



Kundalini Awareness



The Role of Prana as the Energy of Consciousness

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In the study of consciousness it has been theorized that there is a difference between the creative life-energy—prana-shakti—and the energy of consciousness—chit-shakti. This distinction is crucial to the resolution of the question of whether Kundalini is the basis of all mystical experience.

In a 1980 letter to Gene Kieffer, Pandit Gopi Krishna made his position clear in this regard. Excerpts from that letter follow.

I

It is my considered opinion that all the ancient mass of literature on yoga, Kundalini, occultism, esoteric practices or hermetic doctrines occupies the same position in relation to the future science of the Soul as the amorphous mass of literature dealing with Alchemy, Astrology and the Art of Healing occupied before it was crystallized into the modern sciences of chemistry, astronomy and medicine.

I believe that the present desperate situation of the world is primarily the result of a grave disproportion between the intellectual and spiritual progress of mankind. Our neglect of the spiritual side has resulted from:

- 1) Dogmatic resistance of religion to the entry of reason into its holy precincts.
- 2) The materialistic bias of modern science with its over-emphasis on the soma and the neglect of the Soul.
- 3) Lack of unanimity among the adherents of every faith, their controversies and hair-splitting polemics about the views expressed by ancient authorities on the debatable issues of their own faith, the diversity of opinions expressed by the illumine and the variations in their descriptions of the illuminated state.
- 4) Claims to infallibility and divine prerogative on the part of spiritual teachers or their followers and their obvious reluctance to subject the views expressed or the doctrines propounded to the acid test of experiment to find out the truth.
- 5) Rivalry amongst spiritual teachers and the under-the-surface discord existing among the major faiths of mankind, due to the supposed superiority of one faith over the other.

There are other reasons, too, which I shall discuss in my works. Suffice it to say that, if the claims of the religious teachers of our time, both in the East and the West, were all based on truth, the world would be a happier and a far more peaceful place to live in than it is today. What is needed is that the healers of the soul, instead of arrogating superhuman or divine positions to themselves, should pool their talent and their resources to create the same prestigious position for spiritual knowledge as the unstinting labor and sacrifice of dedicated scientists during the last two centuries has created for science today.

About the remark that, "I have not sufficiently distinguished between 'prana-shakti' and 'chit-shakti', or energy and consciousness," only a few words are necessary. The word 'chit' means mind or consciousness. 'Chit-shakti' means the power of consciousness. 'Shakti' in its cosmological significance means the energy of Shiva or the Creator. In the 'para' or unmanifested state, Shiva and Shakti are one.

Human consciousness is the embodied form of Cosmic or Creative Consciousness. 'Jivatma' or the embodied Soul is, according to both the Vedanta and Shaiva systems of Indian philosophy, a spark from the Divine or a drop from the Infinite Ocean of Brahman or Sada-Shiva, entrapped by maya in the former case, or enfettered by Shakti in the latter.

The confusion has arisen because it is supposed that the methods of Raja Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga or Karma Yoga do not involve the arousal of Kundalini and that the illuminated state of consciousness in one practicing these forms of yoga results from 'chit-shakti' or the Energy of Consciousness of the initiate by the purification of the mind and the body which make the Vision possible. This is an error which lies at the root of many of the current misconceptions about yoga and samadhi.

There have been historical cases of spiritual prodigies who evinced illuminated consciousness from a very early age, even before their teens, as for instance, Guru Nanak, Jnaneshwar, Shankaracharya and others. How did illumination in their case come about when millions of those who practice Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga or Jnana Yoga for prolonged periods, or during the whole span of their life, pass away without ever achieving their goal?

The prompt answer would be that this signal Grace is the harvest of the karma or the merit won in past lives. We do not dispute this point. But it should be obvious to anyone that there must have been something in the organic structure of their brains, in the heredity and the genes that led to the bloom of their spiritual genius at such an early age.

From this point of view, all these three spiritual giants can be compared to Mozart the musical prodigy, Durer the master painter and Pascal the great mathematician who, too, evinced extraordinary talent in their own fields from the same early age. What is the secret behind this manifestation?

In dealing with the phenomenon of illumination we have to bear in mind the fact that almost all those who were recipients of the Grace, either in the East or the West, has a passionate longing for spiritual unfoldment or love of God almost from their childhood. We are trying to provide irrefutable evidence for it in the Anthology of Mystical Writings which we have in hand at present. This intensity of love for a particular subject, artistic or intellectual, has been a characteristic of genius also.

No unbiased student of the subject can deny that the great illuminees of the earth have been a class by themselves, in the same way as geniuses form a category of their own. Professional yoga teachers or highly intelligent writers on spiritual subjects, lacking the genuine experience, never approached the stature of the illuminees and were never accepted as such by the discerning readers of their works. It is for this reason that the illuminees of India, the well-known Christian mystics, the acknowledged Sufi masters and the enlightened Taoists still command a homage that has never fallen to the share of the highly erudite scholars or well-informed exponents of yoga and other spiritual or occult disciplines.

That there must be some variation in the brain or some other factor responsible for genius, extraordinary talent or paranormal faculties in human beings no one can deny. If it were not so, every average human being who tried hard for it could become a Plato, a Kalidas, a Shakespeare or a Newton. But such a transformation has never been possible to this day with any methods of education known to us. What mystery surrounds the phenomenon we do not know even at the present advanced stage of knowledge of the brain.

Shiva or Universal Consciousness has the three-fold Shakti of *Ichha* (will), *Jnana* (knowledge) *Kriya* (action), which is manifested in the creation, maintenance and destruction of the universe. Jivatma or embodied Consciousness, in the form of a human being, has the same three-pronged Shakti as that of the Creative Consciousness. This is indicated by trisula, or the three-pronged spear which Shiva carries in his hand in the symbolic portraits of the Deity.

