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CHAPTER ONE: CAN WE KNOW THE MEANING OF LIGHT?

Right off the bat, exploring the meaning of light may strike some as the wrong spiritual or philosophical pursuit. After all, it is *life*—and the meaning of our lives, at that—with which we are generally concerned. Light may be an aspect of life, a sliver of its infinite diversity, yet we do not generally regard it, let alone its elusive meaning, as of the utmost value.

And yet, when we pay attention to it, we must face that light is important to us, and not just because it helps to provide us with sensory data. To paraphrase Professor Mathew Kapstein, light is especially interesting to us because light is something mysterious and special.

The special and intriguing qualities of light are perhaps nowhere more obvious than in spiritual experiences and nonordinary states of consciousness. And it is no secret that spiritual seekers yearn for that which may strike any ordinary person spontaneously and without warning: mystical visions of inner light.

Such visions can come about through a variety of ways. Whether invoked through meditation, fasting, drugs, death, or gratuitous graces, one's first glimpses of supernatural luminosity are often accompanied by feelings of awe and bewilderment. For a moment, one's analytical mind pauses, easily overwhelmed by the divine effulgence.

...And then it is over, you come back to *terra firma*, and wonder what the hell just happened. You ask a local psychiatrist or yoga teacher, though they may have little in the way of useful information to share.

Despite the recent groundswell of popular support for progressive spirituality, we are not all yet living in an enlightened utopia. Strains of fundamentalism, cynical skepticism, and narcissistic ignorance have muted much of the revolutionary potential of New Age discourse. This means that many important questions too often go unanswered, questions like “What was that light?” and “What did it *mean*?”.

Unfortunately, the most prevalent psychological and religious models in America today offer little in the way of understanding with regard to higher states of consciousness. Mental health professionals may view such experiences as pathological, whereas ever-popular Protestant Christianity tends to dismiss ecstatic revelation in favor of the more cerebral medium of scripture.

In terms of common knowledge, however, most of us know that light is often related to knowledge and goodness. Yet, the Herder Symbol Dictionary also characterizes light as an “omnipresent phenomenon” that we may know by its effects despite it being basically “incomprehensible in its essence.”¹

That we have a cultural tendency to regard light as essentially incomprehensible cuts both ways. On the one hand, it means that making sense of light is wide-open field. On the other, it suggests that attempting to do so may be a futile effort. Does this mean that we should throw in the towel already? Hardly.

Regarding light as a symbol, the way it is defined in the Herder, risks reducing it to something almost entirely transcendent to our understanding or to the status of a mere image or icon. Learning what light may signify as a representation of or placeholder for something else is not the same as gaining insight into light itself. And even if we could gain greater insight into light itself or even into light as a symbol, neither insight accounts for our direct—and spiritual—experiences of light per se.

After all, our subject is not so much light as an objective reality or communicating signifier as much as it is a subjective phenomenon; the real meaning of light is not within the realms of physics or semiotics. This shifts the focus of our investigation away from mathematical theories or relativism and closer to the firsthand testimonies of mystics and the receivers of revelations.

To make the focus more fine, our exploration does not hinge upon our relationship to light as it appears to most people everyday, but rather concerns itself with brightness that does not pass through bodily eyes, yet is nevertheless seen. In approaching the meaning of light from this angle, we are less mired down in the technicalities of optics and more free to explore the importance and interpretations humanity at large attaches to brightness and its apprehension.

That a plurality of interpretations already exists is a mixed blessing. Amidst the preponderance of differing (and sometimes conflicting) accounts and hypotheses, we must favor some while excluding others. At the same time, however, ascertaining unity in diversity gives an invigorating challenge to our investigation and lends the conclusions it draws strength.

According to Kapstein, we can find reports of light across a diversity of religions and spiritual orientations, the meaning and value of which “vary widely in differing historical and cultural settings, while disclosing important commonalities nevertheless.”² The disclosure of those important commonalities interests us most. Such an interest suggests that our exploration adopt something of an integrative approach.

It just so happens that the foremost integral philosopher in the world today has weighed in on the apprehension of inner light. Unfortunately, his treatment of the subject suffers from both brevity and apparent contradiction. It is worthwhile, however, to recap his take on the matter.

WILBER’S SYSTEM AND INNER LIGHT

Philosopher and writer Ken Wilber stands as a key figure in the integration of knowledge and insight across a variety of traditions. Given his broad familiarity with spiritual growth and human development, we must ask: what does he make of visions of light? To understand the answer this question, one must be at least somewhat familiar with his work.

In Wilber’s system, the cognitive and spiritual development of human individuals proceeds hierarchically, and is divisible into tiers. Also known as stages and levels, each tier builds off of the one below it, or both transcends and includes it. In this sense, when one achieves a higher level of development, he or she retains the capacities of the lower tiers below it. In other words, one’s current level of development relies upon his or her prior developmental achievements remaining intact.

A simplified example of this is that one must know arithmetic before he or she can solve algebraic equations. Higher up, however, one must attain a level of trans-rational awareness to ascend to the levels of causal or nondual consciousness.

Additionally, Wilber does allow for the possibility that one can temporarily occupy a state of consciousness corresponding to any level at any time in the course of one’s development. Such a thing is by definition fleeting and distinct from the more enduring progress through sequential ascension through the levels. For example, a neophyte could have a brief taste of the subtle level, even if he or she has only established himself or herself at a level far below it.

In terms of inner light, this means that a spell of supernatural luminosity may, however briefly, strike sales professionals just as easily as it can overtake chemistry students. A person could succumb to one in a monastery or while riding a monorail. You may have one as you read this book—so be careful!

In Wilber's groundbreaking work *Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality*, he classifies "interior illuminations" as one of many "subtle-level phenomena." The basic interpretation he provides for such phenomena is that they indicate "the possibility of absorption in Uncreate Spirit." He characterizes the perception of such phenomena and the recognition of the possibility that they entail as part of a distinct stage, that of the subtle level, which stands prior to subsequent higher levels. The level after, or higher than, the subtle is one in which "vision gives way to direct apprehension or direct experience—the union of the whole soul with God."³

The challenge with Wilber's system that arises revolves around whether he considers inner illuminations to be confined to the subtle level (apart from a fleeting subtle-level state of consciousness) or if he allows that they may also take place when one has progressed on to different stages in a manner characteristic of those stages. For example, in his system, can experiences of illumination occur while the possibility of absorption in or union with God/Spirit is actualized? In other words, might one rightfully characterize a direct apprehension or direct experience of one's unity with God as an illumination per se?

There is no a priori reason to suppose that the recognition of one's unity with God or the Absolute could not strike one as akin to seeing or identifying with supernal light. There is also plenty of evidence that suggests inner illuminations have everything to do with that unity. (We examine much of it in the following chapters.)

What Wilber writes about higher levels, however, is ambiguous. On the one hand, he regards the merger of "self and luminosity" as characteristic of the "subtle domain," whereas earlier in the text he characterizes merely beholding the luminous—and not awareness of any merger per se—as characteristic of the subtle. He also suggests that recognition of one's unity with the luminous is characteristic of a level above the subtle, and thus subsequent to attainment of the subtle level and inner illumination as such.⁴

This apparent contradiction can make some sense, however, if one keeps in mind that Wilber writes with development in mind, and with regard to a somewhat linear progression through developmental stages.

"In the subtle level," he writes, "the Soul and God unite."⁵ It may be that one begins his or her time at the subtle level seeing inner light. Perhaps, after a time spent having such experiences of light, they culminate in a sense of unification that allows one

to progress on to the causal level, where “the Soul and God are both transcended in the prior identity of the Godhead, or pure formless awareness, pure consciousness as such.”⁶ Wilber goes on to posit that the level above the subtle (the causal) is characterized by when the unity of self and light “disappear into cessation.”⁷ He boldly states that “Luminosity gives way to pure Emptiness” at the causal level.⁸

In Wilber’s view, ultimate realization is not attained until after the inner light has disappeared. Though this may be true for some, reports from many of the world’s great mystical traditions contradict this characterization. (We will examine them in greater detail in Chapters Four and Five.) To more than a few mystics, “pure consciousness as such” looks like light! Testimonies say that consciousness, “the pure Self as pure Spirit,” and the equivalence of atman and brahman (all hallmarks of the causal level in Wilber’s system) are known and relayed as illuminative experiences.

Although Wilber is free to classify those experiences as mere subtle-level phenomena, and hold that their illuminative character is not indicative of the attainment of causal or nondual levels as defined in his system, evidence suggests the validity of interpreting them differently. While he goes out of his way to stipulate that levels above the subtle are marked by their lack of illuminative experiences per se, such stipulation fails to explain or account for the conflicting reports of various historical personages. It also contextualizes illuminative experience in such a way so as to suggest it is part of a stepping stone to causal and nondual levels that, once tread upon, vanishes, rather than as an important characteristic of those higher levels.

Again, it is Wilber’s system, and he is free to define levels however he likes. But as far as interpreting illuminative experiences—or discovering the meaning of light—goes, the constraints of that system are too narrow.

One should note, however, that Wilber’s stratification of levels of human development serves as an excellent pointer toward the “omega point” of nondual awareness. The subject of *this* book, however, is not human development, nor enlightenment per se, but rather making sense of the otherwise incomprehensible essence of light apprehended in spiritual experiences.

While, in Wilber’s system, such experiences are characteristic of a particular stage of development (though almost any feature thereof can also be experienced as a fleeting state regardless of one’s stage of development), we should not read illuminative experiences *solely* through the lens of his system.

APPROACHING AN UNDERSTANDING OF LIGHT

It is unfortunate that we need to look elsewhere for an understanding of inner illumination, not only because it is less easy than simply looking to Wilber for answers, but also because his thought has such merit overall. Without the orienting generalizations that his system provides, we are left with a wealth of particulars marked by their multitude and diversity. Add to this the problems surrounding reports of mystical experiences—most notably the perennial assertion that such experiences are often impossible to verbalize—and it becomes obvious that our undertaking may be a fool's errand.

After all, this is more than a tour through different accounts of supernal light or the circumstances surrounding its experience—we want to know more about *what that experience means*. What is that light? How do we think of instances when someone glimpses or identifies with it? What are the consequences of such glimpses to individuals and society at large?

Answering such questions requires leaping a gigantic hurdle, for it is not even clear that similar reports describe the same actuality. It is important for our intellectual honesty we keep in mind:

...that when comparing the teachings of mystics who are claimed to have been the subjects of ultimately ineffable experiences, it is not even in principle possible for us to determine whether or not they 'experienced the same thing.'

If words cannot assert the essence of a particular experience, of what use is it trying to compare and analyze the frequently dissimilar words of those who do deign to speak about it? And even if they could assert that their experiences did have a shared essence, how could we ever really know what that was?

For those who want incontrovertible proof that all experiences of light are pretty much the same and that an analysis of accounts of those experiences is indisputably correct, this investigation—and all others—cannot provide it. However, that does not mean that this pursuit is hopeless or cannot bear intriguing results.

For the sake of this exploration, let us assume some things that we cannot prove; they can never be verified nor falsified. For example, let us assume that among the many illuminative experiences that have ever been had, some commonalities *among the experiences themselves* do exist. Also, let's assume that the reports of those experiences, imperfect as they may be, bear some relationship, not only to the specific experiences that they seek to describe, but also to the commonalities that we have assumed exist.

From these assumptions alone, a study of accounts of illuminative experiences may reveal something about their essential nature. And, through the fruits of that study, we may feel emboldened to take a leap and assert something about inner light itself.

Admittedly, such a process is more speculative than authoritative, and that is the essence of its merit. There is more than open-ended guesswork clustered around the notion of what the light apprehended or identified with in mystical experiences *could* be. The educated guesses and suppositions presented here are supported by research and original thought, just as they may be contradicted by the same.

It is through such informed consideration that the discrepancies in Wilber's system, for example, became apparent. And, as discussed above, those discrepancies lead to questions that orbit the perimeter of this investigation. How does one's developmental proximity to the ultimate nondual state or stage impact one's experience of light and/or one's interpretation of that experience? If one's stage of development impacts how he or she interprets experiences of illumination, does that foreclose the possibility that the content of those experiences may be different prior to differences in interpretation?

It is my hope that such questions are hashed out eventually, though they will not find address in full here. As stated above, the subject of this book is not development, nor the characterization of enlightenment and its stages per se.

Rather, we restrain ourselves to the basic issues of *what*—what is the light that mystics see? Of what consequence is its apprehension?—through examining what those who have witnessed it have said about it, as well as what various analysts and commentators have revealed through examining such testimonies. This book reveals the import of illuminative experiences, as well as their impact in societies and traditions of the past, present, and future.

Chapters Four and Five specifically concern themselves with providing relevant historical perspectives on illuminative experiences in the religion, philosophy, and mysticism of the East and the West. Commonalities exist among the present-day experiences of individuals in secular societies and those of people in cultures steeped in Judaism, Vedanta, or Islam. Although Buddhism may not seem to have much in common with ancient Greek philosophy on the surface, visions of spiritual light clearly demarcate overlapping territory, including that of Christianity and Tantra.

Our shared human heritage not only informs research and analysis, but also propels the significance of inner light beyond the sphere of individual concern and through to the moral and practical considerations of collective life. In other words, the book is not just about navel-gazing. It is about the future of society, the species, and the

cosmos as a whole. (We explore those themes most explicitly in Chapters Eight and Nine.)

