

Steve
Taylor

Life-Energy and Spiritual Experience

One possible solution to the problem of relating consciousness purely to neurological processes is to suggest that consciousness may not necessarily come from the brain but through it.

Consciousness is a universal force which is “canalized” by the human brain into our individual consciousness. The function of the complex neurological circuitry of the brain is not to produce consciousness, but to receive and “transmit” it.

The philosopher David Chalmers (1995) has suggested that “experience” is a fundamental property of the world, while Robert Forman (1995) has suggested that consciousness is a universal force which is “canalized” by the human brain into our individual consciousness. The function of the complex neurological circuitry of the brain is not to produce consciousness, but to receive and “transmit” it. The brain as “antenna-receiver for mind” hypothesis put forward by Watson, Schwartz and Russek (2004) suggests a similar view. Around a century ago, both William James (1902/1985) and F.W.H. Myers (1903) (best known as one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research) suggested a similar “filter theory,” which was later advocated by Aldous Huxley. According to this view, the brain does not generate mind but filters our own limited individual consciousness from an unlimited universal consciousness. If it wasn’t for the filtering mechanism of the brain, we would be overwhelmed by experience and unable to survive.

One piece of evidence for this view is the ubiquity of concepts of an all-pervading universal force amongst almost all — if not actually all — of the world’s tribal or indigenous peoples. I have been collecting examples of these from my readings of anthropological and religious texts for years, and have lost count of the number I have. To give just a few examples, in America, the Hopi Indians called it *maasauu*, the Pawnee called it *tirawa*, and the Lakota called it *wakan-tanka* (literally, the “force which moves all things”). The Ainu of Japan called it *ramut* (translated by the anthropologist Monro [in Smart, 1971] as “spirit-energy”), while in parts of New Guinea it was called *imunu* (translated by early anthropologist J.H. Holmes [in Levy-Bruhl, 1965] as “universal soul”). In Africa the Nuer call it *kwoth* and the Mbuti call it *pepo*. Holmes’ description of *imunu* is a good general summary of all of these concepts:

[*Imunu*] was associated with everything, nothing arrived apart from it... Nothing animate or inanimate could exist apart from it. It was the soul of things... It was intangible, but like air, wind, it could manifest its presence. It permeated everything that made up life to the people of the Purari Delta... [It was] that which enables everything to exist as we know it, and distinct from other things which, too, exist by it (in Levy-Bruhl, 1965, p. 17).

In each case, these concepts refer to an impersonal force which pervades all space and all objects and beings. This suggests that these peoples had a direct awareness of consciousness as a fundamental universal force. There is also often a recognition that — as with Forman’s “canalization” theory — the

While the popular versions of the religions saw God as an anthropomorphic being who oversees the world, the mystical traditions saw God as a force or energy which filled all reality, or as a being who was personal and limitlessly immanent at the same time, whose radiance filled all reality.

This view of consciousness as a fundamental force is close to panpsychism or panexperientialism, with the qualification that although consciousness is in all things, all things are not conscious.

universal “spirit-force” forms the essence of our own being. For example, the Ufaina Indians of the Amazon believe that when a person is born, a small amount of *fufuka* (their term for universal spirit) enters her. She, and her tribal group, “borrow” it from the total “stock” of Spirit. While she lives, therefore, this spirit-force is always the essence of her being, and at death it is released and returns to its source (Hildebrand, 1988).

These concepts are also widespread in Eurasian cultures. However, while this “universal soul” or “spirit-energy” seems to have been a part of everyday life for indigenous peoples, for European and Asian cultures the concept is generally confined to spiritual and mystical traditions. In the Indian Vedanta tradition, for example, it is known as *brahman*; in Mahayana Buddhism it has been called *dharmakaya*, while in Chinese Taoism it is the *Tao*. In ancient Greece, the Stoics referred to it as *pneuma*. In the mystical traditions associated with Judaism, Christianity and Islam the term “God” was often used with this meaning. While the popular versions of the religions saw God as an anthropomorphic being who oversees the world, the mystical traditions saw God as a force or energy which filled all reality, or as a being who was personal and limitlessly immanent at the same time, whose radiance filled all reality. And again, there was often a recognition that “spirit-force” forms the essence of our own being. *Brahman* manifests itself in us as *atman*, or as the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1996) put it, God’s form is “stamped” inside us; his seed is planted in us.

Some scholars have rejected the notion of the kind of transcultural “perennial philosophy” which these concepts support, arguing that spiritual traditions are culture-specific, and criticizing transpersonal psychologists in particular for positing a realm of “transcendent truth” that is independent of all subjective and cultural interpretations (e.g., Ferrer, 2001). But in this area at least, the striking ubiquity and similarity of all of these concepts — since it is unlikely that they could have spread by cultural contact — does suggest a “transcendent truth.” Compare the description of *imunu* above, for example, with this description given by a member of the Pawnee tribe of their “supreme God”:

We do not think of *Tirawa* as a person. We think of *Tirawa* as [a power which is] in everything and ... moves upon the darkness, the night, and causes her to bring forth the dawn. It is the breath of the new-born dawn (in Eliade, 1967, p. 13).