I am not aware on what traditional authority a distinction is being made between 'chit-shakti' and 'prana-shakti'. 'Shakti' is the creative aspect of Lord Shiva, the Infinite Power that is manifested as the Cosmos. 'Prana-shakti' means that aspect of the Cosmic Shakti which is behind all the organic phenomena of the universe. It is 'prana-shakti' which runs the human organism and also fuels the activity of thought. Whatever we do, think, imagine or create with our mind is accomplished by 'chit-shakti' or the energy of consciousness which, again, is prana. Prana is the life-force or animating principle in the body, an inseparable part of human awareness, as Cosmic Shakti is an inseparable part of Universal Consciousness.

Our ego, intellect, mind and all the five constituents of living bodies, namely earth, water, fire, air and ether, in their organic form, are the creations of 'prana-shakti'. This is the reason why a living creature is called a prani, which means possessing prana, in India. It is with the energy supplied by prana that the embodied Soul or jivatma can will, act or know. It is with this energy, again, that he can win liberation from the cycle of life and death. I, therefore, do not see the need of introducing a new factor, under the name of 'chit-shakti' in the human organism to explain the phenomenon of illumination.

The actual position is that there is no such variation and that there is such a prolificity of individual views in the books on yoga and Tantra that one is lost in confusion. This has led to such a multiplicity of opinions and ideas that, strange as it may appear, one can support any point of view with a citation from one authority or another.

It is extremely hard, even for the most penetrating intellects, to grasp the nature of metaphysical entities. In spite of incredible laboratory facilities, atomic scientists face almost insuperable obstacles in determining the nature and properties of sub-nuclear particles. Bio-electricity or prana is more subtle and far more complex than even sub-nuclear particles or matter. I, therefore, feel at a loss to understand how a distinction is made between 'prana-shakti' or 'chit-shakti'. Since Consciousness is one, so must be the Shakti or Energy through which it acts, thinks, knows and feels.

To summarize, 'prana-shakti' as the fuel of thought is the 'chit-shakti' or the energy of consciousness. In every form of religious discipline, the exercises undertaken, physical or mental, are performed with the energy supplied with prana. Our mind is able to think, concentrate, meditate, recite a mantra or melt in devotion only with the help of 'prana-shakti', in the same way as the Power to create the universe resting in Shiva is solely the outcome of his Shakti. It would be fallacious to suppose that there are several mechanisms in the body to lead to illumination. In the organic kingdom, Nature is not prodigal with Her devices for one and the same purpose. There is only one organ for a specific activity in living bodies. In fact, there are organs performing more than one function as, for instance, the mouth, rather than two or three organs for one and the same object. The Law of Parsimony applies to the organic kingdom also. It can, therefore, be safely assumed that there must also be only one single mechanism for the evolution of consciousness to reach the illuminated state. In other words, there must be one common basis for all cases of genuine mystical experience and also one common basis for the manifestation of genius or paranormal faculties in human beings.

Success in yoga and other spiritual disciplines, whether achieved slowly and imperceptibly through the practice of Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga and Bhakti Yoga, or spontaneously, as the accumulated harvest of previous karma, or suddenly with agonizing experiences, as the result of Hatha Yoga exercises, must be due to the same organic mechanism that has eluded detection so far.

What can this common basis be except the Power which brings the human organism into existence, controls it every moment through the entire span of life and discards it at the time of dissolution or death. What other Power can achieve this marvelous transmutation of the mental faculties except 'prana-shakti', the architect of the human body, a drop from the Cosmic Ocean of 'Maha-Shakti', the Architect of the universe?

'Chit-shakti', too, is nothing but 'prana-shakti'. In the ordinary sense, 'chit-shakti' means power of mind or attention. The impact of all our mental exercises or practices ultimately redounds on prana, the animating power of the body. In order to illustrate the omnipotent character of prana or 'prana-shakti', I can do no better than reproduce the following passages from the work Raja Yoga, by Vivekananda:

*"By what power is this Akasha manufactured into this universe? By the power of Prana. Just as Akasha is the infinite, omnipresent material of this universe, so is this Prana the infinite, omnipresent manifesting power of this universe. At the beginning and at the end of a cycle everything becomes Akasha, and all the forces that are in the universe resolve back into the Prana: in the next cycle, out of this Prana is evolved everything that we call energy, everything that we call force. It is the Prana that is manifesting as motion, it is the Prana that is manifesting as gravitation, as magnetism. It is the Prana that is manifesting as the actions of the body, as the nerve currents, as the thought force. From thought down to the lowest force, everything is but the manifestation of Prana. The sum total of all forces in the universe, mental or physical, when resolved back to their original state, is called Prana."*¹

To make clear the relations between 'chit' (cit) and 'prana', the following lines from Arthur Avalon's The Serpent Power are illuminating:

*"Mind and body are the instruments whereby the ordinary separatist worldly experience is had. As long, however, as they are so used they are impediments in the way of attainment of the state of pure Consciousness (Cit). For such attainment all screenings (Avarana) of Cit must be cleared away. Yoga, therefore, is the method whereby mental intellection and feeling (Citta-vritti) and Prana are first controlled and then stilled. When the Citta, Vritti and Prana are stilled, then Cit or Paramatma stands revealed. It supervenes without further effort on the absorption of matter and mind into the primordial Power (Shakti) whence they sprang, of whom they are manifested forms, and who is Herself as Shiva, one with Him who is Shiva or Consciousness. Yoga thus works towards a positive state of pure consciousness by the negation of the operation of the principle of unconsciousness, which stands in the way of the uprising."*²

The following passage from the same author's Introduction to Tantra Shastra clearly shows that 'cit-shakti' is the same as Shiva-Shakti in the microcosm of the human body:

*"Devi (Shakti) is the vacaka-shakti, the manifestation of Cit in Prakriti, the vachya-shakti, or Cit itself. The Atma should be contemplated as Devi. Shakti or Devi is thus the Brahman revealed in Its mother aspect (Shri-mata), as Creatrix and Nourisher of the worlds."*³

This is also clear from the following lines of The Serpent Power:

*"Shortly, the subtle body may be described as the Mental body, as that which succeeds is called the gross body of Matter. Mind is abstractedly considered by itself, that is, as dissociated from Consciousness which is never the case, as unconscious force which breaks up into particulars the Experience-Whole which is Cit. It is called the 'working within' or 'internal instrument' (Antah-karana), and is one only, but is given different names to denote the diversity of its functions. The Samkhya thus speaks of 'buddhi', 'ahankara', 'manas', to which the Vedanta adds 'citta', being different aspects or attributes (Dharma) of Mind as displayed in the psychical processes by which the Jiva knows, feels and wills."*⁴

These excerpts make it amply clear that 'cit-shakti' and 'prana-shakti' mean practically the same thing. 'Chit' too is a product of 'prana-shakti' which veils the Brahman or Shiva and makes the supreme Reality to forget its identity as 'Jivatma' or the embodied Soul. It is this Shakti or illusive power maya which is the cause of avidya, i.e. nescience, as also of moksha, that is liberation of the embodied spirit. This is the traditional view about the role of Shakti in the enfeeblement and then emancipation of the human soul, in reality a spark from the Eternal Flame of Consciousness which illumines the universe.

The ideas I am expressing are consistent with this view of Creation, as also with the concepts of embodiment and emancipation of the Soul. The main point of departure is that I believe that there is a specific psychosomatic mechanism, already provided by Nature, through which 'prana-shakti' brings about the release of the spirit.

I am not fond of academic discussions nor am I interested in making what I say acceptable to the world unless it is verified by experiments made with the methods of science. We shall continue to face a critical situation in the world unless the spiritual destiny of mankind is demonstrated with empirical methods and every human being is made aware, from the school-going age, that they have to live a life in consonance with Spiritual Law.

By this time you might have received the article entitled "Life is Everlasting." The basal Energy of the universe is the Energy of Consciousness. How it is transformed into material, organic, gravitational, electromagnetic or atomic energy, future investigations will show. We are at the very beginning of a radical change in the thinking of the race. This change will not be brought about so much by our efforts as by the force of circumstances, created by the racial 'prana-shakti' to draw out mankind from the present groove which is inimical to her spiritual evolution.

III

My position is simple. I believe that 'prana-shakti' or the bioelectricity which is behind the organic activity of the body and the mental activity of the brain can undergo a transformation either as the result of hereditary factors, as in the case of the examples cited above, or with the practices of yoga—Raja Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, etc.—or as the harvest of any other religious or occult discipline, as has happened throughout the past. It is this alteration in the pranic energy or bio-electricity, with a corresponding transformation in certain areas of the brain, which is responsible for all cases of illumination, whether brought about by voluntary methods or spontaneously, as also for all cases of genius, paranormal faculties and, where the body or the brain is not adaptable to the change, for certain intractable forms of insanity.

The Upanishads are the fount-heads of the Vedanta philosophy. The following passages from the Prasna Upanishad—one of the principle Upanishads—clearly depicts the Kundalini mechanism without the least shadow of ambivalence. In these passages, prana is allotted the same position as that ascribed to it by Vivekananda:

"From the Self is born this Prana. Just as there can be a shadow when a man is there, so this Prana is fixed on the Self. He comes to this body owing to the actions of the mind.

As it is the king alone who employs the officers saying, 'Rule over these villages, and those ones,' just so Prana engages the other organs separately.

He places Apana in the two lower apertures. Prana Himself, issuing out of the mouth and nostrils, resides in the eyes and ears. In the middle, however, is Samana, for this one distributes equally all this food that is eaten. From that issue out these seven flames. This Self (this subtle atman) is surely in the heart. There are a hundred and one of the (chief) nerves. Each of them has a hundred (divisions). Each branch is divided into 72,000 sub-branches. Among them moves Vyana.

Now then, Udana, when it is in its upward trend, leads to a virtuous world as a result of virtue, to a sinful world as a result of sin, and to a human world as a result of both.

The sun is indeed the external Prana. It rises up favoring this Prana in the eye. That deity, that is in the earth, favors by attracting Apana in a human being. The space (i.e. air) that is within, is Samana. The (common) air is Vyana.

That which is well-known as luminosity is Udana. Therefore one who gets his light extinguished attains rebirth together with the organs that enter into (his) mind.

Together with whatever thought he had (at the time of death), he enters into Prana. Prana, in combination with Udana and its association with the soul, leads him to the world desired by him.

The line of progeny of any man of knowledge who knows Prana thus, sustains no break. He becomes immortal.

Pertaining to this, there occurs this mantra:

Having known the origin, coming, lodgement and fivefold overlordship and the physical existence of Prana, one achieves immortality. Having known, one achieves immortality." (III, 3-12)

This is how Mundaka Upanishad traces the appearance of mind, the five elements and the worlds to prana:

“As a spider spreads out and withdraws (its thread), as on the earth grow the herbs (and trees), and as from the living man issues out hair on the head and body, so out of the Immutable does the universe emerge here (in this phenomenal creation).

Through knowledge Brahman increases in size. From that is born (the unmanifested) food. From food evolved prana (Hiranyagarbha); (thence the cosmic) mind; (thence) the five elements; (thence) the worlds; (thence) the immortality that is karmas.” (I.1, 7-8)

The indivisible unity of the embodied self and prana is described thus by the Shankaracharya Upanishad:

“Then Usasta, the son of Cakra, questioned him. ‘Yajnavalkya,’ said (he), ‘tell me precisely about the Brahman that is immediate and direct—the self that is within all.’ ‘This is your self that is within all.’ ‘Which is it that is within all, Yajnavalkya?’ ‘That which moves forward through the Prana is your self that is within all. That which moves downward through the Apana is your self that is within all. That which pervades (the body) through the Vyana is your self that is within all. That which passes out through the Udana is yourself that is within all. This is your self that is within all.’ “ (III.4, 1)

Chandogya Upanishad calls prana the body of the atman or, in other words, the vehicle through which it acts:

“He, who is permeating the mind, who has Prana for his body, whose nature is consciousness, whose resolve infallible, whose own form is like Akasha, whose creation is all that exists . . .” (III.14, 2)

The profoundly arcane character of Gayatri, prana and Brahman is brought out by the same Upanishad in the following passages. The reference to ‘heart chakra’ and the five Pranic door-keepers (Kundalini) is unmistakable:

“Gayatri indeed is all this, whatever being exists. Speech indeed is Gayatri; for speech indeed sings and removes fear of all this that exists.

