

The Psychophysiology of Ecstasy in Sufism and Yoga

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For millennia, visionaries and prophets have spoken of higher orders of awareness, compared to which ordinary perception is a diminished level of existence. All cultures have had specialists who attempted to master the "archaic techniques of ecstasy," as historian of religion Mircea Eliade called them. Siberian shamans, North American medicine men, and other practitioners of the sacred were renowned for their "ascents to heaven," by which they obtained cures for the sick as well as knowledge of the spirit.

The scientific and technical achievements of the European Enlightenment created a mood that was not friendly to spiritual ecstasy. The monopoly over nature claimed by the new scientific-technical establishment did not permit unauthorized rival explanations. Skeptics like David Hume, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud proclaimed religion to be an illusion. When consciousness came to be defined exclusively as an epiphenomenon of the brain in a materialistic universe, visions and revelations became mere hallucinations, disorders of the nervous system.

The notion of mystical experience as a pathological condition has not triumphed, however. As the 20th century ends, religion and spirituality have taken on an importance that would have baffled Auguste Comte and his ilk, who proclaimed that science had replaced religion. True, much of the current emphasis on religion lies on the social level of community and politics, but there is a tremendous interest in spiritual experience as the means by which individuals come to terms with the ultimate. For instance, an estimated more than five million Americans now practice some form of yoga. For many, yoga is primarily a form of relaxation and physical training, but it is undeniable that yoga derives from a complex psychophysical system of thought and discipline linked with ancient spiritual traditions.

In this paper, I describe briefly some of the chief concepts and techniques associated with higher consciousness and mystical experience in two traditions, Sufism and yoga. Certainly there is a physical aspect to meditation that is associated with bodily asceticism, and some of its benefits may be explained by

the physical and neurological effects of fasting, sleep deprivation, etc. But I want to suggest that we pay attention to the internal explanations that have been developed over centuries by full-time practitioners of these techniques. If, in fact, these methods "work" in some fashion, then the explanatory psychophysiological systems associated with them deserve a look as well. It seems safe to say, in any case, that the concepts of Sufi and yogic meditation are of a different character than standard medical doctrine.

Sufism

Sufism is the mystical tradition associated with Islam.¹ The Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) and the Qur'anic revelation that he brought are the sacred sources of Sufism. The name "Sufi" derives from the Arabic word for wool and refers to the woolen garments worn by ancient Near Eastern ascetics and prophets. The early mystics of Islam may have been familiar with older spiritual traditions associated with Christianity, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism, but by the 12th century the Sufi movement was a fully developed movement found in Muslim countries from India to Spain.

Sufi meditation techniques originated in the devout recitation of prayers, in particular the Arabic names of God as revealed in the Qur'an. The term for this recitation is *dhikr* (or *zikr*), meaning "recollection," performed either alone or in congregation. Its aim is to concentrate the heart so that it is filled with God and nothing else. The manuals of Sufi practice describe *dhikr* as a multilevel process, in which all of the faculties are employed, beginning with the tongue as the outermost, then engaging the heart, the soul, the spirit, the intellect, and the innermost conscience called the secret. These different levels are part of a psychophysical continuum that allows approach to the subtlest level of consciousness. Prayer formulas and divine names are recited (either subvocally or aloud) and consciously projected into different parts of the body. Each of

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the names of God has the power, when repeated frequently, to create its characteristic quality in the psyche of the practitioner of *dhikr*. For instance, repetition of the name "the Merciful" (*al-rahman*) brings about feelings of mercy and compassion in the heart, but beginners should avoid names such as "the Overpowering" (*al-qahhar*) because of the strong psychic effects that can be unleashed.

In advanced techniques of meditation masters trained disciples during demanding 40-day retreats. In earlier times the emphasis was on theological themes such as the fear of God or the love of God. The growing sophistication of the tradition led to an articulation of multiple psychological "stations," which the soul could traverse in sequence like a ladder carrying one closer to God and, in the process, encompassing the totality of psychic possibilities available to humans. Some lists described as many as a thousand spiritual stations, balanced by unpredictable "states" considered to be the result of divine grace.

The Sufi analysis of mystical experience was grounded in a complex psychophysiology of the body's subtle centers (*latifa*, plural *lata'if*). Drawing on the ancient cosmological symbolism of the seven climes, this teaching described seven subtle centers, each linked with a type of human being and with a particular prophet mentioned in the Qur'an. Each subtle center also was the locus of a mystical experience of light in a particular color. One account of six subtle centers localized the heart (*qalb*) two fingers below the left breast, the spirit (*ruh*) two fingers below the right breast, the soul (*nafs*) beneath the navel, the secret (*sirr*) in the middle of the breast, the mystery (*khafi*) above the eyebrows, and the arcanum (*akhfa*) at the top of the brain. Rather than following from any fixed neurological concept, this complex structure provided a flexible meditation device used to develop a subtle body for mystical experience, in a process that might be compared to the modern concept of virtual reality.

