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15 Metzner 1997, 14.

16 “Pupation, the weaving of the cocoon, followed by the sudden, wondrous emergence of the imago—the butterfly—from the chrysalis, offered, in the classical repertory of symbols, a correlative of hatching, with the significant difference that while hatching produces like from like, as does viviparous birthing, pupating produces something almost entirely unpredictable: the parent in this case does not ensure any recognizable feature in the offspring” (Warner 2002, 84–85).

17 Denton 1871.

18 Denton 1871, 23.

19 “The caterpillar forms the cocoon and then proceeds to total reorganization as a pupa. Only after a period of apparent disorganization and reformation can the butterfly form. After the butterfly is formed, it must rest and realize its being as a butterfly [ . . . ] and before it can fly, it must become dry, allow its wings to spread and form itself. The LSD session itself is the pupation, the period of organized disorganization, in which things are moving around with a fluidity and a plasticity that one normally does not experience [ . . . ] One can be uncertain as to how one will come out, still a caterpillar, or some monstrous combination of caterpillar and butterfly, or as a butterfly” (Lilly 1972, 14–15).

To conclude: the butterfly is most often likened with becoming immortal, or, to be more precise, of *becoming aware of one's hidden immortal nature*, and, read ontologically, for an unending process of reincarnation.<sup>20</sup>

But why is it exactly that the metamorphosis metaphor is less intuitive if taken to express *intentional* transformative experience? If we stick to the common view of minds of lower animals, it appears to be impossible to presuppose any intentional stance in the caterpillar or the larva to willingly become a butterfly. Neither will they know that out of their current appearance a butterfly shall evolve. Thus, I am inclined to argue that cognitive metaphors for “intentional” processes must necessarily imply human intentions and human self-conscious reflection. Of course, in a religious perspective, actors may presuppose experiences evolving from nature itself—a kind of intention and reflection *embedded* in the cosmos, for example, belonging to an *anima mundi*, expressing a world soul. Possibly, such views could be evidenced by a kind of pan-psychic co-evolution of the cosmos and humans. This would, however, express a robust metaphysical stance, and would pose other epistemic riddles not to be discussed here.

A plausible, and for the most uncontroversial assumption holds that to know of intentions, and to reflect on them, presupposes the human, first-person perspective. Only human individuals strive purposefully and deliberately for transformative experiences. Looking again at Metzner's list, human intentionality seems present in at least some categories: for example, to strive for an “awakening” from the sleep or dream includes, to a certain extent or in certain cases, intentionality. Other metaphors, like the “from seed to tree” imagery lacks intentionality in total, whereas other imagery (e.g., returning home, liberation from captivity) presuppose human bodily movement, or even social experiences—for example, of being “imprisoned.” While these images are certainly helpful to understand the larger emotional and biographical framework of the reporting individual, they are as cognitive metaphors less precise and helpful in elucidating processes of *intentional* transformative experiences. In sum: ontological metaphors or symbols of transformation (such as the Catholic imagery of “transubstantiation”<sup>21</sup>) will not capture two very

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<sup>20</sup> See Schlieter 2018. The butterfly symbolizes “each man in his becoming a Logos or Deity,” “the highest, most beautiful, and perfect condition of existence,” as Wilson C. Wordsdell (1904, 502) says. Charles Johnston (1910, 217) holds: “Every object has characteristics belonging to its past, its present and its future [ . . . ]. The chrysalis has, as its past, the caterpillar; as its future, the butterfly. The man has, in his past, the animal; in his future, the angel,” and he comments: “Perfectly concentrated Meditation, perfect insight into the chrysalis, reveals the caterpillar that it has been, the butterfly that it is destined to be.” The “angelic butterfly” (*angelica farfalle*) is mentioned in Dante, *Purgatory* X: 121–26; cf. Warner 2002, 84.

<sup>21</sup> According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, n 283: “*Transubstantiation* means the change of the whole substance of bread into the substance of the Body of Christ and of [ . . . ]

important traits of transformation—that these experiences are *intentionally willed*, and that their results will be *subjectively evaluated*. This, of course, does not mean that ontological metaphors are not used by practitioners, seekers, scholars, or philosophers. They are.<sup>22</sup> No problem, except for the more precise philosophical reconstruction of such experiences.

## 2 Transformative Choice

But how do individuals themselves conceptualize a transformation that yielded new spiritual insights, given that they most often already had a clear picture of what to achieve, and an intention and will to reach or realize this? And how do observing peers may ever be able to observe and evaluate if the transformative quality truly emerged from the said experience? How do practitioners searching for decisive spiritual experiences ensure that they will see the “searched-for” experience, *after* they underwent the respective transformation, as the same? Below, I will argue that the final evaluation of the accomplished transformative experience is still part of the experience because the indispensable basis for evaluation is the autobiographical narrative of the “epistemically” transformed individual. Unfolding the argument, I will first turn to Laurie Paul’s philosophical analysis in her inspiring book discussing “transformative experience.”

Paul’s point of departure is how to decide in “deeply personal, centrally important, life-changing decisions”<sup>23</sup> if they imply making an experience that is not only life-changing but may entirely change the individual’s point of view: a transformative choice.<sup>24</sup> The first, very helpful distinction of L.A. Paul’s approach:

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wine into the substance of his Blood. This change is brought about in the eucharistic prayer through the efficacy of the word of Christ and by the action of the Holy Spirit. However, the outward characteristics of bread and wine, that is the ‘eucharistic species,’ remain unaltered” ([https://www.vatican.va/archive/compendium\\_ccc/documents/archive\\_2005\\_compendium-ccc\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/compendium_ccc/documents/archive_2005_compendium-ccc_en.html)).

22 Practitioners using such examples may probably follow a different worldview, thinking, for example, of a cosmic dimension of a salvific nature. Moreover, the broader metaphors included in Metzner’s list may underscore one of our final conclusions: that transformative experiences are best understood in the larger autobiographical framework of the narrating individual.

23 Paul 2014, 4.

24 I will only deal with such experiences here. Unfortunately, L.A. Paul subsumes under the category “experience” common sense perceptions as well as complex perceptions and processes of alterations in the self. This, for example, becomes obvious here: “Subjective values, grounded by what it is like to have lived experiences, are first-personal values that can range from the value of hearing beautiful music, to the value of tasting a ripe peach, to the value of adopting a new

Transformative experiences can be “personally transformative” or “epistemically transformative,” or both. Personally transformative are those that may just add a new instance to principally known experiences, such as tasting a new flavor. Epistemically transformative are those decisions that lead to an experience which will change the undergoer in unknown ways.<sup>25</sup> Thus, “you cannot know what it is like to have that kind of experience until you’ve had it,”<sup>26</sup> and, moreover, one does not know how one’s preferences will be changed undergoing the experience. Important aspects are, first, the “deep epistemic ignorance,”<sup>27</sup> which presupposes that one cannot base one’s judgment on communicated experiences by others (examples<sup>28</sup> include religious conversion, or mothers having their first child). This ignorance implies that one cannot decide rationally in such cases, simply because the experience has to be made by oneself in order to assign preferences to its different possible outcomes.<sup>29</sup> This, however, does only work if one distrusts all experiential knowledge communicated by others—if one considers testimony by those who underwent the respective process and made ‘their’ experience as largely incommunicable or incommensurable: in short, as irrelevant.<sup>30</sup> This is a strong stance that I will discuss further down. It seems indisputable, though, that each individual has to undergo their own “life-changing” experiences, and that the outcome is—in many cases—to a considerable extent undetermined and uncertain, as is the case in LSD trips. Heaven or hell may loom. Nevertheless, not

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sense of self as a consequence of a major life event” (2014, 13). Subjective values, she says, of such experiences include a “range of mental states, including beliefs, emotions, and desires” (12). This, indeed, points to a very broad and somewhat fuzzy concept of experience. Cf. the example of Mary seeing the color red for the first time—“experience” here basically a sense perception and the reflection on it (can the latter really be grasped by isolating her first perception of red as an “experience”?)

25 “When a person has a new and different kind of experience, a kind of experience that teaches her something she could not have learned without having that kind of experience, she has an epistemic transformation” (Paul 2014, 10).

26 Paul 2014, 32.

27 Paul 2014, 83.

28 “Such experiences may include experiencing a horrific physical attack, gaining a new sensory ability, having a traumatic accident, undergoing major surgery, winning an Olympic gold medal, participating in a revolution, having a religious conversion, having a child, experiencing the death of a parent, making a major scientific discovery, or experiencing the death of a child” (Paul 2014, 16).

29 Paul argues that this epistemic ignorance may even return after a transformative experience: “just as knowledge about the experience of one individual can be inaccessible to another individual, what you can know about yourself at one time can be inaccessible to you at another time” (2014, 8).

30 Cf. Paul 2014, 88–89.

only in the case of psychedelic experiences one should consider Timothy Leary's "set and setting" to be relevant, i.e., that both the experimenter's mindset and the social-physical environment will determine the outcome.<sup>31</sup>

To discuss these complexities, it could be of help to draw on a well-known, often quoted example of a fully transformative experience in the spiritual realm, namely, the report of the awakening of *kuṇḍalinī* energy by Gopi Krishna (1903–1984, see Thaler in this volume). This experience, as described by Krishna, culminated in an 'out of body' experience, followed by months and years of burdensome and distressful aftereffects. Krishna would describe that extraordinary event as his activation of the so-called "coiled (serpent) power" (*kuṇḍalinī śakti*).<sup>32</sup> As such, it can illustrate the observation by H. Carel and I.J. Kidd,<sup>33</sup> that certain transformative experiences may result in epistemically positive but personally negative transformation.<sup>34</sup> However, while Krishna's report has often been quoted as an example of how an unconditional, un-intended eruption of raw *kuṇḍalinī*-power may almost destroy an individual, a close reading of Krishna's autobiographical account will come to a more nuanced picture in respect to its intentionality and destructiveness.

First, the experience has certainly been searched for, and was, thus fully intentional. It only came to the fore with a "non-intentional," extreme intensity. Krishna's account, however, reveals that it was the result of years of meditation practice, and extensive readings of Indian and Western books on Yoga, psychology, and Western occultism including Theosophy.

Second, the outcome of the *kuṇḍalinī*-awakening, while surely also exerting negative effects on Gopi Krishna's mental health and physical well-being—he saw himself suffering from hallucinations, describes phases of nervous breakdown and depression-like states<sup>35</sup>— is certainly seen as positive. Krishna describes its effects as a progressive expansion of his consciousness and of heightened perceptions,<sup>36</sup> as a process of rejuvenation,<sup>37</sup> as blissful, happy, "divine grace,"<sup>38</sup> and as a process of becoming aware of his genius consciousness resulting from *kuṇḍalinī*-power. The experience of this activation led to an epistemic transformation

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31 Cf. Zinberg 1984.

32 Cf. Krishna 1970, 11–13.

33 Carel and Kidd 2020.

34 See Krishna 1970, 19.

35 See Krishna 1970, 50, 170, 175, 190.

36 "I was aware of was a progressively expanding field of consciousness and a slowly increasing brightness of the external and internal objects of perception [ . . . ], I was a different being inside, living in a lustrous world of brilliant colour of which others had no knowledge whatsoever" (Krishna 1970, 182–83; cf. 145–46, 185–86).

37 See Krishna 1970, 149.

38 Krishna 1970, 209.



and a personal one,<sup>39</sup> which can probably best be described as a cognitive enhancement of paranormal qualities. Krishna experiences an intensification of dream consciousness,<sup>40</sup> is able to visit the “supersensible realm,”<sup>41</sup> and learns new languages which are mediated into his brain by electric waves which on their part are again grounded, at least remotely, in *kuṇḍalinī*-consciousness.<sup>42</sup> This supernatural “reception of unknown languages”<sup>43</sup> is a very common trope of Western esotericism and Theosophy. In sum, while Krishna certainly includes vivid descriptions of the negative, strenuous, depressive aspects of his *kuṇḍalinī*-awakening, which is depicted as “awful,” as physical and mental suffering, and so forth, the final outcome is clearly desirable.<sup>44</sup>

Thirdly, the probably most decisive personal insight that Krishna lets us know as emerging from the experience is the knowledge of being a more advanced individual, in terms of an evolutionary process of spiritual enhancement and advanced cerebral activities. It is an evolution of the brain itself—which is *kuṇḍalinī*-consciousness again, merely said in other words.<sup>45</sup> This process, he prophesizes, will soon palpably shape human evolution at large, possibly shaping exceptionally potent spiritual “superman.”<sup>46</sup>

For understanding Krishna’s intention to experience and develop *kuṇḍalinī*, it is essential to note that he shares with us that his father was deeply mystical. Already his father admired Yogic practitioners with occult powers,<sup>47</sup> and chose to leave the household for practicing Yoga in seclusion and reading extensively books on Yoga and occultism when his son was still young. Gopi Krishna obviously follows his father’s lead when he tells his readers: the “fire of renunciation began to burn fiercely in me, seeking knowledge of an honourable way of escape [ . . . ] and quietude of a consecrated existence.”<sup>48</sup> His mother, while also deeply

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39 “But most alarming was the way in which my mind acted and behaved after the incident. I felt as if I were looking at the world from a higher elevation than that from which I saw it before [ . . . ] It seemed as if my cognitive faculty had undergone a transformation and that I had, as it were, mentally expanded. What was more startling and terrifying was the fact that [ . . . ] consciousness [ . . . ] expanded and contracted, regulated in a mysterious way by the radiant current that was flowing up from the lowest plexus” (Krishna 1970, 51).

