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Kundalini and the Paranormal: Proceed with Caution

by Paul Pond, Ph.D.

Abstract

The Kundalini hypothesis asserts that there is a specific psycho-physiological mechanism in human beings that is responsible for mystical experience, creativity, genius, psychic phenomena and, under certain conditions, some types of mental illness. We believe that mystical experience is the ultimate goal of the Kundalini process and the other benefits or 'gifts' which result from this process are to be used cautiously lest the goal be lost.

The purpose of this work is to examine the paranormal in terms of psychic powers, such as telepathy, clairvoyance, pre-cognition, healing, etc. and the danger the pursuit of these powers is said to hold for the spiritual seeker. Warnings of the dangers of the development and use of psychic powers comes from established religious traditions, respected spiritual teachers, contemporary researchers into the paranormal and from practicing psychics themselves. We will examine a wide variety of opinions on this subject.

These warnings are found in the Bible, the teachings of Buddha and in eastern esoteric writings such as those of Patanjali. Yogis such as Gopi Krishna have recommended restraint. Practicing occultists such as Eliphas Levi who issued cautions in the 19th century and more contemporary mediums such as Edgar Cayce all warn of the possible loss of mystical ideals.
The dangers spoken of, aside from the distraction from spiritual goals, are the psychological and physical damage these practices can have on the individual. There are also the ethical implications of the misuse of these powers both for the individual and society.

Yoga theory is based upon the existence of *prana* (bioenergy) as a subtle intelligent life energy. This prana is unlike any energy being investigated by present day science. Kundalini is held to be the mechanism by which an enhanced flow of prana reaches the brain. Under the right conditions this enhanced prana operating in the brain can lead to higher states of consciousness such as genius, psychic abilities and mystical experience.
The fact that this intelligent energy (prana) is of such an extremely subtle nature could explain why the empirical verification of psi experiments has been so difficult. That this energy has its own intelligence may also explain why many psychics when under pressure to repeat their successes have often been discredited.
The Kundalini hypothesis emphasizes that the real treasures of this process are mystical experience and inspired knowledge. It is for this reason that we suggest that attempts to verify the Kundalini experience via psychic research is an avenue that is both limited and dangerous.

KUNDALINI AND THE PARANORMAL: PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Psychic Phenomena, Yoga and Kundalini

Webster defines paranormal as something which cannot be explained scientifically. This definition can be applied to a broad base of occurrences i.e. mystical experience, occult practices, magic, miracles and other psychic phenomena. For the purpose of this paper we will confine the topic to Kundalini, its connection to psychic phenomena and the need for caution in the pursuit of this knowledge.

The Kundalini hypothesis[1] holds that there is a psycho-physiological mechanism responsible for mystical experience, genius, psychic abilities and, under certain conditions, some types of mental illness. Mystical experience is considered the ultimate goal of the Kundalini process. Psychic powers, such as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, psychokinesis, etc. are believed to be gifts that come with a Kundalini awakening.

The fact that Kundalini is associated with the appearance of siddhis, or psychic gifts is presented in esoteric writings. For example: The first canto of the Kashmiri hymn Panchastavi[2] illustrates this relationship.

> *O Goddess Tripura; Pervading the visible and invisible worlds, whatsoever be the Siddhi for which Thy devotees of stable intellect pray. . . they undoubtedly, freed from all obstruction, gain fulfillment. . ..*

in the third canto, verse 15:

> *. . .What Siddhi there is, O Thou adored one of the Deities, that cannot be gained by Thy worship and what Yoga is there that cannot be achieved by centering the mind on Thee?*

The Kundalini hypothesis further asserts that there is an evolution going on in the brain which is refining both the body and the mind and preparing it for the ultimate mystical experience. Concentration on psychic powers alone could interfere with this evolving process producing a life style which, at best, interrupts or, at worst, damages this evolution. It is not unheard of, that under pressure to 'perform', psychics and healers become tempted to fake it, thus becoming slaves to their abilities, jeopardizing their credibility and often, their physical and mental well-being.