The discourse in chapters Four and Five revolves around ancient manuscripts and artifacts that provide clues as urgent and amazing as those revealed in contemporary theory and psychological research. Examining all the available information leads to some fascinating insights. Those chapters are framed by Chapter Three which precedes them; it is there that the metaphysical implications of the nature of inner light are interpreted through elements of the philosophies of Henni Bergson and Arthur Schopenhauer.

While these subjects may seem off-putting, I have done my best to translate confused, impenetrable jargon into intelligible terms and examples. Although the subject matter *is* mind-blowing, it comes across in grounded prose. Metaphysics and mysticism can be heady stuff, though neophytes need not be afraid.

Illuminative experiences and mystical enlightenment have been linked for millennia, though their precise relationship has remained shrouded in mystery. Consequently, the following chapter explores mystical enlightenment as well as the seemingly anti-mystical Age of Enlightenment. What they share in common may come as a surprise.

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CHAPTER TWO: ENLIGHTENMENT AND VISIONS OF LIGHT

Few might confuse a discussion of mystical enlightenment with discourse surrounding the Age of Enlightenment as it has transpired over the past few hundred years, yet it is important to an exploration of inner illumination to recognize their similarities as well as their differences.

Broadly construed, the Enlightenment marked a period of transition away from the acceptance of centralized religious authority, both in terms of what people regarded as true and in terms of the regulation of their lives. “It is true because the Church says so” or “do it because God says so” would no longer suffice for those who embraced Enlightenment principles. People began to explore what made claims of knowledge valid or invalid, just as they pondered what gave governments the right to govern. To be sure, Europeans contemplated weighty issues prior to the Enlightenment, but the changing role of critical thought as applied to epistemology and the ordering of social life was one of its central features.

It would be incomplete, however, to suggest that leaders of the Enlightenment merely wanted people to think more, or to think solely for themselves. A central feature of the Enlightenment that differentiated it from other traditions of rational contemplation was an emphasis upon observation and experimentation. It was not enough to argue logically to arrive at truth; the premises that one employed in argument were themselves subject to question and scrutiny. What made a particular premise acceptable or not was a function of more than just tradition or the social standing of its supporters, but whether or not it was backed by empirical evidence.

Standards for empirical evidence emphasized the role of human experience in ascertaining the reality and features of certain things and events. Of all the ways that a person can experience, however, the consensus expressed during the Enlightenment was that experiences of the senses were most valuable.

If I said that a demon revealed to me that fresh carrots make a crunching sound when chewed, that claim had a much lower standing than if I said that I heard the crunching myself. Such a hierarchy of ways of knowing may sound obvious now, though a few centuries ago, it marked a big change.

Few scientists, however, made it their business to categorize and systematically explore their world through its acoustic impressions. The same could be said for reasoned men who sought to understand the world as it tasted or smelled. The supposed veracity imparted by apprehension via the senses did not extend to all of them in kind. Rather, cultural leaders afforded one sense a position of predominance above all others. That sense was vision, and its organ was the eye.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EYE IN HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

Of all the senses humanity could employ in its quest for understanding, vision held a special place. It should be no surprise that we came to know a social movement concerned with the acquisition of knowledge through sensory experience as the Age of Enlightenment and that the sensory organ containing the most photosensitive tissue in the human body played such a prominent role in it. I do not credit the pioneers of empiricism and reason with self-consciousness in this regard, though I do find the coincidence telling. Sight and knowledge have been paired in our language and culture for a long time, and that pairing has been formalized through the development of specialized devices used in scientific pursuits.

The image of a laboratory technician hunched over a microscope and fiddling with its lenses has become somewhat cliché, though it is a relatively recent addition to our cultural lexicon. Similarly, the scenario of a team of scientists excitedly anticipating a glimpse of celestial events as revealed by their telescopes has similar resonance. Although such situations may come easily to our minds, just as we have often seen them portrayed in film, television, and books, it is important to recognize that they have not always been with us. Rather, the history of scientific inquiry as aided by lenses is relatively short, and has occurred primarily within the last few hundred years.

Relatively speaking, individuals have been attaining mystical insight through luminous visions for much, much longer than they have gained knowledge of the material world through various contraptions of curved glass. Even prior to the first microscopic

and telescopic devices, elite societies of philosophical and empirical investigation emphasized the role of sight in their projects. The founding of the Academy of Nature's Secrets in the mid-sixteenth century began one of the first scientific societies in Italy.¹⁰ Although banned by the Church, it popped up again years later, though under a different name: Academy of the Lynx.

The Academy was so called due to the belief that mountain lions had better eyesight than any other animal, thus covertly proclaiming the Academy's emphasis upon observation and experimentation.¹¹ Although the Academy's inception preceded the development of the microscope and telescope as such, it was not long before it began utilizing such tools.

While the capacity for curved glass to alter light and image has struck many as immediately apparent, it was not until less than a millennium ago that people sought to harness that power in aiding human sight. Spectacles for reading or seeing distant objects did not appear widely in Europe until the thirteenth century. Approximately three hundred years later, when the proliferation of eyeglasses reached an unprecedented peak, many individuals in separate locations claimed that they had invented devices that could magnify images. Some could make the small and near appear larger or even closer; other devices could facilitate one's seeing of objects from afar. The construction of such devices followed relatively a simple plan—a tube with a lens at each end. Such contraptions were the forerunners of the modern microscopes and telescopes that people use today.

Although wealthy Europeans possessed and used “flea glasses” for the simple magnification of things such as leaves and insects since the mid sixteenth century, it wasn't until the early seventeenth century that microscopy made a significant advance. It was then that, as legend has it, Dutch father-and-son lens grinders Hans and Zacharias Janssen built the first magnifying device that involved two lenses instead of just one.¹² Shortly thereafter, Johannes Kepler conceived of a more efficient design that proliferated throughout Europe.¹³

The Janssen microscope resembled the telescope designed by Academy of the Lynx member Galileo Galilei, and thus came to be known as *Galilean*, whereas the designs resembling Kepler's were known as *Keplerian*.¹⁴ At the time, however, inventions of Galileo's sort were not known as telescopes, but as spyglasses.

Through the application of mathematical reasoning, Galileo was able to construct the most powerful spyglass of his time. Although he initially anticipated the usefulness of the device in warfare, it was not long before he turned his gaze away from mundane affairs and instead aimed it toward the heavens. Galileo wrote that through seeing, “one may learn with all the certainty of sense evidence.”¹⁵

Rather than simply add to the arsenals of worldly power, Galileo sought to increase human understanding, specifically of the larger cosmos. With his ingenious device, he led an influential charge that resulted in the widespread recognition that the Earth revolved around the Sun, and not vice versa.

When Galileo went on trial for his controversial views in the 1630s, one of his admirers, Rene Descartes, feared that he, too, might fall under persecution from the Church for his investigative work spanning the fields of mathematics, physics, philosophy, and cosmology.¹⁶ Despite Descartes' occasionally antagonistic stance toward the capacity of empirical investigation to arrive at truth, in 1637 he nevertheless published *Dioptrique*, an influential work on optics, as an appendix to a book he wrote on scientific methodology and reasoning.¹⁷

Descartes writes that “[b]y taking our sense of sight far beyond the realm of our forebears' imagination, these wonderful instruments, the telescopes, open the way to a deeper and more perfect understanding of nature.”¹⁸ Again, the emphasis was placed upon vision above all other senses.

Sir Issac Newton, commonly regarded as one of the greatest scientists who ever lived, brought the initial spyglass of Galileo into the eighteenth century through his work in physics and mathematics. While perhaps most famous for his formulations regarding gravitation (and getting hit on the head with a falling apple), he also contributed his innovation to the construction of telescopes.

Newton developed a kind of telescope that, at six inches in length, could magnify objects more than forty times in diameter, whereas previous models could barely do as much even at lengths of six feet.¹⁹ Inventing the reflecting telescope, however, was but a small fraction of his preoccupation with sight.

In the early eighteenth century, Newton published an updated version of his work, *Optiks*. In it, he explored his theory of colors, as well as the reflection and refraction of light. In his own words, he had initially set out “not to explain the Properties of Light by Hypotheses, but to propose and prove them by Reason and Experiments.”²⁰ While Newton's work left many aspects of light and vision unexplained, many consider his contributions to both optics and science in general unsurpassed by any other individual.

From the cornerstones of empirical investigation—knowledge derived from and tested against human sensation—the legacy of modern science was born. From the rather humble beginnings of optical technology in the seventeenth century, to see was to believe, rather than belief stemming from faith or sophistry. Those that regard mysticism as little more than faith and sophistry make a clear distinction between the pursuits of the

Enlightenment and the pursuits of mystics, though an absolute differentiation would be misleading.

THE INTERTWINED HISTORY OF SCIENCE AND MYSTICISM

While faith and sophistry may have their place in the lives of many mystics, what typifies mysticism in contrast to other spiritual pursuits is that the goals of mystical practices often include direct experience of spiritual realities. Some call such unmediated perceptions gnosis, union, or enlightenment. Whatever the name, what mystics share in common with scientists is that they don't simply take someone's word for the knowledge that they claim—they want to experience the evidence *and see for themselves*.

For example, if a religious leader asserts that God is Love, many of his followers may accept that assertion as a truth, and leave it at that. A mystic, however, endeavors to apprehend that divine love through direct experience. He wants to apprehend it himself, not just hear about it.

He doesn't necessarily doubt all religious teachings, though he may find them incomplete without direct experimental evidence. However, if the evidence that he gathers does not jive with the proclamations of religious authorities, the mystic may risk being branded an outcast or heretic—much like scientists have been! The mystic is less invested in a particular dogma or body of teaching than he is in the direct apprehension of spiritual phenomena or truth: enlightenment.

Given this essential concordance between scientists and mystics, why have the two groups seemed at odds with one another for so long? After all, both classes value the role of experimentation and direct apprehension in testing claims of knowledge and truth. They both want to know what's real, and have similar standards for determining what's real—they both wish to be able to see for themselves, rather than take someone else's word or their own unproven guesses.

What then, is to account for the apparent disparity between science and mysticism? To the surprise of many modern individuals, for many centuries they were one in the same.

Before those who systematically investigated the natural world and attempted to understand it were known as scientists, they went by the name *natural philosophers*. And prior to being known as natural philosophers, many were known (or labored in secret) as *alchemists*.

Alchemists practiced alchemy, an ancient art that emerged from the confluence of traditional Greek and Egyptian perspectives on metallurgy, glassmaking, embalming, and

other practices that involved the manipulation of chemicals. Far from purely practical and materialistic, alchemy was just as much if not more composed of mystical philosophies and rituals. Although outlawed by Roman Christianity around 330 A.D., alchemy flourished in the Arab world; the word alchemy itself derives from the Arabic *alchymia*.²¹

Alchemy reentered Europe in the wake of the Crusades, and although its popularity has dwindled, it continues into the present day. In addition to those who identify as traditional alchemists, there are those who utilize the metaphors and principles of alchemy for psychological and spiritual growth, largely thanks to the efforts of Swiss psychologist C.G. Jung.²² Jung supposed that alchemists followed a spiritual path to enlightenment through the use of rituals that liberated their subconscious minds and allowed them to tap into the collective unconscious, as well.²³ The transformation of lead into gold could therefore take place on a symbolic, if not literal, level.

In addition to the overtly spiritual offshoots of alchemy, we know the most major outgrowth of alchemical efforts as modern chemistry. Perhaps the first and most prominent alchemist to bridge the two fields was the man who coined the word *chemistry* to begin with: Paracelsus. (Interestingly, Robert Boyle, who we will hear about soon, is generally regarded as the first *chemist*.)

Of Swiss-German heritage, Paracelsus entertained the revolutionary idea that chemical imbalances could cause bodily illness, and that medicinal cures might work through the administration of pure chemicals in precise doses. He created a treatment for syphilis that was used until 1909—almost three hundred years after its discovery—and is reputed to have originated chemotherapy for the treatment of goiters. Paracelsus also preached a heretical version of Christianity, and at one point proclaimed himself a Professor of Theology. For a man like Paracelsus, spirituality and experimentation were not only compatible, but inseparable.²⁴

The connection between a spiritual outlook and physical experimentation relied upon more than a pantheistic worldview. Rather, the “participation of the individual experimenter” ranked as the primary concern of alchemists, specifically with regard to their emotional *and spiritual* states.²⁵ Whereas science went on to discount or even deny the interior states of those seeking objective knowledge (think B.F. Skinner), alchemists honored their subjectivity to the point of attributing it a role in the gathering of their experimental/experiential evidence. The data that they gathered informed their conceptions of the cosmos, not only in physical terms, but in mystical ones, as well.

Within one century of the death of Paracelsus, Descartes studied with, and learned from, other alchemists. The strongest evidence for this striking claim comes from the discovery that Descartes utilized alchemical and astrological notations in his notebooks that were adapted from the symbols and methods used by Johann Faulhaber, a

mathematician, surveyor, and alchemist himself.²⁶ Furthermore, contemporary analysis suggests that Descartes was, if not directly involved, at least familiar with the writings of the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, a secret society dedicated to knowledge, including that of astronomy, botany, and magic.²⁷

As mentioned above, Descartes's contemporary, Galileo, belonged to the Academy of the Lynx that had grown out of the Academy of Nature's Secrets. Modern scholarship suggests that the Academies in question "embraced a combination of science and mysticism...belief in direct knowledge of God." Descartes' cautious involvement with the occult and the optically-oriented savants of his day appears slight compared to the passion for spirituality exemplified by Isaac Newton.