40 See Krishna 1970, 146–47.

41 Krishna 1970, 213.

42 See Krishna 1970, 212–13.

43 Krishna 1970, 228.

44 See Krishna 1970, 170–75, 190.

45 See Krishna 1970, 226, 214, 245–49.

46 See the most relevant pages in chapter 19 (Krishna 1970, 248–49).

47 See Krishna 1970, 17–20.

48 Krishna 1970, 20.

spiritual, was of a different kind, showing devotional faith in gods and miracles.<sup>49</sup> To sum up the observations on Gopi Krishna's transformative experience: His mind-set was from early on, by way his family socialization and through extensive readings of Western esotericism and Indian esoteric Yoga, soaked by one desire: to have such experiences himself. It clearly was an intentional endeavor, and the disturbing intensity of the "awakening" not fully negative, that is, not devastating, but much more a narrative illustration of the overwhelming—and in its superior handling: positive—power of *kuṇḍalinī*.

As such, it seems less appropriate to ask if this experience happened as described, or how this experience may correlate to a somehow objectifiable transformative "spiritual energy" in humans or humankind. Obviously, it is almost impossible to disentangle the experience (as an autobiographical narrative) from this biographical background.

In addition, the die-hard distrust in other people's reporting of transformative experiences is less convincing in a second, "Wittgensteinian" regard. Personal transformative experiences are not only subjective. They are also affected by language, including descriptions of transformative experiences by relevant others—living teachers as well as literature (as seen in the case just discussed). Not to include these earlier reports by others as an influential factor seems to rest on the presupposition that the individual will search and experience transformation only in "pure" or "unmediated experiences"—experiences not affected by earlier reports (or, more generally, by language). Particularly, it seems to hinge on the idea that expectations raised through other 'transformative experienter's testimony' have no significant impact. Certainly, one does not know for sure in which way one will evolve from transformative experiences—even if others largely convene that there is a certain usual outcome, e.g., from using psychedelic drugs. But it seems important to me to emphasize that other person's testimony will nevertheless contribute (a) to one's *intention to search* a certain transformative experience, (b) to the *transformative experience proper*, and (c) the *appraisal and evaluation* of the transformation. This does not mean that testimonies are reliable guidelines, but that we live in a universe of testimonies of transformative experiences which raise concrete expectations, and which influence our own post-transformative self-evaluation. Communicated experience, i.e., third-person testimonies, will *afford* certain experiences and their interpretation, while it will make other experiences less likely.

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<sup>49</sup> "I was brought up in a strictly religious atmosphere by my mother, whose faith rested unshakably on each of the innumerable gods and goddesses in her crowded pantheon" (Krishna 1970, 32).

L.A. Paul, in her concluding thoughts on transformative choice, recommends remaining open to epistemic transformative experiences. One should allow for “revelation,” that is, stay open for having new experiences for their own sake.<sup>50</sup> A “revelation” in this meaning, one should add, has no obvious religious connotation. In my understanding, it conforms to an ideal of a continuous self-realization,<sup>51</sup> including an appeal to allow for a different future. This is in broad strokes the major trajectory of L.A. Paul’s philosophical analysis. I will now return to the question of cognitive metaphors for transformative experiences. The guiding cognitive imagery the book uses is the hypothetical choice to become a vampire. An analysis of this imagery may help us not only to distinguish between transformative experience and the experience of being transformed, but also, to characterize an important trait of transformative experiences in the spiritual realm. L.A. Paul starts her thought experiment with the following words:

Imagine that you have the chance to become a vampire. With one [. . .] bite, you’ll be permanently transformed into an elegant and fabulous creature of the night. As a member of the undead, your life will be completely different. You’ll experience a range of intense, revelatory new sense experiences, you’ll gain immortal strength, speed and power.<sup>52</sup>

Yet, only a vampire knows what it is like to be a vampire. One may think here of Nagel’s not only phenotypically cognate example of the impossibility to know what it’s like to be a bat.<sup>53</sup> Let us assume, she says, that the decision of becoming a vampire is irreversible, and that your friends, formerly humans and now vampires, tell you that it is amazing and fantastic. They would never opt to return—even if they could. Would you do it? This highlights once again the epistemic problem: “they aren’t human any more, so their preferences are the ones vampires have, not the ones humans have.”<sup>54</sup> This far, the vampire example illus-

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<sup>50</sup> “The best response to this situation is to choose based on whether we want to discover who we’ll become” (Paul 2014, 4). One could try, L.A. Paul argues, to move from “a consideration of outcomes such as *what it will be like to be a vampire*” to evaluating “outcomes such as *discovering what it is like to be a vampire* versus *not discovering what it is like to be a vampire*,” that is, to reframe the choice of whether “to have the experience for its own sake” (112). But the value “for its own sake” (for the sake of discovery of the radically new), she says, could again look different after the experience (116). Yes, indeed! As argued, the discover being a vampire (by affirming, and not avoiding the choice) might not be the best illustration for this “revelatory” quality, because it is, as argued above, the end of any further “revelation.”

<sup>51</sup> This involves options that “function as crossroads in your path towards self-realization” (Paul 2014, 17).

<sup>52</sup> Paul 2014, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Nagel 1974.

<sup>54</sup> Paul 2014, 2.

trates very nicely the situation of the great “life choices.” Certainly, it appears much more intuitive for us to imagine us as vampires—in contrast to caterpillars and butterflies who lack human intentionality altogether. Interestingly, however, L.A. Paul says that you may not know how it is like to be a vampire, because the vampire will evaluate his existence with his vampire preferences. To assume that we may not evaluate a vampire’s existence on the basis of the vampire’s evaluation(s)—if they are able to talk in our language at all—does not convince. As a philosophical argument, it seems somewhat close to solipsism. If you would like to know what the vampire’s “life” is like: go, ask! Let them describe extensively their existence. If the language of the vampire will be the human language, it will be a language expressing emotions, preferences, evaluations, all of which we will understand. The vampire will express “experiences”—given he is still able to have experiences, and, if it is able to remember its pre-transformative, human state, it will at least be able to describe the general difference between the pre- and post-transformative existence.

The example of the vampire, however, implies one aspect that I would like to discuss more thoroughly. L.A. Paul argues that even if “life choices don’t usually involve the possibility of becoming an *immortal being*, they are fundamentally similar in a different way.”<sup>55</sup> But what does it mean that the vampire is immortal? In contrast to other traits of being a vampire, significant as they are: sucking blood, living in night-time, being able to fly, and so on, the trait of being “undead” or immortal seems to me in fact to be a quality of a different kind. “Being immortal” is one of the central elements which, on the one hand, let appear the existence of a vampire desirable, while, at the same time, it is probably the most central obstacle to deciding *rationally* whether or not to become a vampire.<sup>56</sup> Becoming immortal is the most epistemically transformative element: it is also in several respect the last existential decision the individual makes. To become immortal means to make the ‘life-transforming’ decision par excellence, a decision that pushes all other future decisions in a second rank. Nothing will ever be life-threatening, and nothing can ever be final. Being immortal, I hold, the vampire will be unable to make any further epistemically transformative experience. If the vampire *knows* (self-reflective) of being immortal, it reaches a state in which no further experience can ever undermine a fundamental security of “being.” No new experience will ever again uncover precarious dimensions of existence. Suffering the loss of beloved, for example, will also be fundamentally changed: Ei-

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55 Paul 2014, 2; emphasis added.

56 The Vampire case is certainly more than an illustration (see Paul 2014, 42–43, 46, 47, 49, 50).

ther the beloved are themselves eternal, too,<sup>57</sup> or one lives with an open future of infinite new relationships. I assume that certainly in first case, and most likely also in the second case the existential meaning of loss will vanish. If this is plausible, we could reframe the question like this:

- The transformative choice of becoming a vampire consists in the choice to have a final transformative experience that will at once end the future possibility for transformative experiences.

This is life-changing in the most radical sense because it will put an end to the *human* condition of life. Becoming immortal would render the idea of “life choices” both useless and meaningless. Thus, we can say becoming a vampire is a truly epistemically transformative experience, because it implies that after the transformative experience awaits a state of being permanently transformed<sup>58</sup> without ever repeating a transformative experience of sorts. As such, it seems comparable to a very central Christian idea: paradise lost. Indeed, we can trace fundamental elements of such a risky transformative experience to a classical Christian theme, namely, tasting the forbidden transformative fruit in paradise. I may shortly highlight how the motif has been taken up by John Milton in “Paradise Lost,”<sup>59</sup> explicitly naming it an “experience.” Here, the serpent convinces Eve that tasting the fruit will augment her “inward powers,” and will grant higher knowledge. Tasting the fruit, so the serpent suggests, Eve will enjoy a transformation: Having a more “capacious” mind and power of reason, and discerning the workings of the universe, otherwise visible only in heaven. So, she eats the fruit, and persuades Adam to join her with words again praising the effects of her own experience: “This tree is not as we are told, a tree / Of danger tasted, nor to evil unknown / Opening the way, but of divine effect / To open eyes, and make them gods who taste.”<sup>60</sup> But, of course, the effects are known, and fatal: paradise lost. Interestingly, Milton names the transformation an “experience.”<sup>61</sup> “On my experience,” he has Eve say to Adam, “freely taste, / And fear of death deliver to the winds.”<sup>62</sup> We can easily see that here also there is only one fundamental transformative experience, and Eve and Adam will never return to her pre-transformed garden.

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57 See Jim Jarmush’s movie on a vampire couple, *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Great Britain, Germany 2013 (Pandora Film).

58 The state of being permanently transformed implies, of course, a long-term evaluation—combining judgments immediately after the experience, sometime later, and much later.

59 Milton (1667) 2005.

60 Milton (1667) 2005, 9. 863–66.

61 Milton (1667) 2005, 9.807.

62 Milton (1667) 2005, 9.988–89.

But what does this discussion on vampires yield for the study of intentional transformative experiences in the field of religious and spiritual practices?<sup>63</sup> Sure, the vampire does not figure prominently in the world's major religious traditions. Nevertheless, I consider the transformative choice of "becoming a vampire" to be a perfect metaphor for illustrating the most important message of transformative experiences sought after in the spiritual field: The overwhelming majority of spiritual practitioners search for one specific certainty, namely, of becoming aware of their immortal nature—whether this is conceptualized as unlimited consciousness, as the original self, or an eternal soul. A fully transformative, spiritual experience will arguably always imply a kind of knowledge of the experiencer's own infinite nature.<sup>64</sup> This is, as I argued elsewhere, the transformative dimension of many life-changing "near-death experiences."<sup>65</sup> Even if it is only an ephemeral moment of an "out of body experience," in which the individual (if convinced that the out-of-body perspective is made by a *disembodied* observer) may experience the reality of a non-corporeal consciousness. If not judged to be an illusion, it is a view from nowhere: disembodied consciousness, itself no longer bound to matter that will eventually dissolve. Disembodied consciousness should no longer transform. If disembodied, it should not die. Regarding near-death visions, therefore, it does not matter if the individual includes traditional religious imagery in their near-death vision or not: The medium (that there *are* afterlife insights at all) is the message. Given the hypothesis is plausible that a life-changing religious or spiritual transformative experience will usually, while made, imply an insight into how (suffering from) finitude can be overcome, it should add evidence to the claim by providing examples from religious discourse and religious actors.

To repeat my hypothesis: Searching for a truly life-changing and epistemically transformative experience will mean in the religious field to gain an insight that uncovers human finitude to be unreal, and an illusionary perception. One could probably object here and argue that this sense of a "truly life-changing experience" skips the possibility of somewhat less big, but still life-changing, religious experiences. How about experiences of "great transcendence" (Alfred Schütz, Thomas Luck-

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63 L.A. Paul herself mentions "transformative religious belief" (see Paul 2014, 104, referring to an unpublished paper) but does not discuss it more thoroughly.

64 "You know that undergoing the experience will change what it is like for you to live your life, and perhaps even change what it is like to be you, deeply and fundamentally" (Paul 2014, 3) – Yes, and more, in the case of the vampire, who does no longer know what life is, because life has lost its opposite: death. Again, we encounter very different meanings of "experience" here: the experience of change; the experience of being changed, and of being permanently changed.