The Kundalini hypothesis also holds that this energy is intelligent and that the subject is not the one in control of it. If this is so, other than preparing oneself, i.e. living a balanced life and practicing methods recommended by all spiritual belief systems, we are not in control of Kundalini and should proceed with this understanding in mind.

Classical yoga as described by Patanjali contains eight steps or limbs that should be followed by the earnest spiritual seeker.[3][4] The first two limbs, *yama* (restraint) and *niyama* (discipline) are essentially the proper codes of conduct and thought that must be followed before any real spiritual advancement can occur. The next three, *asana* (posture), *pranayama* (control of breathing) and *pratyahara* (control of senses) lead the seeker to the necessary control of the physical senses, and *prana*. The final three stages collectively are known as *samyama*. *Dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (unbroken contemplation or meditation) and *Samadhi* (complete absorption) are meant to bring about control of consciousness. Certainly in the West, the second and third stages have received the most attention. However we will see the importance of the first stage in relation to our present discussion.

In accordance with Book III of the Yoga Sutras once the practitioner has reached the third stage—samyama— certain 'miraculous powers' or *siddhi*s are acquired. These powers or perfections are described in many ways and include what are currently considered to be occult or psychic powers. From this perspective the attainment of siddhis is an indication of the seeker's 'spiritual' progress.

The lives of saints and mystics contain a wealth of miraculous episodes. "In India an accomplished yogi has always been considered to be a *mahasiddha*, a possessor of occult powers. . ." [5]. Miraculous powers are ascribed to those mystics and saints, such as Mohammed and Buddha, who have strongly denounced their use. Gopi Krishna says Kundalini is the basic lever in all forms of Yoga and siddhis are the harvest of an awakened Kundalini and its ascent into the brain.[6][2]

Lee Sannella believes that the Kundalini process is not necessarily connected with the appearance of psychic phenomena, i.e. there are psychics who have not undergone the psychophysiological transformation he associates with Kundalini and there are those in whom Kundalini is active but who show no apparent psychic talents. However, he does tend to agree with Gopi Krishna's appraisal that "Kundalini is the real cause of all so-called spiritual and psychic phenomena."[7]

Warnings from Religious & Spiritual Traditions

Warnings of the dangers of the use of psychic powers or siddhis come from a variety of sources, from biblical time to the present. These warnings run the gamut from caution to outright damnation. Both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible contain warnings of varying degrees. For example:

From Leviticus., Chapter 19, Verse 31

> *. . .and the Lord spoke unto Moses "Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them. I am the LORD, your God.*

From Deuteronomy, Chapter 18, Verses 10, 11, 12.

> *. . .There shall not be found among you anyone who maketh his son or daughter to pass through the fire or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch.*
> *. . .Or a charmer or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard or a necromancer.*
> *. . .for all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord. . . .*

From St. Paul—Corinthians, Chapter 13, Verse 2

> *....And though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. . .*

It is interesting to note that Jesus never used his powers to exalt himself, i.e. when goaded by the priests or his temptation in the desert. It appears he only used them to heal or save others.

Buddha, not unlike St. Paul, was concerned that the possession of psychic powers might tempt the seeker away from his original goal—mystical experience. Yet, Buddha (as well as Patanjali) took the acquisition of siddhis to be an indication of the seeker's spiritual progress. The possession of siddhis is not harmful in itself but the seeker must not succumb to their temptation and must not exhibit these 'powers' in front of others. Buddha forbade the use and display of siddhis since he considered them doubly dangerous. They tempt the practitioner with a 'vain magical mastery of the world' and confuse the minds of the public at large.[5]

According to Patanjali, Book III—37,3 "these powers stand in contradistinction to the highest spiritual vision. In manifestation they are called magical powers". Thus these powers in the waking state represent obstacles in the mystical state.

