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The Spectrum of Consciousness and Kundalini Experience:

Since the early 1980s, I have - in my roles as a Zen practitioner and as a psychotherapist - been studying my own, my students', and my clients' modes of consciousness and knowing. I find Zazen, still-sitting on the cushion, is the most powerful, effective, and comprehensive way to study consciousness and the many modalities of knowing.

Several years ago, my Zazen practice became a spinal and bodily kundalini awakening - and a new kind of consciousness. This didn't happen by choice, nor was it my expectation - it just happened. I have lived it since, while it has incrementally and dramatically transformed and extended my bodily experience of knowing and consciousness, and my knowing of others.

The kundalini awakening experience can be very painful, and once in motion, it follows its "own" rules, awakening a new consciousness and a new clarity and alertness throughout the body.

Imagine you are sitting on your cushion, as you do daily, practicing with all your attention and your breath. Suddenly, you notice a small tingling sensation in the lower part of the spine. You don't attach any special importance to it. The tingling intensifies and, over time, turns into strong movements that take hold of the whole body, make you tremble, stop you sitting still and - for several years - throw you off the path you have become familiar with. This was the beginning of a change process for which I was not prepared.

After talking to my teacher and friends about what was happening, it became clear to me that these processes were what is known as a kundalini awakening.

Kundalini is often elevated into some kind of mysterious process indispensable to a truly spiritual path. Countless practices are suggested to trigger the kundalini process. The traditional description is much simpler; the kundalini process is described as an ascending energy that is first perceptible at the base of the spine and then ascends to the head and beyond. On its way up, it encounters physical blockages, some of which cause great pain as they are dissolved. There are many different descriptions of the process in literature, but it is (still) generally met with a lot of skepticism. Western classification categories generally draw on terms such as psychosis, schizophrenia, delusion, and people who are unprepared for the process of kundalini usually have serious problems finding adequate support.

From a Western understanding of the human psyche, it is practically impossible to grasp kundalini as a kind of purification, a rebirth, an awakening, or a connection with cosmic consciousness, as it is often seen in Eastern traditions. This is because we do not have the basis for systematically examining and experiencing it from a place of silence.

I have been practicing Zazen, sitting in contemplation, regularly for over 30 years. Zazen is the cultivation of silence. It is based on the non-movement, the resting of the body and the mind. "Sit down and don't move", the basic instruction given to beginners and advanced practitioners alike, means: Don't move your body, and don't move your mind. The non-moving mind is a mind that "remains silent", a mind that does not react and simply pauses. Nagarjuna describes this as the "joyful coming to rest" and the "calming of the unfolding" of the mind.

This long practice has made it possible for me to get through the process that I will now try to describe to you.

What exactly happened to me in the process?

As I said, the process began with a slight tingling sensation at the base of the spine. It intensified, went over into a tremor, which in turn became movements that were jerky, uncontrollable and regularly put me into convulsions that seized my whole body. These symptoms accompanied me for several years, then they gradually ebbed away, though I still have them today as ascending energies. The process is often described in literature as a snake that lies peacefully rolled up at the base of the spine until it begins to "awaken" (kundalini, Sanskrit: kundala: rolled, wound). The snake begins to move and straighten up. This image matches with my experience of a different consciousness of body emerging over time as I myself began to straighten up more.

Zen, too, is about ascending energies: How can a coiled snake be stretched? Put it in a bamboo cane (the spine).

Every few years, I have a general medical check-up that includes a measurement of my height. Once when I went, I had apparently "grown" since my previous examination. The doctor was irritated, measured again, got the same result, and mumbled something to himself like "must have noted it down wrong last time". He wasn't interested in listening to the explanation I was just starting to offer him.

In the absence of other words for it, I would like to call the snake that had begun to uncoil in me kundalini energy. It is not just an ascending energy, but one that has made its business to dissolve any resistance that hinders its flow. In other words, its task is to open the spinal canal - consisting of the vertebral column, the cervical vertebral column and the head - and make it completely permeable.

Where kundalini energy encounters resistance, a kind of pressure arises like dammed up liquid, and then the energy bursts through and the resistance is dissolved. Kundalini does not proceed cautiously, as one would like, but very forcefully. The pressure and the pain can become almost unbearable. I take it that these blockages are felt by different people in different parts of the spine. For me the strongest blockages were in the middle of the spine, in the neck-shoulder area and in the head.