65 Schlieter 2018.

mann) which are beyond the everyday world, and life-changing, but not exclusively made in a religious framework: for example, an encounter with some sort of truth (for example, a person's cognitive experience of having understood for the first time a deep emotion such as empathy), or experiences in nature?<sup>66</sup> While there are certainly such intermediate, secular "life-transforming" experiences, I will define as truly life-changing experiences only those which change substantially and irreversibly the attitude towards the meaning of individual's life. These perceptions are, *per definitionem*, religious. Religious perceptions can be defined as those that transform and transcend exactly these perceptions of finite life: the loss of a beloved, contingency and uncertainty in every other respect, or the feeling of being a meaningless fragment. This attitude is reflected in what Niklas Luhmann or Hermann Lübbe have called the "contingency reduction" of religion.<sup>67</sup> Religion is a coping strategy, providing formula to overcome contingency. I will take Buddhism as an example here. Describing his achievement, the liberation found in his awakening, the Buddha is said to have taught the following in a very prominent place, his first sermon "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma" (*Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*): "Listen! Immortality is found" (Pali: *amatam adhigatam*, Vin I.9,15ff.).<sup>68</sup> As the famous "four noble truth," communicated for the first time in exactly this Sutta, he describes his teaching and practice to be the most efficient means against all forms of "suffering" arising from human finitude: aging, illness, death; union with what is displeasing; separation from what is pleasing, and so forth. Elsewhere, he told his followers how he achieved the transformative experience of awakening, and described "the noble search" for this transformative experience with the following words: "There is the case where a person, himself being subject to aging . . . illness. . . death. . . sorrow. . . defilement [. . .], seeks the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke: Unbinding. This is the noble search."<sup>69</sup>

And it is exactly this, this awakening (*bodhi*)—the meditative practice under the tree of awakening— which he is said to consider as the intentional transformative experience in which he gained exactly these insights (M I. 160ff.). These depictions harmonize with the concept of *nirvāṇa*, the state of ultimate and infinite peace. It will not be necessary to go into detail here, but this is one major trait of Buddhist practice that has been from the beginning defined as overcoming precarious life by achieving a state (of mind) that includes eternal peace. The Buddha

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<sup>66</sup> See Thurfjell 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Luhmann 1989, 349–51; see also Hägglund 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Vetter 1988, 8.

<sup>69</sup> MN 26; M I.160 ff. Ariyapariyesana Sutta ("The Noble Search"). Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2004. <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.026.than.html>.

says: Immortality, or, more precisely, the deathless, the “last birth” state,<sup>70</sup> is found. Becoming the Buddha by his “awakening” (*bodhi*), the Buddha obviously narrates to not only being personally transformed, but also epistemically: In the experience, he is able to see himself in earlier births and existences, he understands the conditionality of karma, and he understands himself to be the Buddha—all elements of his narrative that demonstrate his deep epistemic transformation.

But again, one could object and argue that the life-changing experience is exactly the opposite of what has been stated above. Instead of an insight that uncovers human finitude to be unreal (as argued above) it could, on the contrary, be an insight that uncovers human finitude to be real. Hence, it would be an insight that results in embracing finitude, an insight that renders each moment precious.<sup>71</sup> I will not deny that practitioners of various religio-philosophical traditions such as, for example, strands of Indian, Tibetan, or East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism seek to realize an insight that accepts finitude, an insight into selflessness and emptiness, which entails to go beyond the distinction of finite/infinite. This philosophical Buddhist understanding, nevertheless, still includes an emphatic inclusion of the “non-finite.” Furthermore, if it fully breaks with any inspiration of a “beyond,” and only embraces the finite without any reference to nirvana, Buddhahood, or else, one could also define this attitude as no longer located within the religious field. Instead, it reflects a philosophical attitude springing forth from the nourishing ground of a religious tradition.

The primary religious goal to transform into someone who knows that finitude is transcended, that anxiety of non-being besieged, and that mortality is no longer a pressing existential issue, is also an effect of other major tradition’s transformative experiences. Next to Buddhism, one should think of the Hindu traditions here, that is, the idea of the “released” (*jivanmukta*, the completely free, “liberated in life”), who now know their “true self.” Equally, one could think of Christian or Muslim conversion experiences. Although I may not elaborate here on further examples, I may mention that it is in perfect harmony with attempts to describe human intentional efforts to become aware of one’s immortal soul,<sup>72</sup> even if transformative experiences are sometimes less valued in theological discourse. Some Christian, Jewish, and Muslim theologians seem to share a certain reservation against intentional efforts to *train* or *experiment* with transformative

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<sup>70</sup> See A I 259, “But when I comprehended, as it really is, the satisfaction of the world as satisfaction, the misery as misery, and the escape therefrom as escape, then I understood perfectly and accepted full Buddha-status, and the knowledge and vision arose in me: sure is the release of my mind: this is my last birth” (quoted in Johansson 1969, 21).

<sup>71</sup> My thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this possibility.

<sup>72</sup> e.g., William James—see his *Human Immortality*, 1898.



experiences, and may stress instead the importance of devotion, correct ritual behavior, and especially, unconditional belief in the grace of God, and so forth—see, again exemplary, Paul Tillich.<sup>73</sup>

### 3 Narrating Transformative Experience – Autobiographies of the Transformed Self

Finally, I shall discuss how transformative experiences are depicted from the perspective of the “permanently transformed,” and what this may teach us for the systematic study of religious experiences, or, experiences deemed “*religious*.” I may share a general observation first: Many practitioners and scholars of religion deeply cherish the idea of a sudden enlightenment. *Intentional* transformative experiences, if they come as a result a long-term *search* and a *continuous training*, are much less appealing. Why is this so? I think there is first a rather obvious moment: One generally shies away from arduous labor if the outcome is unclear. It seems that practitioners as well as seekers like to narrate a *sudden* change, because being *unexpected* entails full authenticity. To be suddenly overpowered by a “struck-by-a-lightning” experience is intensifying the evidence, if not, a narrative evidence-mechanism: A sudden awakening or enlightenment, or being unexpectedly liberated from prison, and so forth—just note again Metzner’s list of transformative metaphors above. All this will discursively express that the whole experience was *real*. It did not happen as a lukewarm, half-imagined fulfilment of long-cherished hopes. Yet, a closer look at autobiographical depictions of such life-changing experiences uncovers a truly amazing fact: Very often, the post-ecstatic, transformed individual explains that in their life prior to the life-changing experience, they already somehow knew what to search for.

I will only shortly summarize this argument on the narrative autobiographical frame of “religious experience” here, that I developed elsewhere.<sup>74</sup> I will again take the historical Buddha as an example, but the structure can be shown from sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant conversion narratives up to experiences of “enlightenment” in the most recent esoteric milieu.

In the autobiographical sources in which the Buddha is depicted to narrate his spiritual search, he first speaks of unsuccessful attempts: his meditation practice under guidance of his two Yogic teachers, which did not avail the bliss and

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<sup>73</sup> Tillich 1957, 36.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Schlieter 2023.

awareness of full liberation. Neither were his radical ascetic practices hailed with salvific results. After almost starving himself to death, the Buddha narrates his followers that he finally thought to himself:

‘And whatever recluses and brahmins at present experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. But by this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to awakening? (*Siyā nu kho añño maggo bodhāyā*)? ‘I considered: ‘I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first *jhāna* [meditative state]. Could that be the path to awakening?’ Then, following on that memory, came the realization: ‘That is the path to awakening.’<sup>75</sup>

In other words, the Buddha is said to already know what to find! He knew it all the time. Let me remark that this blissful state is not only the entrance gate of his fully intentional transformative experience: the memory of this initial state of him being a teenager is *invoked* in order to serve as an additional criterion for the *authenticity and agency of the way to awakening*—thus, it is part of the *real* awakening. Surely, in how far the source above articulates the *ipsissima vox* of the Buddha must remain an open question, given the long oral transmission of the Buddha’s speeches. However, even if it is largely a narrative of intentional transformative experiences as construed by his followers, it is still significant.

What do we do with these observations on “life-changing transformative experiences,” and what will follow for the study of religious experience? First, intentional transformative experiences have to be studied in the autobiographical framework. Being “transformative,” they presuppose a retrospective view on a process which makes it less appropriate to construe those experiences as isolated events, as for example, in the “event cognition” paradigm of Egil Asprem and Ann Taves.<sup>76</sup> Transformative experiences can rarely be understood without a view of what the individual intentionally searched for—and, often, already set on the path in their youth.

See this excerpt from Leo Tolstoy, *My Confession* (*Íspoved*, 1882):

I remember one day in early spring when I was alone in the forest listening to the sounds of the woods. I [. . .] thought about the one thing that had constantly occupied me for the last three years. Again I was searching for God. [. . .] ‘Live, seeking God, for there can be no life without God.’ And more powerfully than ever a light shone within me and all around me,

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75 Mahāsaccaka Sutta, MN 36; M I.246; translation by Bodhi 1995, 340, with small terminological adaptations.

76 Asprem and Taves 2017.

and this light has not abandoned me since. Thus I was saved from suicide. When and how this transformation within me was accomplished, I could not say. Just as the life force within me was gradually and imperceptibly destroyed, [ . . . ] so too did this life force return to me gradually and imperceptibly. And the strange thing is that the life force which returned to me was not new but very old; it was the same force that had guided me during the early periods of my life. In essence I returned to the first things, to the things of childhood and youth. I returned to a faith in that will which gave birth to me.<sup>77</sup>

In their recent compendium on religious experience, Paul K. Moser and Chad Meister select the respective passage from Tolstoy's autobiographical account to show how "religious experience" culminates in a life-changing meaningfulness, which, due to its transformative qualities, alters the way individuals see their earlier lives. In this trajectory, they comment: "Something happened, or was presented, to Tolstoy in his experience, or qualitative awareness, and this was not just a belief, hypothesis, or theory. He directly experienced new meaning for his life."<sup>78</sup>

From the importance of the autobiographical background, which embeds the transformative, cutting-edge experience into a complex setting of other cognate, although not similarly intense, experiences, follows an interest in exactly those earlier other experiences, which allow to see the whole life of the "experiencers" as a series of more or less transformative experiences, which finally reintroduce the Shakespearean, pre-Empiricist-individualist semantics of "experience": Experience, Anna Wierzbicka has shown in her impressive work,<sup>79</sup> how the modern usage of the term "experience" changed significantly from a model of experience as positive, accumulated objective knowledge to a sensory-based model of subjective, replicable experience(s)—now a count noun. In regard to a more accurate description of what one shall depict as "life-changing experiences," I consider it relevant to revive the "Shakespearean" view of experience as accumulated knowledge by either a doer or an undergoer who has collected his experiential knowledge with difficulties, laborious repetition, and over many years. Even if it goes against the grain of the current use of "religious experience" (presupposing the empiricist preference of sense-perception), it seems much more accurate to me to construe "religious experience" as deeply dependent on a *religious individual's biography*. Even if individuals from the late eighteenth century onwards spoke of *experiments* with transformative experiences, one can still become aware how their scientific rhetoric emerged from a religious endeavor (and an ontological view of experiments that simply show *how*

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77 Tolstoy 1882; 1920, 75.

78 Tolstoy 2020, 2; emphasis in original.

79 Wierzbicka 2010; cf. Schlieter 2023, 155–57.

*nature is*).<sup>80</sup> Sure, to include earlier and not fully life-changing experiences in what counts as “religious experiences” may lead us to a view of religious experiences as having a less dramatic outcome for the experiencing individual. If, however, one defines as religious “*any ideal of being absolved from the pain of loss*,”<sup>81</sup> the Vampire, and any other human being immortalized, could indeed count as living up to a religious ideal. But as we can see from the Buddha’s example, it seems much better to already know what one is looking for. In the case of the missionary Vampire, one has only a third-person testimony at hand.

There is no experimental option to be a Vampire for a limited period. Hence, if you meet a benevolent Vampire on your way praising its transformed existence, think twice before letting it bite you.

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<sup>80</sup> Cf., for example, the in this case much more radical idea of an open experiment in Nietzsche, starting, interestingly, with the title “mortal souls”: Nietzsche’s “Experimental-Philosophie” (NL 1888 16[32], Fröhliche Wissenschaft, KSA 13, 492): due to the fact, that the belief in an immortal soul is lost— “mortal souls” (Sterbliche Seelen), as the title of the aphorism has it, and which includes the loss of belief in possible eternal punishment, it is now allowed to experiment with oneself (being free to do so, because it no longer counts as madness, or as playing with heaven and hell (see KSA 3, 294).

<sup>81</sup> Häggglund 2019, 74.

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Sarah Perez

# Chapter 12

## Through the Looking-Glass: A Stage-Based Approach to the Intentional Transformative Experience of Reality Shifting

To me, reality shifting is a way of unlocking my true potential via other realities. Infinite realities mean infinite possibilities for what I can live through and experience and all I need is my mind to do so. From having supernatural powers to meeting people who are unobtainable in this reality to even just exploring different life paths for myself. *Starlitsky*<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Introduction

The above quote comes from a practitioner involved with a new phenomenon called reality shifting. The name of the phenomenon already makes its content clear: the participants practice various techniques that seem to enable them to enter another reality temporarily or permanently.<sup>2</sup> Two terms are important here: the *current reality* (CR; sometimes also target reality) refers to the reality in which the practitioner normally finds themselves before the shift. They can then select a *desired reality* (DR) that they would like to visit using reality shifting.<sup>3</sup> This desired reality can be chosen freely, which is often done through ‘scripting,’

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1 Starlitsky, personal communication. The names of all interviewees have been anonymized through made-up usernames. All personal communication took place in May 2022, unless stated otherwise.