That which is this Gayatri, even that is this earth; for on this earth are all the beings established and they do not transcend it.

That which is this earth (as Gayatri), even that is this, i.e. this body in respect of this person; for these senses are indeed established in this body and they do not transcend it.

That which is the body in respect of a person, even that is (identical with) the heart within the body; for these senses are indeed established in it and they do not transcend it.

This well-known Gayatri is four-footed and sixfold. The Gayatri Brahman is thus expressed in the following way;

Such is the greatness of this (Brahman called Gayatri in the form of the phenomenal world, i.e. Maya-Shakti). Purusha is even greater than this. All this world is a quarter of Him. The other three quarters of Him constitute immortality in Heaven.

That which is (designated as) Brahman, even that is this Akasha outside the body. That which is the Akasha outside the body, even that is this Akasha inside the body. That which is the Akasha inside the body, even that is this Akasha within the (lotus of the) heart. This Brahman is all-filling and unchanging. He who knows (Brahman) thus, gets all-filling and unchanging prosperity.

Of the said heart, there are, indeed, five doors guarded by the Gods. (He who is in) that which is the eastern door of this, is Prana. He is the eye, he is the sun. This (Brahman called Prana) should be meditated upon as brightness and as the source of food. He who meditates thus, becomes resplendent and an eater of food.

And (he who is in) that which is the southern door of this (heart), is Vyana. He is the ear, he is the moon. This (Brahman called Vyana) should be meditated upon as prosperity and fame. He who meditates thus becomes prosperous and famous.

And (he who is in) that which is the western door of this (heart), is Apana. He is speech, he is fire. This (Brahman called Apana) should be meditated upon as the holy effulgence born of sacred wisdom and as the source of food. He who meditates thus becomes radiant with the holy effulgence born of sacred wisdom and also as eater of food.

And (he who is in) that which is the northern door of this (heart), is Samana. He is the mind, he is Prajanya (the rain god). This (Brahman called Samana) should be meditated upon as fame and grace. He who meditates thus becomes famous and graceful.

And (he who is in) that which is the upper door of this (heart), is Udana. He is the air, he is the Akasha. This (Brahman called Udana) should be meditated upon as strength and nobility. He who meditates thus becomes strong and noble.

These, verily, are the five persons under Brahman, the sentinels of the heavenly world. He who adores thus these five persons under Brahman, the sentinels of the heavenly world, in his family is a hero born. He who adores thus these five persons under Brahman, the sentinels of the heavenly world, reaches the heavenly world.” (III. 12, 1-9; III. 13, 1-6)

The sub-joined verse from the Katha Upanishad, again, is a reference to the heart-chakra and sushumna. The explanatory note, which is added, is based on the commentary by the great Vedanta philosopher, Shankaracharya:

“The nerves of the heart are 101 in number. Of them the one passes through the head. Going up through that nerve, one gets immortality. The others that have different directions, become the causes of death.” (II-3, 16)

“The nerves that issue out of the heart of a man are one hundred in number; and one—called sushumna. Of these, the one—the sushumna—goes out, by piercing through murdhanam, the head. At the time of death one should bring one’s mind under control through that (sushumna) nerve, and get it concentrated in the heart. Through that nerve, going up—along the path of the sun (uttara-marga)—one attains immortality.”

Considered in the light of the sublime experience, described in the Upanishads, and the cosmological concepts contained in them, our intellectual wrangling about the phenomena and the entities, entirely beyond our normal perception, is nothing but an exercise in futility. According to these scriptures, the world of matter is transformed consciousness, appearing as the objective universe through the action of maya or Shakti, the illusive or creative Power residing in the Supreme Reality. Success in yoga does not mean an inner visionary experience of this Reality, but a change in perception which shows consciousness and the melted image of the phenomenal world as the two aspects of one and the same reality. It is only then that the mind is stilled in awe and the hairs on the body stand erect at the surpassing wonder of the supernal world.

The association of prana with every form of yoga is common knowledge in India. The popular image of a yogi often depicts him as one who has drawn the entire prana of his body into his head. It is immaterial whether this concentration of prana is achieved with the gentle methods of Raja Yoga or the arduous ones of Hatha Yoga. The medium affected is the same, namely prana. There is no other rival force in the body to which we could point as the one that comes into operation by Raja Yoga methods in contrast to the other activated by the techniques of Hatha Yoga. There is only one living electricity in the body and that is prana.

The terms ‘yoga’ or ‘Raja Yoga’ are nowhere mentioned in the Vedas nor in the earlier Upanishads, and rarely in the later out of those known as the Principle Upanishads. But prana is repeatedly referred to. The distinction between Hatha Yoga and Raja Yoga is merely one of technique. The operative force and the mechanisms involved are the same.

V

Kundalini in a symbolic or allegoric form is mentioned in the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Puranas, also in the writings of medieval saints of India, like Kabir, Guru Nanak, Mira Bhai, Lalleshwari, Dadu, Jnaneshwar and others. The most sacred mantra of the Rig Veda, namely Gayatri Mantra, is an invocation to Kundalini. The investiture ceremony of Gayatri, according to the Vedic ritual, provides irrefutable evidence for the fact that instructions about the discipline were imparted to the initiates from an early age. The tuft of hair on the crown of the head, which is still a common sight in India, and the vermilion or sandal mark on the forehead, clearly point to the fact that the physiology of the mechanism was very well known to the priestly hierarchy in the Vedic age.

In the Rig Veda there are scores of hymns addressed to soma. The Western scholars have interpreted soma to mean an inebriating beverage prepared from a plant called soma. If this interpretation is accepted, it would then reduce the Vedic hymns to the effusions of bacchanalian priests in a state of gay intoxication rather than to the inspired compositions of august Rishis and Munis.