And compare this with the following passage from the Indian Upanishads, describing the presence of *brahman* within the manifest world:

Shining, yet hidden, Spirit lives in the cavern. Everything that sways, breathes, opens and closes, lives in Spirit... Spirit is everywhere, upon the right, upon the left, above, below, behind, in front. What is the world but Spirit? (in Happold, 1963, p. 146)

Here we do appear to be dealing with a “universal truth,” which lends some support to the notion of a “perennial philosophy.” This view of consciousness as a fundamental force is close to panpsychism or panexperientialism, with the qualification that although consciousness is in all things, all things are not conscious. That is, all things do not have their own individualized consciousness. Only the structures — beginning with cells — which have the necessary complexity and organizational form to receive and canalize consciousness are

Consciousness does not go “all the way down” although — speaking horizontally rather than vertically — it goes everywhere and into everything.

Consciousness is not a force which is separate from matter, and enters into and animates fundamentally inert structures. It is embedded in all matter from the beginning and cannot be separated from it.

Persinger’s and D’Aquili and Newberg’s neurological correlates may be the results of higher states of consciousness rather than their causes, the “footprints” of mystical and spiritual experience rather than the experience itself.

You might as well assert that numbers emerge from biscuits or ethics from rhubarb.

individually conscious, and individually alive. Consciousness — or even experience — does not go “all the way down,” although — speaking horizontally rather than vertically — it goes everywhere and into everything. The simplest forms of matter do not have an “interior,” and are not capable of prehension and sensation. Experience and interiority only emerge at the cellular levels and above. In David Ray Griffin’s (1998) terminology — which he borrows from Leibniz — rather than being “mere aggregates,” cells are “centers of experience” with “living occasions of experience.” And above the cellular levels, as structures become more complex and organized, they become capable of receiving more consciousness. As a result they become more individually conscious, with greater powers of prehension, sensation and autonomy.

This might be seen as a form of dualism, or even vitalism, but this would be misleading. Consciousness is not a force which is separate from matter, and enters into and animates fundamentally inert structures. It is embedded in all matter from the beginning and cannot be separated from it. Everything is alive, even though simple structures may not have “experience.”

This concept of consciousness can be extended to help explain why higher states of consciousness occur. Scholars of mysticism generally agree that there are certain common features of higher states of consciousness which have occurred independently across cultures throughout history. These include an intensified perception of the phenomenal world, a sense of inner peace and wholeness, a sense of oneness with the manifest world (or a sense of transcending boundaries), and a sense of becoming a deeper and truer Self (e.g., James, 1985; Underhill, 1960; Stace, 1964). The justification for using the term “higher” for the experiences is that subjectively they appear as an intensification or expansion of ordinary consciousness, and to reveal a truer and wider vision of reality. Those who have them often feel that their ordinary consciousness is a kind of “sleep” in comparison. In the words of the Sufi mystic Al-Ghazali, this is a state “whose relation to your waking consciousness is analogous to the relation of the latter to dreaming. In comparison with this state your waking consciousness would be like dreaming!” (in Scharfstein, 1973, p. 28).

There are, of course, attempts to explain such experiences in purely physicalist terms, such as Persinger’s (1987) and D’Aquili and Newberg’s (2000). But their neurological correlates may be the results of higher states of consciousness rather than their causes, the “footprints” of mystical and spiritual experience rather than the experience itself. At the same time, physicalist theories of higher states of consciousness are subject to the “explanatory gap.” McGinn has written that “You might as well assert that numbers emerge from biscuits or ethics from rhubarb” as suggest that the “soggy clump of matter” which is the brain produces consciousness (McGinn, 1993, p. 160). And we can say the same for the suggestion that increased or decreased activity in different parts of this “soggy clump of matter” might produce higher states of consciousness.

There appear to be two basic types of higher states of consciousness, which have distinctive causes. Fischer (1971) made an important distinction between “ergotropic” higher states of consciousness (“high arousal,” active or ecstatic states which involve sensory content) and “trophotropic” higher states (“low

arousal” passive and serene experiences, with no sensory content). Throughout history human beings have made a conscious effort to produce “ergotropic” high arousal states by disrupting the normal homeostasis of the human organism. To do this, they have used practices such as fasting, taking drugs, hyper- and hypoventilation, self-inflicted pain and prolonged dancing (Krippner, 2000). All of these change our normal body chemistry and neurological functioning. They result in an “internal imbalance” in homeostasis (Green, 1987), which can (although by no means always) give rise to a higher state of consciousness (of the “ergotropic” type).

The second type of higher states of consciousness — including Fischer’s “trophotropic” states, and also passive and serene experiences which do include sensory content — may be specifically related to consciousness as a fundamental universal force. If it is true that consciousness is “canalized” into us, and that universal consciousness is a kind of force or energy (which is how indigenous peoples and mystics describe it), then presumably we would experience this as a kind of force or energy in ourselves. This is how indigenous peoples and Eurasian mystics experience universal consciousness: a phenomenon which is both sentient and energetic, a consciousness which is animate and dynamic. In Hindu terms, ultimate reality — or *brahman* — has passive and active aspects, *Shiva* (sentient consciousness) and *Shakti* (energetic consciousness). This universal consciousness is “canalized” into us and becomes our being. In its passive sentient aspect, it becomes our consciousness — that is, consciousness in terms of awareness — and in its active energetic aspect, it becomes our “life-energy,” the energy which makes us alive, and which we expend through mental functions such as perception, cognition and concentration, when it manifests itself as “psychic energy.” It can also manifest itself in sexual or emotional energy, and fuels the functioning — and maintains the health of — our bodies.