Newton demonstrated an interest in the Rosicrucians, both for their intellectual achievements and anti-Catholic views.²⁸ Despite, or perhaps because of their anti-papal inclinations, the Rosicrucian worldview placed religious matters as central to existence. Additionally, they believed that mystical knowledge, or personal religious experience, was indispensable to human progress.²⁹ As vital to the development of optics and mathematics as Newton was, he nevertheless absorbed himself in alchemical and theological pursuits.

It should hardly be surprising, then, that Newton was influenced by microscopy pioneer Johannes Kepler. Kepler originated the notion of *anima movens*, or "spirit of movement" to account for the changing appearances of heavenly bodies. As refined through the work of Newton, the notion of *anima movens* became what we now recognize as the law of gravitation.³⁰ The religious implications of *anima movens*, however, cut both ways, for it suggested a somewhat taboo commonality between mundane and celestial spheres.³¹ Similar themes of religiosity and blasphemy appeared in Newton's work, as well.

Newton found alchemy attractive because it incorporated the motive powers of spirit and sexual energy into an otherwise lifeless and mechanical conception of the universe.³² Contrary to what we might assume, he did not begin with alchemy and then progress toward the more sober discipline of chemistry, but rather gave up chemistry for what he regarded as the "greater profundity" of alchemy.³³

One of Newton's contemporaries, Robert Boyle (AKA "the first chemist"), introduced him to chemistry and eventually corresponded with him at great length about alchemy.³⁴ Boyle believed that alchemy could facilitate communication between humanity and spirits or angels; after Boyle's death, Newton requested and received some of the chemicals with which Boyle had been working.³⁵ Despite their occult affinity, however, the collaboration of Boyle and Newton sewed the seeds for the demise of mysticism as an accepted feature of natural philosophy.

Although Newton personally found conceptions of nature impoverished when they lacked a spiritual element, his work in physics and mathematics allowed others to build upon the notion that the universe operated in an orderly manner according to “immutable laws” as if it were an enormous and finely-tuned machine.³⁶ Such advances in knowledge and thought gave rise to a religious philosophy known as *Deism*, which was characterized by an emphasis on the rational scrutiny and rejection of traditional religious beliefs.

Although Deists proclaimed a belief in God, they also believed that after God created humanity and Earth, he did not intervene in nor direct the course of events.³⁷ Because people believed that they could explain and predict the functioning of the cosmos through rational rules regarding the motion of matter, they began to consider religious or spiritual questions largely irrelevant to issues of ultimate truth.

Mystical experiences, by and large, were not objective events sensible to multiple observers, nor were they generally subject to analytical scrutiny. Rather, they were often intensely personal and perceived intuitively. Subsequently, the standing of psychological interiority lost out to empirical investigation in the evaluations of scientists, philosophers, statesmen, and capitalists.

Deism “excluded the emotional and mysterious aspects of religion” while it “ignored the need of many humans for spiritual guidance.”³⁸ Despite such shortcomings, it was profoundly influential. In addition to characterizing the personal beliefs of many of early America’s political leaders, Deism was also en vogue at educational institutions that embraced Enlightenment principles such as Yale, Harvard, and William and Mary.³⁹ By the time the direct influence of Deism as such had petered out, modern science as distinct from religion, alchemy, and their forbearers had become firmly established.

Within a span of a few hundred years, millennia of religious and spiritual tradition gave way to increasing scrutiny and skepticism about knowledge claims. That, in turn, facilitated the rise of people preferring information gathered from the senses, particularly sight. Such an emphasis on optical phenomena combined with materialism, or the notion that all things could be explained in terms of physical interactions, and atheism—the outright denial of the existence of God or spirit—, thus leaving little room for the honoring of metaphysically-oriented subjective perceptions that lacked an obvious sensory cause, particularly those that seemed to arise through means other than syllogistic logic or mathematical calculation. To remember how science and mysticism grew apart, one must understand that the eye got in the way.

The eye got in the way—this means that what one can apprehend with the naked (or technologically aided) eye has been afforded a superior status to what one may sense through touch or smell, for example. Furthermore, what one perceives in the absence of

an obvious external stimulus, although a person has experienced it, may likely be interpreted by scientists as unsupported by evidence, and thus nonexistent or not worthy of study (at best), though the psychologically inclined might interpret it as a hallucination or confabulation (at worst). While an astronomer and a layman can both look through a telescope at the planet Jupiter, they might not both look through a telescope and see divine love.

Mystics, philosophers, and cognitive scientists, however, have cast doubt upon the reliability of sense impressions. Rather than regarding the appearance of the sensed world as particularly real or true, they tend to regard it as an illusion or construction achieved through conscious and unconscious mental processes.

If all perceptions, including sense perceptions, are the outcome of psychological processes, the notion that empirical investigation should remain limited to what people can see with their physical eyes seems rather arbitrary. In addition to exploring the evidence presented by other sensory modalities, why not explore the full range of human experience, including experiences that appear to arise in the absence of sensory stimuli?

Experiences that arise from mental processes alone might serve as valuable sources of experimental data, not only in psychological investigation, but in other disciplines as well. One realm of human endeavor in which the value of psychological or extra-sensory experience has persisted is mysticism. And one sort of experience in particular has been of significant value to mystics: enlightenment.

PERSPECTIVES ON MYSTICAL ENLIGHTENMENT

Understandably, the subject of mysticism has often remained in a shroud of the apparently unknowable, or at least unspeakable. While much of this may be due to initiates upholding their vows of secrecy, the ineffable quality of mystical experiences plays its part, as well. Additionally, in a cultural climate that supports either authoritarian religion or scientific reductionism, attempts to learn and communicate about such taboo topics as an intuitive apprehension of God or Reality may be met with derision, resistance, or denial. Fortunately, none of this need be the case.

In a nutshell, mystical enlightenment often involves transformations within the processes of one's perception, as well as the content of that perception. Enlightenment has to do with experiencing and recognizing in ways that are particularly revealing and rewarding.

While individuals have reported instances of spontaneous enlightenment, or mystical experiences without training or obvious prompting, many find that they must engage in a spiritual discipline to prepare themselves for and to elicit such states and

developmental progress. To observe spiritual realities one must focus upon them, but one must also attain new eyes. Or, more accurately, a new mind.

Coincidentally enough, the same is also true for scientists. A nuclear physicist must undergo years of training in the interpretation of data to “see” the spin of a subatomic particle, just as an oncologist must acquire the inferential skills necessary to distinguish certain kinds of cancerous cells from others. By the same token, mystics also develop perceptual capacities that are both valuable and specialized.

Depending upon the nature of and progress upon one’s spiritual path, his or her enlightenment may include any or all of the following:

- identification with consciousness or awareness
- identification with the contents of awareness
- sensing in greater detail and with greater clarity
- increased focus and attentiveness
- apprehending the otherwise insensible

While I have witnessed much inquiry and debate about what constitutes enlightenment per se, my aim is not to provide a comprehensive and final definition, but rather to account for and explore a constellation of features and issues that have been and continue to be part of the ongoing discourse surrounding mysticism and spiritual development. That said, I would like to examine more closely each of the aspects of enlightenment I outlined above. To do this, I will embrace a time-honored metaphor for conscious experience that has fallen into disrepute among certain philosophers and scientists. The metaphor is that of the theatre, and of the movie theatre in particular.

Among the major objections to the cinematic metaphor is that it suggests a centralized, cohesive procession of the contents of conscious awareness in concert with a unitary observer, rather than a more heterogeneous and distributed model of both awareness and the phenomena of which we are aware.⁴⁰ Again, I have not chosen the cinematic metaphor in the interest of taking sides or attempting to issue a final word in an ongoing debate, but rather for its communicative power.

While it may be technically incorrect or misleading from a neuropsychological standpoint, for the purposes of this investigation the metaphor of the movie theatre is both useful and historically relevant, as subsequent chapters illustrate. I trust that readers will focus on its explanatory power and the message it can help to convey.

A simplified layout of a movie theatre is rather straightforward. In the theatre, a screen hangs on a wall, and images appear on it. The images arrive there due to a film projector nested in the opposite wall. The film projector works as a machine that shines light through semi-transparent photographs; as the light shines, areas of light and dark in the pictures are translated to the screen, thus presenting a projection of an image upon it. Seats for the audience facing the screen complete the basic setup.

How this pared-down theatre serves as a metaphor for perception is a little trickier. The most popular conception goes like this: our awareness or consciousness is the audience, whereas everything that we are aware of, everything we see and hear and in other ways perceive, equates to the movie that is being watched. These words as you read them now are part of the movie on the screen; the fact that you are aware of them means that an audience is in the theatre.

Another example: a blind man plays the piano. The feeling of his fingers touching the keys, the sound that is produced when he presses them, and the emotion he puts into his performance are all things that he is aware of. Although they are all invisible, according to the cinematic metaphor they are all a part of the movie. The fact that he feels and hears is a function of his awareness, or that someone is in the audience to “watch” the movie. Were he blind and deaf, the movie would be silent and imageless, and would instead consist of tactile sensations, emotions, and other kinesthetic impressions. The fact that he felt them, however, would be do to the presence of a feeler, a smeller, a witness—someone in the audience who could perceive what was going on in the movie.

Part of the process of enlightenment involves recognizing this basic distinction between *what* one experiences and *that* one experiences. Many go through life so wrapped up in the movie that they fail to appreciate that the audience even exists.

One perspective on enlightenment suggests that you should think of yourself as the audience, and not the movie. According to this idea, you identify with consciousness or your “inner witness.” In essence, you are not the things that you perceive, such as your memories or current sensations, but rather the subjectivity that remains present in each moment, always aware.

From such a perspective, even though you may be able to see and feel your body, for example, what you see and feel are ephemeral phenomena that lack an intrinsic or eternal existence, and thus cannot be your true self. Instead, you are that which is aware of the images and sensations of your body, and not your body per se. Ever the consummate viewer, you can become emotionally detached from the images on the screen. After all, it’s only a movie, and you’re not in it.

A variation on this theme suggests that individuals should identify with the contents of awareness, as well as with consciousness. In other words, at the same time that you are in the audience, you are also one with what takes place on screen. In this scenario, you transcend the duality of subject (audience) and object (movie); you recognize your fundamental unity with all phenomena that you experience as well as the unity of consciousness that resides within all things. This usually means that you end up caring for the characters on the screen as you would yourself, essentially because you recognize that they are Self.

In this scenario, the sight and feeling of your body does not stand in opposition to the awareness that beholds them, but instead is one with them. To apprehend something is to unite with it, in other words, to be it.

In addition to the matter of what one identifies with, enlightenment can also involve other aspects of perception. For example, through discipline and education, people can learn to sense in greater detail and with greater clarity. In the metaphor of the theatre, this looks like the difference between the movie being out-of-focus, dim, or in black-and-white and the film that is in sharp focus, brilliantly illuminated, and in Technicolor.

It is important to note, however, that the basic plot of the movie may not change much at all in this scenario—a damaged and dusty print of an old murder mystery will not become a romantic comedy simply because it's been cleaned and digitally restored. This sort of enlightenment can help us to be more aware and mindful, can make it easier for the audience to see what is going on, but that does not mean that circumstances are necessarily transformed. There is debate about this point, however, and I am willing to believe that greater mindfulness can contribute to the substantial transformation of the circumstance of one's experience, and not merely how it is experienced. At the same time, there is no credible denial of the power of unenlightened action to create and alter situations, and it may be that action alone, enlightened or otherwise, and not awareness per se shapes the events from which we extrapolate our perceptions.

Transformations of the contents of awareness (the movie) brought about by processes of enlightenment are not limited to the intensification or clarification of phenomena. They also include one's capacity to direct his or her attention, thus broadening or narrowing the scope of one's awareness. In the metaphor of the movie theatre, this may appear as a variety of close-ups, edits, following shots, or panoramic views. Disciplines that can lead to enlightenment experiences often involve training the mind to narrow its focus and attend to very particular and limited stimuli, such as the sensation of one's breath or the appearance of a candle flame. At the same time, those who report achieving glimpses of enlightenment also speak of apprehending great wholes

where they only saw parts before; some even sense all sentient beings or even the entirety of the cosmos itself!

Perhaps most intriguingly, initiates and seekers have reported achieving more than just shifts in the scope of what they perceive, more than a varied array of camera angles and duration of shots. Indeed, they have reported apprehending the otherwise insensible. Beyond the province of heightened sensation, those on the path to enlightenment have reported the ability to perceive such things as subtle energy currents, past or future events, as well as events taking place in faraway locations. In the language of the cinema, the films of such individuals have great special effects. They can see flashbacks, flash forwards, split screens, and other tricks of the trade. But that is not all.

Among the “special effects” one may witness in relation to the process of enlightenment stands the most obvious and literal of all: light itself. In the metaphor of the movie theatre, any image we see is the result of light reflecting off of the screen. The different shapes and colors of the light owe their characteristics to the film through which the light has been projected. But suppose that the film showing on the screen disappeared, and in its place stood a white glowing, the unfiltered radiance of the projector bulb itself.

While this particular image is but one of many possible facets encompassed by the term enlightenment, it is common and significant enough to warrant its own name: illumination. From this standpoint, we may consider illumination as a version of enlightenment experience and not simply, say, mere hallucination or the result of looking at or imagining something bright. Rather, illumination has its own set of meanings and implications. An exploration of how people have interpreted, or should interpret, experiences of illumination and the consequences of such interpretations constitutes the following chapters.

