

EPISODE 6

KUNDALINI

Hello everyone. Whether or not you are still on the path that you may or may not have ever been on. This is episode number 6 of my podcast ManWomanSexGod. And my name is Michael Folz.

Okay. In Episode 5 I went over a series of stories, from Ancient Rome to the Middle Ages, and then back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In all of them there were strange references to, and images of, snakes and poles and trees of life and goddesses guarding sacred mysteries. And when we finished that episode we were still kind of in mid-story.

So now we're going to continue it. And I'm going to do that by starting this episode with a completely different story.

Now one day in 1937 a Kashmiri Hindu by the name of Gopi Krishna sat down to meditate. He was 34 at the time, with a wife and children and a minor government job, but—like many other Indian householders back then—he always set aside time each morning for meditation. He had done this since he was 17, although, truth be told, by this point to a large extent he was just going through the motions.

But this day's meditation would be different.

Because for some reason he decided to concentrate at the point at the top of the skull where those three bones come together. And all of a sudden there was a tremendous burst of *something* at the base of his spine. And soon this indescribably incredible energy shot up to that point at the top of his head and, seemingly, way beyond it. At once his consciousness became beyond ecstatic, free of all ego, and all-encompassing. There was a dramatic experience of inner sound and inner light, and he felt like his soul was being forcibly pulled up into a higher realm. Total unrelenting bliss ensued. And it was only after several unending hours that this heightened state of awareness slowly wore off and he was back to being who he had been before this had all happened.

Although, before you envy his experience, you need to know what happened next.

Because now his entire being felt utterly exhausted. And although he had a similar, but lesser, 'awakening' the next day, that was about it. And for the next twelve years he went through sheer and

unrelenting hell. His body and mind felt like they were on fire. He had severe and bizarre reactions to virtually every food that he ate, and every medicine, even innocuous ones, that he took. Each and every day he wasn't sure whether he would even be alive the next morning.

Hardly a comforting tale from the Mystic East. But a true one nonetheless. And an excellent way to begin this particular episode.

Now the intention of the previous episode was to make you at least receptive to the idea that common symbolism across time and cultures might well refer to some sort of common inner experience.

Although if you wanted to remain a skeptic, there would still have been plenty of opportunity to do so. For instance, I may have been inferring symbolism where none was intended. As even Freud admitted, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Maybe the snakes and unicorns were just the fanciful fantasies of relatively simple minds. After all, if these esoteric truths was so incredibly important, why didn't the storytellers just come out and say it? Furthermore, these mystery cults and 'hidden' knowledge smack of the silly rituals involved with Masonic Temples and college secret societies. Who's to say that it hasn't always been mumbo jumbo?

Finally, let's agree for the sake of argument that there really may have been some genuine mysticism in these ancient mystery cults. Unless I'm claiming some sort of magical, mystical connection to 'hidden masters' or the like, where do I get off saying that I know what these other people actually believed?

Fortunately, though, you don't have to just take my word on any of this. Because it turns out that in one area of the world total secrecy about these matters was not the rule.

Now of all the cultures of the ancient and not-so-ancient world, that of India was perhaps the strangest. Especially when you consider the incredibly high level of literacy, artistry, philosophy and mathematics that it achieved. Because unlike, say, the Romans or Greeks, Hindu society never celebrated the idea of a 'republic' or a 'democracy', let alone 'political equality'. Worse, although every even semi-advanced society has always been separated into higher and lower classes, even between slaves and free men, India took this stratification way, way further.

What it developed, and maintained for some three thousand years, was the most rigid caste system conceivable.

You may already be familiar with the four main castes: Brahman priests at the top, followed by the warriors, then the merchants, and finally, down at the bottom, the peasants. But each of these various castes was then itself divided into innumerable subgroups. And if you happened to be born into, say, the metal working sub caste, that's where you stayed your entire life. That's where you got your (pre-arranged) marriage partner from. That's the work your children would do when they grew up. And there was not a scintilla of freedom or choice in the matter that the wider society offered to any or all of its members.

But at the same time, although its social constrictions were so mind numbing that Fascism seems almost liberal in comparison, India allowed for a tolerance of religious thought that was so broad that today's liberalism seems almost Fascist in comparison. Many Hindus worshiped brightly colored multiple gods in incredibly convoluted temples. There they would offer offerings and pray for personal favors. But others scorned such a simplistic understanding and instead contemplated an impersonal Atman (the Oversoul or ultimate reality), which was similar to Deism, and was almost atheistic in conception. What's more, when other religions developed or arrived on the sub-continent—Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism—they were always accepted as absolutely valid alternative ways to worship and to know God.

Syncreticism once again.

So it's interesting to speculate on the connection between the absolute slavery of the caste system and the absolute independence which Hindu society granted you once you applied yourself to the larger questions of existence. It's almost as if the demands of being part of the social order were made so onerous that it would become the most natural thing in the world for citizens to want to reject the world.