Psychologists often assume the existence of “attentional energy” (e.g. Deikman, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; Marchetti, 2004) or “psychic energy” (e.g. Novak, 1995; Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) without making it clear exactly what this energy is. Others talk more obliquely of “mental effort” (e.g. Gross, 1996) or “pool of attentional resources” (Kahneman, 1973), seeming to assume the existence of some form of “mental energy” without actually using the term. More explicitly, the philosopher Michael Washburn (2002) suggests the essence of our being is a life-energy which expresses itself in three different ways: as psychic energy, as *libido* (or sexual energy), and as spiritual power. He notes that psychic energy is used continually, fuelling our ongoing conscious experience, while *libido* and spiritual power are both “potential” energies, which are usually latent but become “activated” by certain stimuli.

Earlier psychologists also used the concept of life-energy or psychic energy very freely. Both Freud and Jung, for example, used the term *libido* for psychic energy. Although they had a different views on the nature of this energy — typically, Freud saw it as sexual in origin — they both saw the psyche as a “closed system” with a finite amount of energy, which could be “portioned out” in different amounts to the different structures and functions of our minds. In Freud’s model, the id, the ego and the superego competed against one another

to monopolize psychic energy. If you spend most of your time chasing after hedonistic pleasures like sex and food, your “id” is monopolizing your psychic energy, and leaving little over for the ego and the superego. Whereas if you have a very powerful conscience and are constantly assailed by feelings of guilt, the superego is monopolizing most of your psychic energy. Freud also believed that one of the problems caused by repression is that the act of repressing instincts or old experiences can take up a large portion of our *libido*, leaving less energy for other functions.

For Jung, psychic energy was the power behind all of our experience — such as thinking, concentrating, instincts and sexual desire — but which was of a different nature to that experience. As he saw it, psychic energy could be *actual*, manifesting itself as the “dynamic phenomena of the psyche, such as instinct, wishing, willing, affect, attention, capacity for work etc.” Or it could be *potential*, when it shows itself as “possibilities, aptitudes [and] attitudes” (1928/88. p. 15). And as with Freud, if a lot of energy was used up by one of these functions then there would be less available in other areas.

William James also took the existence of psychic energy for granted. He often refers to it as “vitality,” and in his essay *The Energies of Man*, he puzzles over the question of why we all feel more or less alive on different days, and how most of us feel as if we should be more alive than we are, as if there are reserves of vitality inside us which “the incitements of the day do not call forth.” James notes that it’s only when we make an effort to *act* that we are able to “raise the sense of vitality.” As he puts it, “*excitements, ideas and efforts ... are what carry us over the dam.*” (1917, p. 75)

Like the concept of universal “spirit-energy,” life-energy or psychic energy is a common cross-cultural concept.

Like the concept of universal “spirit-energy” (to use the Ainu term), life-energy or psychic energy is a common cross-cultural concept. The Indian concept of *prana* is very close to it, as is the Chinese Taoist concept of *chi*. According to Indian Tantric philosophy, *prana* flows through thousands of tiny channels throughout our body, called *nadi*. The body has seven main energy centers, the *cakras*, which can be active to different degrees, and utilize different amounts of *prana*. (There are obvious similarities here with Freud’s model.) According to Tantra, the ideal is to allow as much energy as possible to flow upwards to the highest *cakra*, at the crown of the head, which is associated with a state of inner peace and mystical union (Feuerstein, 1990). In ancient Egypt — as with the “canalization” hypothesis — the “life-energy” of an individual was seen as essentially the same nature as universal “spirit-force.” Universal energy (*akh*) expressed itself as *ba*, the animating spirit of the natural world, and *ba* was itself “channeled” into the individual by the body’s “shadow” or “double,” *ka* (Lamy, 1981). Similarly, the Stoics of ancient Greece believed that, as well as being the “soul of the universe,” *pneuma* was the force which animated living beings. Beings could have varying concentrations of *pneuma* inside them, making certain life forms more intelligent and more conscious than others. Human beings were a “higher” life form than animals, for example, because of their greater concentration of *pneuma* (Sandbach, 1975). Elsewhere, the Maoris of New Zealand referred to psychic energy (or life-energy) as *tapu* (not related to the word taboo), in parts of New Guinea it was referred to as *rokao*, the Algonquian Indians called it *orenda*, while the Ainu — like the Stoics, the

Life-energy is distinct from energy as we normally think of it, as in the chemical energy which we absorb from food and which fuels the functioning of our bodies. It is a non-physical energy whose existence has not — at least so far — been detected through western scientific methods.

On the “canalization” hypothesis, it is a logical step to assume the existence of an inner life-energy, as the “inflow” of universal consciousness that is received via (and limited by) our brains. What we experience as “life-energy” may be fundamentally the same as the “spirit-energy” which pervades the universe, mediated through the neuronal networks of the “soggy grey clump of matter” in our heads.

Unfaina and other indigenous peoples — made no distinction between the spiritual energy which pervades the universe and that which constitutes the life of an individual being (Levy-Bruhl, 1965; Monro, 1962). In both cases, the term *ramat* is used. As the anthropologist Neil Gordon Monro wrote of the Ainu, “When living things — men, animals, trees or plants — die, *ramat* leaves them and goes elsewhere, but does not perish” (1962, p. 8).