2 I would like to thank my interviewees, who provided me with a great deal of information about their own experiences and the moderators of the internet platforms used, who supported me in my research. Many thanks to Sara A. Kuwar and Max O'Brien for providing me with their collected data and thus helping to support some of the theses. Their surveys reached more than 600 participants and therefore were able to provide important information about the practice, the participants, and the intentions of reality shifting. Working on this topic alongside my dissertation was made possible by financial support from the Swiss National Science Foundation. Lastly, I want to especially thank Leoni van Rijn and Bastiaan van Rijn for their helpful discussions and intense feedback.

3 In the following I refer to the respective realities as often as possible with the identifying signifiers *current* or *desired*. If this is not the case, it will become clear from the context what kind of reality—in the sense of the shifters—is being referred to.

the act of writing down details about one's desired reality. Since many shifters are convinced that there are infinite realities, even fiction-based<sup>4</sup> worlds such as the world of *Harry Potter* or the *Marvel Universe* exist and are open to explore. Although fiction-based worlds are particularly popular with shifters, this does not mean that shifting is limited to them. Instead, numerous shifters choose a reality that is similar to their current reality, but offers better conditions for them; for example, by not including discrimination, violence, or climate change.

This chapter will first briefly introduce the phenomenon, before then focusing on the transformational aspects of reality shifting. On a theoretical basis, the chapter will apply the terminology of transformative experience by Laurie Paul to analyze reality shifting. Her terms will therefore be introduced later to apply them on the phenomenon. This analysis will show that different stages of the phenomenon bring with them different degrees of transformations. I argue that only by including 1. the direct engagement with the phenomenon prior to actually experiencing a successful reality shift, as well as 2. the post-experience interpretation of the shift, we can better understand what the practice means to shifters. Furthermore, an integration of the pre-shifting stage shows the importance of intentionality within the phenomenon, as reality shifting is characterized by a high amount of planning, influencing both how shifters experience their shifts, as well as their subsequent interpretations. These outcomes will show that reality shifting is more than just a daydreaming trend, or a combination of imagination and fandom, as it is often portrayed in popular media and in the limited academic coverage of the practice so far. It is a complex and nuanced phenomenon that as a case study can highlight relevant approaches to intentional transformative experiences.

## 2 The Phenomenon of Reality Shifting

The above introduction already states that reality shifting is the practice of entering a different reality. The theoretical interpretations which reality shifting is based on are diverse. There are very different ideas about the origins and theoretical foundations of this phenomenon, but only two of the most widely held interpretations, the

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term 'fiction-based' here to indicate that while some of these worlds are based on fictional literature or other media, these worlds are expanded and customized by the shifters. This can affect significant elements. For example, it was stated in one interview that although the target reality of the interviewee was the world of *Harry Potter*, the titular character himself did not exist in that world.

*multiverse theory*, and the *consciousness theory*,<sup>5</sup> will be briefly presented here. The multiverse theory states that there is an infinite number of universes and, therefore, of realities. Reality shifting practitioners can choose one of these realities and enter it. Nothing is created by them; the reality already exists in exactly this way before the shift. The practitioners themselves also exist in this reality, sometimes in a slightly changed form, for example with a different hair color or character traits, but sometimes also very different, for example, when they enter an anime universe. The consciousness theory reflects the belief that one's consciousness can, through practices such as visualization or imagination, create different realities. Those do not actually exist outside of the current reality, one is still in the same reality, but it is perceived as a different one. The quote below from a Reddit user shows how practitioners understand this distinction:

Multiverse:

We are in an infinite multiverse. In some of these other realities versions of ourselves exist, with a part of our vast consciousness in each. When you shift you move your awareness from part of your consciousness in this reality, to part in a different reality. We have a consciousness that spans across every reality in the multiverse.

Consciousness:

Your brain is powerful enough to be able to alter your perception of reality around you. With shifting you are just manipulating your five senses to perceive reality as a different place, with different people/experiences that are just as real and intricate as life here. However just because your brain is creating this doesn't mean it's not real.<sup>6</sup>

Both interpretations as well as other individual ideas, are discussed on various platforms and the preferences for specific interpretations differ per platform.<sup>7</sup> Despite the different foundations, the approaches to reach a successful shift are the same and it can be assumed that how it works is less relevant to many shifters than *that* it works. Although some standardized methods initially enjoyed great popularity, most shifters now propose individual approaches. As a result, there is a very large number of different methods that continue to be customized and individualized. It therefore makes more sense to present recurring elements within the various methods, rather than summarize specific methods as such. The fol-

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<sup>5</sup> These terms were chosen by the practitioners themselves.

<sup>6</sup> Random-acc248 2022.

<sup>7</sup> The internal survey done by Sara A. Kuwar within the Reddit community r/shiftingrealities pointed to an overwhelming preference for the multiverse theory. The analysis is mostly based on the multiverse interpretation due to the position of the interviewees. However, recently there has been an influx of consciousness-related posts.



lowing example of one interviewee shows how practitioners can try to achieve a shift:

Like many practitioners, Alpacasonly heard about shifting on TikTok, and only after a while started researching more about this phenomenon. They start their practice by reading through their script. Alpacasonly states that a script is not necessary, but they do this, because it makes them feel comfortable. After reading for a while, they meditate for ten minutes to help them focus and let go of any doubts or worries. When Alpacasonly feels ready, they lay down and say their affirmations. Often, they repeat the sentence “I am,” and combine this sentence with more personal affirmations about them and their desired reality. After lying and saying affirmations for a couple of minutes, they start counting to one hundred and again repeat some affirmations while visualizing the destination they chose. Then, they are ready to enter their desired reality. For Alpacasonly, their first shift resulted in them suddenly finding themselves in a restaurant. They emphasize the realness of them physically being in this restaurant, but every few minutes, when Alpacasonly blinked, they could see their bedroom for a short second.<sup>8</sup>

What emerges from this example are the various elements that Alpacasonly integrates into their shifting method, and which are also found in other methods. These include scripting, subliminals, affirmations, imagination, and visualization, which will shortly be summarized here. An important part of the method is scripting. The script can be understood as a roadmap to the chosen reality, whereas upon arrival in that very reality, opinions differ as to whether it can be manipulated post-scripting. For example, some Reddit users state:

Think of scripting as guidelines. You're shifting to another pre-existing reality. It doesn't only exist because you decided it did. It was always there. You were always there.<sup>9</sup>

Scripting which reality you go into is less of a creation of a new reality, and more of a guide to a new reality. it gives you a better understanding of where exactly you'll be going!<sup>10</sup>

Even though both explanations above relate to the multiverse theory, scripting is used independently of the theoretical belief concerning reality shifting.

Although scripts often contain exactly what ideas the practitioners have of their desired reality, this is not strictly necessary, since reality shifters believe that all the important information is already known by them subconsciously. Therefore, according to many shifters, even moments and events that have not been written down beforehand, will be exactly how the practitioners wanted them to be. This

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<sup>8</sup> Alpacasonly, personal communication.

<sup>9</sup> Moonlit-baby 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Ellio 2020.

point will be of interest later, when the first stage of experiencing reality shifting is discussed in which intentionality is highly relevant.

Many reality shifting practitioners begin their method with specific music playlists that include so-called subliminals. Such subliminals are believed to be based on certain frequencies that facilitate shifting and which sometimes contain encouraging messages. Such messages are known as affirmations. These are not only unconsciously received through subliminals, but also spoken by the practitioners. As already described in Alpacasonly's routine, two different types of affirmations are recited by the reality shifters. First those that relate to the act of shifting itself. Here practitioners talk about their shifting skills and the tenets of the phenomenon. Example sentences mentioned by the interviewee Purple\_Waves are as follows: "I am in my desired reality, I can shift, I'm a master shifter."<sup>11</sup> In addition to affirmations that refer to the shifting itself, there are also more individual affirmations that refer to one's own desired reality, such as "I have arrived in Hogwarts"; and "I am magical."<sup>12</sup>

Affirmations are often connected with imagination and visualization. As practitioners recite that they are in a reality with certain people, those same people are being imagined. Some methods emphasize imagination and visualization, when they for example suggest imagining the smell of the desired reality and important persons within it.<sup>13</sup> This does not mean, however, that the practitioners believe that shifting is imagination (at least not for the multiverse adherents), it is merely seen as a part of the method to reach a 'full shift.'

At this point, a short literature overview is useful to show how the phenomenon is framed within the existing academic research. Surprisingly, not much has been published on reality shifting yet.<sup>14</sup> One team of psychologists, led by Eli Somer, tried to explain the phenomenon with their article "Reality Shifting: Psycho-

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<sup>11</sup> Purple\_Waves, personal communication.

<sup>12</sup> BrookePhobic 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Many shifters have 'comfort characters.' A comfort character is that character in the fictional world who plays a central role for the reality shifter. It is often already specified in the script that there is a friendly or romantic relationship between the reality shifter and the comfort character.

<sup>14</sup> Except for the article by Somer and colleagues, several more publications have appeared that shortly discuss reality shifting. These base themselves mainly on the work by Somer and colleagues, resulting in problematic conclusions based on no first-hand data (Hudson and Johnson 2022; Necpál and Šoltýsová, 2023). The phenomenon is treated more cautiously by O'Neill and colleagues. The team concludes that "identifying and understanding new subcultures of the Internet will allow a better understanding of what should be considered a psychiatric concern within an increasingly online-based society" (O'Neill et al. 2023, 378). For a different perspective, see Van Rijn and Perez (forthcoming).

logical Features of an Emergent Online Daydreaming Culture.”<sup>15</sup> Three of the ten pages of this relatively short article are spent on shortly explaining what reality shifting is. After that, the next four pages are filled with comparisons to psychological phenomena the investigators deem similar to reality shifting: tulpa-mancy, self-hypnosis, lucid dreaming, dissociative absorption, and maladaptive daydreaming. Even though the article ends cautiously by stating the possible benefits of shifting, throughout the comparison to these other phenomena, threatening references are made to various pathological tendencies. The data collection of Somer and colleagues was done exclusively through a review of the online communities. From this, and their comparisons, they conclude that reality shifting is “a new solitary mental activity” involving “imaginal worlds experienced as ‘real.’”<sup>16</sup>

The article by Somer and colleagues tries to fairly judge the phenomenon. However, they miss some crucial points that skew their analysis. First, to call reality shifting ‘solitary’ misses the continuous exchange of stories, tips, motivational messages and more on the various online media—making the practice highly social. Second, comparing reality shifting to phenomena such as maladaptive daydreaming frames the whole in a purely psychological context. It is, however, important to understand that shifting is closely related to the wider spiritual milieu. The affirmations mentioned above, for example, are a part of a wider manifestation interest within the spiritual milieu that goes back to the New Thought movement of the late nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> In a way, we could see reality shifting as the successful combination of manifestation with the multiverse theory, resulting in a novel (Generation Z specific) phenomenon that is nonetheless rooted deeply within earlier ones. Third, certain alleged pathological elements of reality shifting—such as the hearing of voices as potentially psychotic—could more fruitfully be seen as practice-specific. Tanya Luhrmann, for example, showed that in a specific subpart of Evangelical Christianity in America, such behavior is also encouraged and trained.<sup>18</sup> Once social and cultural expectations allow certain phenomena such as the hearing of voices, it becomes much more complicated to write it off simply as pathological. This short discussion of the work of Somer and colleagues is merely meant to show that theirs is not the final word on the phenomenon, and that a cultural perspective has much to offer.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Somer, Cardeña, Catelan, and Soffer-Dudek 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Somer, Cardeña, Catelan, and Soffer-Dudek 2021, 1, 6.

<sup>17</sup> On the Law of Attraction see Albanese (2015). For more on the New Thought Movement see Deveney (2015), Hanegraaff (2006), and Satter (1999).

<sup>18</sup> Luhrmann 2012.

<sup>19</sup> For a larger overview of reality shifting as an extension of New Thought, see Van Rijn and Perez (forthcoming).

At this point, the demographics of the phenomenon will be shortly discussed to give a wider contextual overview of who is involved with reality shifting. Using the data of Sara A. Kuwar and Max O'Brien<sup>20</sup> it becomes clear that a majority of shifters are teenagers or young adults. Kuwar's survey with 621 participants came to the result that 456 participants (76.8%) were in the age between 13 and 19. O'Brien came to a similar conclusion. In his survey of 371 participants, a total of 66.2% were between 14 and 19 years old. The survey by Kuwar also shed light on the most common entry and information platforms for reality shifting. A total of 66.9% participants answered that they found out about reality shifting through various social media and internet platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Wattpad and others. Another point of interest is the number of participants who have not yet successfully shifted. Kuwar's survey shows that 78.7% of the practitioners have not shifted yet, which is a significant amount. Nevertheless, these participants still identify as shifters and state that the phenomenon had an impact on them or their life: almost half of the participants that have not yet shifted (43.2%) state that shifting affected them, either positively or negatively.<sup>21</sup> This means that reality shifting is predominately a young adult and internet-based sub-culture of which a substantial part of practitioners have not shifted.