CHAPTER THREE: THE METAPHYSICS OF ILLUMINATION

Seeing light in addition to or apart from external sources available to the eye constitutes one category of experience under the heading of mystical enlightenment. Assuming that such experiences have an intrinsic meaning or veracity to them, and are not merely pathological malfunctions or hallucinations, what can they tell us about the cosmos and our place in it? What truth do they convey or reveal?

Answering such questions necessitates an examination of the various faculties of the human mind as well as the fundamental nature of the sphere in which we experience and seek to understand, the reality in which human minds arise.

This chapter draws heavily upon the work of two men, the European philosophers Henri Bergson and Arthur Schopenhauer. Through focused readings of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* and Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, one may not only expand his or her grasp of metaphysics and epistemology, but also gain insight into the meaning of experiences of illumination. Although neither work contains overt advocacy for mysticism as such, both emphasize the role of subjectivity in knowing the actual and inner nature of things.

Additionally, both texts also contain references to the theatrical presentation of projected images, not only as a model of perception, but also as a means to indicate the existence of a reality beyond conventional appearances. It is in this way that the metaphor of the cinema takes on greater importance.

BERGSON'S THEORY OF PERCEPTION

Although he composed *Creative Evolution* in the twentieth century, Bergson makes clear that his philosophical allegiances stem back prior to the advent of Deism, and even prior to the Age of Enlightenment itself. He does not romanticize the past per se, though he does voice his objection to a certain “scholasticism that has grown up during the latter half of the nineteenth century around the physics of Galileo.”⁴¹ His objection stems not from an outright intolerance of the empirical or rational methods of scientists and academics, but rather from the incompleteness of their perspective, their partiality.

In his own way, Bergson objected to the priority given to optics and their implicit focus on externalities. He did not object to empiricism per se, though he did indicate that he viewed science as in need of completion or “continuation.” The problem was not that scientific inquiry began in the first place, but rather that it hadn't gone far enough. In Bergson's view, science ought to include more of the truths that could be either experienced or demonstrated, and those truths included ones apprehended by intuition as well as the senses or rational intellect. (Bergson uses the terms *intuition* and *intellect* in his own idiosyncratic way, which I elaborate upon below.)

Bergson viewed science and philosophy as interdependent, and his description of the manner in which they overlap carries overtones of the mystical. He describes not only the examination of truth and experience, but also “the turning of the mind homeward, the coincidence of human consciousness with the living principle whence it emanates, a contact with the creative...”⁴² Bergson collected this amalgam of rational science, philosophy, and mystical experience under the heading of the study of evolution, evolution in the broadest sense. Beyond mere biological terms or explanatory theory, to Bergson, exploring evolution equated with the study of becoming in general, the unfolding of the cosmos.

Undertaking such an exploration required more than a desire to understand and experience the universe. It also demanded a working knowledge of the capacities of the human mind. After all, the course of study that Bergson suggests involves more than the syllogisms of academics and the lenses of technicians. Given his ambitious aim, how might such a study proceed? The answer hinges upon embracing a duality within human psychology, namely that of intuition and intellect.

Bergson identified two main modes in which people perceived. One of the modes, which he characterized as *intellect*, corresponds roughly to the faculty of mind responsible for organizing perceptions into discreet things and moments. For example, when you experience this sentence as composed of distinct comprehensible words as opposed to seeing everything in your entire field of vision in one glance, the intellect has

done its job. According to Bergson, the intellect serves a primarily analytic function, not only in the common sense of logical analysis, but also in the more elemental sense of cutting something up or breaking down into smaller parts.

The “something” that the intellect analyses is, in part, sensory experience. Though the intellect also functions in labeling and discriminating between concepts, emotions, and imagined things, as well.

It would be amiss, however, to characterize the intellect as solely analytical. The intellect not only introduces division and separation into experience; it also performs a synthetic function, as well. After “breaking things up,” the intellect puts the pieces back together in what generally appears as a cohesive and meaningful order. With the best of luck, this synthetic order resembles actuality in a manner beneficial to people.

Regardless of how successful the intellect is at creating and assembling the fragments that shape our experience, however, it is important to recognize that we never experience actuality itself through it—our perceptions mediated by the intellect are fashioned according to its analytic and synthetic functions. Our impressions of the world as given to us by the intellect are thus constructions of our minds, and for whatever resemblance they bear to actuality, they are at best a fair facsimile of it, and not reality itself.

To be sure, in many everyday situations the intellect as outlined by Bergson comes in very handy. The utility of being able to recognize the differences between things—or even to regard the totality of experience as containing or being composed of multiple things—may be difficult to exceed.

To illustrate this point, suppose that you are attempting to build a robot that can kill your enemies when they come to attack you. And suppose that you want the robot to distinguish between you and your enemies on the basis of what your faces look like. In order to make a visual identification, the robot would have to have some way of interpreting the visual information that it receives about the world.

Let’s say that the robot is equipped with a special video camera. How would the robot be able to tell when it is looking at a face? It would need to be able to distinguish between visual information fitting the profile of a face and everything else. Such a distinction illustrates the analytical function of the intellect. With the capacity to distinguish, the robot can tell a face from the non-face, and eventually the faces of your enemies from the face of you.

Now suppose that you wanted the robot to leap into action, not just when it sees your enemies, but only when it sees that your enemies have weapons. The analytical function of the intellect comes in handy again; the robot will learn to distinguish faces

from non-faces, enemies' faces from yours, and weapons from everything else. (It will also need to assess what weapons belong to your enemies, what weapons may belong to you, and what weapons may belong to nobody in particular.) Obviously, this is no small feat of programming. But the basic principle still applies: the robot will analyze the visual information, thereby interpreting it according to several different categories. With enough sophistication, the robot could identify each shape or object evident via its visual input through basic analysis, by breaking it down according to what it is or is not.

Once the identifying distinctions have been made, however, the job is not complete. To ascertain whether or not the visual feed of the robot has indicated the presence of a weapon or a face is one thing; to associate the face of your enemy with a weapon that the robot has identified involves putting two things that have been distinguished together. In other words, synthesis must occur.

The synthetic function of intellect will allow the robot to associate a weapon with a face, and it will only be able to do so once the weapons and faces have already been identified. As far as the intellect is concerned, analysis precedes synthesis. Further analysis may occur, which may in turn spawn further synthesis: rinse and repeat as needed. But as far as Bergson's conception of the human mind is concerned, there is no intellectual synthesis without analysis.

Again, in many day-to-day situations, this works out just fine. The necessity of analysis in perception does not come across as any sort of evil; instead, it makes almost every intelligent and meaningful human action possible. That does not, however, mean that it is flawless.

According to Bergson, apprehending how and why certain things happen so that we can achieve certain objectives is the proper use of intellect. It allows one to view things in terms of causality, technique, and purposefulness. By holding a particular image of a desired state in mind, we can function to bring about that state, to forge a resemblance between our imagined conditions and our experience as mediated by the intellect that excels at manufacturing such discriminations.

A major drawback to this mode of perception, however, is that it confines one to perceiving in terms of his goals, and in terms at all. The robot described above, for example, might only detect faces and weapons—it would have no need nor ability to find something funny, or to enjoy tastes of transcendent truth. Intellect does not allow one to see things “as they are,” but rather as they conform to established mental categories.⁴³ English author and mystic Evelyn Underhill makes this point of Bergson's quite exquisitely when she writes that the “mind which thinks it knows Reality because it has made a diagram of Reality” exists as but “the dupe of its own categories.”⁴⁴

In other words, experience as synthesized through the intellect is not immediate, but rather a useful fabrication of our minds. This is particularly evident when we consider almost anything having to do with time. Temporality serves as a big challenge to the intellect, and attempting to comprehend it in intellectual terms exposes the limits of intellectual ability.

To illustrate this conundrum, Bergson uses the metaphor of the cinema. When we see a motion picture, the picture itself does not actually move; that is an illusion created in our minds, a trick of perception. Instead, what we actually view is a series of still photographs in rapid succession. The sequence of still photographs advances so quickly that we don't perceive them as such, but rather perceive the motion that they suggest. Although it looks like we are watching events unfold continuously, we are really seeing them in a great number of separate and distinct stages: one frame at a time.

In Bergson's model, intellect functions much like a film camera. Instead of simply recording experience as it happens, it takes a series of still images. We tend to have an image for now, a great many images for before now, and often posit various images for after now. When we run these still images together, it creates the illusion that we experience life continuously, that time passes. And while the differences between the images composed by our intellects allow us to infer that time has passed, we do not actually sense time passing *per se*. We are able to infer that something has moved, but we cannot witness motion itself through the intellect.

In Bergson's words:

Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially...Whether we would think becoming, or express it, or even perceive it, we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us. We may therefore sum up what we have been saying in the conclusion that the *mechanism of our ordinary knowledge is of a cinematographical kind.*⁴⁵

To illustrate this point, consider where you are right now. As you experience each of these words, your snapshot of now changes. If you'd like, you could even go back to remind yourself of your previous snapshots of now, what have become the snapshots of your past. As you concentrate more, you may find that each word is its own snapshot, and perhaps the spaces between the words are their own snapshots, too. And as your intellect continues to make temporal distinctions, your snapshots of now may appear smaller and smaller, big enough only to hold a fraction of a word, or even a fraction of a letter. They may even become so small that they seem to contain nothing at all.

But even that teeny, tiniest snapshot could be even teenier and tinier. Time, like space, may be subdivided infinitely. You could have an infinite number of snapshots, and

never capture now. And were you to run those snapshots back, and simulate their advance, you could reason that one thing lead to another. What happens in one snapshot resembles the snapshot immediately after it, though the one after it is always at least slightly different. It is through the accumulation of these slight differences that we can tell that things have happened, that things have changed, that time has passed.

According to the cinematic experience produced by the intellect, one thing leads to another. In one frame of the film, the ball hovers above the ground. In the next, it appears closer to the ground. A few frames later, the ball touches the ground. In the next few frames, the ball is in the air again: the ball seems to have bounced.

The trouble is that we never actually witness the ball bouncing. We never actually witness the ball falling or rising, or moving at all, for that matter. We are only able to get the illusion of motion from the snapshots. The intellect allows us to distinguish between past and present, and between any number of things at those times. But it never allows us to bear direct witness to them, and definitely not to how they move and change through time. This is what Bergson suggests when he writes “*If the discontinuous alone does the intellect form a clear idea.*”⁴⁶

While the teaching that “the only constant is change” is popular enough to rank as a cliché, it also remains a mere abstraction to the intellect. Analysis, whether followed by synthesis or not, allows no room for constancy—only similarity between discreet snapshots as ascertained through synthesis. Nor does the analytical intellect allow for change as it actually occurs—only dissimilarity between discreet snapshots.

How, then, can we see actual motion? Actual continuity? Actual change as it occurs?

According to Bergson, people can apprehend things without subjecting them to analysis. He recognized the capacity for this as distinct from intellect and dubbed it *intuition*. In the cinematic metaphor, intuitive perception means no snapshots, no distinct temporal boundaries, no inferring motion frame by frame. Instead, people can perceive motion directly. That perception is not limited to the motion of discreet objects—

it includes the ongoing change from which the appearance of discreet objects arises. (We will explore this further below.) The intellect fabricates separation and stillness whereas intuition apprehends infinite continuity and flux.

In the metaphor of the cinema, where can intuition be found? If the intellect analyses as a camera shoots frames of film, and if the intellect synthesizes as viewers accept the illusion of motion produced when the film is projected, what of the unanalyzed, of the direct perception of that which is never broken into a series of still

images—what of apprehending continual change? We must turn to Schopenhauer for answers.

SCHOPENHAUER'S BLOCKBUSTER -OR- WILL PERCEIVED VIA INTUITION

In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer mentions a very popular device used for entertainment and education prior to the 20th century. The *magic lantern* that he references resembles a modern slide projector, and served as a forerunner to contemporary cinema.⁴⁷ While both the magic lantern and film projectors of the present day show separate still images in succession, operators of magic lanterns switched images more slowly, and thus did not create as convincing an illusion of motion. Despite the rudimentary technology, entrepreneurs nevertheless employed magic lanterns in narrative storytelling. One thing lead to another.

Schopenhauer, however, expounded upon something beyond the images that the lantern displayed. He focused on something encompassed by the stories that the lantern helped to tell, but also transcended them. In the metaphor of the cinema, instead of giving attention to the apparently moving pictures on screen or the film from which the pictures arose, Schopenhauer was fascinated by the projector bulb that shined its light through the film, whose light reflected off of the silver screen. His name for this light, for this projector bulb, was *will*.

According to Schopenhauer, pictures came and went, but will was eternal. Not only that, but in addition to the seeming changelessness of will, will was also what accounted for apparent change.

In the metaphor of the cinema, this makes perfect sense. No matter what movie plays, the projector bulb remains the same. Yet without the projector bulb, no movie appears upon the screen, no stories are told, nothing seems to happen.

In Schopenhauer's words:

Just as a magic lantern shows many different pictures, but it is only one and the same flame that makes them all visible, so in all the many different phenomena which together fill the world or supplant one another as successive events, it is only the *one will* that appears, and everything is its visibility, its objectivity; it remains unmoved in the midst of this change.⁴⁸

Indeed, Schopenhauer not only employs the metaphor of the projected image, but, like Bergson, he also relates it to what we perceive and that we perceive distinct happenings in sequence. In his view, both the manifest content of our perceptions as well as their temporality are functions—or masks—of will. Without the flame or the projector bulb,

without a source of light beyond the distinctions of any particular image or story, in short, without will, we experience nothing. What, then, is will?