If these perceptions are valid, and life-energy does exist, it is clearly distinct from energy as we normally think of it, as in the chemical energy which we absorb from food and which fuels the functioning of our bodies. It is a non-physical energy whose existence has not — at least so far — been detected through western scientific methods. However, it is interesting to note that the practice of acupuncture — which Chinese tradition has always held works through the manipulation of the flow of *chi* throughout the body — has now been received widespread scientific validation, although tellingly, the question of how it works has remained a puzzle (e.g., White et al., 2004; Linde et al., 2005).

The existence of life-energy or psychic energy certainly seems to make sense from a subjective point of view. As Marchetti (2004) puts it, “Every time we direct our attention towards an object, we spend our [attentional] energy on it.” We have the sense that our level of life energy continually fluctuates, according to how much we have expended through concentrating or attending to stimuli. If we have been concentrating hard, we might feel lethargic or fatigued; if there is a “surplus” of life-energy we feel alert and vibrant. Our moods seem to be affected by our level of life-energy too. When we feel mentally fatigued we often feel depressed, whereas when we feel mentally “buoyant,” with a high level of life-energy, we usually feel cheerful and optimistic. We use many metaphors which seem to assume the existence of this energy — we say that we are “run down,” “drained,” or that we need to “recharge our batteries.” In addition, it has been suggested that the purpose of automatization may be to conserve psychic energy. Activities such as driving, typing or playing a musical instrument are initially painstaking conscious processes, but at a certain point there is a switch to “fully automatic processing,” the purpose of which is to conserve “attentional energy” so that we can focus our minds elsewhere (Norman & Shallice, 1980; Deikman, 2004).

However, it is not the purpose of this essay to try to prove the existence of such a form of energy. All I would like to suggest is that, if the “canalization” hypothesis — or the “filter” theory — is true, it is a logical step to assume the existence of an inner life-energy, as the “inflow” of universal consciousness that is received via (and limited by) our brains. What we experience as “life-energy” may be fundamentally the same as the “spirit-energy” which pervades the universe, mediated through the neuronal networks of the “soggy grey clump of matter” in our heads, or transmitted by the “antenna-receiver” of the mind.

For the purposes of this essay, my main point is simply that the existence of life-energy can also help explain higher states of consciousness. It might be said that, in its expression as psychic energy, we expend life-energy in three main

The endless associational chatter of our minds monopolizes psychic energy, leaving none available for us to devote to open, receptive and present-centered awareness.

ways: through cognitive and mental activity (mainly what Novak [1995] describes as the “endless associational chatter” of the ego-mind); through the concentrative effort, and through the processing of various forms of information such as perceptual stimuli and verbal information. However, when, for some reason, the constant outflow of energy through these sources is halted, this generates a higher than normal inner concentration of “static” life-energy — together with an increased *stillness* of the energy — which means that we are liable to experience higher states of consciousness.

According to Novak (1995), this is why the practice of meditation often generates higher states. He notes that the “endless associational chatter” of our minds monopolizes psychic energy, leaving none available for us to devote to what he calls the “open, receptive and present-centered awareness.” However, when a person meditates she diverts attention away from the automatized structures of consciousness which produce “thought-chatter.” As a result they begin to weaken and fade away, which “frees up” the psychic energy which they normally monopolize. As a result, in Novak’s words, “energy formerly bound in emotive spasms, ego defense, fantasy and fear can appear as the delight of present-centeredness.” It can be seen here that Novak — although he does not explicitly say so — is assuming the existence of a finite closed system of psychic energy.

Deikman (2004) also makes a connection between mystical experiences and energy when he suggests that they are

brought about by a deautomatization of hierarchically ordered structures that ordinarily conserve attentional energy for maximum efficiency in achieving the basic goods of survival. . . . Under special conditions of dysfunction, such as in acute psychosis or in LSD states, or under special goal conditions such as exists in religions mystics, the pragmatic systems of automatic selection are set aside or break down, in favor of alternate modes of consciousness.

In other words, the quietening of ego-chatter creates a “surplus” of energy which means that there is no need for these structures to conserve energy anymore. As a result our perceptions become deautomatized, and we develop an intensified awareness of the phenomenal world.

Meditation halts the normal “outflow” of life-energy (manifesting itself as psychic energy in particular). When a person sits down to meditate, she removes herself from external stimuli by sitting quietly and closing her eyes. She might hear some sounds from the street outside, or catch some smells wafting through the window, but compared to a normal situation — say, walking down the street or working at the office — this is nothing more than a trickle of sensory information, which requires hardly any effort to process. She is no longer active either. She might be using some psychic energy to concentrate on her mantra (or her breathing or a candle flame), but after a while, when her mind is quiet enough, she will probably cease repeating the mantra to herself. At this point her mind will not be focused upon any object, and she will be expending no energy through concentrative effort. And when the “endless associational chatter” of mind fades away, the third major “outflow” of energy will be closed.

After a successful meditation, there is an intense inner concentration of our life-energy; our life-energy is concentrated and intensified rather than dispersed and dissipated — and this means that a spiritual experience is likely to occur.

The end effect of this is that, after a successful meditation, there is an intense inner concentration of our life-energy; our life-energy is concentrated and intensified rather than dispersed and dissipated — and this means that a spiritual experience is likely to occur.