Evelyn Underhill[8] has given a splendid explanation of the difference between the pursuit of self-knowledge and the pursuit of occult knowledge. She relates mankind's attitude toward the unseen in terms of two paths—the 'way of mysticism' and the 'way of magic'. Accordingly, she says "the fundamental difference between the two is this: magic wants to get, mysticism wants to give. . ." Underhill goes on to say that "the great mystics themselves. . .are unanimous in warning their disciples against the danger of attributing too much importance to 'visions' and 'voices'."

Warnings of the abuse of siddhis come from all ages and from varied belief systems.
Lal Ded, a famous Hindu mystic of the 14th century is described by Jayalal Kaul: "She cleansed the mirror of her heart for the Truth to shine unmistakable and clear. She took the middle path, of moderation in food and drink, neither pandering to her appetites nor undergoing extreme penance. Nor did she hanker after the siddhis, the miraculous powers which she condemned as fraud and jugglery."[9]

Kirpal Singh, 20th century spiritual master in *Man! Know Thyself* writes: "Master-Saints never show any miracles, except in very rare cases, to a disciple due to special circumstances. Miracles are in accordance with the laws of Nature but are nevertheless, terrible entangling webs detrimental to the higher ideals of man to approach the Almighty God. . .The miraculous powers achieved after lengthy periods are instrumental in doing both good and harm, and as they are utilized more to harm than anything else, are looked down upon by all truly spiritual persons. The Masters are in possession of Supreme Power but their mission is sacred. . .Those who are anxious to see miracles are not true seekers."[10]

Vera Stanley Alder in *Finding of the Third Eye* also points out the pitfalls of the seeker after Truth. She says one of the distractions is sensationalism and warns "It must always be remembered that sensationalism (or emotional excitement) is to the mentality what sexual overindulgence is to the body. Even religious emotion can be a type of mental sensuality and therefore unbalancing."[11]

If we can accept the basic teaching of Emanuel Swedenborg that there are good spirits and evil spirits associated with man and it is possible to contact them, his warnings have significant meaning. His teachings indicate that we are more likely to contact evil spirits because these spirits are fulfilled and satisfied by being associated with people in the world who are doing the things they love. Terry Schnarr, Director of Information Swedenborg in Canada gives us his interpretation of Swedenborg's teachings: "Basically his warning is not to seek contact with the other world, as is the warning of the Bible. This does not mean that contact can not be made, only that it should not be sought after. If and when it happens naturally, the chances are very good the Lord arranged it to happen for good use."[12]

Wilson Van Dusen in *The Presence of Other Worlds* talks of Swedenborg's reluctance to display his miraculous powers and says "In several places he said that miracles have a coercive effect on belief and destroy the free will in spiritual matters."[13]
In his book *The Mystics of Islam*, Reynold Nicholson says "In early Mohammedan Vitae Sanctorum it is not uncommon to meet with sayings to the effect that miraculous powers are comparatively of small account." The Persian saint Bayazid said "God used to bring me wonders and miracles, but I paid no heed to them; and when He saw that I did so, he gave me the means of attaining to knowledge of Himself."[14]

We have quoted from a variety of spiritual teachers and religious traditions to show that the appearance of siddhis is universally accepted as an occurrence on the path to self knowledge. Further, each suggests that too much attention to the display of these powers will prevent the seeker from attaining the ultimate goal—mystical experience.

Caution from Psychics / Examples of Problems Related to Psychic Activity

In addition to the warnings from established religious traditions; occultists and practicing psychics have issued their own concerns.

Underhill[8] quotes from Eliphas Levi, a 19th century occult philosopher: "Too deep a study of the mysteries of nature may estrange from God the careless investigator, in whom mental fatigue paralyses the ardor of the heart."