What's more, if you really got serious about the liberation of your soul, then there was indeed a fantastic escape clause built into the straitjacket of the caste system. For you could become a *sadhu*, a sanyassin, a renunciate. And once you did that you were no longer bound by any of the constraints of caste.

Which is how the practice of yoga got started.

Now I don't know if you are aware that the language of ancient Sanskrit arose from the exact same Indo-European roots as did ancient Greek and, later on, for that matter, English. Which is why 'Krishna' is essentially the same word as 'Krystos' or 'Christ'. Similarly, 'yoga' is essentially the same

word as 'to yoke', so that the word originally referred to one's attempt to bind oneself back to God. Which, as you'll recall, was also the probable original meaning of the Latin word 'religio'.

But whereas our modern word 'religion' now comes freighted with thoughts of priesthood, dogma, and miracles, our idea of 'yoga' has almost the opposite connotation. At its most basic level, we think of a series of stretching exercises that has nothing to do with any particular belief system. And even if we understand that there is a deeper purpose involved, we think of the breathing exercises and meditation as not only not 'religious', but if anything a rational alternative to religion.

This is as it should be. Because somehow, around the year 1500 BC when the practice of yoga got started, its unknown founders stumbled onto some of the principles of the scientific method about 2500 years before anyone in the West did. That is to say, one of yoga's foundational principles was that the understanding of the mind and of a possible soul could and would only be discovered through ongoing experimentation with one's own mind and body.

In other words, nothing should be believed unless and until you have experienced it for yourself.

In this way they developed a framework whereby what I have previously referred to as the religious experience could be described and understood completely outside the realm of rites and rituals and back story.

Now anyone who has seriously studied yoga beyond the asanas, or physical exercises, knows that what I have just said doesn't seem quite accurate. After all, the present day practice of yoga also often involves chanting. It involves references to Rama and Shiva. It involves belief in karma and reincarnation.

But my point is that, although you can't really be a Christian without believing in Jesus, you can very readily practice yoga—both the exercises and the meditation—without any explicit beliefs in anything even vaguely Hindu. Indeed, the whole selling point of yoga is that, so long as you do the prescribed practices, you can be an atheist and still have the exact same experiences as if you were a believer.

The beauty of this divorcing of religious beliefs from the religious experience is what has made yoga so appealing to so many Western intellectuals ever since the middle of the Nineteenth Century. This has been helped by the fact that starting in the late 19th Century there have come forth in the West a fair number of trained yogis who at least appear to have achieved some sort of steadiness of mind and

inner peace. Not to mention that modern science has confirmed numerous instances of calm brain waves and controlled heart beats, etc., arising from the practices of yoga.

Which doesn't mean to say that modern science in any way has admitted the reality of a religious experience. But remember what I seem to point out every episode. Namely, that for the purposes of this discussion it doesn't matter if said religious experience is 'really real'. For the purposes of this discussion it could just as well be some psycho-chemical phenomenon. Right now all we're trying to establish is that such a phenomenon has been reported across cultures and across time, and that this phenomenon is replicable.

So here's another way to look at what the yogis were trying to do: They were trying to figure out what happened when you stilled those thoughts in your mind. Because at some point way back in the beginning someone in India realized something that virtually no one in the Western World ever seemed to: Namely, that one's *consciousness* is an entirely different entity than one's *thoughts*. That is to say, that there seems to be some sort of awareness which is watching over our mind and our personality as we go about our daily business. There seems to be an ethereal *something* which is behind of, and is witnessing, our minds and our thoughts and our actions.

Or, to use one of yoga's favorite metaphors, our being is like the water in a pond or lake. And our thoughts are like the ripples that are formed when you throw in a pebble or rock. Except that at any given time, given the complex nature of our personalities, not to mention our busy, busy minds, hundreds of pebbles and rocks are constantly being thrown in. So that one can never get to see through the water, and one is never aware that there is anything beneath the surface. For that matter, in our normal state we're not even necessarily aware that there is any water. Just ripples.

Therefore the idea way back when was to find out what would happen if you could actually still your mind and see what then existed behind it.

And what did they discover?

Before we continue, though, let me remind you about those first two steps on the eight fold path of Raja Yoga. These had to do with inculcating specific virtues and avoiding specific vices. And the most important virtue required of the aspiring yogi was complete Honesty. This is important to remember. Because—as I mentioned—the original yogis were not trying to 'prove' some previously held religious or other belief. They were honestly trying to find out what lay behind our thoughts. And

if they had discovered that in reality there was nothing, then one would think that their sacred vow of honesty would have led at least some of them to admit that this was indeed the case.

But that's not what happened.