Kundalini stays at the obstacle that hinders its flow until the blockage dissolves. Sometimes that happens fast, but usually it doesn't. As I said, the energy works with a lot of pressure and great intensity. It just wants to get the blockage out of its way. It often felt as if it just wanted to break out and unfold itself.

Some of the pain extended over the whole body, creating a feeling of intense illness, which became unbearable for me at times. It got so bad, I just couldn't take it anymore. I thought about taking painkillers, sedating myself with alcohol or going to a psychiatrist to get psychotropic drugs.

I didn't (of course) end up doing that.

It was very helpful for me in getting through this process to have developed discipline about my meditation practice over the years. I continued to meditate regularly and was thus able to observe and accept the processes taking place. There is much written about how important it is to have a meditation practice that makes it possible to learn to deal with this energy. In that practice, the development and cultivation of an observer role plays a decisive role. The observer is an inner instance that observes what is happening to us and by so doing gives us the opportunity not to (continue to) identify with what we perceive. It is important not to add anything to what is observed, and not to take anything from it.

Just now, I described this as the ability to observe and study myself and my processes "out of silence", from a state of calmness. As far as the kundalini process is concerned, one part of me was completely absorbed in the process, but with the help of my meditation practice, I was also able to observe the processes taking place in me as "from outside". In times of strong suffering, my practice acted like an anchor that helped me get through it.

Moreover, it was extremely important that I could discuss my experience with my teacher Baker Roshi. That's an important point: it is key to have people who may have had similar experiences to accompany you in a process like this, or who at least support you with their good will through the process. In my case, I was also able to turn to friends, and especially to my wife. She experienced my journey up close and supported me with great patience and attention.

The conversations and exchange with my teacher were central. Time and time again, I drove to our center in the Black Forest and sought direct contact with him - a process that spanned several years.

The kundalini system is an entire additional system in our body. It is a system alongside the blood, nervous, lymph, acupuncture, craniosacral and light systems that is hardly known at all in the western world. It can awaken, but it doesn't have to; it follows its own rules and cannot be dictated to.

The kundalini system seems to solely serve the "purpose" of opening and maintaining energy pathways. It goes farther than simply opening channels around the spine like I've described. Over the years, the kundalini opened energy channels from the spine to each organ of my body. Depending on where the ascending energy was at any particular time, it opened a channel to the inner organ at that level. Over time, it reached all of my organs. The channels formed without resistance; they emerged very gently. When opened, I could feel

each of my organs very clearly. Moreover, they felt like they were being connected to a new energy system, and that actually felt very easy and "normal" to me, there didn't seem to be anything special about it.

As I said, resistance to the rising energy was especially strong in my shoulders and head. In the shoulder area, the kundalini took several weeks to make the body tissue soft and permeable. The strongest resistances in the head was in the forehead and at the back of my head. The blockade felt like an iron ring wrapped around my head. As the kundalini tried to blast the ring - that's how it felt like at the time - my mental abilities were utterly blocked. When the ring finally dissolved, something truly wonderful happened: it turned into a "halo" that was connected at the lowest point of the ring to my neck, so it didn't float over my head like saints are depicted in classical religious paintings. Maybe the artists creating these works were trying to depict a phenomenon like this but never themselves had any experience of it, so they didn't know quite how to depict it and just cut the halo off from the body and hung it over the head for aesthetic reasons. Anyway, my halo left me after a while, and besides, nobody got to see it in the first place!

Something interesting happened when the kundalini reached the tip of my head (the process of ascending is not linear, especially not in the head. It runs in a kind of zigzag path across and through the head, including through the right eye, but not in a straight line here either, rather in a kind of jerky pathway): The two strands of energy that had reached the tip of my head from the right and from the left continued upwards and met about 40 cm above my head. They formed a kind of closed circuit. I was immediately reminded of the representation of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of unlimited compassion (and perceiver of the sounds of suffering beings), who is depicted with a number of Buddha figures on his head, the pyramid of Buddhas ending with a single Buddha at the top. The ritual use of the black hat in Tibetan ceremonies also came to mind.

The ascending process ended there for me. There were what I would call tweaks that had to be made whenever one of the channels seemed like it was about to close again. All in all, the entire process took 5 years, and the channels have not closed again since then.

