

A Broader Look at the Spiritual Emergence Experience: Implications for Consciousness Studies

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Galbraith (1999) has provided us with a fascinating account of the Spiritual Emergence Experience, for which she uses the acronym SEUS (spiritual experience up spine). As she points out this is also known as the rising of the kundalini energy (KE) in certain Eastern traditions. The nature of such experiences can be benign and relatively "gentle" or sudden and terrifying, especially to those who do not know what is happening to them. Thus, in an earlier article in *Network* Galbraith (1998) posed the question "Spontaneous rising of Kundalini energy: pseudo-schizophrenia or spiritual disease?" It becomes clear from researching this phenomenon that it can be a life-changing, experience that individuals often associate, to varying degrees, with a transformation of consciousness.

Galbraith collected questionnaires from twenty patients and tabulated data on when they experienced their Kundalini energy rises, whether the experiences were single, multiple, major, moderate or minor, associated with hospital admissions and so forth. In the Western literature there are a number of discussions of the kundalini experience and Galbraith cites Bentov (1997) who reported 10 cases, tabulated in similar format, and Sannella (1987) who gives a book length account, of the varieties of kundalini experience including 17 case histories. In both these accounts it is clear that the experience varies considerably though common threads can be discerned. Often the experience is not benign, or easy for the person having the experience to understand. As Galbraith points out, about 50% of persons having KE experiences reported prior stress. There is also an almost one to one correlation between those reporting stress and a major KE experience, rather than a moderate or minor experience.

Although I have collected information on a few additional cases, it is not my aim to provide additional tabulations at this stage. As my background is in evolutionary studies rather than medicine, I think it fruitful to consider some of the broader implications of this phenomenon. In particular I am interested in documenting the transformation in consciousness noted by those who report such experience.

Although the experience may cause considerable apprehension, fear, temporary imbalance and even hospitalization, in almost all cases (90% in Galbraith's survey) individuals considered the experience beneficial, and reported subsequently that their consciousness had been enhanced in some way. These faculties which we might loosely call spiritual gifts included improved intuition, various degrees of clairvoyance and clairaudience, acquisition of healing powers, prophetic perception, increased sensitivity, maturity, loving qualities and so forth. These enhanced perceptual powers often diminished with time. However, it seems that in the majority of cases persons having the KE experience describe themselves as having been engaged in some sort of spiritual quest, and may in some cases have been engaged in consciousness enhancing practices such as meditation or yoga.

In his classic book *Cosmic Consciousness*, Bucke (1901) reported 43 cases of transformations in consciousness which he characterized as a shift to a state of higher illumination which he called cosmic consciousness. He described the transformation in to this state as sudden or instantaneous, often accompanied by a sense of light, illumination, grace and joy, and

always, according to him, leading to an enhanced moral and intellectual sense. The experience was also never forgotten, and invariably, though it might diminish somewhat, a subjective awareness of a heightened state of consciousness remained for life. Bucke suggested that only 14 of these cases represented transformations to a full state of illumination. Many of those on his short list were spiritual leaders, and many on his long list philosophers, artists and poets, most of whom are well known historical figures who produced extraordinary bodies of work thus highlighting their enhanced intellectual and moral senses.

Only four persons on Bucke's list were women compared with 10 out of 20 on Galbraith's list and 6 out of 10 on Bentov's list and 10 of 17 on Sanella's list. However, we should probably view Bucke's work in the context of the times, when circumstances and conventions probably made women very cautious of revealing details of personal experiences. Taking these four published accounts we come up with a total of 90 cases, of which 30 are women.

Another interesting fact is that Bucke carefully recorded the age at which the cosmic consciousness experience was reported and came up with an average age of 37 years, for 34 of his 43 subjects for whom ages were known. (He even suggested that the transformation took place most commonly in the springtime). The average age of the ten people in Bentov's sample is 39.4 years. Ages in Galbraith's group are given only as +20, +30,+40, and so on. Assuming that in each ten year interval the average is 25,35,45 and so on the average age comes out to 35.