Edgar Cayce, the 20th century medium, had some very specific views concerning the development and use of psychic abilities. He felt that psychic talents should not be sought in themselves. Cayce, like Gopi Krishna, felt that psychic talents were the direct result of the activity of Kundalini and that the practice of spiritual discipline was a prerequisite for a healthy awakening.[15]

Following are a few examples from his readings:[16]

"Development in the spiritual sense by meditation and prayer is dependent upon the Creative, the soul or spiritual energy trapped in the body, rather than upon that which is wholly of the material. This brings about what may be termed psychic development of individuals."
"The activities of the glands used aright may bring serenity, hope, peace, faith, understanding. . . .Misdirected, the energies may bring doubts, fears, apprehensions, contentions, disorders, disruptions. . . .raised in power and then misdirected may bring death itself."

Hugh Lynn Cayce, Edgar's son, repeatedly mentions the destruction of personality, the suffering caused by oversensitivity and the complications that could result through ignorance and misuse of such energies.[16]
Shortly before her death, the Theosophist, H.P. Blavatsky wrote: "Psychic capacities held perfectly under control, checked and directed by the *Manasic* principle, are valuable aids in development. But these capacities running riot, controlling instead of controlled, using instead of being used, lead the student into the most dangerous delusions and the certainty of moral destruction. . ."[17]
All seem to agree on the danger inherent in the development of psychic powers as ends in themselves. Not only does the earnest seeker risk losing sight of his real goal but he may suffer both psychological and physical damage. The following cases are illustrative:

The Case of Eusapia Palladino

In the *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, Leslie Shepard[18] recounts the experiences of Eusapia Palladino, a medium whose psychic powers were observed by numerous academics, including Caesare Lombroso and Mme. Curie. Lombroso noted that although Palladino possessed a keen visual memory and remarkable intuition and subtlety for an uneducated person, she had many marked characteristics i.e. mood swings, hallucinations, strange phobias and was given to violent outbursts. It was also observed that she became ill immediately after a *séance*, sometimes for more than two days when she could not eat and would vomit. She began to use deception and fraud to avoid the physical discomfort of using her psychic powers.

The Case of Vanga Dimitrova

According to scientists who have worked with and noted her abilities, the blind Bulgarian psychic Vanga Dimitrova is unhappy with her psychic gift. "She's often very sad about the things she foresees. . . . But, on the other hand, she can't live without it. She can't stop."[19] This suggests that a person can become obsessed by psychic desires and abilities.

Vanga admits her own inabilities to control or access the images that give rise to her psychic abilities. She says "I can't force them. They may be about the past, the present, or the future."[19]

Nina Kulagina a Russian who has demonstrated psychokinesis (PK) has developed serious medical problems as a result. In addition ". . . she feels a strong energy like a prickling sensation begin to move up her spine to the base of the brain. She has also said that she knows when she is going to move an object because she feels pain and her blood pressure rises."[20]

It is not difficult to imagine the effect that misuse of psychic powers could have on the ethical development of the seeker. If as has been expressed so often by the great teachers, the spiritual student should use his gifts for material gain or fame, he has virtually destroyed his moral progress and has surely traded the real thing for fool's gold.

On another level, what might happen to the balance of power, world economies or social laws if someone with highly advanced powers chose to use them for personal gain? These and the other dangers cautioned against have lead us to believe that investigation into the paranormal should be approached carefully.

Conclusion

We have discussed the appearance of psychic gifts or siddhis as a mark of progress in spiritual development. Traditional warnings from a wide variety of spiritual disciplines and religious traditions have been cited to emphasize the inherent danger in the mishandling of these 'talents' by the seeker. Even the verse quoted from the first canto of Panchastavi emphasizes that the seeker must be of stable intellect and free from all obstruction.

The fact that definite demonstrative signs appear as proof of spiritual progress suggest that Yoga was indeed developed as a verifiable science. This proof was available to the seeker and could also serve as evidence to others that spiritual progress had been made. Thus both the student and teacher had a way to distinguish factual progress from wishful thinking.

It should be emphasized that the appearance of siddhis is not proof that mystical consciousness has been attained—only a sign that progress has been made. Many have made the mistake of equating psychic talent with mystical consciousness.