Visualization was a prominent aspect of meditation. Meditation manuals describe a series of visions that recapitulate the hierarchical structure of the universe, from the lowest minerals to the divine presence and the cosmic realms beyond time. The ultimate goal was to emulate the heavenly ascension of the Prophet Muhammad and to reach the presence of God. In the process, many remarkable experiences have been recorded. For example, the visionary diary of Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209) is filled with astonishing encounters with God, the prophets, the angels, and the Sufi saints. These experiences could not be guaranteed by simply following a given procedure, however. For Ruzbihan, the encounters with God were the product of unmediated divine grace.²

Yoga

Yoga, which originated in India, is one of the most widely spread systems of meditation in the world.³ On the philosophical level, it was originally expounded in ancient times in the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, and it constituted one of the six classical

philosophical systems of India. Patanjali described yogic practice in terms of eight categories called "limbs": restraints, disciplines, postures, breathing, detaching senses from external objects, concentration, and the highest consciousness, called *samadhi* or "enstasis" as Eliade translated the term. Yoga in various forms played a major part in important Indian religious texts such as the Mahabharata and the Bhagavadgita. We see the term in compound words such as karma yoga (the yoga of action), jnana yoga (the yoga of knowledge), and bhakti yoga (the yoga of love and devotion). But mostly we are concerned with the increasingly specialized physical practice that came to be associated primarily with the term hatha yoga (literally, the yoga of violent force).

Hatha yoga, which became popular about a thousand years ago, uses complicated techniques, usually accompanied by a minimum of metaphysical explanation. The founders of hatha yoga, the legendary yogis Matsyendranath and Gorakhnath, were believed to have learned the techniques from the Hindu god Shiva. Using a physiology of subtle nerve and breath control, which may have quite ancient roots, hatha yoga conceives of a subtle body containing seven chakras or "circles" connected by nerves (other systems counted four or nine chakras). Meditative exercises typically involve awakening the powerful psychic energy in the lowest chakra at the base of the spine, visualized as a coiled snake (*kundalini*), and causing it to ascend to the chakra at the top of the skull. Each chakra is associated with a yantra or diagram, a mantra or chant, and one or more gods. The yogi attempts simultaneously to arrest the breath, the activity of the mind, and the emission of semen in order to gain extraordinary powers and long life. The basic emphasis of hatha yoga is on the human body as the medium for the attainment of immortality and salvation. Many techniques of bodily purification, postures for meditation, and breath control have been described in hatha yoga texts. Since these are in general presented with a minimal metaphysical elaboration, they have been adaptable to a variety of religious contexts. Thus yogic and related tantric practices are widely distributed among Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and even Sikh traditions throughout India, Tibet, and the Far East.

A Comparison

Sufi and yogic meditation techniques have a number of similarities, which caused early observers to speculate that they were essentially one system that originated in India and spread to Muslim countries. Superficial similarities between their psychophysiology (for example, the subtle centers of Sufism and the chakras of yoga) seemed to reinforce the concept of cultural diffusion. In fact, it is difficult to marshal historical evidence for a yogic basis for Sufi practice (Figure 1, next page, shows a rare 19th-century Urdu example of a juxtaposition of yogic and Sufi physiologies). Further afield, in China or the eastern Mediterranean, there are Taoist or Christian meditative techniques that rely on extensive chanting of sacred names or

formulas together with control of breathing and other physiological applications. The famous "Jesus prayer," developed by early Christian monks, is a good example of such technique. It has been preserved in Orthodox Christianity, and is well described in the late 19th-century Russian classic, *The Way of A Pilgrim* (and echoed by J. D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*). Interestingly, the anonymous author of the Russian book maintains that yo-gis and Sufis borrowed (and bungled) meditative techniques of the Christian church fathers: "It was from [the Greek Orthodox saints] that the monks of India and Bokhara took over the 'heart method' of interior prayer, only they quite spoiled and garbled it in doing so."⁴

An attractive alternative to the cultural diffusion theory supposes that hidden potentialities in the mind and body can be unlocked by sufficiently prolonged use of meditative techniques that naturally arise in religious traditions. But many questions remain. Whether we are concerned with Sufism, shamanism, Christian monasticism, or yoga, the practitioners inform us that not only their particular psychophysiology but also their theology is crucial to the success of the method. Their universe is not impersonal, but is activated by the same kind of consciousness that humans experience—recalling the "anthropic principle" of some recent philosophers of science. On one hand, the existence of long traditions of meditative training suggests that there is an experiential basis for mysticism. On the other hand, the divergence between different psychophysiological systems and theological doctrines indicates that we are dealing with something more than an unchanging biological substratum. Disciplined human consciousness may have the power to fashion the intensified levels of psychological experience known to Sufis and yogis.