These data can be supplemented by a number of individual accounts: notably Krishna (1967) whose major KE experience, at age 34, generated a considerable literature on the subject (White, 1979). Yatri (1988) reported a life-changing illumination experience in his "late thirties." A number of additional experiences, presumably of the KE type, have been mentioned by Johnson (1959) Leggett (1987) and Paulsen (1984). I also consider Teilhard de Chardin another classic case of cosmic consciousness (cf. Zaehner, 1971) reported in his thirties. Many additional cases of religious experience have been collected by Hardy (1979) at the Religious Experiences Center at Oxford, and we can also turn to James (1902) and (Underhill, 1911) on mysticism, and Aurobindo (see Satprem, 1968) and Wilber (1995) on consciousness to explore the subject more deeply.

All such accounts suggest that there is a tendency for some males and females to undergo a consciousness shift in mid life, though this can happen at almost any age. We know that there are distinct development stages in human ontogeny, including the transformation from simple infant consciousness to self-consciousness in early childhood. Other well-known developmental stages are manifest as physical metamorphoses associated with the acquisition of permanent teeth and the onset of puberty. According to experts in human development such as Jean Piaget and Rudolph Steiner, understanding and facilitating such changes properly is essential to healthy development, and enlightened educational programs. We might even consider the seven year cycles of emotional (*Homo ludens*) and intellectual (*Homo faber*) development summarized by Thompson (1973) on the schedule of 1-7, 7-14, 14-21, 21-28, 28-35 years of age, thereafter changing to a 14 year cycle (35-49 and 49-63) culminating, depressingly late in life, in the transformation to *Homo sapiens!* It is intriguing that the average age of the cosmic consciousness (or SEUS) experience coincides with a significant, independently-identified, developmental stage. Other later life phase shifts include menopause. Could it be that the cosmic consciousness phenomenon is a mid life developmental shift that is less well known because it is common. Some would assert

however that the phenomenon is becoming more common as an evolutionary indication (Sanella, 1987).

Assuming some validity in such assertions, we can ask why the transformation, in some cases is so dramatic and traumatic. It is clear from the researches of Sannella, Bentov, Galbraith and the KE experiences of many individuals, that in Western society the phenomenon is poorly known. Nevertheless, some individuals evidently experience a relatively benign and gentle transformation accompanied feelings of love joy and warmth, where as others experience highly energetic transformations involving involuntary twitchings and convulsions, that can, in extreme cases, result in partial paralysis. The former transformations may be a sign of a state of minimal stress, whereas wildly energetic KE experiences may be a reflection the bodies need to overcome greater stresses and tensions.

Such differences in the KE experience may also reflect different constitutional types. It is known that among, ectomorphs, mesomorphs and endomorphs respectively there are tendencies towards schizophrenia, epilepsy and manic depression in stressed or unhealthy individuals (Sheldon, 1942; Schad, 1977). Analogous though not identical constitutional types are represented in the three doshas of Ayurvedic medicine (Vata, Pitta and Kapha respectively). As noted by Galbraith in consultation with Dr. Robert Orange 10 of her respondents shows symptoms associated with manic episodes. Involuntary convulsions, resembling epilepsy, in patients with no prior history of this disease, may be an indication of an exaggerated expression of the mesomorph (athletic) constitutional type. Similarly the propensity towards schizophrenic symptoms (Galbraith, 1998) may indicate some relationship to the ectomorphic type.

In conclusion, it is worth stressing that although experiences vary in intensity, there seems to be consistency between the accounts reported by Bucke a century ago and those now being published by the present generation of researchers including Galbraith (1999). Regardless of the vocabulary used to describe the spiritual emergence experience, I suggest that the terms "religious experience," "cosmic consciousness," "Kundalini energy" (KE) experiences or "spontaneous emergence up spine (SEUS) all have something, if not a lot in common. It may help medical practitioners and researchers in the field of consciousness studies to cross reference these and other sources in order to understand the phenomenon more fully. Given the lack expertise demonstrated by Western medical establishments in recognizing, diagnosing and treating those who have had either relatively benign or acute experiences, any treatment of the problem that brings about a semantic synthesis and broader awareness may prove useful.

Of particular interest to students of evolution and human development, is the repeated claim that such KE or cosmic consciousness experiences and transformations bring about a greater awareness that evolution is process directed towards higher consciousness (Krishna, 1967; Sanella, 1987). Such states of elevated consciousness, seem to be characterized by intuition, interest in health and healing, mysticism and spirituality. As a paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin (1959, 1964) held that human evolution could no longer be understood merely as a progression of morphological transformations among hominid species. Rather the real "spirit" of human evolution resides in the growth and maturation of consciousness into the cosmic and spiritual realms.

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