The data collection for this chapter included interviews with reality shifters. For ethical reasons, I have only talked to shifters that were above the age of eighteen, which limited the number of participants significantly. In the end, twenty interviews were conducted.<sup>22</sup> Since the practitioners usually post with usernames on the various Internet platforms, the anonymity of the interviewees is already partly guaranteed. Nevertheless, to fully assure anonymity, different usernames were assigned to the interviewees. Gender references within these names were selected by the interviewees themselves.

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<sup>20</sup> The surveys were conducted by the practitioners independently from this chapter to form a better understanding of the phenomenon and the community from within.

<sup>21</sup> Often, the engagement in scripting, meditation, and the belief in the multiverse or generally the possibility of one day entering a different reality gives the shifters hope, while on the other hand, some participants stated that it can be frustrating to try shifting realities for a long time without any success.

<sup>22</sup> Due to the scope of this chapter, no more interviews could be conducted, although almost fifty reality shifters made themselves available for them.

### 3 Reality Shifting as a Transformative Experience

Intended transformation of one's reality and one's own self forms the core of the reality shifting phenomenon as mirrored in the different social media platform. Entering another, freely chosen reality; shaping oneself according to one's own wishes and the characteristics of this desired reality; and finally maintaining parts of this transformation even after the shifting are all decisive elements of reality shifting. From these goals, the layering of the phenomenon is already clear: in the first stage, the practitioner is introduced to the phenomenon and starts getting involved with the methods. Of course, entering other worlds, such as that of the Harry Potter novels and other (often fiction-based) worlds, is a central concern of the shifters, therefore the second stage will analyze the moment of realization of a successful shift. Following this, the third stage then discusses the experiences the shifters make while in their desired reality. Here, a focus lies on living in the reality for a longer period but also the changes of one's own person within it that are necessary to adapt to the respective reality as well as to individual preferences. A fourth and final stage takes place after returning to the current reality; since some reality shifters claim to remain in their desired realities for long periods of time, certain skills, character traits or even physical characteristics are said to have evolved or changed upon return. These factors, next to the emotional aftereffects the practice brings with it, should not be underestimated.

This subchapter analyses the different (non-)experiential stages within reality shifting by first explaining what each stage entails, followed by illustrating what kind of experiences the shifters make and what effects these have on them. In a third step, the terminology of Laurie Paul will be utilized to better understand what consequences each stage has, as well as making it possible to see where reality shifting follows established patterns of (religious) intentional transformative practices, and where it differs. For this reason, a short introduction into L.A. Paul's definition of transformative experience is necessary.

In her book *Transformative Experiences*,<sup>23</sup> L.A. Paul asks the question of how one should make a decision if it cannot be known what consequences it has for oneself. One example, among various others, is that even though we can partially imagine how it is like to be able to see in the dark, we have no knowledge how it is to experience the world in such a way as an echo-locating bat. L.A. Paul summarizes:

All of these examples bring out the deep and familiar fact that different subjective points of view, as different conscious perspectives, can be fundamentally inaccessible to each other.

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<sup>23</sup> Paul 2014.

[ . . . ] It isn't that you can't imagine something in place of the experience you haven't had. It's that this act of imagining isn't enough to let you know what it is really like to be an octopus, or to be a slave, or to be blind. You need to have the experience itself to know what it is really like.<sup>24</sup>

One of the main outcomes of L.A. Paul's book is the observation, supported by many examples ranging from thought-experiments to everyday situations, that a life-changing transformative experience consists of an epistemic and a personal transformation. As the name suggest, the epistemic transformation is based on knowledge that is gained only through the experience:

When a person has a new and different kind of experience, a kind of experience that teaches her something she could not have learned without having that kind of experience, she has an epistemic transformation.<sup>25</sup>

Summarized, the epistemic transformation is based on the knowledge that such an experience can provide, but it will not change the experiencer's life drastically in most cases. When experiences do indeed change the perspective that the experiencer has on themselves and their core preferences, L.A. Paul speaks of a personally transformative experience:

If an experience changes you enough to substantially change your point of view, thus substantially revising your core preferences or revising how you experience being yourself, it is a personally transformative experience.<sup>26</sup>

Such personally transformative experiences can be negative, such as physical attacks, or positive, such as getting and caring for a pet. But what is important for L.A. Paul is that the experiencer cannot beforehand know how they will see themselves after the experience. Only through the experience itself is this knowledge accessible to them, and they have no reliable way of getting information on how it will transform them and their life. Although some experiences can be either epistemically or personally transformative without including the other one, L.A. Paul is mostly interested in those experiences that provide both forms of transformation. The four different stages of reality shifting can fruitfully be analyzed with the above terms introduced and defined by L.A. Paul. It will be shown how the breaking up of the phenomenon in such stages makes for a richer analysis that can shed light on exactly how shifting is described by proponents, and how these descrip-

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<sup>24</sup> Paul 2014, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Paul 2014, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Paul 2014, 16.

tions compare to the term ‘transformative experience’ as a whole, as well as to specific instances of this concept in particular.

The division into different stages of experience and the application of L.A. Paul’s concepts to them is already a difference from the examples that characterize her work. However, these stages show that although not every stage has both an epistemic and a personal transformation, they together potentially form a transformative experience in the sense of L.A. Paul. This subdivision also makes it clear in which phases personal and in which epistemic transformations take place. L.A. Paul’s terms are used in a variety of ways in this edited volume and are further developed and expanded in some chapters.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the present chapter will interpret and apply L.A. Paul’s terms, mainly the epistemic and personal transformation, to the case study in a specific way. It can thus be shown that theoretical concepts such as hers can be further developed in a fruitful way using case studies from different disciplines.

A last important methodological point is the term ‘experience,’ which needs to be problematized in order that its usage here is clear. As I will show, next to the experience of reality shifting as a whole, the various stages within this can be understood as experiences in themselves. The work of linguist Anna Wierzbicka, *Experience, Evidence, and Sense: The Hidden Cultural Legacy of English*,<sup>28</sup> shows the multi-faceted nature of the English term, identifying a total of seven different meanings of the word. Without going further into her definitions, one of them is important to make the necessary distinction for this chapter clear. One of Wierzbicka’s reconstructed meanings is “an experiencer’s current, subjective awareness-cum-feeling.”<sup>29</sup> This is a sensory-based experience that can be connected to a specific moment or period of time, which here will be called for convenience’s sake an immediate experience.<sup>30</sup> The moment of shifting into a different reality, for example, can be understood as such a kind of experience. Practitioners report that it was a shock for them to suddenly enter a different reality. Nevertheless, multiple such immediate experiences can together form a distinct longer marked period of time, that is equally understandable as an experience as a whole. Such ‘long-term experiences’ are for example the process of obtaining a PhD, or the healing process after serious illnesses. As will become clear from the analysis, there is a strong interconnectedness between the various short-term experiences

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27 For example, Bastiaan van Rijn adds a public and private dimension to L.A. Paul’s and can thus make them applicable to his individual case study.

28 Wierzbicka 2010.

29 Wierzbicka 2010, 41.

30 See for more information on this the introduction to this volume.

inherent in reality shifting, and the process as a whole.<sup>31</sup> Before starting the analysis of the four different stages, this focus needs to be stressed once more: The interest of this chapter lies in the long-term experience as the combination of all four stages. No stage is by itself a transformative experience in the terms of L.A. Paul, nor do stages one and four necessarily include distinct short-term experiences. Nevertheless, they all contain significant changes, either epistemic or personal, which together can form a transformative experience in the eyes of the practitioners.

### 3.1 Stage One: The Intention to Shift as a Personal Transformation

Reality shifting does not only describe the successful shift into a different reality, but also the practice itself. Many participants identify as shifters, even though they have not yet achieved what they deem to be a full shift. As will be shown below, the first encounter with the phenomenon, as well as the involvement with the shifting community and the practice itself, is an important part of the long-term experience of reality shifting. Many factors play a role in making this stage relevant.

The long-term experience of shifting realities starts by learning about the phenomenon. Either through different social media platforms, or other people, shifters are first exposed to the main ideas and goals of shifting, which are—connected to the multiverse interpretation—the belief that different realities exist and are accessible in some way or another, as well as the goal to enter one particular reality. Knowledge is often gained through the same platforms, such as discussions on Reddit or Amino, as well as through watching TikTok and YouTube videos. Even though by now there are also handbooks and other literature that provide information on reality shifting, the internet still seems to be one of the main ways to learn about reality shifting.<sup>32</sup> Simultaneously, the various online platforms can aid the practitioners in finding groups and communities in which information and experience narratives can be shared. After the individuals have accumulated sufficient knowledge about the phenomenon and are convinced enough of its reality, many will already identify as reality shifters. Even though

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<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the pre- and post-experiential stages—when dealing with immediate experiences—can have an immense influence on how the immediate experiences themselves are framed and interpreted. The approach used here has as advantage to take this point clearly into consideration.

<sup>32</sup> See for example Sei 2022; Venvonis 2022; and Virtuoso 2022.



these practitioners might not have successfully shifted yet, they do so for the reason that they understand themselves as someone who is aware of the possibility of multiple realities, has knowledge about the practice used to make these realities accessible, and has the intention to shift.

The next relevant step is to actively participate in the practice of reality shifting. As already stated, this can be a very individual endeavor, since there are numerous methods and other aspects of the practice, such as choosing to listen to subliminals, to meditate, or to speak affirmations. These actions can lead to a heavy involvement of the practitioner with the contents of their desired reality and their own role within it. As I will show in the next step, this can influence the shifter deeply, as the involvement can take place over months, sometimes on a daily basis. This is supported by the data of Kuwar, which shows that 80,6% of the partitioners try to shift at least once a week.

The reasons for reality shifting can vary widely and therefore the hopes and intentions that come with becoming a shifter, as well as the effects this has, are highly individual. While some practitioners aim for a shift that brings them adventures and new exciting experiences, others see reality shifting more as a vacation from their current reality. These intentions can influence the immediate effect that reality shifting has on the practitioner even before a successful shift. The general aim for shifting seems to be to collect more experiences. The idea of being able to shift realities and spend time in other worlds and societies gives practitioners the hope to explore different life paths.<sup>33</sup> One example is given below by a Reddit user:

I haven't shifted but shifting has given me a lot more hope for the future. I always found myself worrying over the concept of time. I always felt like I only had such a small amount of time to achieve my goals, the fact that I and my loved ones are getting older, etc. and it has put a lot of stress on my life. Discovering shifting has relieved an enormous amount of that stress and has helped me let go of the constraints of time. [ . . . ] The idea of shifting brings a lot of feelings to mind, both good and bad ones, but I'm just grateful that I know about it at all and that I have the power to be anywhere I want to be and go anywhere I want to go.<sup>34</sup>

The quote shows that discovering reality shifting has influenced the shifter. They learned about different realities and how to utilize those to have a fruitful and adventurous life with many different experiences and possibilities. These goals

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<sup>33</sup> Kuwar's survey shows that 68.39% of the participants answered the question of why they want to shift at least partially with "I get to choose my own story" with some of them explicitly mentioning that they want to explore new life paths or more generally make new experiences.

<sup>34</sup> Puzzleheaded\_Comb618 2021.

are by themselves understandable and relevant, but it should be highlighted that many shifters can have different and sometimes severe reasons for shifting. One user—and by no means the only one—painted a bleak picture of their lifeworld until they found out about shifting:

Before June 2020 I was extremely obsessed with science, anything that couldn't be explained by it, it was stupid and a waste of time for me. But then I discovered LOA [law of attraction]<sup>35</sup> and later shifting (in October-November). For some reason, it made a lot of sense for me or maybe I just saw it like my last opportunity to change my life and stop being depressed. As you can see the change of mentality was big, from needing evidence of everything to learn how to have faith.<sup>36</sup>

The above quote shows that there are also very serious reasons to practice reality shifting.<sup>37</sup> In this specific case, depression played a crucial role in forming the shifters intentions, hopes and goals for their shift as well as their desired reality. This has also been highlighted by some interviewees, one of whom stated:

I'm not completely giving up on this reality yet, but it felt like a huge weight had been lifted. It also assisted with my mental health on top of the therapy and meds I already have. I've struggled with suicidal ideation for the past few years because I would always think of escaping everything. But now more often, I think of shifting in similar situations.<sup>38</sup>

Even though they have not shifted yet, the introduction to reality shifting has changed this practitioner's perspective on their life as well as of themselves. As mentioned before, not only do the shifters learn about the possibilities that reality shifting can bring them, but they also interact with the practice due to intense scripting, visualization, and imagination. This leads them to already be very involved with their desired reality even before a potential successful shift, and as shifters go along, their expectations and hopes evolve accordingly. Such hopes and expectations, together with the new conviction that shifting is real and possible, can already influence their lives without the experience of a successful shift.