These speculations aside, I must confess that it is difficult to establish with any confidence the relationship of the psychophysiology of ecstasy to modern concepts of neurophysiology and the brain. Today's industrial society permits few individuals to devote the years of full-time practice necessary to master these disciplines. A limited amount of research on the brain

waves produced during meditation has produced no conclusive or dramatic results. Even if we could hook up a Sufi master or yogi to our most advanced apparatus, would the brain-wave readings finally tell us anything about the ultimate state of consciousness? There may be a point where individual spiritual experience cannot be replaced by institutional science. □

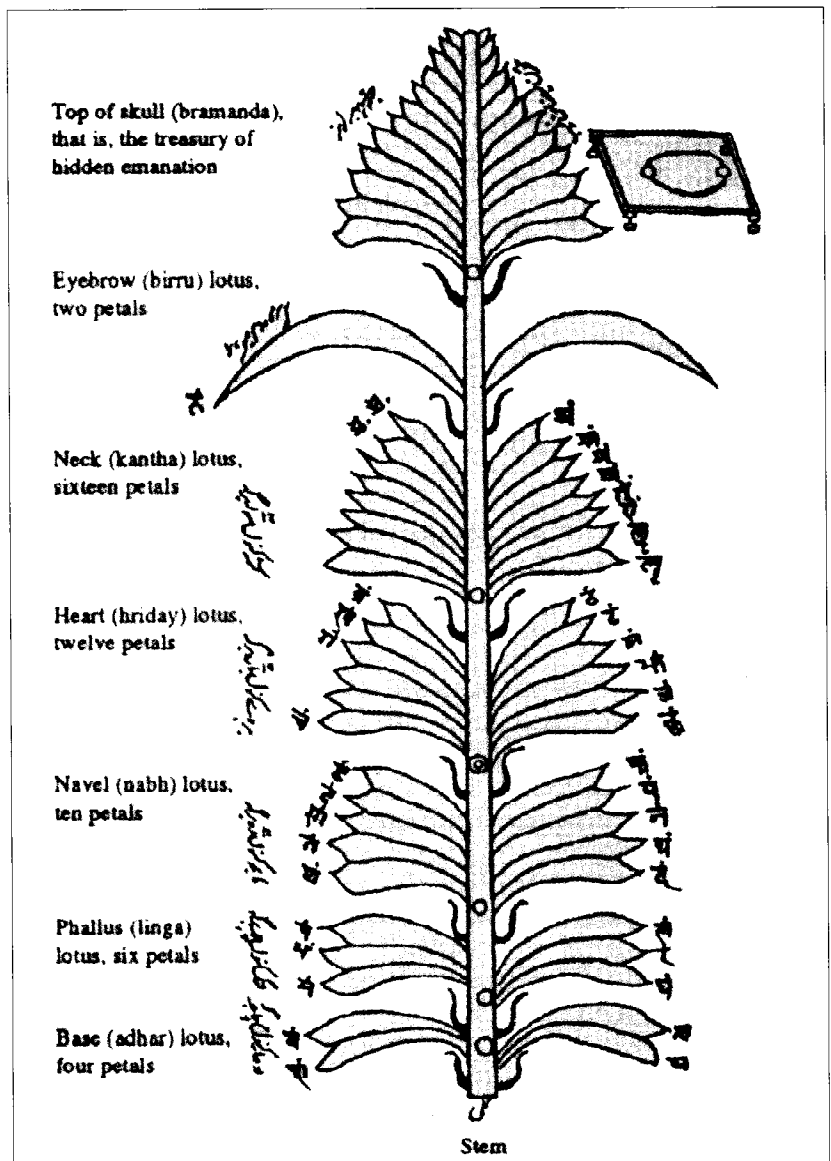


Fig 1: The lotus structure of chakras according to Ghawth 'Ali Shah Qalandar (19th c.) juxtaposes yogic and Sufi physiologies. Urdu notations identify the physical locations of each chakra.

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- 3 Eliade M. *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom*, 2nd ed. Trask WT (translator). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- 4 Anonymous. *The Way of a Pilgrim, and The Pilgrim Continues His Way*. French RM (translator). San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991, p 71.