Somewhat esoteric philosophical arguments suggest that will cannot be known as such, but that we can only refer to it through its manifestations or objectifications. This does not necessarily imply that will is a mere abstract principle, however. Many would characterize will as an active power or meta-force, though there are many others who would correct them, saying that such characterizations regarded the objectifications or manifestations of will, rather than will itself. My aim is not to split hairs here, but rather to provide a context that may help to clarify what metaphors of flames and light bulbs have to do with human perception and the dynamic cosmos.

After all, the resemblance between the visual impressions of mystical illumination and the unfiltered and undifferentiated light of a flame or projector bulb indicates at least an uncanny coincidence, and one that lends itself quite nicely to the metaphor of cinema as analog to human perception. It stands to reason that if one gains insight into what the projecting source of light represents, one will similarly gain insight into what one apprehends in experiences of illumination. Bergson indicates that such a source relates to the continuity of temporal advance, whereas Schopenhauer labels it as “will”—what do those two things have to do with each other?

Schopenhauer himself oscillates between being careful about characterizing will and being more reckless (or poetic) in describing it. That said, I will let him speak again in his own words:

...the force that shoots and vegetates in the plant, indeed the force by which the crystal is formed, the force that turns the magnet to the north pole, the force whose shock he encounters from the contact of metals of different kinds, the force that appears in the elective affinities of matter as repulsion and attraction, separation and union, and finally even gravitation, which acts so powerfully in all matter, pulling the stone to the earth and the earth to the sun; all these [one] will recognize as different only in the phenomenon, but the same according to their inner nature. He will recognize them all as that which is immediately known to him so intimately and better than everything else, and where it appears most distinctly is called will.⁴⁹

Like Kepler’s notion of *anima movens*, will is what makes things happen. If all powers and energies were united, or possessed a shared commonality, such a monolithic causal entity might rightly go by the name of will.

Will remains unconvincing as a causal explanation, however. To illustrate this, recall how annoying it is when a small child won’t stop asking “why?” to every answer he or she is given.

“Oh, look, the bird is flying through the sky.”

“Why?”

“Because it is going South for the winter.”

“Why?”

“Because the winter is warmer in the South.”

“Why?” ET CETERA.

A flippant, philosophically hip caregiver might try to nip the conversation in the bud. “Oh, look, the fire engine is going down the street.”

“Why?”

“Because of will.”

“Why?”

“Will.”

ET CETERA.

Will, as unconditioned by cause or purpose, or perhaps serving as its own cause and purpose, fails to suffice as an intellectually satisfactory explanation for *why* things happen. To recognize that a single will operates through the guises of many forces and phenomena offers little in terms of specificity or context from which situationally relevant information may be gleaned.

Whereas the analytical endeavor of scientific reductionism may aspire to account for all phenomena through physics, or through describing motion in terms of fundamental forces, an intuitive philosopher would recognize such energies and their effects as aspects of will. For him, “every universal, original force of nature is, in its inner essence, nothing but the objectification of the will at a low grade.”⁵⁰

However, this does not mean that Schopenhauer or his devotees suppose that all could be ‘reduced’ to will. For instance, they did not believe that the power of human minds was built upon electromagnetic forces which built upon will itself. Will is not the most fundamental force, nor is it a component or building-block of other forces, but rather something that transcends objectification as such. It is more readily apprehended with intuition than analytical intellect.

Schopenhauer does, however, submit that one may bear witness to will in every “blindly acting force of nature” as well as in human conduct—even in intentional acts. He does not say that human intentionality can be explained in terms of, or is an emergent property of, fundamental forces. Whether human agency comes about through impersonal gravitation, the flow of orgone, or an immortal soul, such causal factors would also indicate the presence or operation of will. While useful separations may be made between the powers of human minds and the powers of the weak nuclear force, whatever their differences in kind to scientists, philosophers may consider them distinct only by matter of degree, namely the manner in which they manifest their “inner nature”: will.⁵¹

And while the inner natures of various powers and energies share the common characterization of will, what of the things upon which such forces operate? If it is will that makes one turn the page, or that expresses itself in a turning page, what of the page itself? What is the relationship between material objects and will? How are they differentiated?

Through their intellectual capacities, philosophers may infer the presence of will when they observe motion or change. Conversely, material objects appear to the intellect as relatively stable and cohesive, often as possessing intrinsic shape and existence apart from other things. Upon greater scrutiny, however, all material objects both come into and pass out of being, and while they exist they are subject to change at both macroscopic and microscopic levels.

A new automobile, for example, while it may seem like a relatively straightforward material object, arose through the interactions of countless engineers, laborers, marketers, and customers. Routine maintenance requires that its oil and parts get changed, and personal preference may dictate a new paint job. Many would consider the car as essentially the same, though it is clearly not the same as when it was initially purchased. Eventually, maintenance of the car is suspended and it ends up in a scrap heap, cannibalized for parts and eventually disposed of.

At the end of the life of the vehicle, one may look back and see that the car went through a variety of transformations after it was first driven off the lot, and that even driving it off the lot subjected it to transformation (and not just in terms of depreciation...). Many transformations were required to bring it into being, such as changing ore into iron, sand into glass, and oil into plastic. Many transformations were required to keep it in existence, such as changing the spark plugs or the upholstery or the radiator. Many transformations went into its disposal.

In all of these transformations, where was the car itself? We can point to certain slices of time, certain snapshots, but those are only true for their moment; as soon as the next moment arrives, the vehicle has changed and is no longer the same.

Bergson suggests that forms apprehended through analytical faculties are illusions or unrealities. Instead of looking for one real car common among all of the different snapshots, one should focus on the changes between them. In Bergson's view, it is the continual change of form, and not many inert ideal forms, which constitutes reality. In his words, "*form is only a snapshot view of a transition.*"⁵² Because things usually appear "relatively stable, and counterfeit immobility so well that we treat each of them as a *thing* rather than as a *progress*" we tend not to recognize that "the very permanence of their form is only the outline of a movement."⁵³

In short, material objects *are* will; manifestations of will as it operates and is apprehended via intellectual analysis. Schopenhauer writes that eternal becoming and "endless flux" are among the characteristics of "the essential nature of the will."⁵⁴ This means that the continual change that Bergson identified as reality is synonymous with will's expression. Thus the ongoing transformation from which people may intellectualize the existence of objects is also attributable to will.

Schopenhauer suggests as much when he writes that will "is the innermost essence, the kernel, of every particular thing and also of the whole."⁵⁵ It stands to reason that illumination experiences may be intuitive apprehensions of this "innermost essence" of all things, and of their integral unity.

Given that the composition and animation of all things may be attributed to will, it should hardly be surprising that faculties of human perception themselves are outgrowths of it. Bergson goes so far as to assert that intellect is only one of will's "aspects or products."⁵⁶ Although he does not mention it specifically, presumably intuition has its roots in will, as well. In this way, both the unmediated recognition and artificial abstraction of will owe their existence to it.

Despite originating in will, the very function of intellect prevents it from apprehending will directly, or without inference and synthesis. This engenders a condition in which intellect is epistemologically blinded or cut off from its own source. Despite its usefulness in facilitating survival and practical accomplishments, intellect lacks the power of intuition in bringing about certain kinds of insight, specifically those that reveal the activity and advance of phenomena beyond artificial boundaries or snapshots. It is in this sense that Bergson proclaims that "*intellect is characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life.*"⁵⁷

The life of which Bergson writes is not merely biological life. Instead, by life he references the dynamism and vitality of the entire cosmos, and the cosmos as it appears to one's intuitive faculties.

Although the intellect allows individuals to communicate effectively, learn from experience, and to work toward premeditated ends with deduced means, that does not mean it is adequate for all tasks, particularly those involving the recognition of seemingly impractical truths. The faculty of intuition reaches beyond plan and purpose, beyond inferences of causality and pretenses of objectivity. Instead, it emphasizes impermanence and ephemerality as well as the enduring constancy of change and the forces that drive it.

The inadequacies of intellect in the face of intuitive prowess are difficult to express in prose, and can result in poor metaphors and the obscure pronouncements of continental philosophers. Perhaps that is one small reason why centuries-old mystical poetry still endures.

The basic contrast between intellect and intuition finds an elevated expression in the verse of the thirteenth century Persian mystic Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi. In the poem “Someone Digging in the Ground,” Rumi writes of how the mind is for “learning what men have done and tried to do.” It is not, however, for comprehending every last detail of the cosmos. Rather, he suggests that “[m]ysteries are not to be solved,” and that “[t]he eye goes blind when it only wants to see why.”⁵⁸

In essence, the analytical mind with its implicit assumptions of causation and teleology are somewhat beside the point when it comes to apprehending actuality or, perhaps more to the point, experiencing it. After all, empirical investigation is not only about theories or abstract models, but also what one subjectively perceives. In the case of mystical enlightenment, such perception demands transcending the rational intellect and actualizing one’s intuition. The resulting experience corresponds to the apprehension of will, and may appear visually as illumination. In the metaphor of the cinema, the succession of still frames can give way to the brilliant light of the projector bulb.

At the same time, however, even as the still frames pass they are brightened by the light that shines through them. Bergson attests to seeing such a light, or what it signifies, specifically in the cases of biological reproduction and nurturance. In articulating his vision, he describes the apparent materialization of the “invisible breath” that bears living things.⁵⁹

While such insight often pertains to the active principle of will in general, Bergson also relates it to a sort of maternal love as glimpsed, not only in humans and animals, but also among plants and their offspring. The character of such love appears as the transmission of life itself, or the mysterious power of movement as granted through movement, what Bergson identifies as “the essence of life.”⁶⁰

In many ways, the testimonies and exegeses of mystics resonate with the metaphysics outlined above. For example, the combination of love and will points toward

many traditional conceptions of divinity, as well as what mystics the world over report perceiving in their spiritual experiences. Although the nature of illumination is often related to continual flux and its origin, the reports of mystics also point to it being something more than just the apprehension of will and its manifestation. What that additional something may be is addressed in the following chapters.

DR.RUPNATHJI(DR.RUPAK NATH)

CHAPTER FOUR: ILLUMINATION IN WESTERN MYSTICISM

Mysticism is not synonymous with illumination or experiences of seemingly supernatural light. Those without the power of sight may nevertheless taste transcendence, immanence, and identify with *Sekh*. One needn't visualize to warrant being considered enlightened.

That said, there is an overwhelming body of literature produced by and about mystics and mysticism that concerns itself with and makes reference to light and its visual apprehension. Some may assert that light-oriented language in discussions of spirituality cannot be taken literally, but rather must be interpreted on a symbolic level or in an allegorical fashion, and such assertions definitely have their place. At the same time, however, countless individuals for at least thousands of years all over the world have reported enlightenment experiences that include the visual apprehension of light that has no apparent external cause.

The research of mystic and early twentieth century author Evelyn Underhill confirms that individuals who report illumination experiences “assure us that its apparently symbolic name is really descriptive; that they do experience a kind of radiance, a flooding of the personality with new light.”⁶¹ While such floodings are not always common, they frequently coincide with both progress toward and achievement of an enlightened state or stage. Discipline and training needn't precede such experiences, however, and occasionally they arise spontaneously and/or mark the outset of one's intentional pursuit of a spiritual path. Underhill cites reports of first conversion experiences that frequently contain an “actual and overpowering consciousness of radiant light, ineffable in its splendour, as an accompaniment of their inward adjustment.”⁶²

Please, allow me to repeat: illumination experiences are neither necessary nor sufficient for enlightenment per se. (Obviously, this depends upon one's definition of enlightenment, and by asserting the inadequacy of illumination I merely assert that enlightenment—whatever it is—is more than a glimpse of mysterious light.) The overwhelming majority of mystics would likely agree that a working definition of enlightenment would also include a transformation of one's sense of identity or individuality, most often in the direction of joining it with or allowing it to encompass spirit, the Infinite, the One, etc.⁶³ Granted, it could mean identifying with divine light or transpersonal will or even losing all sense of identity in such things, too. The main point is that for most folks, enlightenment requires more than just observation, even if it is supernal luminosity that one is witnessing.

And yet, such luminosity *is* witnessed. And individuals who have reported illumination experiences tend to emphasize not only the glory of what they've experienced, but also how the analytic intellect is seemingly incompatible with their glimpses of radiance. In the parlance of Bergson, intellect has a tendency to overshadow intuition, or what mystics tend to refer to as the "spiritual eye."⁶⁴ Analysis wreaks havoc upon continuity; once the unity is broken up, all the king's horses and all the king's men (nor the synthetic function of intellect) cannot undo the fracture. Intuition, however, never parses things out to begin with, thus attending to the information presented by the spiritual eye and cultivating its capacity to "gaze steadfastly at the Uncreated Light" are emphasized by a variety of mystical traditions.⁶⁵

What follows is an overview of such traditions and their exemplars in the West over the past five thousand years or so, specifically with regard to experiences of illumination. While a truly comprehensive accounting could itself fill multiple volumes, in this chapter I merely wish to touch upon some important instances and themes in an effort to illustrate both the shared origins and character of western illuminative mysticism. Consider it a rough sketch, by no means complete, that nevertheless affords a glimpse into the torch of mystical insight as well as its passing. To emphasize the development of certain trends, I have chosen to present examples in what is essentially chronological sequence. Although such a large scale of time lends itself to arbitrarily sequencing overlapping phenomena, my goal is to emphasize the continuity among illuminations in the west, and not to take an intractable stance on which ones are or are not the rightful inheritors of the thrones of specific legacies.