Another important aspect of this is that, as well as being intensified, in meditative states our life-energy is stilled, or purified. At the same time as using up a large portion of our energy, the constant thought-chatter of our minds creates a constant disturbance inside us. In Meister Eckhart's (1996) phrase, there is a constant "storm of inward thought," a chaos of swirling images and impressions which we have absolutely no control over. In fact, the "storm of inward thought" largely controls us, changing our moods (often generating states of anxiety and worry) and determining our emotional state. Emotions are another kind of disturbance to our being, whether they are triggered by thought-activity (such as when thinking about the past triggers feelings of guilt or bitterness, or when thinking about other people gives rise to hatred or jealousy) or by the events and encounters of our day to day lives. And our desires create more disturbance, whether they are physical desires for sex or food, or — more frequently — psychological desires for affection, excitement or self-validation.

But in meditation most of this disturbance may fade away. As the chattering of our mind slows down and fades away, so do our desires and emotions (which are largely triggered by thought-chatter, after all), so that our being becomes still and peaceful, like the still surface of lake. And this will contribute to the spiritual state we feel, particularly the inner feelings of well-being and peacefulness, and of connecting to a deeper and truer Self.

This "stilling" of life-energy goes together with its intensification. Our thought-chatter and emotions and desires have to be stilled in order to "harness" the energy which they normally dissipate.

This "stilling" of life-energy always goes together with its intensification. The two cannot happen separately. In order for it to be intensified, our life-energy has to be stilled. Our thought-chatter and emotions and desires have to be stilled in order to "harness" the energy which they normally dissipate.

Meditation is, we might say, a conscious attempt to intensify and still our life-energy, both in the short and long term. (In the long term it is an attempt to permanently halt the "associational chatter" of the mind, which may lead to a permanent alteration of the structures of consciousness, if a point is reached where the chattering ego-mind becomes so weakened that it disappears as a psychic habit.) However, there are situations in which life-energy may be intensified and stilled more accidentally, and give rise to higher states of consciousness. This is probably, for example, the reason why natural surroundings are a frequent trigger of spiritual or mystical experiences (Laski, 1961; Hardy, 1979; Hay, 1987). If a person is alone amongst natural surroundings she is relatively inactive, and absorbing and processing comparatively little information, and so largely closing two of the main channels through which psychic energy drains away. And at the same time the beauty of nature may have a similar effect to a mantra in meditation, directing attention away from the chattering of the ego-mind. Cognitive activity may fade away, until life-energy intensifies, bringing a sense of inner peace and wholeness and heightened awareness of the phenomenal world.

Perhaps this is also why music is a significant trigger of spiritual experience

(Laski, 1961; Hardy, 1979). When we listen to music we usually become relaxed and are exposed to comparatively little external stimuli (aside from the music itself), which reduces the “outflow” of our life-energy. And the music itself focuses our minds, quietening our thought-chatter and generating stillness. The following is a good example of this:

I was sitting one evening, listening to a Brahms symphony. My eyes were closed, and I must have become completely relaxed, for I became aware of a feeling of “expansion,” and seemed to be beyond the boundary of my physical self. Then an intense feeling of “light” and “love” uplifted and enfolded me. (Hardy, 1979, p. 85)

Similarly, one person told Marghanita Laski how, while listening to Mahler’s tenth symphony, he experienced a sense of weightlessness, a “complete sense of liberation. . . . a tremendous expansion, a different dimension altogether” (Laski, 1961, p. 390). The incidence of spiritual experiences amongst athletes and sportspeople (e.g., Murphy & Whyte, 1995; Taylor, 2002) can be explained in similar terms. Some of these may be due to homeostasis disruption, since the exertions of some sports will obviously create “internal imbalances.” However, sports also often demand an intense degree of concentration. This is particularly the case with sports which involve long periods of monotonous rhythmic activity, such as long distance running or swimming. The activity itself serves as a focusing device, and quietens the chattering ego-mind. As the psychiatrist Kostrulaba writes of his own experiences with running, after discussing the universal use of mantras to induce different states of consciousness, “I think the same process occurs in the repetitive rhythm of long-distance running. Eventually, at somewhere between 30 and 40 minutes, the conscious mind gets exhausted and other areas of consciousness are activated” (in Murphy & Whyte, 1995, p. 66). Similarly, the poet Ted Hughes often experienced a meditative state while fishing. He notes how poetry depends upon the ability to intensely focus the mind, and believes that he acquired this ability through fishing. He describes the effect of staring at a float for long periods: “All the nagging impulses that are normally distracting your mind dissolve. . . . [O]nce they have dissolved, you enter one of the orders of bliss. Your whole being rests lightly on your float, but not drowsily, very alert” (Hughes, 1967, p. 72).

Certain sports may also affect the flow of *chi* or *prana* through our bodies. This may be part of the reason for the feeling of alertness and aliveness many people feel after running or swimming: a feeling that the exercise has somehow increased the flow of our energy. Every part of our bodies seems to be alive with energy, as if blockages have been removed. And this may be part of the general energy-intensification which induces spiritual experience. And this, of course, relates to Eastern forms of exercise such as Hatha Yoga, Chi Kung, T’ai Chi, Judo and Karate. These practices combine the usual breath-control and attention-focusing of meditation with physical exercises which are designed to generate new energy inside us (from the energy points — or *cakras* or meridians — we have inside us) and remove blockages which may be preventing energy flowing through to certain parts of our beings and causing illness. In a sense, then, at the same time as serving as a kind of meditation, sports such as running and swimming may also have a physical “yoga-like” (or “Chi Gung-like”) effect.