Soma means the moon also. The moon is a symbolic reference to Kundalini, when it irradiates the Sahasrara. The symbol of the crescent of the moon, on the heads of Shiva and Shakti, provide corroboration for this fact. Soma, therefore, refers to the rain of nectar in the Sahasrara, leading to inexpressible bliss when Kundalini enters the brain. This is clear from the passage in the Rig Veda (10.85.3) which says, "One thinks one drinks Soma because a plant is crushed. The Soma that the Brahmans know—that no one drinks." This is also clear from the reference to Soma by Tantrics and other medieval saints of India.

Seals with the figure of a deity, like Shiva sitting in asana, with phallus erectus, a symbolic depiction of the arousal of Kundalini, have been found in the excavations made at some sites of the Indus Valley civilization. There is also evidence to show that the secret of Kundalini was known to the Egyptians, Sumerians, Cretans, Persians, Chinese, Greeks and Romans, centuries and even thousands of years before the birth of Christ. The cross, too, is an emblem of Kundalini.

Kundalini was known to the Mayans and is mentioned in the traditions of the Hopis in America. I would be glad to know if there is any other spiritual discipline, religious observance, esoteric practice or occult ritual even half as widely known with as many ramifications and as extended to the remotest periods of time as the cult of Kundalini.

It has been a universal method for gaining mystical vision, oracular gifts and occult powers for the past thousands of years. The neolithic symbol of the serpent and the sun provides evidence to show that, in some form, the cult of Kundalini existed in the neolithic age, over 10,000 years before the birth of Christ. The only other religious practices comparable to those belonging to Kundalini, in the extended area of their operation or their antiquity, are the sexo-religious or fertility cults of primitive or pagan populations which, too, fall within the gamut of the Serpent Power.

This is as it should be. If what I assert is true, then Kundalini, as the psychosomatic mechanism for the evolution of consciousness must have been active in the race for the past hundreds of thousand years. During this vast period, persons must have been born in whom the mechanism was active from birth, as it is now in some cases, resulting in oracular or occult gifts which must have been a source of wonder and amazement to their contemporaries. Shamanistic practices, the art of divination, mystery cults, occult disciplines, prophethood and oracular performances must have originated from the amazing exhibitions of those with a spontaneously active Kundalini.

The experience of oneness with the Brahman, which is the goal of Vedanta, points to a colossal achievement. Consciousness must rise above the phenomenal world, that is above all the impressions brought in by the senses, and reach a state of illumination where the 'observer' and the 'observed' fuse into one inexpressible Reality. Our common sense cannot readily accept the proposition that this solid world of matter can melt away from our vision, except as the result of a swoon, hypnosis, sleep or the ingestion of a drug.

It is a feat impossible for an average mind. This is the reason why, in the case of the majority of mystics, both of the East and of the West, a state of trance or insensibility supervenes to allow the Vision to gather shape without distraction from outside. In most such cases, the condition has been inborn. The reason for this lies in the psychosomatic changes that occur in the brain and the nervous system with the onset of samadhi. If it were a simple, everyday experience, immobile or cataleptic conditions of the body would not be a feature of mystical experience.

There are references to chakras, especially the heart chakra, in the commentaries of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. In the laudatory verse, at the head of his learned commentary on the Yoga Sutras, Bhoja, the commentator, salutes Patanjali as the Lord of Serpents, or Shesha-Naga, who forms the couch of Lord Vishnu in the Ocean of Milk. Shesha-Naga is Kundalini.

Shankaracharya, in the famous work Saundarya Lahari, (75.100) ascribed to him, himself admits his indebtedness to Kundalini for his own incomparable talent. Jnaneshwar's exposition of Kundalini in Jnaneshwari

is a revelation. Kundalini is the source from which all spiritual knowledge, philosophy, and science in India has flown out. There could be and has been no source other than this.

Kundalini is the profound Secret behind all spiritual and cultural achievements in India. It is this all-important Secret which drew and still draws crowds of seekers after spiritual illumination from all parts of the earth to India, the land of sages, from the Vedic period to this age. It is now admitted that even ancient Egypt borrowed occult knowledge from this land.

Can we imagine for a moment that common-place disciplines and cheap practices, which are the stock-in-trade of not a few teachers of our day, could form the Secret Teaching which distant seekers traversed thousands of miles on foot to learn, risking their life and limb in the hazardous expedition in olden times? Why, to suit our own preferences, do we try to belittle a still hidden Knowledge that was valued beyond all the treasures of the earth by the greatest sons of India in the past?

The view that there is a 'chit-shakti-kundalini' and 'prana-shakti-kundalini', as expressed in the study of Sri Mehta, is paradoxical. "The fact of the matter is," writes Sri Mehta, "that Prana is widely but unwittingly equated with the cosmic spiritual Energy (Atman) by writers both spiritual and modern, who have caused confusion worse-confounded by giving an esoteric meaning to Prana and thereby misapplying the ramifications of Prana to chit-shakti."

In the first place, 'chit-shakti' is not Atman, according to any view, Vedantic, Tantric or Puranic. The Atman is Brahman, that is, pure Universal consciousness, beyond the reach of the intellect, and It perceives Itself as a Jiva by the action of maya or shakti inherent in Brahman.

"As the place, time, objects, knower, etc. called up in a dream are unreal," says Shankaracharya in Vivekachudamani, "so also is the world experienced here in the waking state, for it is all an effect of one's own ignorance. Because this body, the organs, the Pranas, egoism, etc. are also thus unreal, therefore art Thou that serene, pure, Supreme Brahman, the One without a second." (II.52)

Instead of attributing this illusion to avidhya or ignorance, we can ascribe it to the interposition of a 'veil' by Shakti or prana. A change in the pranic spectrum causes a change in the perception of the indwelling Atman also, unfolding the underlying reality behind the phenomenal universe.

VI

The Indian tradition does not mention any third kind of creative energy for the creation, maintenance or dissolution of the universe. In the Samkhya system, we have only Purusha and Prakriti and no Brahman. Prakriti is the architect of the universe.

"Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, reason and also egoism," says Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, "these are the eight-fold divisions of my Prakriti." (VII.4)

The ego, intellect, mind, senses and the five elements constituting the body, by which the Atman wills, cogitates, perceives or acts, are the creations of maya, Shakti, or Prakriti. If the Atman has its own special energy—apart from maya, Shakti or Prakriti, which deludes or enfetters it—why then, at all, should it allow itself to be reduced to this unenviable position? Why then should it undergo the painful cycle of countless births and deaths before releasing itself from the prison of embodiment, when the power of release rests in its own hands?

I see no reason why we should depart from the cosmological concepts of Vedanta, Tantra, Samkhya or Yoga simply to explain that samadhi or illumination is also possible with mental processes or intellection and not only by the Yogic or Tantric processes of asana, pranayama and the like. Prana has never been equated with Atman by any Indian authority, ancient or modern. It is the Shakti or Power of the Reality and in this sense alone is one with That. The answer to this problem is very simple. In cases of intellectually mature individuals, in whom the psychosomatic mechanism of evolution, namely Kundalini, has attained a riper stage, samadhi or

the mystical trance can occur with only a moderate mental effort or even spontaneously. The cases of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Pascal, Tagore, Bucke and many others are instances in point.

The mind-body complex, which enshrines the Atman, is not something entirely alien to it or an imposition from some other power in the universe. It is its own creation through Maya or Shakti. Tapas, Yoga or any other form of spiritual discipline is but a process by which the Atman gains freedom from the self-imposed illusion or internment which makes it forget its sovereignty as Brahman, Paramatma or Shiva. Whether it is an illusion, mistaken identity, or a creation of Shakti, this psycho-physiological prisonhouse in which the Atman finds itself cannot vanish like a dream to free it from bondage or grant it true awareness of itself as the Eternal Reality.

There must be a natural process for liberation as there is an inexorable organic process for incarnation—conception, embryo, birth, childhood, prime, old age, death, etc., repeated time after time. It cannot be that while the process of internment spreads over ages, that of release should occur in a day, through a magically potent sadhana or a glance of favor from a guru.

The Indian tradition bases salvation on the fruition of karma done in countless past lives of a Jiva.

“But the Yogi,” says the Bhagavad Gita, “laboring with assiduity, purified from sin, fully perfected through manifold births, he reacheth the supreme goal.” (VI.45)

It is this accumulated Karmic harvest of the past which determines the when, where and how of the efforts made for liberation in this life. In other words, involution and then evolution are the processes which govern the embodiment and then emancipation of the Soul. The key to unlock the door of the prisonhouse exists in the corporeal frame to unwind the obstructing sheaths that cause the Atman to forget its identity. The key is Kundalini.

There is no need to invent several kundalinis when one can serve the purpose. This is against the plan followed by Nature in the formation of organic bodies. There is already confusion about the number of chakras in the body. Some authorities place their number at four, others at six, still others at twelve, and yet others at even a larger number. The same is the case with the nadis. Should we now make a fresh addition to the number of kundalinis also?

The main difference between Hatha-Yoga and Patanjali Yoga lies in the use of shat-karma (six processes of body cleaning) and a huge variety of asanas with mudras, bandhas and more arduous types of pranayama, in addition to the disciplines prescribed in the latter. Both consist of the same eight steps of yama, niyama, etc., for which the latter is known as Ashtanga Yoga also. Asana and pranayama constitute two of the eight steps in both of these systems of Yoga. Pranayama is referred to in aphorisms 49, 50 and 51 of the second chapter of the Yoga Sutras.

According to Patanjali (II.52), “With the practice of Pranayama, the covering to the light of the ‘chitta’ is attenuated.” Hatha Yoga manuals say the same thing. Pranayama purifies the body and cleans the nadis, resulting in a greater purity of Prana. The object of both the systems is the same, viz., the unveiling of the Atman. Some of the techniques used in one are more intricate, strenuous, even violent and risky than the other. That is all.

Patanjali in his Yoga-Sutras shows complete awareness of the fact that varying intensity in the methods of Yoga is needed to suit individuals of different mental or physical constitutions. Thus he says:

“Success is speedy for the extremely energetic.” (I.21)

“The success of Yogis differs according as the means they adopt are mild, medium or intense.” (I.22)

The opening verse of the Gheranda Samhita runs as follows:

“I bow to that Lord Primeval, who taught in the beginning the science of the Training in Hardiness (Hatha-Yoga)—a science that stands out as the first rung on the ladder that leads to the supreme heights of Royal Training (Raja-Yoga).

Verse two of Chapter Seven of the same work says:

“That Yogi quickly attains this most beautiful practice of Samadhi, who has faith in knowledge; faith in his own Guru; faith in his own Self; and whose mind awakens to intelligence from day to day.”

The Shiva Samhita divides the aspirants to illumination into four categories—mild, moderate, ardent and the most ardent. The period of practice needed for success for the first is said to be twelve years, the third six years and the fourth three years. This shows a clear awareness of the fact that the state of maturity of the psychosomatic organism determines the period of practice for each individual.

Vijnana Bhairava is a Tantra, written more than 1,200 years ago. Many of the methods described in it are simple and easy to perform. They rest on intellection, self-inquiry or visualization. A few of these are reproduced below:

“Just as, O Goddess, one’s sensuous consciousness may, with the magic of memory, in absence of the actual object, be flooded with all the pleasures derived from the adjuncts of the copulative act, like kissing, hugging, pressing, etc.,” (70)

“Just as all the dormant joy in the mind leaps forth at the sight of meeting a beloved son or a close friend, after a long absence, while all the time this latent joy lay in the mind itself, without coming to the surface.” (71)

“So even the pleasures of the senses provided by eating or drinking or by appreciation of what is lovely can lead to that state of happiness which is called the Supreme Bliss.” (72)

“The pleasures derived from melody or through the senses of touch, taste and smell can beget that oneness of the mind and that peerless joy by which the Yogi—his mind totally self-absorbed—becomes completely immune to ordinary pleasure or pain.” (75)

“Wherever the mind of the individual finds delight (without agitation), let it be concentrated on that. In every such case, highest bliss will manifest itself.” (74)