BEGINNINGS IN GREECE

Scholarship suggests that western civilization, broadly conceived, has many of its roots in ancient Greece. Beginning in approximately 3000 BC, Greeks participated in the

Dionysian Mysteries, a set of rituals and ceremonies that centered around one of their many gods, Dionysus. Intimately associated with death and resurrection, as well as intoxication, the Dionysian Mysteries incorporated a conception of Dionysus's "immortal light."⁶⁶ Through participation in the Mysteries of Dionysus, and involvement with his immortal light, one expected to gain freedom from mortality, and perhaps even achieve life after death.⁶⁷ While brightness generally informed the ancient Greeks' image of immortal light, torchlight specifically symbolized their conception of life after death.⁶⁸ The relationship between light and immortality endures for millennia, as we will see and explore further below.

As significant as the Dionysian Mysteries were in ancient Greece, they were not the only game in town. In approximately 1500 BC, the Eleusinian Mysteries began picking up steam. Not merely some passing fad or fashionable cult, the Mysteries came to occupy the "very center of Panhellenic religious life."⁶⁹ While scholars from Herodotus to Foucart have asserted that the Eleusinian Mysteries had their origin in Egypt, such claims remain controversial.⁷⁰ Adding fuel to the controversy, the Eleusinian Mysteries shared much in common with the older Dionysian rites. Although named after their primary location, Eleusis, the Eleusinian Mysteries also incorporated bright light, and again torchlight specifically, in their rituals and artistic representations.

Surviving descriptions of the torchlight distinguish between it as a commonplace, utilitarian thing and as a different sort of mystical brightness. In the Eleusinian Mysteries, the light had a special significance, "over and above its indisputable practical necessity in the nocturnal ceremonies."⁷¹ In addition to helping mortals find their way in the dark, somehow torchlight also helped them to taste immortality. Greeks who participated in the Eleusinian Mysteries, called initiates, experienced an image or vision of life after death.⁷²

The glimpse of the afterlife that Eleusinian initiates received was no mere sideshow or inadvertent byproduct of the Mysteries, but rather their culmination. This "supreme vision" was called the *epopteia*.⁷³ According to the few remaining accounts, the *epopteia* "took place in a dazzling light."⁷⁴ Initiates would "gaze upon the splendor of a never-setting sun," not only at the apex of the Mysteries, but also upon their deaths.⁷⁵ As classical scholar Eva Parisinou writes:

Brightness, which in the context of the Mysteries is the effect of torchlight, is clearly associated with the initiates' happiness in the afterlife. Torchlight is therefore compared to the light of the sun which can be enjoyed only by those who have experienced initiation, in contrast to darkness...that envelops those who did not taste this experience.⁷⁶

In Chapter Two, I explored the relationship between vision and knowledge in both scientific and mystical pursuits. In the Mysteries at Eleusis, the illuminative vision

of the epopteia also conveyed knowledge: something that made it easier for individuals to accept, and perhaps transcend, their mortality.⁷⁷

It is important to note that in the form of the epopteia, the Eleusinian illumination was not merely a denial of death. Initiates were not content to die simply because they believed that they would live again in some other realm. Rather, initiation “revealed both closeness to the divine world and continuity between life and death.”⁷⁸ It was this experiential revelation, and not mere promises or delusions of a personalized afterworld, that bolstered their outlook.

One of the most significant literary figures of ancient Greece, the poet Homer often utilized imagery of flooding light, to the point of it appearing “indispensable” in accounts of divine epiphany.⁷⁹ Although Homer and other poets portrayed heroes of great courage and virtue, such individuals also possessed fear of existence after death, and hoped that their souls would not be as “the mournful fallen shade, without memory and strength.”⁸⁰ According to ancient texts, such fears would have been dispelled through initiation into the Mysteries. Such texts emphasize what was seen at Eleusis as resulting in “postmortem bliss.”⁸¹

Given the initiates were having illuminative experiences, how does the perception of continuity between life and death relate to dazzling light? And what does that have to do with bliss?

In Chapter Three, the metaphor of the cinema allowed us to garner a connection between illumination and will. Will, as that which appeared in all motion and change, and thus all phenomena, corresponded to a projector bulb. In as much as will corresponds to the force or forces that result in the continual flux and metamorphosis of the cosmos, will bears quite a close relation to the continuity between life and death. Don’t understand how? Think of it this way.

In the most basic terms, the death of a living thing is a transformation, and the ultimate agent of that transformation is will. At the same time, however, life itself is an ongoing transformation, and is likewise wrought through the operation of will. And even when a living organism appears to have transformed into a dead object, its inertia is only relative and superficial, for it, too, is still subject to further disintegration and decay, to further reincorporation into other living organisms and ecosystems, and ultimately is never separate from the incessant motion of the cosmos itself. In this sense, even the dead provide will with an opportunity to flourish. It is thus that continuity exists between life and death; continuity *is* life and death—the continuity of the ever-evolving universe as an expression or manifestation of will.

In as much as the intuitive and direct apprehension of will appears as a vision of dazzling light, the initiates of Eleusis may have experienced their own “inner kernel” that is identical with the “inner kernel” of immortal will. To the extent that they were able to cease identifying with the aspects of themselves they apprehended through their intellect, and instead identified with will, they recognized themselves not only as integrally united with the advancing cosmos, but also as likewise ceaselessly transforming, active and immortal.

ILLUMINATIVE MYSTICISM IN GREEK PHILOSOPHY

During the centuries that the Eleusinian Mysteries took place, some of the most renowned philosophers in the history of the western world drew their first and last breaths. Among them were Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. Although not as widely recognized as the others in contemporary society, Plotinus had a profound and enduring impact upon western society. Well-versed in Platonic philosophy, many scholars consider the contributions of Plotinus and others like him distinct enough to warrant their own category: *neoplatonism*. Although he lived in the 3rd century CE, Plotinus played a pivotal role in shaping subsequent Christian philosophy that came to predominate in ensuing millennia.

While much of what we know about Plotinus’s philosophy is attributable to one of his students, Porphyry, it is also pertinent to a discussion of enlightenment. However, only some aspects of it touch upon illuminative experience as such. Consequently, what follows is not so much a primer on neoplatonism as it is a brief summation of the relationship between Plotinus and light, namely his experiences of and views regarding mystical light. Some scholars go so far as to suggest that Plotinus’s mysticism is “a mysticism of light,” specifically with regard to the constant presence of a supreme and transcendent entity as the center and source of one’s soul: the One.⁸²

As stated in the *Enneads*:

Any that have seen know what I have in mind: the soul takes another life as it draws nearer and nearer to God and gains participation in Him...a self wrought to splendor, brimmed with the Intellectual light, become that very light, pure, buoyant, unburdened, raised to Godhood, or better, knowing its Godhood...⁸³

Plotinus even uses illumination as a sort of litmus test for determining whether or not an individual has had an experience of the One. This makes sense, given that he describes the entire realm of the spirit as consisting of light. According to him, an illumination of the soul is both from God as well as God, and that when “the soul has suddenly taken light, we may be certain that we have experienced Divinity.”⁸⁴

To be sure, Plotinus instructed his pupils about a sort of light that was not of the everyday material variety, but rather something more extraordinary. Some scholarship suggests that he considered that light as “pure incorporeal power.”⁸⁵

Although Plotinus did not associate God or the One with will per se, the association between his accounts of light and a generative transcendent principle serves as enough to encourage speculation in that regard.

Conversely, consensus generally holds that the One may be regarded as “superconscious” or eternal awareness.⁸⁶ For example, Wilber asserts that the One is “the ever-present Wakefulness that is aware of any concept, including ‘One,’ but is *not itself* that or any other image.”⁸⁷ At the same time, however, that Wakefulness “is never apart from what it witnesses...just as the reflections on an empty mirror are never apart from it.”⁸⁸ In this sense, even if the One is conceived of as pure consciousness, that consciousness is never separate from that which it beholds. In the metaphor of the cinema, the audience is always united with what appears upon the screen.

In the context of experiences of illumination what appears upon the screen is not these or those frames of film involved in the illusion of moving things, but rather the glow of the projector bulb itself. The unity of the audience and the projector bulb, or consciousness and will, thus form an integral or nondual aspect of illuminative experience. Due to the limits of language, to what extent knowledge of the One is simply the realization of pure consciousness as such, or the witness, and to what extent it is the realization of the nonduality between consciousness and will, or the witness and/as the intuited essence of all phenomena, remains unclear.

Fortunately, we have clearer, more concrete terms regarding the means whereby Plotinus elicited his vision of light. For him, contemplation, rather than public or private ritual, stood as his preferred means of attaining experiences of divinity.⁸⁹ Whereas others engaged in religious rites or theurgy (which we explore later), Plotinus practiced and advocated for “sheer intellection.”⁹⁰ Of the techniques he employed, one stands out as particularly interesting.

Plotinus recommended that aspiring philosophers “visualize the universe and then mentally abolish its limitations.”⁹¹ This sounds exactly like the sort of thing one would do if he or she were interested in overcoming the constraints and illusions of intellect. After all, the boundaries and definitions imposed by the mind through its faculty of analysis are precisely what precludes many from apprehending the unity and continuity of the cosmos. And, after all, what are the limitations in one’s vision of the universe apart from assumptions that he has made in his imagination? When one discards his preconceptions and the perceptual faculty responsible for generating them, his intuition may have a fighting chance. And, should intuition apprehend will or its nondual expression with

consciousness as undifferentiated continuity, it seems that such an apprehension may appear as extraordinary light.

The idea that light may be what remains after all limitations have been abolished is also significant from a theological perspective. Whereas some teachers and traditions are *apophatic*, pointing to what divinity is by saying what it is not, others are *cataphatic*, or assert the nature of divinity in affirmative terms. To say that God is not finite or static is apophatic, to say that God is radiant love is cataphatic. An experience of illumination can be just the thing that:

...bridges the difficult gap between apophatic and cataphatic discourses; for while light is phenomenally experienced, light also represents a clearing; it is what is perceived when all else is removed...The divine nature can be approached positively and negatively, but usually we seem unable to get our minds around both at once, and light offers a path whereby we might transcend this apparent dilemma.⁹²

Although Plotinus recommended contemplation as a means whereby one might behold such light, others were drawn to other means. One of Plotinus's students, Porphyry, argued for Plotinus's contemplative methods, despite the discipline and hardship that they often required. However, Porphyry instructed another individual who insisted upon "communication or union with God" through theurgy.⁹³ That student's name was Iamblichus.

Iamblichus lived in the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Christian Era, and in his time produced important works regarding the Greek philosopher Pythagoras.⁹⁴ Although Pythagoras has his own mystical notions, little remains to suggest that he personally had achieved illumination experiences or instructed others to do so. Iamblichus, however, shared many of his views on "union with the One" and "disciplined moral and intellectual ascent" in common with Plotinus, save how best to get there.⁹⁵ Whereas Plotinus supported a rather mental approach toward transcendence, Iamblichus preferred to practice theurgy.

While theurgy bears many resemblances to ritual magic, including the use of techniques such as incantation and the use of magical instruments and objects, it differs significantly from it, as well.⁹⁶ The sort of theurgy that Iamblichus practiced sought to demonstrate the causative power behind and beyond natural forces, and in such rituals concerning supernatural power a practitioner's soul was reputed to convert back to its "divine cause."⁹⁷ Conversely, magic at the time tended to lack such a transcendent element, and instead concerned itself with manipulating and exploiting nature and its forces.⁹⁸ In short, Iamblichus did not enact his rituals to achieve mundane ends, but rather to elevate his consciousness and experience the mysterious source of both his soul and the cosmos at large.

When Iamblichus considered his theurgy successful, he experienced a vision of light. In this sense, he passed the “litmus test” of Plotinus, even though he gained such glimpses of heavenly brilliance in his own way. According to Iamblichus, when a theurgist makes contact with divinity, an illumination takes place that is “spontaneously visible and self-perfect” and “shines forth due to divine energy and perfection.”⁹⁹ Much like Schopenhauer after him, Iamblichus characterized the power behind and beyond natural forces as light. And, also like Schopenhauer, Iamblichus perceived commonality among the various forces apparently at work in the cosmos.

Whereas Schopenhauer identified various causal energies as united in will, Iamblichus regarded them as one in light. Iamblichus accounted for the “apparent multiplicity of divine forces that are spread throughout the world” by arguing that because divine light emerged from a single source of illumination (God, the Father, One, etc.) it remained unified “even as it seemed to be dispersed infinitely throughout the cosmos.”¹⁰⁰ In his writings, he not only suggests that the indivisible light of the divinities is “present in all the powers that partake of it” but also that it “brings all things to accomplishment within itself” by virtue of its “superior causality” and “perfect power.” It remains to be seen if a clearer parallel to will could be made than light as described by Iamblichus.

Interestingly, shortly before Christianity became the state religion of Rome, the work of Iamblichus was cited by the emperor Julian as a means whereby he and other non-Christians might attain a “greater understanding” of their ancestral gods.¹⁰¹ One must wonder to what extent this move was calculatedly political, and to what extent it pointed to Iamblichus’s expertise in pre-Christian Greek religion. The work of Iamblichus does give cause for hope, if only because the Eleusinian Mysteries were banned shortly after the ascendancy of Christianity and with their outlawing went all traces of the true nature of epopteia and how it was achieved.