Similar explanations can be made for other prominent triggers of spiritual

This connection between mystical states and an intensification of life-energy is often inferred by mystics and spiritual teachers, and occasionally stated explicitly.

Long-term spiritual development can also be interpreted as a gradual, long-term effort to intensify and still life-energy.

experience, such as literature, the contemplation of art, creative work, relaxation and physical activity (Hardy, 1979; Laski, 1961). I am certainly not trying to say that all spiritual experiences (of the low arousal type) can be interpreted in these terms. Sometimes the experiences seem to have no apparent cause, and may be — at least so far as we can see — a matter of grace or accident. But I do believe that a large percentage of them are related to the intensification and stilling of life-energy.

This connection between mystical states and an intensification of life-energy is often inferred by mystics and spiritual teachers, and occasionally stated explicitly. The Hindu text Moksha-Dharma compares the transcendental Self to a sun, and notes that through the process of concentration (*dharana*), the “rays” of the sun — or the “whirls” of consciousness — are gathered up and focused inwardly. As a result the yogin experiences the intense radiance of the Self, and attains a state of *samadhi* (Feuerstein, 1990). In the Christian mystical tradition, Meister Eckhart describes how mystical experience occurs when “you are able to draw in your [intellectual and sensory] powers to a unity and forget all those things and their images which you have absorbed” (1979, p. 7). Or again, he states that to achieve union with God, “a man must collect all his powers as if into a corner of his soul” (*ibid*, p. 20). Similarly, St. Gregory of Sinai described spiritual experience as “the total lifting of the powers of the soul to what may be discerned of the entire majesty of glory” (in Happold, 1986, p. 223). The terms “powers” and “powers of the soul” here are equivalent to psychic energy, while the terms “drawing in,” “collecting” and “lifting” — and also the “gathering up” of the whirls of consciousness described in the Moksha-Dharma — refer to what I describe as generating a high concentration of life-energy.

Long-term spiritual development can also be interpreted as a gradual, long-term effort to intensify and still life-energy. The traditions of monasticism, renunciation and detachment can be partly seen as an attempt to “close down” the channels through which energy drains away. The monk renounces the responsibilities of family and social life, endures long periods of silence and solitude, and lives without possessions, all of which will have the effect of conserving and concentrating life-energy. This underlying purpose of detachment was noted by Underhill (1960), who described it as a process of “stripping or purging away of those superfluous, unreal, and harmful things which dissipate the precious energies of the self” (p. 205). Speaking of the practice of “voluntary poverty,” Underhill notes that possessions “are a drain upon the energy of the self, preventing her from attaining that intenser life for which she was made.” (p. 212) Even the practice of celibacy can be interpreted in these terms. Although in the Christian monastic traditions celibacy was often rooted in a dualistic repulsion to the body and its desires, in Eastern spiritual traditions it was usually seen in a more pragmatic way, as a method of conserving — and harnessing — the energy of our being. As Swami Prabhavananda (1952) wrote of celibacy, for example, “Sexual activity, and the thoughts and fantasies of sex, use up a great portion of our vital force. When that force is conserved through abstinence, it becomes sublimated as spiritual energy” (p. 102).

In a similar way, in the Christian tradition the practice of asceticism was often a morbid and neurotic expression of an anti-physical dualistic ideology. But in its

less extreme forms, there was undoubtedly a positive “transcendental” aspect to it. It was also a method of taming or controlling what ascetics called “the body of desire” in order to conserve — and redirect — the psychic energy which it normally monopolizes. As Underhill (1911) notes again, “The mortifying process is necessary ... because those senses have usurped a place beyond their station; become the focus of energy, steadily drained the vitality of the self.” Underhill actually refers to a “wrong distribution of energy” (p. 220).

Similarly, the yogic asceticism of *tapas* was defined by Swami Prabhavananda (1952) as “the practice of conserving energy and directing it toward the goal of yoga... [O]bviously, in order to do this, we must exercise self-discipline; we must control our physical appetites and passions” (p. 102). *Tapas* usually involves chastity (*brahmacarya*) and the subjugation of the senses (*indriya-jaya*) and is believed to generate an intense form of energy, *ojas*, which is sometimes experienced as heat (the literal meaning of the word *tapas*). The first two stages of Patanjali’s eight-limbed path of yoga also involve self-control and an effort to tame “the body of desire.” The purpose of *yama* (often translated as restraint) is, as Feuerstein (1990) puts it, “to check the powerful survival instinct and rechannel it to serve a higher purpose” (p. 186). This “frees up” psychospiritual energy, which the adept can use at the *niyama* (discipline) stage, when he attempts to “harmonize his relationship to life at large and to the transcendental reality” (p. 186).

It might seem that I am advocating a retreat from an open participation with life, and suggesting that only the monastic way of life can lead to enlightenment. But this is not the case. The effort to “tame” or “subjugate” physical appetites does not — and should not — entail a mind/body duality or a sense of disgust towards the body. In the same way, withdrawing from everyday life does not entail a feeling of disgust towards “the world,” or a sense that the everyday world is inimical to spiritual development. The practices should be seen purely as a matter of economy, of permanently “taming” our desires so that they no longer monopolize our psychic energy. In the same way that after many years of regular meditation the chattering ego may become permanently quietened, it seems that after a period of self-discipline, the “body of desire” may become less dominant, so that the individual is no longer as disturbed by the desire for sensory pleasures, status and possessions etc. After a certain amount of time a new kind of psychic organization is formed, which includes a different distribution of energy.