“On the approach of that middle state, when sleep has not yet completely overcome consciousness nor entirely dimmed one’s perception of external objects, by concentrating the mind on it, the Supreme Goddess will reveal Herself.” (75)

“The Yogi should contemplate the entire open space (or sky) under the form of the essence of Bhairava, (Shiva) and as dissolved (in the space) in the head. Then the entire universe will be absorbed in the light of Bhairava.” (85)

“When one concentrates on one’s self in the form of a vast firmament unlimited in any direction whatsoever, then the ‘chit-shakti’, freed of all props, reveals Herself.” (92)

“If one pierces at first any limb (of one’s body) with a sharp pointed needle, etc., and then concentrates on that very spot (owing to the intensity of one-pointed awareness) one has access to the pure nature of Bhairava. (93)

These few verses have been reproduced to show the variety of methods prescribed by spiritual teachers in India for practice to their disciples. There are simple and mild methods as also intricate and hard ones in the ancient systems of Yoga in India. It is not, therefore, possible to draw hard and fast lines between this system and that in respect of the exercises prescribed. Svatamarama, the author of Hatha-Yoga Pradipika, accords a high place to Raja-Yoga in one of his passages. (III.126)

How few really succeed in the enterprise we know only too well. The reason for this poverty of results in the spiritual quest lies in the ignorance about the real nature of the mechanism responsible for success. The means of attainment to the state of Cosmic Consciousness have been classified under four broad heads by the authorities in Kashmir, namely anupaya, shambhava, shakta and anava. Of these, the first literally signifies ‘no-means’ or, in other words, natural or spontaneous. The other three are dependent on certain methods or techniques. This, again, refers to the constitutional factor, i.e., the state of ripeness of the organism for the experience.

Similarly, Shankaracharya says in Vivekachudamani:

“Know, O wise man, dispassion (vairagya) and discrimination (viveka) to be like the two wings of a bird in the case of an aspirant. Unless both are there, none can, with the help of either one, reach the creeper of liberation that grows, as it were, on the top of an edifice.” (III.74)

At another place in the same work he writes:

“Reflecting on this Atman continuously and without any foreign thought intervening, one must distinctly realize it to be one’s real Self.” (III.81)

“That kind of mental function which cognizes only the identity of the Self and Brahman, purified of all adjuncts, which is free from duality and which concerns itself only with pure Intelligence, is called illumination. He who has this perfectly steady is called a man of steady illumination.” (IV.27)

“He whose illumination is steady, who has constant bliss and who has almost forgotten the phenomenal universe, is accepted as a man liberated in this very life.” (IV.28)

VII

These excerpts clearly show that the authorities in India have been divergent in their views about the nature of the disciplines to be undertaken to reach the illuminated state of consciousness and that it is not necessary for everybody to arouse Kundalini-Shakti with Hatha Yoga methods only. Also, it is not necessary that everyone would reach enlightenment with application of only one form of Yoga, namely Raja-Yoga, Jnana-Yoga, Karma-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Laya-Yoga or Dhyana-Yoga.

There is no one way to reach the Eternal. There is no one method that would suit everyone. The illuminees born in different parts of the earth have been divergent in their philosophy, metaphysics, methods of attainment, the nature of the Reality, the nature of the Soul, ideas about the Hereafter and the state of the Soul after disembodiment. But all this divergence does not mean that there is a chaos in the spiritual world or that the illuminees of the past knew all that is to be known of this profound Ocean of Knowledge of the Self.

The disparity in the views about the means of attainment, expressed by the illuminees of India—the solemn exhortations to self-perfection contained in the Bhagavad Gita, the possibility of fantastic paranormal gifts opened up by Patanjali, the even more fantastic claims put forward in the manuals on Hatha-Yoga, the instant methods of self-awareness described in Vijnana Bhairava, and the purely intellectual exercises of Shankaracharya—should make us pause and consider what is the reason behind the divergence of opinions and what inscrutable Law rules the spiritual life of mankind.

This diversity and this confusion only means that concentrated methods are needed to study all that has been written on the subject, as a prelude to experiments directed to unravel the mystery of illuminated consciousness that has been the most powerful factor in history in shaping the thinking of human beings. From my point of view, the Secret lies in the still unexplored areas of the human brain. We cannot assume that the human Soul, which is so inextricably bound to the body, the mind and the senses, can find release with any methods whatsoever, unless there is a provision for it in the brain itself. There is no area of our organic life which is ruled by magical or arbitrary forces. How can we then introduce this factor suddenly in respect of our spiritual evolution alone. This leads us, again, to the psychosomatic mechanism of Kundalini.

We do not come across the same level of intelligence in all human beings. Similarly, we do not meet the same level of spiritual evolution in every member of the race. The shades of difference between those at the bottom and those at the top can be as numerous, if not more, as the shades of difference between an idiot and an intellectual of the highest rank.

How, then, can the same methods of spiritual discipline apply to all? How, then, can we measure the whole race with the same yardstick and provide spiritual food of the same kind for one and all? How, then, can we continue to accept the authority or infallibility of the various authorities, when the very fundamentals of this variation are still a sealed book to us? How, then, can we find the way out of the labyrinth of ancient thought when we continue to have reservations about new ideas expressed by contemporaries without giving a fair trial to them?

Kundalini underlies every creed and cult in India. It is the string on which the entire religious ritual and religious tradition in India is threaded. It would need volumes to show that Kundalini is the soil from which all the lavish crop of Indian scriptural lore and philosophy has sprung. It is also the source of all religions, occult and esoteric traditions of mankind from the dawn of civilizations to this day. Ramakrishna, the great apostle of Vedanta in our time was himself a product of Kundalini. All his life he remained a devotee of the Goddess.

One whole chapter in the Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali is devoted to the description of siddhis or miraculous powers. This shows that not only illumination but also siddhis result from the practice of Yoga prescribed by him. We know that siddhis are very rarely met within those who practice the system of Yoga advocated by Patanjali or even other systems. Out of the millions who practice Raja-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Karma-Yoga, Jnana-Yoga, Dhyana-Yoga or Hatha-Yoga all over the world, how many are there who can claim to have gained siddhis or miraculous gifts? Out of those who make the claim, how many are prepared to have their claims verified in a laboratory? If there is hardly any, it means, then, that the possession of siddhis is a rare achievement, not possible for millions who practice Yoga or other religious disciplines.