The process of energy ascending upward toward my head was followed by a downward process: the kundalini energy made its way first through my right leg, then through my left leg to the tips of my toes. Here the resistance was not as strong as it had been in the spinal column. I began to notice some areas in my feet that I hadn't been aware of up to then - like during the ascending process that had occupied me so intensely before, I felt short pinches and pains that I didn't pay much attention to at first. There were points on the back of my foot and in my big toe that seemed to recur. Later it became clear to me that the kundalini had also been active in these parts at the same time and had already opened energy channels there too. The literature mentions these points in connection with kundalini, so there seem to be "typical" body parts where this kind of energy is particularly noticeable.

How can these experiences be viewed and classified in the context of today's conference? The question is not easy to answer. I'd like to start by describing what is "new" for me since this process.

- I have a new image of my body, which is even more complex and multi-layered than I previously experienced and thought.

- I have been able to evolve a different understanding of body energies that taps into the many different forms of energy our so-called "life energy" is composed of. I found an old entry in one of my diaries that I think put the point quite well:

There are small energy vortices everywhere: in the joints, when turning left, but also everywhere else, sometimes when turning right. It's a pure, beautiful chaos. Energy everywhere. It also rotates everywhere outside the body. It does not correspond at all to the image of silence, or even to the wish for silence - energy dancing everywhere. The skin tingles, the vortexes are even touching the internal organs. Pure energy, wonderful.

- My experience of consciousness, (which we usually use to refer to an aspect of the mind) has changed fundamentally through this, as also through my meditation experiences. Consciousness has, for me, become a simultaneous consciousness of the body too. A separation might be possible on an intellectual level, but not in my daily experience. At this point I would like to define it as a body-mind-consciousness. It seems to me that my mind works more clearly and precisely than ever before.

- My work as a psychotherapist has benefited a lot from these processes. I "listen" differently and react differently to my patients, often to my own surprise.

- My image of myself as an "I-self" has become less rigid, my "I" is no longer the exclusive driving force of my actions and I allow these tendencies towards dissolution of my "self" to occupy more and more space.

- The spine has moved to the center of my attention next to my breath. In Zen, the breath is the central focus.

"When we practice Zazen our mind always follows our breathing. When we inhale, the air comes into the inner world. When we exhale, the air goes out to the outer world. The inner world is limitless, and the outer world is also limitless. We say, "inner world" or "outer world", but actually there is just one whole world. In this limitless world, our throat is like a swinging door. The air comes in and goes out like someone passing through a swinging door. If you think, "I breathe," the "I" is extra. There is no you to say "I". What we call "I" is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale. It just moves; that is all. When your mind iscalm enough to follow this movement, there is nothing: no „I“, no world, no mind nor body; just a swinging door.“ (Suzuki Roshi, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, in German: Zen-Geist Anfänger-Geist)

The kundalini process has added the spine as another focus of attention to this breathing practice in addition to the focus on breathing. Not only that: If I focus my attention on my breathing and then direct it to the lower spine, I can "activate" the kundalini at any time, by which I mean that I can make it "noticeable". It seems to be active all the time, even when I am not perceiving it, but by drawing my attention to it, the flow of the energies becomes perceptible, tangible and conscious.

- I have mentioned "attention" a few times, and I'd like to take a moment to talk a little about what I mean by the term. My teacher Baker Roshi attaches great importance to

attention in Zen practice. Attention is, generally speaking, "alertness" and liveliness. Alertness can be focused, for example, on a specific object. Usually, the objects of one's attention change seemingly erratically and are subject to individual patterns.

In Zen practice, we perceive and study this, and then we turn our attention again and again back to our own breathing. Suzuki made this very clear in the quote just mentioned: We leave our habitual structures and place the breath at the center of our attention, again and again. In this way, we develop over time an 'attention body', one in which attention permeates the body more and more.

This attention-practice makes us more and more awake for the respective moment, we develop the ability to "pause for the particular". We stop the mind for the respective object of attention. These are processes that we can cultivate over the years by which the mind becomes increasingly still: it reacts less and less. It changes from a mind of reaction to a lingering pausing mind, the basis of which is stillness. We stay in the respective moment and become awake to this moment. It is the awakening into the moment. Now.

For me, the experience of the kundalini process fortified this practice of attention and the resulting 'attentive body'. The kundalini has repeatedly demanded my attention for the processes taking place, and I have often been absorbed for long times in these processes. On the other hand, it has also heightened my perception of details in and individual parts of my body. In a sense, I was being made to perceive my body very precisely, and in effect to study it more thoroughly.

- I have also gained a lot of new experience about what we call energies. As mentioned earlier, the vitality in me as a living being has become clearer to me through these processes. The body, the mind, pure liveliness. This liveliness presents itself in different forms, but it is and remains pure liveliness.