AFTER THE END OF ELEUSIS

Whatever the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and their subsequent popularization in the centuries after his death, it was not long before the philosophical and mystical traditions of Greece found their way into Christianity. Simply put, the Neoplatonism of Plotinus “powerfully influenced” the theological writings of Christians.¹⁰² This was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the case of one of the founding philosophers of Christianity: St. Augustine of Hippo. In addition to composing his prolific and foundational writings, St. Augustine also reported his own illumination experience. In his words:

I... beheld with the mysterious eye of my soul the Light that never changes, above the eye of my soul, above my intelligence. It was not the common light which all flesh can see, nor was it greater yet of the same kind, as if the light of day were to grow brighter and brighter and flood all space. It was not like this, but different: altogether different from such things. Nor was it above my intelligence in the same way oil is above water, or heaven above earth; but it was higher because it made me, and I was lower because made by it. He who knoweth the truth knoweth that Light: and who knoweth it, knoweth eternity.¹⁰³

The similarity to the accounts of Iamblichus and Plotinus is striking, especially given St. Augustine's Christian convictions. Scholarship reveals that St. Augustine not only read Plotinus, but also that passages of Plotinus "haunted his memory."¹⁰⁴ One in particular concerned itself with rising to God and uniting with Him. That passage echoed in Augustine's mind as he wrote *The City of God*; it relayed how without uniting with God, one's soul remains "unlit," and that one's proper goal is to "attain that light, to perceive God in His own radiance and not by any other light."¹⁰⁵

Often in accord with Augustine characterization of transcendent light as above the intellect, subsequent Christian mystics such as Dante, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and St. Hildegard described transcendent light as "intangible but unescapable, ever emanating Its splendour through the Universe...indwelling, un-resting, and energizing Life."¹⁰⁶ According to their accounts, it was such encounters with the "flowing light of the Godhead" that made distinctions between Christian mystics and the otherwise uninitiated meaningful.¹⁰⁷ Echoing the neoplatonists, Meister Eckhart declared that when the soul's striving for God is achieved, "the soul is called light...God, too, is light and when the divine light pours into the soul, the soul is united with God, as light blends with light."¹⁰⁸ Similarly, St. Teresa reported seeing an "infused brightness...a light which knows no night; but rather, as it is always light, nothing ever disturbs it."¹⁰⁹

The similarity of the accounts of the Christian mystics is enough to give one pause, and to make one wonder to what extent such accounts of illuminative experience were simply a parroting of St. Augustine or his influences. Indeed, to what extent had St. Augustine simply borrowed from the work of Plotinus—and to what extent had Plotinus borrowed from Plato, from the Egyptians, from Pythagoras, or from the initiates of the various Mysteries? While such critical speculation has its place, my aim is not to debunk claims of mystical experience, but rather to illustrate their commonality and, to some extent, their historical lineage, if not through direct causation, through their general overlapping according to social and cultural trends.

Just as one such trend, Christianity, began to rise to the status of state religion in ancient Rome, the seed of another was planted. Almost two centuries after the Empire legitimated Christianity in Europe, the prophet Muhammad had founded Islam. Many Arab scholars who studied alchemy, philosophy, and mathematics in the years preceding

the ascendancy of Christianity went on to become Muslims, and their new faith did not demand that they leave their intellectual pursuits behind. Rather, like St. Augustine did for the Christian church, Muslim philosophers found ways to incorporate their knowledge of neoplatonism into their religious communities.

One such Muslim scholar was known as al-Ghazali. His work in the eleventh century involved his attempts to reconcile Islamic orthodoxy with the increasingly prevalent “mystical ideas” of Sufism.¹¹⁰ During a time when a culturally and doctrinally cohesive Islam was threatened by the Crusades from without and rampant sectarianism from within, al-Ghazali labored to both defend and deeply understand his faith. In doing this, he focused on creating written works that maintained reference to the Qur’an while also interpreting and explaining it for others.

One verse in the Qur’an in particular captured his interest to such an extent that he devoted an entire book to it. Al-Ghazali’s *The Niche of Lights* expounded upon the so-called Light Verse of the Qur’an. One translation renders the Light Verse thusly:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star kindled from a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; light upon light; God guides to His light whom He will. And God strikes similitudes for men, and God has knowledge of everything.¹¹¹

Al-Ghazali’s concern with light was not limited to analysis and interpretation of this single verse. Rather, his use of light imagery in his writings borders on “constant.”¹¹² While, for those preoccupied by adherence to orthodoxy, this has a justifiable basis in the Light Verse, strong evidence suggests that al-Ghazali derived his penchant for luminosity from neoplatonism.¹¹³ This evidence is bolstered by the fact that most of the known Sufi literature written prior to al-Ghazali’s work did not contain light symbolism.¹¹⁴ The majority of scholars believe that al-Ghazali’s use of the “motif of light” can be traced back to Plotinus.¹¹⁵

To be sure, al-Ghazali’s monotheism differed greatly from Greek paganism. However, when one reads that through God “all things are made manifest” and that “which makes all other things manifest...is Light”, one must wonder if the writer is referring to Plotinus’s One, Schopenhauer’s will, or something else entirely.¹¹⁶ Knowing that the author is al-Ghazali helps somewhat, but not enough!

Interestingly, al-Ghazali offers a doctrine that differed greatly from that of orthodox Islam. He asserts that, through self-purification, one may open his or her “inner eye” or “polish the mirror of his heart,” and thereby receive a revelation consisting of “the lights of Divine knowledge.”¹¹⁷ What made this notion so revolutionary was that it

suggested that many individuals, and not merely a chosen few, could attain prophetic insight. This democratization of spiritual insight, while common among mystical traditions, has not been smiled upon in mainstream Islam.

According to al-Ghazali's writings, the most inward part of a person is "a spark from the Eternal Flame, and within it, and to it, is revealed the Ultimate Reality...so that it, too, is filled with Divine Light and manifests it forth."¹¹⁸ Like many other mystics, and eventually Bergson, al-Ghazali taught that perception of reality takes place "by means of a spiritual sense called intuition, which goes beyond reason."¹¹⁹ I suggest the commonalities of al-Ghazali's discourse surrounding illumination experience with that which preceded it, not to falsely equate Allah with pagan or secular notions, but rather to suggest that illumination in different times and places may possess a shared meaning.

A further testament of a common significance of illumination in the West shows up in al-Ghazali's influence on Christians, including St. Thomas Aquinas and Dante Alighieri. While Dante's account of *soma luce*, "wherein he saw multiplicity in unity" occupies a prestigious role in the history of Christian mysticism, Dante himself was inspired by Muslim philosophy.¹²⁰ Interestingly, one could posit Dante as receiving neoplatonist wisdom from multiple streams, including those of Christianity and Islam.

Dante writes in *Paradiso* that "Divine Essence is conceived of as living Light, giving forth in creation."¹²¹ He goes on to assert that through looking at or contemplating eternal light "the human soul enters into eternal life."¹²² Clearly, his words strike a parallel with what we have gleaned about the Mysteries at Eleusis. Although the Mysteries were outlawed by the Christian state, it is charming to suppose that some aspect of them returned to Christendom through the pen of one of the Muslims who shaped Islam.

THE MIDDLE AGES AND BEYOND

Although al-Ghazali's eleventh century contributions to mysticism in the West were great, they have not retained the widespread prestige and popularity of one of their Judaic successors: kabbalah. Scholars consider almost the entire duration between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries to be the "formative period" of kabbalistic activity.¹²³ When it comes to discussions of light in kabbalistic writing, they also single out two texts in particular: *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the *Book of Illumination* attributed to Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah, and *Sefer ha Zohar*, the *Book of Splendor* attributed to Simeon ben Yohai.¹²⁴ Kabbalistic works differ from other religious texts in that working with them can constitute a practical method for engendering an altered state of consciousness. In kabbalah, one may be "assimilated into the splendor of the Godhead" while the texts

themselves “reflect the mystic’s experiences of the divine pleroma and the reintegration of his soul with its ontological source.”¹²⁵

An English translation of a passage from the *Book of Splendor* reads thus:

...all the heavenly lights are illumined from One and depend on One and all the lights there form only one Light and desire never to be separated, and he who does separate them in his mind is as though he separated himself from life eternal.¹²⁶

The parallel to Bergson’s conception of mind is clear: “he who does separate...in his mind” speaks to the predominance of analytical intellect, in contrast to intuition that has insight into “life eternal,” or ever-evolving continual flux. By now, that such a contrast employs the metaphor of light should not come as a surprise! In the words of one kabbalistic scholar, the “mystical vision of light” stems from a mode of perception “wherein opposites are not set against one another.”¹²⁷

While a state of nonduality that permits mystical insight recapitulates one of Plotinus’s teachings concerning apprehension of the One, the language of *Splendor* also makes reference to “One.” This is no mere coincidence. We know that kabbalistic fraternities in the twelfth century were influenced by Neoplatonic writings, and that the *Book of Illumination* contains passages that reveal such influence.¹²⁸ Whether or not kabbalists got their Neoplatonism solely and directly from Greek texts or if they obtained it from later Muslim writers is a matter of speculation.

What is known, however, is how kabbalists regarded supernal mystery and the divine potency that they believed emanated from it. Naturally, they described it using the language of light, calling it the “pure light of life,” or “an effulgence that is entirely incomprehensible.”¹²⁹ Although “divine potency” does seem like a sensible synonym for will as described by Schopenhauer, kabbalists did not stoop to using that inelegant term. Rather, quite poetically, they wrote of the “unalloyed gold that is written and sealed in the splendor of the beautiful canopy, which is composed of the radiance of luminous splendor, in the image of the soul.”¹³⁰

While study and contemplation of kabbalah continued well past the end of the fourteenth century, within one hundred years of the *Book of Splendor*, another set of texts captured the imagination of the religious and philosophically-minded of Europe. Their attention and interest went toward a compendium of documents known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Although various pieces of the *Hermeticum* had been in existence since at least the third century¹³¹, it was not until the fourteenth that they first appeared as a collection.¹³² It took almost a century before that collection was made legible to a wide audience of European readers. In 1471, however, a Latin translation was published, and

the impact of the *Hermeticum* upon alchemists, magicians, and religious philosophers can still be felt to this day.¹³³

To understand why the *Hermeticum* warranted such an enthusiastic reception, one must appreciate the perspective of an occultist in the Middle Ages. As far as many of them were concerned, some of the greatest wisdom in history was known to them through the works of Pythagoras, Plato, and the like. Additionally, many assumed that their teachings did not come from their original thought, but rather from their tutelage in Egypt, which contained the esoteric doctrines of Egyptian priests. Legend had it that such priests deposited their knowledge in sacred books, which were called “the books of Thoth,” after the Egyptian god of the same name.¹³⁴ Because Greeks generally equated Thoth to their god Hermes, the books of Thoth could also go by the name of the books of Hermes.¹³⁵ Thus, the *Corpus Hermeticum* gained the reputation of containing the ancient Egyptian wisdom upon which later Western philosophy, from Pythagoras to Iamblichus and beyond, was built.

While evidence points to the conclusion that the *Hermeticum* was written by people in Egypt, that alone is not enough to substantiate its reputation. Further evidence suggests that it was written at the time of the Roman Empire, and that despite its geographic origin in Egypt, “the Egyptian ingredient in Hermetic doctrine...remains comparatively small in amount.”¹³⁶ If the *Hermeticum* was written in Egypt, but doesn't seem very “Egyptian” to contemporary scholars, what is to account for the discrepancy?

To the best of our knowledge, the authors of the *Hermeticum* were primarily students of Greek philosophy, especially the doctrines of what came to be known as neoplatonism.¹³⁷ In this sense the authors of the *Hermeticum* were not so much influences of Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus, but rather were influenced by them. In the words of one scholar, the “main bulk” of the *Hermeticum* “is unquestionably derived from Greek philosophy.”¹³⁸ As for why the *Hermeticum* does not contain references to the philosophers or the groups to which they belonged that proved so influential, it is useful to think of its authors as truth-seekers who were discontent with “merely accepting and repeating the cut-and-dried dogmas of the orthodox philosophic schools.”¹³⁹ Rather than engage in lengthy citations and rehashed arguments, they sought to distill what they had learned into concise and informative missals.

One could argue that Greek philosophy was derived from some esoteric Egyptian philosophy for which no surviving record has been discovered, though such a point may be of debatable import. What is important, however, is noting the concord between Greek philosophy and the *Hermeticum*, as well as the widespread belief that the body of Western spiritual knowledge, from mystical Christianity, Judaism, and Islam to the pre-Platonic Eleusinian Mysteries, could be traced back to Egypt, for this belief would influence magical and theurgic practice through the twentieth century.

After the Latin publication of the *Hermeticum*, however, the strains of philosophical and religious knowledge contained therein faced a growing threat, not only from a Church that demanded obedience to dogma and orthodoxy, but also from the emerging current of Enlightenment thought. Within a century of the dissemination of the *Hermeticum*, the Academy of Nature's Secrets had been established, and before long advances in mathematics, microscopy, and telescoping made many of the insights of modern science within the reach of investigators. Through the emergence of this trend toward skepticism and empirical inquiry mystics in the West continued their work, as well. While the ascendancy of science led to an emphasis on seeing exteriors rather than inner light, its power to eclipse was neither immediate nor complete.