No, instead they declared that, besides the supple bodies and controlled heart beats that they had attained, they also announced that after stilling the mind sufficiently they had discovered another version of reality. A higher one, which we can only call mystical. But, unlike the West, they didn't create mystery cults and esoteric symbols and all the other stuff that we can argue about. They just came right out and, more or less, shared it with the world.

Talk about honesty.

For right now, though, I don't need to go over everything they discovered. Rather I would like to limit the discussion to what they figured out about the spinal column and the nervous system.

Now it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of our spinal column to our very existence. We couldn't feel our fingers or our toes or much else without it. We couldn't lift our arms or walk down the street or perform most of our behavior without it. Without its proper functioning we would, at best, be quadriplegics.

It is the centerpiece of our nervous system. Next to the brain, it is who we are. Even an atheist would not argue with that proposition. And, when you think about it, and picture it, what with all the myriad bunches of nerves branching off from it, one doesn't have to be overly poetic in labeling it as sort of an upside down Tree of Life.

And if we were to hypothesize that we do have an immaterial existence which somehow enters our physical plane body at birth and leaves it at death, then it would seem to naturally follow that the spinal column would be intimately connected to that process.

Whatever the true situation, yogis from the beginning figured out that one could not have a 'spiritual experience' unless one was upright. And not just morally, but physically. That is why when you see yogis sitting in the lotus position, they are not just showing off. It is because when you sit like that, with each foot on top of the other knee, your spine can't help but be perfectly straight. For some reason your spine needs to be that way in order for your mind to totally center itself.

Interesting. It's as if, in order to perfectly still the mind and to clear and to center the consciousness, what we can call the soul current has to withdraw from its attachment to the nervous system and those extremities that it leads to. In which case, meditation thus also has a bodily component.

But straight backs weren't the only thing that the yogis found out about the importance of the spinal column. They also discovered the existence of the kundalini.

And now it gets really interesting. Because the word 'kundalini' in Sanskrit literally means 'coiled power'. As in a serpent. And it has also always been referred to as the 'serpent power'.

So here, according to the yogis, is the rundown:

At the base of each of our spines is an energy which for the vast, vast majority of us is latent. The 'serpent' part comes from the fact that this energy is supposedly coiled, two and a half times to be exact, around the base of the spine. And although most yogis reach their higher states of consciousness through that Raja Yoga meditation that stills the thought currents up there in the head, it is also accurate to say that they are at the same time subtly and slowly awakening and raising their kundalini energy.

Because it so happens that, when you awaken it, as in a tropism (an example of which is a sunflower following the sun), this energy seeks to, as it were, defy gravity and immediately rush higher up the spinal column. And eventually it reaches the pineal gland in the brain, which not so coincidentally is where that Third Eye is.

Further, yogis say, as the kundalini does so it passes through a series of points in the spinal column that are called chakras. There are a total of seven of them. And here's a brief rundown on what the yogis say they represent and/or control:

The lowest is the anal chakra, which is connected to the basest level of existence, which one could also call 'Power'.

Next is the sexual chakra, which obviously has to do with sexual energy. According to yoga, when you have an orgasm you are experiencing a very momentary release of energy, down and out, through this chakra.

Above this, on a point on the spine behind the belly button, is what is called the stomach chakra. This controls digestion. But it is also involved with the other energies that have to do with being alive and well while living in this world, along with all the desires and fears that go along with that.

These three are commonly referred to as the lower chakras. To the extent that we are connected to chakras, these are the ones which (literally) run our lives. After all, most of our time and attention is spent on keeping us alive in this world and getting ahead in it.

The higher chakras are where it really gets interesting. And they start with the heart chakra. Although in reality this has nothing to do with that organ which pumps blood for a few billion times

before you die. Rather it is that this chakra is at a specific spot on the spine kind of behind where the heart is located.

And what a chakra it is.

Because this is where emotional happiness emanates from. Although by using the word 'emotional' I am not referring to usual emotions, such as anger or fear, or even ordinary happiness. And I certainly don't mean to imply that what happens here is not a spiritual type of energy, also. Rather, this is where what we call human warmth radiates from. More important, this is the reservoir from which spontaneously erupts that happiness or joy which is not dependent on those worldly events such as getting a new car or winning the lottery. In fact, it is a specific point (or node, if you prefer) from which, ultimately, all hope and inspiration arise.

Pretty cosmic, eh?

And you might thus think that the heart chakra would be sufficient. But wait, there's more. Because above that one is another chakra, the throat one, which is about two thirds up the neck. The sources are a little hazy on this one, but it can be said that awakening it even a little produces a somewhat stronger and more rarified form of hope and inspiration, and that it is therefore a strong fount of creativity.

Finally there is the Third Eye chakra. Awakening this is the exact same experience that you would have if you perfectly stilled your mind. The result is a bliss which is totally one pointed, and is at least co-equal and somewhat more refined and ethereal than the warm joy of the heart. Once your consciousness reaches that point, well, that was the point of the whole human game of life.