As the quotes and description of the phenomenon show, in this first stage a major change of perspective can happen. Even before (or without) a successful shift, practitioners gain a new interpretational frame that can profoundly impact their perspectives on their own life and future. They realize that they not only

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<sup>35</sup> The Law of Attraction is part of the New Thought movement and entails the belief that thoughts can influence the practitioner's life. The underlying idea of this belief is that energy can be attracted by one's own energy.

<sup>36</sup> [deleted]-a 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Somer and colleagues also point to the recent surge of the phenomenon due to the restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Somer, Cardeña, Catelan, and Soffer-Dudek 2021, 1–2).

<sup>38</sup> Starlitsky, personal communication.

identify as shifters, but also that they want to shift, temporarily or permanently, to live a different life in their desired reality. Their point of view changes, because they see themselves as someone who is capable of entering a different reality and therefore exploring other worlds. In connection with this, their core preferences are also changed,<sup>39</sup> which in turn has an influence on the shifters' self-awareness. If they, to pick up the example of the interviewee above, had a negative view on their life in the current reality because they felt like they did not belong, they have now realized, that this might be due to them being a shifter and having multiple realities in which they exist. In the case of the interviewee, this fact helped them to deal with their problems in their current reality, because they knew that there is a different reality which they might soon visit. Stage one, therefore, can entail a personal transformation, because it indeed changes the perspective of at least a part of the shifting practitioners. This could not be made clearer than by one online user, who stated: "[Reality Shifting] changed my perspective, I can decide my own future and have my own freedom."<sup>40</sup>

Even though this a pre-experiential stage, it is still potentially filled with smaller immediate experiences. Examples are bodily sensations during attempts at shifting (i.e., 'symptoms'), or what practitioners deem to be mini-shifts; either a very short shift or a longer shift to a very similar reality (e.g., where only a single song sounds differently, or where one's parents are suddenly nicer). Even spotting things like angel numbers, supposed messages from the universe in the form of number sequences, can lead reality shifters to experience short bursts of hope. However, at this point in the practice of reality shifting, there is not yet an epistemic transformation, as most of the knowledge is of a non-experiential kind.<sup>41</sup> This changes for those who successfully shift, as shall be seen in stage two.

### 3.2 Stage Two: The Initial Shift as an Epistemic Shock

After shifters have gone through the practice of scripting and tried various methods, some report to have successfully entered a different reality of their choice. In

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<sup>39</sup> Changes in core preferences are evident, among other things, from the surveys, which indicate the intensity with which practitioners interact the phenomenon. Further indications are the emotional posts, which also repeatedly indicate that the practitioners were able to find a new attitude towards themselves and their lives through the phenomenon.

<sup>40</sup> X4740N 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Even mini-shifts, which might be regarded as successful shifts in their own right, are often seen as bringers of hope only. Due to their short duration, or subtle changes, they often leave participants unsure about whether they truly shifted.

this part, only the arrival into the desired reality will be considered. It will become clear that entering a different reality is a different part of the experience than living in it, which will be discussed in the next part.

The experience reality shifters undergo when successfully shifting into a new reality can be very individual, but there seem to be two main ways of describing the emotional reaction to it: The first kind can be described as a sudden realization and will here be called the ‘shock experience.’ This realization is accompanied by strong emotions. Others report initially not realizing they entered a different reality due to the fact that it is just as real as this reality. Only later do they realize that they shifted, after which they, too, experience excitement. This type can be characterized as a ‘gradual realization.’ I will first discuss the shock experience, before turning to the gradual realization.

Even though practitioners have usually scripted how their desired reality looks like—including which characters, relationships and even actions it will contain—the initial successful entering of it can still be a very exciting, or even shocking, experience. One shifter described their experience on the Reddit community *r/shiftingrealities* as follows:

I remember the first time I shifted I was so disoriented and felt really hazy but at the same time I was hyper aware of everything around me everything felt too real. [ . . . ] I was shocked at first it kind of felt like getting up from a high fall without feeling any pain when I woke up (when I shift I put in my script that when I reach my desired reality I'll be in my bed waking up in the morning) I literally just stayed in my bed for a solid 15 minutes just to take everything in and to take my new environment in, my desired reality felt like my normal current reality except I was hyper aware of everything. I remember feeling so giddy and excited about everything I literally felt like a kid at Disneyland and when I say I was hyper aware I WAS AWARE OF EVERYTHING the feeling of my bedsheets and my feet on floorboards made everything feel 10x more realistic than my current reality but eventually I got used to it.<sup>42</sup>

This practitioner describes that they were initially shocked by the new environment but at the same time their perception was heightened, and they were aware of everything around them. These feelings are also experienced by other shifters who add that they panicked or that they wanted to explore their new reality with all their senses:

When I first got there, I knew I had fully shifted because my body JOLTED up in my dr bed. I caught my breath then realized I had done it. I looked around my room and it was amazing, better than I ever imagined. My room has LED lights and when I got there the first night they were on a dim whiteish yellow. I got out of bed, and I was in absolute shock.<sup>43</sup>

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42 Pinkhorns\_2021.

43 Kogayne 2021.

The experience of a gradual realization differs strongly from the ‘shock experience.’ There is no shock or immediate excitement because the desired reality feels very natural to the shifter. However, this does not mean that the shift stays undetected. At one point the shifters realize that they are in their desired reality, often because something they scripted happened. Take the following example:

Then it suddenly hits you, either you recognize something you scripted, or it comes at you like a memory, and you remember (key word: remember) that you had actually gone to sleep in your current reality. At first, you won’t even believe that. How is it possible that this is not my reality, you will think? You slowly process and accept it, and that’s when you’re fully aware of your two separate realities and that you can go back whenever you decide to.<sup>44</sup>

Here, too, after the realization that they entered a different reality, shifters need some time to process until they get used to the thought that they shifted. Although this is a different way of experiencing the arrival into the other reality, both experiences share commonalities. One practitioner sums up the experience of reality shifting as not being tangible before it occurs. They say: “to sum it up very shortly: you don’t know. You have no idea.”<sup>45</sup> A different shifter says: “It was such a crazy experience; one I feel like you wouldn’t be able to fully believe unless you’d successfully achieved it yourself!”<sup>46</sup> Neither does the intensity of this initial shock seem to fully disappear on subsequent shifts: “It’s so real that it kind of freaked me out, even though I have shifted more than once, every time it happened, I would have a few seconds to let it sink in.”<sup>47</sup>

The main similarity between the shock experience and the gradual realization is the shifters’ claim that one has to experience it in order to understand what it is like. This is exactly one of the main points of L.A. Paul’s concept of transformative experience. Shifters state that this initial shock (either immediate or delayed) is hard to grasp and does not compare well to other experiences.<sup>48</sup> They try to use metaphors such as falling or floating to describe the sensations of entering a different reality and they mention the excitement or even shock they

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44 Jeldreen 2021.

45 Jeldreen 2021.

46 Selfacceptedtrash 2021.

47 Momoshiiy 2021.

48 In her book, L.A. Paul (2014, 12n14) only uses examples that are “‘real’ or veridical,” and therefore limits herself to experiences that take place in ‘this’ reality, she nevertheless herself points out that “I don’t, in fact, think correct representation or veridicality is necessary for an experience to have [ . . . ] subjective value.” This means that whether or not reality shifting is regarded as ‘real’ does not have bearing on its ability to be subjectively valuable to practitioners. Neither is the question of the veracity of reality shifting of interest to me.

feel (e.g., comparisons to Disney Land as in an above example) after successfully shifting, but it is emphasized that these descriptions do not cover the uniqueness of the experience. Therefore, following the narratives of shifters about their successful shifts, we are dealing here with a moment of epistemic transformation.

Many shifters have tried for long periods of time to shift but are only successful after many failed tries. They eagerly try to learn from other shifters how they successfully shifted and regularly change their methods to find out which one works for them. Most internet platforms such as Reddit, Amino and TikTok show that learning about successful shifting is a big part of the community's interest. Nevertheless, when a full shift is then finally achieved, none of the preparations—according to the shifters—could have *truly* prepared them for the actual experience. It is something that must be lived through to understand, and the fact that scripts constrain what happens does not seem to alter this point. Not only are the shifters excited or shocked, but they also realize that what they learned about the phenomenon is—according to their own experience—true. One of the top posts of the r/shiftingrealities subreddit encapsulates well the emotions that this brings with it:

SHIFTING IS REAL!!!!!! IVE SHIFTED AND IT IS AMAZING, ITS MIND-BLOWING, AND ITS WORTH THE WAIT!!!!!! SHIFTING IS REAL AND ITS AWESOME!!!!!! ITS REAL, EVERYTHING IS REALL!!!!!! MULTIPLE REALITIES, SHIFTING, THE PEOPLE IN THE REALITIES, THEY'RE ALL REAL!!!! AND THE FOOD TASTED DELICIOUS, AND LIKE HOME!!!! I COULD FEEL THE SHIVERS AS I JUMPED INTO THE COLD POOL!!!! [ . . ] AND IT WASN'T A DREAM, OH GOSH IT WASN'T A DREAM!!!! IT WAS REAL, SO SO REAL. THE MEMORY DIDNT FADE LIKE A DREAM, I COULD EXPERIENCE THINGS UNLIKE A DREAM. IT WAS ALL SO AMAZING!!!! AND IM HERE TO TELL YOU THAT ITS REAL!!!!!!<sup>49</sup>

For the successful shifter, an epistemic transformation has occurred through the experience of their first, initial shift. Thereby, for them, their beliefs in multiple realities (or the power of the subconscious) are proven true through direct experience in a manner that is otherwise not accessible. The personal transformation that came through an involvement with the phenomenon before the successful shift (stage one in my scheme), is thereby accompanied and verified by this epistemic transformation upon a successful shift. How shifters saw themselves, including their core values and what they wanted, had already changed before successfully shifting. However, it was only on a successful shift that this was given the experiential evidence to truly push the shifter from 'believing,' or hoping, into 'knowing.' Without the epistemic shock of a successful shift—and it should be recalled, many shifters report to not have shifted—the personal trans-

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<sup>49</sup> Itsacucumberrrrr 2021.

formation of the pre-shift lacks an epistemic certainty. On the other hand, it would be impossible to even have this epistemic certainty if one did not first have the personal transformation of believing and participating in the phenomenon of reality shifting.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.3 Stage Three: The Desired Reality as Confirmation of Pre-Shift Intentions

After the practitioners entered their desired reality, they can live in it, interact with other people, and experience all aspects of their chosen world. Two simultaneous transformations can be analyzed in this stage: the transformation of the shifter's self and the transformation of the chosen reality. It shall become clear that both transformations are deeply connected to the concept of scripting, as practiced in the first pre-shifting stage.

Sometimes the desired reality requires specific skills or changes of the appearance or identity of the practitioners. Coming back to the popular desired reality of Hogwarts and the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, most shifters desire to be wizards or witches themselves within this reality. Of course, being capable of practicing magic is a skill that they do not have in the current reality but do want to have in the desired reality. Shifters therefore change themselves through the acting of (mental or physical) scripting. Often a change of age is also necessary, as practitioners above the age of seventeen still want to be able to experience the school and classes. One practitioner for example lists some of the experiences they made in their desired reality, of which they say made them the person they are today:

Casting magic! Playing with magic in any regard. I practice witchcraft here, but it is nothing like what we are capable of in the wizarding world. It enchants you. You become somehow more self-confident here as well, as all magic you do comes from skill. [ . . . ] A world beyond your imagination awaits you.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> It is believed in the shifting community that spontaneous shifts can occur, even to persons who do not know about the phenomenon. However, this would then only lead to confusion as the shifter would not be able to correctly interpret the event. In that case, stage two would precede state one, as long as the person in question eventually comes to interpret the event as a shift. The Reddit user Smallgreenalien states: "I also minishifted a couple times before I knew about shifting in an official sense, where I saw, heard, or sensed other realities while in a half awake/half asleep state" (Smallgreenalien 2022).

<sup>51</sup> E-o-e-xo 2022.

These changes are necessary because they are needed to be part of the everyday life within the desired reality and to interact with the people in it. But shifters are also able to change themselves based on their preferences, such as hair color, height, and other features. Of course, some practitioners change their looks because they are not happy with their appearance in their current reality, but for many other practitioners, they simply enjoy the freedom of changing themselves from time to time.<sup>52</sup> Yet such changes of appearance are not the only changes performed by practitioners. In addition to the necessary skills, such as magical abilities, required to attend Hogwarts school classes, some shifters script additional abilities, such as being talented artists or singers or having beneficial character traits. For example, the Reddit user dracocanslytherin writes that they are a particularly talented dancer and singer as well as having a good sense of humor and being popular.<sup>53</sup> Such changes might seem generally done for purposes of having a better time within one's desired reality, but they can also have their roots in deep dissatisfactions about one's person in their everyday life. One example for this is the interviewee QueenOfSwords. They are in the progress of transitioning to a woman but have a strong wish to have a family soon. While this is not yet possible in their current reality, they script themselves within their desired reality as a person who can already get pregnant and start a family. The reason for them to want to shift, which so far has not happened yet, is "To be me"; with which they meant to be a woman who can get pregnant and have a family.<sup>54</sup>

Summarized, practitioners do not only hope to enter a different reality that they can choose beforehand, but also that they can change themselves within that reality. Often these are small changes such as a different hair color and different figure, others on the other hand change more about their identities such as their gender.