This is certainly how many mystics viewed the practices of detachment and mortification (or asceticism). They were not — at least ideally — ongoing or permanent processes, but processes directed to a particular end: a release from what Underhill calls “the tyranny of selfhood” and from the dominance (and energy-monopolization) of our lower, hedonistic impulses. Many mystics strove for years to attain this freedom, at which point they often relinquished their lives of detachment and became extremely active. St. Catherine of Siena, for example, spent three years living as a hermit and an ascetic until she attained a state of “deification.” At that point she abandoned her solitude and was frenetically active for the rest of her life, teaching, converting non-Christians and serving the poor and sick (Underhill, 1960). The same is true of other

The effort to “tame” or “subjugate” physical appetites does not entail a mind/body duality or a sense of disgust towards the body. In the same way, withdrawing from everyday life does not entail a sense that the everyday world is inimical to spiritual development. The practices should be seen purely as a matter of economy, of permanently “taming” our desires so that they no longer monopolize our psychic energy.

mystics such as St. Theresa, St. John of the Cross, and St. Francis of Assisi. The purpose of detachment and mortification is to produce a transformation of being, a permanent redistribution of psychic energy, which equates with a permanently higher state of consciousness, or ascendance to the higher transpersonal realms.

In other words, this process of withdrawal and “energy-conservation” — which does not in itself entail a dualistic attitude — is only a temporary one, a period of initial “spiritual training.” Once the training is complete, and once the individual has brought about this new psychic organization, there is no reason why he or she should not fully engage with the everyday world again — as many mystics did — and respect and revere the physical and material realms, and see them as the manifestation of spirit-force. And in any case, there is no need to take these practices to the extremes which some mystics and ascetics did. Perhaps, rather than wearing hair shirts and whipping ourselves or retreating to a monastery, we can achieve the same effect by following the “middle way” of moderation and morality which the Buddha recommended.

If an intensification and stilling of life-energy is associated with low arousal spiritual experiences, the common characteristics of the experiences should be explicable in these terms. We have already seen how states of intensified life-energy cause a heightened perception of the phenomenal world: through what Deikman [2004] refers to as a “deautomatization of perception.” The canalization hypothesis can account for the sense of oneness with the manifest world which spiritual experiences feature too. Since the energy of our being is in essence one and the same as the “spirit-force” which pervades the universe, it is not surprising that in intensified states we experience a sense of union with all reality. In a real sense, we *are* the universe. The essence of our being is the essence of all reality. In the same way, it is also not surprising that, in what Stace (1964) called “extrovertive” mystical states, we perceive an underlying oneness amongst all of the seemingly separate and disparate phenomena of the world. All the phenomenal world is pervaded with the same Spirit-force, and therefore it is a unity. If consciousness is a fundamental force, these are direct experiences of reality.

As for the sense of inner peace or joy which spiritual experiences generally feature, I would suggest that this may be related to the canalization hypothesis in two ways. As we have seen, the normal “associational chatter” of the mind generates a constant psychic disturbance, the “storm of inward thought” (Eckhart, 1996). In states of intensified life-energy this “storm” usually fades away (it has to, to “free up” the psychic energy which is normally monopolized by thought-chatter), and our consciousness becomes more still. The sense of inner peace is, therefore, partly a direct experience of this stillness. We feel peaceful inside precisely because this storm has faded away. At the same time this feeling may partly arise from the fact that, as the Indian mystical traditions suggest, bliss is the nature of being or consciousness — being-consciousness-bliss (*Sat-Chit-Ananda*) is the essence of reality. Life-energy has a qualitative aspect — in the same way that, for example, water has the quality of wetness, it has a quality which we experience subjectively as joy or bliss. When life-energy is intensely concentrated — and the normal clutter of our minds is quietened —

Since the energy of our being is in essence the same as the “spirit-force” which pervades the universe, it is not surprising that in intensified states we experience a sense of union with all reality.

we are likely to experience this bliss.

And finally, I would suggest that the sense of becoming a truer or deeper self may be related to another effect of the “associational chatter” of the ego-mind. This generates and sustains our normal sense of identity, our normal sense of being an “I” inside our heads. If spiritual teachers are correct, this normal sense of “I” is only a superficial and shallow self which alienates us from our true identity. As the Svetasvatara Upanishad puts it, this is the self with a small “s,” the bird which sits on the branch of the tree and “eats the fruit therefore,” while the other bird — Self with a capital S — “looks on in silence” (Mascaro, 1990, p. 89). In states of intensified and stilled life-energy the small and limited self fades away, allowing us to make contact with our real nature, the *atman* which the “storm of inward thought” normally obscures.

The concept of life-energy can, therefore, be used to explain why higher states of consciousness occur. According to this view, there is a direct connection between our own consciousness and consciousness as a fundamental universal force. Our own being issues from universal consciousness, and always remains in union with it. If the canalization hypothesis is correct, higher states of consciousness cannot be explained in terms of neurological malfunctions (as per Persinger, 1987) or as a regression to a pre-egoic state of mind (Moxon, 1920; Freud, 1930). Rather, they are direct and simple experiences of the reality of the universe.