Apart from other siddhis, the Yogi, idealized by Patanjali, becomes the possessor of hidden knowledge concerning the sky, the earth and the human body, etc. A few of his aphorisms in the Yoga-Sutras concerning these siddhis are reproduced below as a sample:

“By making Samyama of the form of the body, the perceptibility of the form being obstructed and the power of manifestation in the eye being separated, the Yogi’s body becomes unseen.” (III.21)

“By making Samyama on the Effulgent Light, comes the knowledge of the fine, the obstructed, and the remote.” (III.26)

“By making Samyama on the sun, (comes) the knowledge of the world.” (III.27)

“On the moon, (comes) the knowledge of the cluster of stars. (III.28)

“On the Pole Star, (comes) the knowledge of the motions of the stars.” (III.29)

“On the navel circle, (comes) the knowledge of the constitution of the body. (III.30)

They clearly refer to clairvoyance or sprouting of genius. A system of Yoga that leads to the bloom of these extraordinary faculties is not radically different from the systems mentioned in the Tantras.

Psychic faculties are as much an inborn gift as genius and often reveal their existence from an early age. It is out of this gifted class of men and women, commonly known as mediums and psychics, that subjects for empirical study have been chosen. It is from the experiments conducted with their cooperation that the whole mass of literature on psychic phenomena or extrasensory perception has come into existence. On the other hand, there have been extremely few, if any, out of the multitudes practicing Yoga who ever came forward with the same readiness to undergo laboratory tests for the verification of their claims.

The only conclusion that we can draw from this is that in almost all cases of genius or psychic powers, the gift is inborn, being a part of the natural mental endowment of a human being. It is only in extremely few cases, if at all any, that the gifts have been cultivated. The fact that Patanjali is including siddhis and extraordinary intellectual gifts with success in Yoga leaves us in no doubt about his own conception of a true Yogi. This is the same as I have tried to present in my writings on Kundalini.

The inquiry into Self is also a practice of Yoga. It was prescribed by Maharishi Ramana—a born contemplative whose ecstasies, like Ramakrishna, started from an early age, clearly a case of spontaneously active Kundalini. It is a potent form of meditation and finely impinges on the same organic mechanism of Kundalini. It is not at all necessary that Kundalini should awaken with equal force in all practitioners of religious disciplines. The degree to which it acts can be infinitely varied. In most cases, its activity may not be noticed at all though it might be operating all the time. The degree of success in the practice of Yoga depends on the extent to which the Pranic force, put into motion by the arousal of the Serpent Power, can succeed in purifying the mind and the body on the activation of the Brahma-randhra, the normally dormant paranormal centre in the brain.

Intervals of sublime peace, luminous phenomena, flashes of insight, out-of-body experiences, brief illuminative visions, streams of colored light or other similar experiences can flow from this activity of Prana. It is only when human awareness rises to another level of perception, that turiya or the Fourth State of Consciousness is attained. For its manifestation, a radical change in the subtle levels of the cerebrospinal system and the Prana must occur to make the new awareness possible. It is the difficult nature of the process of adjustment of the body to this expanded state of consciousness that is at the root of the traumatic experience undergone by Yogis and mystics, which has been an inexplicable feature in the lives of many of them.

“It is held in practical yoga,” says Das Gupta, “that the quintessence of the visible body is distilled in the form of Soma or nectar (amrita) and is repositied in the moon in the Sahasrara. There is a curved duct from the moon below the Sahasrara up to the hollow in the palatal region; it is well-known in Yoga physiology as the shankhini. This is the banka-nala (i.e. the curved duct) frequently mentioned in the vernaculars through which the maha-rasa (i.e. soma-rasa) passes. This curved duct shankhini is described in the Goraksha Vijaya as the serpent with mouths at both ends. The mouth of the shankhini, through which the soma or the amrita pours down from the moon, is called the dashama-dvara or the tenth door of the body as distinguished from the other nine ordinary doors.”⁵

This is the soma of the Vedas. This is the tenth door referred to by Guru Nanak in his Adi Granth. This is the stream of nectar which flows from Kundalini when it reaches the Sahasrara to unite with her spouse, Lord Shiva. This is the one and the only source of inexpressible bliss experienced in Samadhi. There is no comparison between this heavenly joy and the euphoria of drug experiences or that met within hypnagogic or self-induced visionary states.

In one form or the other, Kundalini is met everywhere. Tantric influences on even Vaishnavism is palpable. This is clear from a popular Vaishnava text, the Brahma-Samhita, which was brought by Sir Chaitanya himself from South India. The Brahma-Samhita contains a description of the lotus of a thousand petals which it calls Gokula, the abode of Krishna.⁵ The secret of Kundalini lurks under the surface of all genuine spiritual experiences of sat-chit-ananda (Existence, Consciousness, Bliss) brought about by any method whatsoever.

The image of a Yogi who has attained to turiya, or the Fourth State of Consciousness, as presented in the Upanishads, in the Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali, in the Gita, in the Tantras, Puranas and the manuals on Yoga, is so incredible as to be almost beyond the power of a normal human being to conform to it. The only possible way to rise up to it can lie in a hidden potentiality in the body to perfect itself for the emergence of a new personality that exhibits, to a more or less extent, the extraordinary attributes which, according to this image, characterized the illuminated state.

The tragedy is that the profundity of illuminative experience is not brought out clearly by many of the spiritual teachers of our time. What they usually dwell on are vacant, delusory or self-induced hypnotic states of mind, miscalled visionary God experiences, which are but altered states of the normal human awareness, like those caused by drugs or other changes in the chemistry of the brain. The true mystical experience, even for one brief duration, shakes the individual to the roots, and lives in the memory as a Beacon of Light, Immortality and Peace to the end.

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