The unwary seeker may fall prey to the distraction provided by appearance of these 'gifts'—resulting in the loss of the spiritual goal. In addition, physical and psychological damage may result. A few examples of this have also been cited.

Given these concerns, those in whom psychic gifts appear should be extremely cautious and diligent. Their lifestyle should follow the standards outlined in classical yoga theory. In addition to a moderate lifestyle with proper nutrition, particular attention should be paid to the first two steps of yoga—restraint and discipline. This is equally important for someone who may not be practicing a directed spiritual discipline.

Extreme caution must also be practiced by scientists using psychics in their research, lest they 'push' the student too far and cause damage. The student/teacher relationship of traditional yoga was there for good reason. The essence of spiritual discipline can only be truly understood by one who practices it on himself. Today's scientists need to understand that in dealing with consciousness they are attempting to directly probe a super-intelligent life energy. This energy—prana— has its own agenda unlike the insentient energies accepted by present day science. This may mean that psi-experiments cannot be verified or repeated in the standard empirical way.

Gopi Krishna offers a possible explanation for the difficulty in establishing empirically verifiable data from psi-experiments.[21]

> *How can nature allow man to win this sovereign position unless he has also gained the capability to shoulder the highly increased responsibility in a befitting manner and not to abuse the almost superhuman powers gained. This is the reason why in every case of the awakening of Kundalini secret devices in the brain come into play to mold the individual towards a state of mind where the possibility of abuse of psychic power is eliminated. This is also the reason why almost all those who possess psychic talents are never able to control the power or to remain alert and conscious when the phenomena come to pass.*

Kundalini Research

A general framework for the verification of paranormal experience must be developed and tested as part of any serious research into the Kundalini experience. According to classical yoga theory and other research,[4][22][23][24] one who has attained the transcendent state should display the following characteristics: new knowledge (genius), sense of inner light or sound, detachment, cosmic expansion, religious impulse, highly developed moral nature, psychic ability. From Vedic times, one in whom Kundalini is awakened was believed to be transformed from an average person into an intellectual prodigy, an eloquent speaker, even a poet.24 Even Whitman said that the future man will be a poet.

From 'A Prayer to Columbus'.[25]

> *After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd)*
> *After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their works,*
> *After the noble inventors—after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,*
> *Finally shall come the Poet, worthy that name:*
> *The true Son of God shall come, singing his songs.*

As Gopi Krishna has pointed out[4] the development of increased intellectual powers and literary talents—i.e. genius as part of the Kundalini process has essentially been ignored by modern authors. In *Cosmic Consciousness*, Dr. Bucke also points out that intellectual illumination is a key feature of one who has attained what he calls the Cosmic Sense.[23] The association of intellectual development with spiritual perfection is constantly referred to in the traditional writings on Kundalini and should be used as a test point for anyone claiming a full Kundalini awakening.

To illustrate the 'powers' ascribed to one in whom Kundalini is awakened we reproduce portions of three verses from the Sanskrit Sat-Chakra-Nirupana (Description of the Six Centers) as presented by Arthur Avalon in *The Serpent Power*.[22]

from verse 10 and 11

> *. . . .Her (Kundalini) lustre is as that of a strong flash of young strong lightning. Her sweet murmur is like the indistinct hum of swarms of love-mad bees. She produces melodious poetry and Bandha (literary composition in which verse is arranged in the manner of a diagram or picture). . . .*

Here we can clearly see the obvious reference to light, sound, and literary talents.

From verse 27

> *Foremost among Yogis, he even is dearer than the dearest to women, He is pre-eminently wise and full of noble deeds. His senses are completely under control. His mind in its intense concentration is engrossed in thoughts of the Brahman. His inspired speech flows like a stream of (clear) water. He is like the Devata. . . .and he is able at will to enter another body.*

This paper was first presented in May 1989 at the annual Academy of Religion and Psychical Research Conference at Rosemont College, Philadelphia, PA.

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