Now if you've been counting along you'll have noticed that that's only six chakras. The seventh is at the tippy top of your skull, where those three bones come together. This is where, according to yoga, the soul enters and leaves the body. A realized being can supposedly do this at will.

Of course, a realized being is supposed to have gotten that way through (at least) a lifetime of good and beautiful thoughts, words, and deeds. Plus all those yoga practices. Such a pure soul finds that their kundalini has also become purified, and that as a reward it naturally rises up along a natural channel in the middle of the spine. This awakens all of the higher chakras, and releases all that hope and inspiration and love. And from that point on everything is obviously wonderful.

But what about for the rest of us? And what about Gopi Krishna? Because what he experienced in 1937 was pretty clearly a spontaneous awakening of that same kundalini. And, although

by all accounts he was a pretty nice guy before this awakening, that apparently wasn't good enough. Instead his kundalini had somehow arisen before its time, and it was now all kinked up. With the effect of this kinking being twelve years of excruciating pain and suffering, fear and fevers, and a very unsteady mind.

Fortunately for him in 1950 all of that fell away, and he was lifted up to a permanently high, and peacefully clear, state of consciousness for the remaining 33 years of his life. Every waking moment was filled with bliss. He even developed strange yogic gifts. For instance, even though he had had no interest or talent in poetry in his earlier life, now he would spontaneously write poems of hundreds of stanzas. In multiple languages. Including ones he didn't know.

And fortunately for us he never tried to take on the role of saint or guru. He never made the slightest attempt to promote himself or his experience. Instead he continued to consider himself as a normal, not especially gifted human who had had this strange life altering experience thrust upon him. So that when you read his works he comes across as a simple, honest witness who was sincerely trying to explain his new, seemingly magical, state of mind to a skeptical Westernized world. And he ended up giving us a really fascinating account of the *kundalini syndrome*.

Because, yes, there is a medical term for it. Well, not mainstream medical perhaps, but at least a psychological one. And it was coined by *transpersonal* psychologists, a small subset of psychologists who are following in the footsteps of thinkers such as William James and Carl Jung, and who are trying to explain religious and/or spiritual experiences through the lens of the Western paradigm of psychology.

Because, although extremely rare, what happened to Gopi Krishna has also happened to other people in other cultures in all walks of life. These 'awakenings' can happen as a result of a car accident, a near death experience, childbirth, or for no obvious reason at all. Moreover, they have happened to people with no prior knowledge of yoga or mysticism or the like.

It's all been documented.

And, remember, I'm not telling you that you have to necessarily believe in souls or in souls leaving the body. One can alternatively hypothesize that the kundalini syndrome is some psycho-electrical phenomenon and that the chakras are merely nodes on the spine that vibrate a lot when this phenomenon occurs. After all, everything that we feel comes from nerve endings, and those nerves feed all their electrical impulses into the spinal cord. And you may think that a term like Life Force is archaic or New Age or over the top, but the plain fact of the matter is that we do have a qualitative

force of some kind that makes us feel *alive*. And, whether it turns out to be spiritual or merely mechanical, it's easy to theorize that in concentrated form it could well pack quite the punch.

So I hope that by now you can see why there was that serpent in the Garden of Eden. And why it was right there on the one tree that Adam and Eve weren't supposed to mess with. (Although, as we shall learn in a later episode, there were certain wrong elements in that biblical story that have screwed up our understanding of the nature of Male and Female ever since.) And hopefully you can also see why Mercury/Hermes, the interlocutor between the Gods and man, had serpents curled around his staff. And why our symbol for the medical profession also has serpents coiled around its staff.

You might even have drawn a comparison between kundalini and ch'i, the mysterious life force associated with Chinese philosophy and medicine.

But when you look at the list of the symptoms associated with the kundalini syndrome—tremors, shaking, numbness, mood swings, intense heat, terrible headaches, insomnia, anxiety—you will probably start to see why the mystery cults worked so hard to keep it a secret. As with your typical horror movie plot, it's not wise for people to play around with forces which they can't control.

And you'll also understand why even yogis who readily acknowledged the existence of such energy actively discouraged everyone from dabbling in it. After all, if you can achieve a state of serenity and higher consciousness simply by concentrating on the Third Eye, why would anyone want to fool around with something that they're not ready for, and which almost invariably leads to pain and suffering. And that can actually kill you?

But in the end I trust that you'll understand that this kundalini energy, regardless of whether it is ultimately 'spiritual' or 'physical', is indeed the plausible ultimate cause and source of what I am referring to as the religious experience.

And *that* is the lesson for today. So that now it is time to pause and reflect. Not to mention that it's also time for my friend the engineer to... cue the music.