Another part of this stage concerns changes to society as a whole. As already mentioned, some practitioners choose a desired reality that is very different to their current reality, while others prefer a desired reality that differs only slightly. The aforementioned interviewee is one example for this, another one would be the experience of the interviewee Kindstranger. They said:

I chose this specific reality because it's one that I cannot imagine me achieving in this reality. I don't think I would actually go to college in the US out of free will: student debt, dangers for me as a person of color, things like that. In my [desired] reality, I don't need to

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52 Blue-Ghost, personal communication.

53 Dracocanslytherin 2020.

54 QueenOfSwords, personal communication.



worry about anything of that, because they simply do not exist. It's like, an upped version of the actual situation in America.<sup>55</sup>

The desired reality of this practitioner is very similar to the current reality, but nevertheless it is a completely different one. Kindstranger would then experience that reality differently because they are not a victim of racism. Such changes within the desired reality affect the shifters themselves because of how they experience themselves and their life within the desired reality. Changing gender or race as well as removing racism or adding magic can all lead to a very different experience of life in the desired reality, even if the desired reality is otherwise similar to the current reality.

Taking the terms of L.A. Paul into consideration, the potential for epistemic transformation seems to be very clear: shifters believe they are learning that other versions of themselves exist in different realities and that these versions have different features, traits and skills that are necessary to live in that desired reality. The knowledge of how it is to live as a person who can practice magic, or in a world without systemic racism, can only be acquired through experiencing it. Just like the initial shock of successful shifts, longer engagement within a desired reality will—depending on its features—potentially lead to the acquiring of experiential knowledge that shifters would not be able to obtain without the act of shifting. A more difficult question is whether there is the potential for a personal transformation in this stage. Following L.A. Paul, an experience would be personally transformative if it changes the practitioner's core preferences, or how they see themselves. Here the matter of scripting comes into the picture. If all the details for one's desired reality have already been formulated within scripts, that would mean that the preferences of the shifters are only being acted on within the desired reality. Successful shifting narratives indeed do not often offer hints that shifters changed their view of themselves.<sup>56</sup> Karl Baier, in his contribution to this volume, explores the often-present notion of non-intentionality in transformative practices: the fact that one can only predetermine what will happen within such an experience to a certain degree. Shifting seems to largely escape this dimension of non-intentionality through the act of scripting. As a consequence, reality shifters often get to act out

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<sup>55</sup> Kindstranger, personal communication.

<sup>56</sup> As subreddit threads like the following show, most shifters already notice a change of perspective in stage one (e.g., sweetgrimme 2021). The comments in this section show, that most commenters have not shifted yet. Therefore, the change of perspective that they experienced is discussed in stage one and not in this subchapter.

exactly what they wished for, but it has little chance of changing them as a person because of this same reason, at least at this stage.<sup>57</sup>

### 3.4 Stage Four: Post-Shift Effects and Transformations

The resulting impact of successful shifts on practitioners is an important aspect of the phenomenon. Many practitioners claim to have spent days, weeks, months or even years in their desired reality. This has led to lasting changes that reportedly have an effect beyond the desired reality. In stage four, the practitioners are back in their current reality, after having spent some time in their desired reality. It is in this stage that they can communicate their experience and share it with other shifters. As will be shown, the shifters' review of the actual shift (stages two and three), as well as the effects these had on them, do influence the transformation they undergo in the post-experiential stage four of the phenomenon. Interestingly, the shifters themselves seem to be aware of this, as one practitioner states: "So, there are two 'perceptions' or 'points of perception' (sort of like points of view) to take into consideration: the one you have about the experience while you're there in it, and the one you have about the experience when you come back and remember it."<sup>58</sup>

Some of the changes that are reported by the shifting community are emotional effects or skills connected to being back at the current reality, new or advanced skills that were learned in the desired reality and sometimes even differences in physical appearance as a result of living as a different version of oneself in the desired reality for longer periods of time.

Starting with the emotional connection that comes with staying in the chosen reality for a long time, together with the relationships that shifters formed there, some TikTok videos show the emotional extent of reality shifting as they picture practitioners crying or desperately wanting to return to their desired reality. For example, the TikTok user *mister.malfoy* writes in his video: "It's currently 9 AM and I just woke up from a full 5 months at Hogwarts. . . take me back home, I hate

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<sup>57</sup> However, in another recourse to L.A. Paul's own examples, this intentionality does not affect the character of the experience, since she deals with transformative experiences which can also contain a strong desire and planning. An example of this would be the experience of an athlete winning an Olympic gold medal. Not only is this an experience that has been worked towards for years and was certainly desired, but athletes have had similar experiences through winning other important competitions. This does not detract from the life-changing nature of the transformative experience (Paul 2014, 16).

<sup>58</sup> Jeldreen 2021.

it here.”<sup>59</sup> This description can be read in the video while the practitioner can be seen crying in the background. On some platforms, tips are shared in this regard so as not to be too strongly influenced or even traumatized by the experiences in the desired reality. The user moonlit-baby suggests:

I've seen and experienced some pretty messed up things in all my time shifting, stuff that still affects me to this day. [ . . . ] I know what I saw, I know what I experienced; I remember the emotional pain, the physical pain, the shock. Nothing could come close to stirring such intense emotions in me. But that's it; they're just memories to me now. With time, I've healed from those experiences. I still remember and get upset; but not as upset as I initially was. What went from full-blown ugly crying has faded into tear-filled eyes and a moment of silence.<sup>60</sup>

Since numerous shifters want to enter a reality in which traumatic experiences are unavoidable, the question arises within the community as to whether the trauma continues to exist in the current reality.<sup>61</sup> In this case one can speak of a long-term personally transformative experience. However, there is disagreement as to whether trauma can also be taken over into current reality or not.

On the other hand, many shifters' experiences also lead to a positive outlook on themselves and their current reality. The Reddit user Ok\_Bend93 for example stated:

I feel lighter. I feel a little happier than yesterday. It's real. And when I came back, I looked in the mirror and hugged myself. I said, 'Just because I may want to leave this reality, doesn't mean I don't love and appreciate you here [referring to Ok\_Bend93 themselves in this reality] as well.'<sup>62</sup>

The more I do it, the more I wake up here in this CR. Not literally wake up but I look around at objects, things, people, places in awe. I'm starting to look at this reality with new eyes.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, shifters largely agree that the experiences in the desired reality can lead to the shifters developing and maturing personally. For example, when asked whether the time spent in the desired reality affects maturity, the Reddit user moonlit-baby replies:

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<sup>59</sup> Video not available anymore, a copy can be requested from the author.

<sup>60</sup> Moonlit-baby 2021.

<sup>61</sup> For example, many shifters choose the reality of the show *Attack on Titan*, in which they participate in the adventures of the other characters and, as a result, expose themselves to certain dangers (e.g., hunting giants).

<sup>62</sup> Ok\_Bend93 2022a.

<sup>63</sup> Ok\_Bend93 2022b.

Definitely! Personally, I feel like for a 19-year-old I act a little too old sometimes; which was never an issue until I started shifting. [ . . . ] The instincts I developed as I aged in my DR stuck around and I'm always the only one in my friendship group who is mature enough to talk to about everything and anything. [ . . . ] I feel like, more than the age; the experiences I had in DR's are what brought me to this point, though. [ . . . ] I've experienced so much through my DR's that it forced me to become more mentally mature.<sup>64</sup>

That the practitioners miss their surroundings and relationships of the desired reality, too, is repeatedly picked up on various platforms and seems to be a great burden. However, this emotional change is only one aspect of the transformation at this stage. Entering a different reality can have varying consequences for the shifters in the current reality. A personal transformation can be identified when shifters talk about missing characters from their desired reality or suddenly see their current reality in a different light. The interviewee *Dreaming\_Akita* said about reality shifting, that it “has actually motivated [them], to make something out of this CR.”<sup>65</sup> Such examples show the potential for the personally transformative power of post-shift reflections. Shifters do not just say that they come back from an often-scripted stay in what they deem to be a different reality. They describe connections to the persons in that reality, or even new perspectives on who they themselves are in this one—be they connected to trauma or joy. Persons like *moonlit-baby*, *Ok\_Bend93*, and *Dreaming\_Akita* are clear on the matter that they see themselves in a new light.

The relation between post-shift emotional transformations and the actual contents of the shift are ambivalent. Emotional connections to persons of a desired reality are the direct outcome of the (usually) scripted content that was already decided upon before the shift (in stage one). Nevertheless, the actual connections, as interpreted in this post-shift stage, were formed on the basis of the shift and can only be missed upon return. The same goes for trauma and emotional growth, they can be presumed to often be the result of scripted events. Yet unlike during the stay in one's desired reality (stage three), where I have refrained from using the term personal transformation due to the scripted nature of the experience, here the consequences are—as stated by the practitioners—at the same time based on the scripted events yet go beyond them in their consequences. Going even further, there are shifters whose personal transformations are even based on the fact that they did not experience what they scripted. The case of interviewee *Dreaming\_Akita* is especially interesting, as they did not shift to their desired reality but to a different reality:

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64 *Moonlit-baby* 2021.

65 *Dreaming\_Akita*, personal communication, September 2022.

I've seen 20 different realities but none my DR yet. For me, I think it's because I'm not so adamant to shift to my DR. If I do it's great but I'm shifting to gain experience and knowledge of my other realities. I try to just see what happens. [ . . . ] My intention has changed and now I want to see what I'm up to in other realities whereas I initially wanted to just be in my DR.<sup>66</sup>

What all these personal changes have in common, whether they are the outcome of scripted events or not, is the unexpectedness. Sometimes this is implicit, but often it is explicitly mentioned as well. But there are more deliberate attempts at post-shifting changes too.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to these emotional and personality changes, other shifters also claim to take specific skills from the desired reality into the current reality. Examples of this would include learning new languages or the playing of musical instruments. Depending on the desired reality, combat techniques are also mentioned. Videos abound in which practitioners are asked how they suddenly acquired a new skill, only for them to smile and show the camera the symbol of reality shifting in the form of jewelry, on clothing, or on their skin.<sup>68</sup> Opinions on this matter differ strongly. On the one hand, videos that make statements about skills learned in the desired reality and transferred to the current reality are popular, especially on TikTok. On the other hand, discussions are being held whether such a transferal of skill is possible at all, or if it would only facilitate learning that particular skill faster in one's current reality.<sup>69</sup>

From the discussions that arise on the platforms and in the comments on the videos, it is clear that many practitioners are at least partially interested in learning new skills that could also be helpful in the current reality, even if there is no consensus on the matter.<sup>70</sup> Learning a new skill would not be considered an epistemic transformation if similar experiences have already been made by the prac-

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<sup>66</sup> Dreaming\_Akita, personal communication, September 2022.

<sup>67</sup> One of these changes would be a physical transformation. Here the practitioners assume that their external changes in the desired reality can affect their appearance in the current reality. Although these changes are highly debated within the community, for some shifters it can be an epistemic confirmation and proof that a different version of them exists. See for this Jeldreen (2021) as well as [deleted]-b (2021).

<sup>68</sup> The symbol depicts an S, which stands for shifting, two circles, representing two different realities, and a line, representing the shifters and their connection between the two realities (Chick-enharmesan 2021).

<sup>69</sup> See for example PoetryAndTea 2021; Scqrletwitches 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Some shifters also encourage the scripting of matters in one's desired reality that would benefit their current reality as well. For example, to learn about the highly advanced technology of the Marvel Universe in order to bring an alternative to plastic to the current reality. See gangsta (2021) for one such a list of possible improvements.

titioners before. Nevertheless, experiencing themselves as a different version of their current reality self with different skills and character traits, can be an epistemic confirmation that the experience was real. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that just because these changes do not readily fit the analytical scheme used here, this does not take away from the fact that they are of importance to the shifters themselves.

Stage four of reality shifting—the post-experiential reports of the effects upon coming back after a successful shift—identifies that there are strong personal transformations, such as mental growth, but also the chance of trauma. The relationships and experiences, both positive and negative, can have a lasting impact in how the shifters see themselves and their life. While many shifters already set the intentions for their shift *before* the shift (stage one), the epistemic shock of realizing one is successful (stage two) still shows that what they experience can only be understood through the experience itself. Shifters can imagine how the experience will be like and what influence it has on their life, but only after shifting, do they get to learn how they are personally affected by the shift. Although the experiences were often scripted in detail, including the relationships formed and actions that were experienced in the desired reality, the consequences of living through these cannot be predicted. In this sense, a personal transformation can be identified at this post-experiential stage.