References

- Chalmers, D J (1995). Facing up to the problem of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2 (3), 200-219.
- Deikman, A (2004). Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience, <http://www.deikman.com/deautomat.html>, accessed 05/05/04.
- Eliade, M (1967). *From Primitives to Zen*. London: Collins.
- Ferrer, J (2001). *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Feuerstein, G (1990). *Yoga: the Technology of Ecstasy*. Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press.
- Fischer, R (1971). A cartography of the ecstatic and meditative states. *Science* 174 , 897-904.
- Forman, R (1998). What does mysticism have to teach us about consciousness? *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 5 (2), 185-201.
- Freud, S (1923/1962). *The Ego and the Id*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Freud, S (1930). *Civilization and its Discontents*. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 24 vols. Ed. James Strachey. 21: 64-145. London: Hogarth Press.
- Goswami, A (1993). *The Self-Aware Universe*. London and New York: Simon Schuster.
- Green, S (1987). *Physiological Psychology: an Introduction*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Griffin, D R (1998). *Unsnarling the World-Knot*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gross, R (1996). *Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behaviour*. London: Hodder & Staughton.
- Happold, F C (1986). *Mysticism*. London: Pelican
- Hardy, A (1979). *The Spiritual Nature of Man*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hay, D (1987). *Exploring Inner Space*. Oxford: Mowbray.
- Hildebrand, M, von (1988). An Amazonian tribe's view of cosmology. In P. Bunyard and E. Goldsmith (Eds.). *Gaia, the Thesis, the Mechanisms and the Implications*. Wadebridge Ecological Centre, Camelford, Cornwall.
- Hughes, T (1967). *Poetry in the Making*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Huxley, A (1977). *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*. London: Grafton.
- James, W (1902/1985). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Penguin.

- James, W (1917). *The Energies of Man*. In *Selected Papers on Philosophy*. London: Everyman's Library.
- Kahneman, D (1973). *Attention and Effort*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kostrulaba, T (1976). *The Joy of Running*. Philadelphia: Lippencott.
- Krippner, S (2000). The Epistemology and Technologies of Shamanic States of Consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7 (11–12). 93–118.
- Lamy, L (1981). *Egyptian Mysteries*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Laski, M (1961). *Ecstasy*. London: The Cresset Press.
- Levy-Bruhl, L (1965). *The Soul of the Primitive*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Linde, K, et. al. (2005). Acupuncture for Patients With Migraine: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *JAMA* 17, 2118–2125.
- Marchetti, G (2004). The Role Attention Plays in Building our Subjective Experiences. *Journal of Non-Locality and Remote Mental Interactions* 1 (2), <http://www.emergentmind.org/marchetti2.htm>, accessed 11/10/04.
- Mascaro, J (Ed.) (1990), *The Upanishads*. London: Penguin.
- McGinn, C (1993). Consciousness and cosmology: hyperdualism ventilated. In *Consciousness*, ed. M. Davies and G. W. Humphreys. Oxford: Blackwell.
- McTaggart, L (2001). *The Field*. London: Harper Collins.
- Meister Eckhart (1979). *German Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 1, trans. M. Walshe. London: Watkins.
- Meister Eckhart (1996). *Meister Eckhart: From Whom God Hid Nothing*. Ed. David O'Neal. Boston: Shambhala.
- Monro, N G (1962). *Ainu Creed and Cult*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Moxon, C (1920). Mystical Ecstasy and Hysterical Dream States. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 15, 329–334.
- Murphy, M & White, R A (1995). *In the Zone: Transcendent Experience in Sports*. London: Arkana.
- Myers, F W H (1903). *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*. London: Longmans.
- Newberg, A & D'Aquilli, E (2000). Neuropsychology of religious and spiritual experience. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7 (11–12), 111–122.
- Norman, D A & Shallice, T (1980). Attention to Action: Willed and Automatic Control of Behaviour, CHIP Report 99, San Diego, CA: University of California.
- Novak, P (1997). Buddhist meditation and the consciousness of time. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 3 (3). 267–277.
- Persinger, M A (1987). *Neuropsychological Bases of God Beliefs*. New York: Praeger.
- Prabhavananda, Swami & Isherwood, C (1952). *How to Know God: the Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali*. New York: Mentor.
- Sandbach, F H (1975). *The Stoics*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Scharfstein, B (1973). *Mystical Experience*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Smart, N (1971). *The Religious Experience of Mankind*. London: Fontana.
- Stace, W (1964/1988). *Mysticism and Philosophy*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher.
- Taylor, S (2002). Spirituality: the hidden side of sports. *New Renaissance* 10 (4).
- Taylor, S. (2003). Primal Spirituality and the Onto/Phylo Fallacy: A Critique of the Claim that Indigenous peoples were/are less Spiritually and Socially Developed than Modern Humans. *The International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 22, 61–76.
- Underhill, E (1911/1960). *Mysticism*. London: Methuen.
- White, P, Lewith, G, Prescott, P & Conway, J (2004) Acupuncture versus Placebo for the Treatment of Chronic Mechanical Neck Pain: A Randomized, Controlled Trial. *Annals of Internal Medicine* 141 (12), 911–919.
- Washburn, M (2002). Psychic Energy, Libido & Spirit: Three Energies or One? <http://www.personaltransformation.com/washburn.html>, accessed 12/11/07.
- Wilber, K (1996). *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Wilber, K (2000). *Integral Psychology*. Boston: Shambhala.