- The basic prerequisite for starting kundalini energy - as indeed any meditation session - is deep relaxation. The breath is then "put" "on" the relaxation. The emphasis is on a very slow and long out-breath. This deep relaxation is of the lower spine and the anal sphincter. In the course of this "exercise", the whole body is seized by the kundalini energy. It is like "charging" with energy, with life energy, which will, as I have described, then become a flow.

- I maintain my attention, focus my mind, on the lower part of the spine and I begin - and this is new - to experience my senses from "there", to see or hear from there.

What's that supposed to mean? We normally associate our senses with the respective organ, so we see with our eyes, hear with our ears. Our eye is defined as the organ with which we "see", the ear as one with which we "hear". This is of course a "correct" description, but at the same time it limits the respective organ of perception to the ability and the possibilities (pre)defined by me.

By holding my attention on the spine, I begin to see or hear "from there". In other words, I do not limit myself to what definition and experience says they can do, I "expand" their possibilities. I begin to remove limitations: by physically expanding the sense organs to the

spine, I expand their visual or hearing abilities. One Koan goes something like: Hear with your eyes and see with your ears. This is a directly experienceable extension of my consciousness. Subjectively experienced, this is a "different" seeing or hearing.

Expanding the sense organs in this way formed the basis for a further step in the development of my perception: I began to perceive the "things" of the outer world from their inner being. I could experience them both from the outside, from their surface, temperature and so on, and from the inside. This created a direct experience of "connectedness".

- Through this "expansion" of my sense organs my whole body has "expanded". Body has become more and more a direct experience. And all while my body straightened more and more. The kundalini energy never stops reminding to straighten up, to adapt an upright posture. Subjectively, I feel something like a pillar around which my life can "revolve".

The word *shin* in Chinese and in Japanese means both heart and mind. With the awakening of the kundalini, a process began for me that has enabled something like the development of a heart-body-mind.

I'm sure you noticed that I made plenty of references to my Zen practice. This practice is of course my frame of reference; it is what I have practiced and cultivated over the years. From the perspective of this practice, something like the awakening of the kundalini is unusual, but not "special". Through my practice of Zen I have become more and more sensitive to what we call the body and what we call the world. I like to think there's a little less illusion in what I experience daily, that I go more directly into contact, experience the world not so much through thinking, but experience it more directly.

A kind of new world has opened up, and my guess is that there are more worlds beyond those worlds. I mean that in two distinct ways: in relation to the "outer" world, the more we explore the universe the wider it gets. The other way is an inward look, an ever more precise experience and examination of my body and mind. Here, too, a universe of infinite dimensions is opened.

Still sitting Zazen on the cushion is in my experience the most effective and comprehensive way to study body, consciousness, mind and the many forms of "knowledge". The kundalini process has greatly supported this path, but it is by no means a prerequisite.

Some further thoughts:

The conference is entitled "Science of Consciousness". What does science mean in this context?

Science is a collective effort to gain knowledge of the world whilst also attempting to methodically protect against error. Contemporary scientists find their object of investigation "outside" of themselves. The resulting separation allows an apparently "objective" observation.

What I am telling you about here does not fit into these definitions. Nevertheless, much of what I have described has been experienced by many others. Although not objectifiable, it should under the same conditions be repeatable and capable both of being studied and communicated to others.

When we make ourselves the object of our investigations, we need a different, new form of science, one that is not exclusive, but inclusive of everything. What is needed is a science that includes the object of investigation, the investigator and the whole universe.

As I mentioned at the beginning, I was not prepared for the awakening of the kundalini process. Throughout this phase of my life, I did not try to "understand" kundalini, I simply let myself be carried by the process, which is by the way still ongoing. Also, I have only sporadically looked for and read literature on the phenomenon, usually with the frustrating realization that the authors describing it tend to mystify kundalini, consider it to be "important" and desirable, but usually have not experienced it themselves.

There are, however, two books I would like to mention:

Lee Sanella: Kundalini - Psychosis or Transcendence, San Francisco, USA 1976

Sudhir Kakar: Shamans, Mystics and Doctors, 1982/deutsch 2006

I myself am still fascinated and amazed by the kundalini process. A process which, I would say, is present in the human body as a possibility, but which is often not activated. I don't know what it is exactly that triggers it, and what conditions it needs. When it is triggered and begins to make its way through the body, it can change a person's life, and if the conditions are right, their life will become more vital, more direct and clearer.