## 4 Conclusion

Reality shifting is an interesting case when discussing intentional transformative experiences. It is a complex phenomenon, which can be understood as potentially including a long-term transformative experience consisting of four stages. All different stages together form a unique and complex phenomenon that has personal as well as epistemic effects on the practitioners. Shifters claim to experience things in their desired reality as well as in their current reality that they could not have experienced without this practice. A life in a different world, with different friends, family members, abilities, and a different everyday life. Even with shifts in realities that differ only slightly from the current reality, the epistemic experience is decisive, since the shifters can, for example, experience a life without racism or abuse, or generally lead a happy life. While some shifters see the practice purely as an adventure or hobby, the experience can also be a personally transformative one. Many shifters report, for example, that they are more balanced as a result of reality shifting and see their place in the current reality more calmly: “[It] helps me understand who I am. That I am not my physical body, I am

energy that can shift everywhere.”<sup>71</sup> Others, on the other hand, are more negatively influenced and wish to be permanently in the other reality after the reality shift. The interviewee Blue-Ghost for example states: “I just want to say I feel like this is something that isn’t talked about enough: Just not wanting to be here and just feeling like you don’t fucking belong here, and just want to leave and the failed attempts don’t help.”<sup>72</sup> These mentioned struggles and failed attempts make this phenomenon even more fascinating as it shows that non-experiential personal transformations can already occur without the alleged entering of a different reality. The complexity of the practice as well as the numerous different reasons for reality shifting and the various effects it can have on the practitioners show that this phenomenon should be taken seriously. It is unique in its methods and integration of other spiritual practices. These factors make it accessible to a large group of people, who not all necessarily have shifted yet, but still hope to potentially benefit from the practice.

A summary of the results of this chapter will now be given in the form of a concise description as well as a table below. As Table 12.1 shows, a personal transformation takes place in stage one (The Intention to Shift), followed by an epistemic transformation in stages two (The Initial Shift) and three (Being in the Desired Reality), which is geared towards the desired reality of the practitioner. Finally, there is another personal transformation in stage four (Post-Shift Effects and Transformations). The overall experience can therefore be presented in such a way that, due to the intentionality of the practitioners, the personal transformation forms the framework for the epistemic transformation. Only in stages two and three, when the practitioner enters the desired reality, does an epistemic transformation take place, whereas the intentionality and later the interpretation of the experience result in a personal transformation.

Another aspect that emerges and is taken up in the following table is the distinction between immediate and long-term experiences. Some of the stages involve immediate experiences, such as stage two and stage three. The practitioner is directly confronted with a change, such as entering another reality, and perceives it just as directly. This experience is also temporal and measurable and is defined in the introduction to this volume as “a temporary, subjective change in awareness, knowledge, and/or feeling.” Such immediate experience must be distinguished from the long-term experience. The concrete example of reality shifting can show how a longer process of practices and experiences, such as trying different methods, writing scripts, and being part of the shifting community and

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71 Energy\_720, personal communication.

72 Blue-Ghost, personal communication.

immediate experiences, such as the shift itself and the time spent in the desired reality, together form a long-term experience with different transformations:

**Table 12.1:** The stages of reality shifting.

Stage	Transformation	Description
<i>Stage 1:</i> The Intention to Shift as a Personal Transformation	Personal Transformation	The practitioner gets involved with the phenomenon, identifies as a reality shifter and practices reality shifting and its methods.
<i>Stage 2:</i> The Initial Shift as an Epistemic Shock	Epistemic Transformation	This marks the moment in which the practitioner enters the desired reality and experiences it as an initial shock or gradual realization.
<i>Stage 3:</i> The Desired Reality as Confirmation of Pre-Shift Intentions	Epistemic Transformation	Living in the desired reality and experiencing it confirms the information the practitioners gained in stage 1.
<i>Stage 4:</i> Post-Shift Effects and Transformations	Personal Transformation	Returning to the current reality after experiencing a different reality can lead to after-effects (often mental growth or trauma).

Diagrammatic annotations:

- A bracket on the left side groups Stages 2 and 3 under the label "The Shift" Immediate Experience.
- A bracket on the right side groups Stages 1, 2, 3, and 4 under the label "Long-term Transformative Experience 'Being a Shifter'".

L.A. Paul's scheme proved helpful not only in analyzing the phenomenon, but also in showing that when taking it a step further, it can help identifying exactly where a transformation takes part and what kind of transformation it is. This can then lead to unexpected findings. What the analysis of reality shifting showed, for example, is that a personal transformation can only be found if the pre- and post-shifting parts of the experience are integrated. The actual shifts themselves are—barring limited exceptions—only epistemically transformative. This case study shows that both the pre- as well as the post-experiential states are highly relevant for the life-changing interpretation of such phenomena.

Another point of interest for this edited volume is the question of intentionality. As Karl Baier argues in his chapter to this edited volume, many intentional transformative experiences still contain unexpected elements. This is somewhat different in reality shifting, in which a successful shift is mostly approached through pre-determined scripts. While some scripts can be very detailed, even the less detailed ones are supposed to lead to an experience that is exactly how



the practitioners expect it to be. This means that unlike many other intentional transformative experiences, shifters do not expect the unexpected. Their wish for successful shifts is previously scripted to (often) fit their specific desires. For them, this does not take away from the awe-inspiring nature of the experience, nor does it mean that there is no personal transformation involved. It does instead mean reality shifting is an intentional transformative experience unlike many others. A possible reason for this focus on predetermined experiences might be due to the combination of the multiverse theory and a culture of manifestation: after all, the former states (in the interpretation of many shifters) that every possible kind of universe exists, while the latter makes it possible to manifest oneself directly into consciously visiting whichever of these universes one wants.<sup>73</sup>

These nuances tend to be drowned out by impressions that focus on the “weirdness” of the phenomenon or the immediate psychologization of the experience. Taking a step back and applying L.A. Paul’s terms as well as breaking the phenomenon down in stages makes it possible to see exactly what the practitioners themselves say reality shifting is, does and means or what they hope it will be, do or mean. Only from there can the phenomenon truly be discussed from an academic point of view. It deserves the same treatment as older, or more established intentional transformative experiences. Even more so because it might be characterized as *the* spiritual practice of the generation that is referred to as Generation Z (birthyears 1995/7–2015) and for now, there is no decline in interest or participant numbers.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> More research on this would be needed to substantiate this hypothesis.

<sup>74</sup> I have no knowledge of any other spiritual practice of this scope that was mainly formed by Generation Z, rather than a continuation of older interests (e.g., such as the case with astral travel, healing crystals, or tarot cards). In how far reality shifting is a new phenomenon is further discussed in Perez and Van Rijn (forthcoming).

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# Contributors

**Dr. Joseph Azize** holds a doctorate in Philosophy (Ancient History) and a law degree, both from the University of Sydney. He is an honorary associate in the Department of Studies in Religion (University of Sydney). He is also a Maronite priest and Chancellor of the Maronite Eparchy of Australia. Dr. Azize has published academically in ancient history, litigation law, and religious studies. His studies are now concentrated in two areas: first, the role of Gurdjieff in modern Western mysticism (see *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises*, 2020), and a growing number of studies attempting to restate the ancient Syriac tradition of typology, a sort of mystic theosophy. His latest book concerns the thought of a Gurdjieff pupil (*John G. Bennett: Witness to Death and Resurrection*) and is due for publication by Monkfish in 2024.

**Karl Baier** studied ethnology, philosophy and Catholic theology at the University of Vienna. In 2009 he habilitated at the Institute for Religious Studies, University of Vienna. From 2013 to 2020 he served as head of this institute. Today he is associated with it as a Professorial Research Fellow. His work focusses on the history of religion from late eighteenth to twentieth century. Baier's research topics in this field include mesmerism, occultism, modern yoga, spirituality research and psychedelics. Recent Publications: Lavater's Anomalistik, in: *Der bekannteste Unbekannte des 18. Jahrhunderts. Johann Caspar Lavater im Kontext*, ed. by Soboth, Chr. and Stengel, Fr. (2023); Esotericism, in: *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (2021); *Occult Vienna: From the Beginnings to the First World War*, in *Religion in Austria*, Vol. 5 (2020).

**Maddalena Canna, PhD** is an assistant professor of sociocultural anthropology at Washington University in Saint Louis, USA. She earned her PhD at the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences of Paris (EHESS – Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale). Her thesis on trance possession among the Afro-Indigenous Miskitu won the Martine Aublet Foundation – Musée du Quai Branly Award in 2018. From 2019 to 2022, she was postdoctoral fellow at Northwestern University, Evanston-Chicago (Fyssen Foundation Grant, then National Science Foundation – NSF). She specializes in anthropology of consciousness, global mental health and embodiment studies. In the last decade, she conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Nicaragua, US, France, Canada, and at a global scale.

**Keith Edward Cantú** is a Research Affiliate of the Transcendence and Transformation initiative at the Center for the Study of World Religions of Harvard Divinity School, where he is working with other colleagues on developing the Transcendence and Transformation Database. He is also Visiting Assistant Professor at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. His most recent book, *Like a Tree Universally Spread: Sri Sabhapati Swami and Śivarājyoga*, examines the historical context for and practical cosmology behind the Tamil yoga of a nineteenth century yogi named Sabhapati Swami whose work informed global esoteric currents as diverse as Theosophy and Thelema.

**Wouter J. Hanegraaff** is Professor of History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He is a member of the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences, and an honorary member of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism. Among many other publications, including seven collective volumes, he is the author of *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden 1996/Albany 1998); *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge 2012); and *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge

University Press, 2022). A new volume *Esotericism in Western Culture: Counter-Normativity and Rejected Knowledge* will appear with Bloomsbury in the spring of 2025.

**Flavio A. Geisshuesler** earned two Ph.D. degrees from the universities of Virginia and Bern before conducting postdoctoral research at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He also spent several years conducting ethnographic and textual research in the Himalayas and taught at various universities across the globe. Currently, he is the Khyentse Macready Senior Lecturer for Tibetan Buddhism at the University of Sydney.

**Magdalena Kraller** holds a PhD in religious studies (University of Vienna, 2022) and an MA in music and dance education (Carl-Orff-Institute, Mozarteum Salzburg, 2013). In her PhD thesis “Yoga Breath: The Reinvention of Prāṇa and Prāṇāyāma in Early Modern Yoga,” she has traced seminal developments of modern prāṇāyāma between 1850 and 1945. Her latest work incorporates a focus on prāṇāyāma as practice (particularly in relation to occultism and singing), practices of breath and sound, and, together with scholars of dance and physical culture, a re-naming project of “American Delsartism.” Her broader research interests lie in (the history of) body and breath work intersecting with alternative-religious movements, and their artistic implications.

**Sarah Perez** is a postdoctoral researcher with an affiliation to the University of Bern. Here she worked on early modern pamphlets with extraordinary content as religious-political tools in conflicts. An additional focus of hers lies on online spirituality, eco-spirituality and new religious movements. Since 2024, a research project on spirituality, lifestyle as well as youth and internet culture deepened this research interest.

**Bastiaan van Rijn** is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bern. He writes from the perspective of the systematic study of religion, but integrates ideas from a wide variety of other disciplines such as science studies and psychology. His research interests are at the intersection between experimental approaches to life after death, playful attitudes toward practitioners’ own religions, and contemporary forms of Western divination.

**Jens Schlieter** is Director of the Institute for the Science of Religion at the University of Bern, where he is working on theory of religion, on the Western reception of Buddhist thoughts and practices, and on Ethics of Buddhism. Methodological contributions include conceptual metaphor theory and philosophy of language, applied to the study of religion. Recent Contributions include the book *What is it like to be Dead? Near-death Experiences, Christianity, and the Occult*. Oxford University Press: New York 2018, or “Religious Experience: A Genealogy of the Concept and Future Prospects of its Scholarly Use.” In: Maren Freudenberg, Frederik Elwert et al., eds. *Studying Religious Contacts*. Leiden: Brill, 2023, 140–81.

**Dr. Steven J. Sutcliffe** is Senior Lecturer in the Study of Religion at the University of Edinburgh and past President of the British Association for the Study of Religions (2015–2018). He studies new and alternative forms of religion in the long twentieth century and the post-1945 history of the Study of Religion/s as an academic discipline. He is author of *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (2003), editor of *Religion: Empirical Studies* (2004), and co-editor (with Marion Bowman) of *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (2000), (with Ingvild Sælid Gilhus) of *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (2014) and (with Carole Cusack) of *The Problem of Invented Religions*

(2016). He is currently researching the interwar 'guru field' in Europe (c. 1918–1939) and completing a monograph on Scottish intersections with the European Life Reform/*Lebensreform* movement.

**Marleen Thaler** is a historian of religion at the University of Vienna, with additional degrees in Social and Cultural Anthropology and Oriental Studies, all from her alma mater. Her research interests include Alternative Religious Currents, Esoteric Studies, Religious Traditionalism, Global History, Contemporary Paganism, and the history of yoga. Currently she is finalizing her doctoral dissertation on the globalization, scientification, and nationalization of kuṇḍalinī, focusing on Gopi Krishna's seminal influence on modern kuṇḍalinī discourses. Other current projects involve a co-edited volume on subtle energies and her upcoming monography on John Michell.





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