At the beginning of the 17th century, just before the public proclamation of the Rosicrucian Brotherhood and the work of Descartes, a cobbler by the name of Jacob Boheme had an experience of light.¹⁴⁰ While we know that Boheme's writings were influenced by such varied sources as Paracelsus and Lutheran Christianity, an accounting of his vision is at once otherworldly and familiar:

His inner mind and the hidden forces beyond nature became as one, pulsing, radiant, divine...he was amazed to see similarly into the heart and essence of nature, detecting the harmonious forces pushing up through herbs and grasses, feeling creation at work. He noted the harmony between living and objective things. Thus were the wonders of God's purpose revealed to him...periodically he was taken up 'as in a flash' to experience illumination anew.¹⁴¹

Although Boheme's illuminative experience predates Bergson by hundreds of years, it is clear that the two men share a common language. The proximity of Boheme's feeling of "creation at work" and apprehension of the "essence of nature" bear a striking resemblance to Bergson's intuitive perception of that which bears all living things and is "the essence of life," which he also associates with light. Even "the harmony between living and objective things" points to, not only their commonality in animation and its source, but also those cycles of life and death wherein members of the apparently separate classes of living and nonliving things are transformed into each other.

While experiences such as Boheme's are novel, not only in terms of their significant content, but also in their arising spontaneously, that novelty has not excluded individuals from attempting to systematically elicit them and subject them to categorization. As discussed, magical and theurgic efforts throughout history often involved the pursuit of illumination. With the increasing popularity and influence of Newtonian physics, however, much interest in such practices suffered a decline. In the late eighteenth century, however, a revival of sorts took place, spurred on by both "dilletante and aristocratic interest" in magic, astrology, alchemy, and the like.¹⁴² While historians may yet provide a comprehensive explanation for why this occurred, it was

largely associated with the burgeoning mock-medievalism of the Gothic revival.¹⁴³ In other words, it became fashionable.

As the fashion waxed and waned, enough of it survived into nineteenth century Great Britain to make possible the founding of one of the most famous occult societies in the contemporary world: the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Often credited with the “survival” of ritual magic, the Golden Dawn’s membership included poet and Nobel prize winner W.B. Yeats, actress Florence Farr, and, perhaps most infamous, Aleister Crowley.¹⁴⁴ With their aims alternately defined as “the science and art of creating changes in consciousness” and “concentrating the will of the magician into a blazing stream of pure energy,” the Golden Dawn draw from a variety of sources, including both kabbalah and the *Corpus Hermeticum*.¹⁴⁵ Some Golden Dawn documents also referenced knowledge of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

The ritual initiation of a neophyte in particular drew upon language that was allegedly Eleusinian in origin. Designed to “introduce the aspirant to a new life” and open the soul of the initiate “to the Light,” a successful execution of the ritual forged a connection between one’s objective universe (the macrocosm) and his or her subjective universe (the microcosm).¹⁴⁶ Drawing upon an account alleged by the seventeenth century writer Meursius, Golden Dawn members uttered the phrase “Knox Om Pax” during the ritual in imitation of Eleusinian priests.¹⁴⁷ According to scholars of classical Greek, such an utterance would have been meaningless.¹⁴⁸

To account for the dubious nature of “Knox Om Pax,” some have interpreted the saying to be a variation upon an older Egyptian phrase, thus referencing the belief that Greek philosophy and mysticism owed a debt of gratitude to North Africa. In the Egyptian language of Coptic, “Knox Om Pax” may have been “Khabs Am Pekht.” Whatever its genesis, European and American mages took the phrase to mean “Light in Extension,” or “Light Rushing Out in One Ray,” or “May Light be extended in Abundance upon you.”¹⁴⁹ They also equated the Light indicated in the phrase with that which was symbolized by the Staff of Kerux: hidden wisdom.¹⁵⁰

Whether or not such rituals actually engendered illuminative states remains a subject of controversy; most likely an admirer of the Golden Dawn would encourage one to pursue such investigation personally, and not merely rely upon the accounts of others. It was this sort of spirit that doubtlessly contributed to the growing popularity of the movement. As of the turn of the twentieth century, the Golden Dawn had spread across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States, and adepts had founded a temple in Chicago. Reportedly, “many” Americans were initiated between 1907 and 1914.¹⁵¹ That their initiation drew upon the ancient Mysteries at Eleusis, even if only in spirit, illustrates how mysticism in the West had, in many ways, come full circle.

And, in many ways, the Golden Dawn marked the end of an era. While some have stipulated that there has always been contact and exchange between societies of the East and West, it has never been more clear that philosophies and spiritual practices from the East proliferated in the West throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Consequently, it has become increasingly difficult to identify progress in religious and mystical trends while ruling out the possibility of non-Western influence. I draw attention to this, not because of a misguided compulsion toward Western purity, but rather to suggest the timeliness of exploring Eastern spirituality. While many Western readers may already be familiar with some Eastern views and practices, few also have a sense of their historical context and relation to illumination. Both may be found in the following chapter.

DR.RUPNATHJI(DR.RUPAK NATH)

CHAPTER FIVE: EASTERN LIGHT

In contemporary America, the word “enlightenment” generally conjures up images of sages sitting with their eyes closed and legs crossed in a full lotus position, presumably meditating. That such images are both clichéd and derivative of actual spiritual practices may be unsurprising. What is, surprising, however, is how closely this caricature of enlightenment seekers is patterned after the poses and personas of the East, and not the rich mystical tradition of the West. Although this may be due to ignorance of Western traditions as well as the proliferation of popular stereotypes that are the unfortunate progeny of a distasteful Orientalism, the association remains. Given that Westerners have inherited many projections, misunderstandings, and appropriations of Eastern culture and spirituality, how can we separate fact from fiction or, more pointedly, authentic understanding from imperialist fetish?

While such a mammoth task lay beyond the scope of this chapter, I will endeavor to contribute one particular sort of clarification. Although “enlightenment” has as multifaceted a character in the East as in the West, experiences of illumination as such serve as a point of commonality. Thankfully, written records in countries such as India, China, and Japan have preserved accounts of such experiences for millennia. As in the West, some hold that light serves as a mere symbol in such texts, and that not all mentions of light actually refer to illumination per se. This is undoubtedly true, and resorting to unwarranted literalism would do neither scholars nor students any good. To be sure, however, the symbolism of light remains connected to the sight of it, and its use in religious allegory does, at times, pertain to its experiential apprehension.

Underhill’s survey of mysticism assured us that accounts of illumination involve descriptions of what people actually perceive despite also serving as poetic metaphor.

The same could be said regarding the documented evidence of such experiences in the East. And, as in the Western mystical tradition, visions of light are not typically regarded as merely visual phenomena, but rather as distinctly spiritual in nature. However, in the East, as in the West, illumination is not always synonymous with spiritual attainment or enlightenment *per se*.

The two concepts, however, are closely related, and not merely because of the similarity of their etymological roots. Perhaps most central to their shared meaning is their pertinence to the transformation of perception, a marked change in how and what one perceives. While the mode and content of perception may alter spontaneously, resulting in illumination or enlightenment, more frequently individuals work toward such alterations according to tradition as relayed through personal contact, oral transmission, and the study of sacred texts. What follows is an overview of the content of such teachings in the East over the past four thousand years or so, specifically with regard to experiences of illumination.

While a truly comprehensive accounting could itself fill multiple volumes, in this chapter I merely wish to touch upon some significant examples and themes in an effort to illustrate both the shared origins and character of eastern illuminative mysticism. Consider it a rough sketch, by no means complete, that nevertheless affords another glimpse into traditions of mystical insight. To emphasize the development of certain trends, I have chosen to present examples in what is essentially chronological sequence. Although such a large scale of time lends itself to arbitrarily parsing out overlapping phenomena, my goal is to emphasize the continuity among illuminations in the east, and not to take an untenable stance on which traditions have served as proverbial chickens and which have served solely as eggs.

BEGINNING IN INDIA

Before Japan succumbed to Western influence in the nineteenth century, the samurai warriors practiced a religion known as Zen. Zen was a Japanese form of Buddhism that came to Japan from China. In China, the monks that developed kung fu and tai'chi were greatly influenced by Buddhism. Before Buddhism caught on in China and the rest of Asia, it began as the teachings of one man: Siddhartha Guatama. And before Buddhists throughout the world outnumbered adherents to Abrahamic faiths, Siddhartha was first known as a man in a land now known as India.

India played host to many religions well before the time of Siddhartha, just as it did after. Luckily, editions of many of the documents from Siddhartha's time remain available to scholars and students to this day. And, fortunately, much of what is contained in those texts dates back well before their written formulation as part of a rich oral

tradition. Throughout all of the ancient Indian teachings and writings, light and its “mystical apprehension” plays a large part.¹⁵²

Whether mentioned in terms of sparks, rays, beams, or fire and things related to fire, the breadth and variety of such references alone indicates their significance.¹⁵³ Knowledge of this rich vocabulary for spiritual light comes to us through the Vedas, the oldest scriptures of Hinduism.¹⁵⁴ Although many challenges conspire to prevent an accurate assessment of who wrote the original Vedas and where, the knowledge contained therein has been dated back to at least 1400 B.C., and possible earlier.¹⁵⁵ Because various written incarnations of the Vedas contain differences, in part due to the interpolation of other texts, it is difficult to assert when they were first committed to paper. Scholarship suggests that they were “reduced to writing” prior to the fourth century B.C.¹⁵⁶

The Vedas constituted a foundation from which other Eastern religions built. One set of sacred texts that appeared later on the scene, the Upanishads, are considered by many to be the “culmination” of the spiritual truth of the Vedas.¹⁵⁷ Various aspects of Buddhism and yogic practice, as well, can trace their roots back to the Vedas. According to poet and philosopher Sri Aurobindo, the common center of these various systems is the search for Truth, Light, and Immortality.¹⁵⁸ In his words:

There is a Truth deeper and higher than the truth of outward existence, a Light greater and higher than the light of human understanding which comes by revelation and inspiration, an immortality towards which the soul has to rise... To do so is to unite ourselves with the Godhead and to pass from mortality into immortality. This is the first and the central teaching of the Vedic mystics.¹⁵⁹

The “Vedic mystics” Aurobindo mentioned were not only those who adhered to and preserved the tradition—but also included its progenitors. Legend has it that the hymns and poems of the Vedas were delivered through *rishis*, or “Self-illuminated sages who acted as channels for the divine wisdom.”¹⁶⁰ In addition to believing that their inspired utterances contained “secret knowledge,” the rishis also believed that the transmission of such knowledge to other human individuals required that those receiving it occupied the correct frame of mind. The “hidden knowledge” of the Vedas remained hidden from those who were not themselves seers or mystics, though it was believed that one could attain the truth of the Vedas without the verbal mediation of rishis through practices such as meditation.¹⁶¹ In this sense, the poetry of the Vedas is a sort of “preaching to the choir,” a preaching that may ultimately be redundant or unnecessary for those spiritually evolved enough to truly understand it.

In addition to their roles as channels for or communicators of divine utterances, rishis also served a more fundamental function: that of “seer.”¹⁶² As those who were aware of their contact with divinity, rishis were believed to have insight into the

otherwise enigmatic nature of the greatness of the gods.¹⁶³ Based upon available evidence, it is safe to assume that this insight involved vision of mystic light. From the perspective of the rishis, beholding such light did not merely signify knowledge of a god, but also played a role in making one more godlike.

As in many religions, the ancient Hindus attributed many human traits to the divinities of their pantheon. With respect to their shared characteristics, the difference between a rishi and a god “was one in degree, not in kind.”¹⁶⁴ This continuity between man and god is perhaps nowhere as evident as in the mythical origin of rishis as such. In the Vedas, the god Agni not only “utters ritual exclamations” in a manner similar to a human rishi, but is also regarded as the primary rishi—both “the first and the best.”¹⁶⁵ In succeeding as a rishi, one not only achieves closer knowledge of the divine, of which Agni is a form, but one also becomes closer to having the essential features of Agni’s identity, as well.

It may be useless to try to maintain an absolute division between what constitutes a rishi and the identity of Agni. Do mystic poets or gods give visions, inspirations, and “mental illuminations” to those who seek wisdom?¹⁶⁶ Do mystic poets or gods attain higher insight by means of their own minds?¹⁶⁷ According to the Vedas, the answer to both questions is *yes, all of the above*.

Although associated with many different properties and functions, Agni is most closely tied to fire—hence the cognate with the word “ignite.” The conflagration tied to Agni, however, is not merely a mundane burning. Rather, Agni represented “the divine power of fire.”¹⁶⁸ As “the illuminating and sacrificial fire of the Vedas,” Agni was also equated with *jyotir uttamam*, or “supreme light.”¹⁶⁹ As the god of “light and inspiration,” it was Agni who was believed to provide mystical poets with visions of light.¹⁷⁰ The relevance of Agni to a discussion of illumination in Indian mysticism requires little more justification.

As an example of the “archetype of the priest,” or rishi, Agni functions as a sort of “messenger” or *pontifex* between heavenly and earthly realms.¹⁷¹ In the Rig Veda, Agni connected the two realms through bolts of lightning, the shining sun, or fires that immolated sacrificial offerings.¹⁷² It is important to reiterate that Agni is identified with the “sacrality of fire” and its performance of a function related to divine contact and properties, and not merely fire’s physical manifestation.¹⁷³ A Vedic sage did not meditate upon the “Nature-Power” or external appearance of fire per se, but rather regarded its employment in rituals of sacrifice as symbolic of “inner work, an inner interchange between the gods and men.”¹⁷⁴ Agni is associated with both physical light and “the internal light which illuminates seers and poets.”¹⁷⁵

In the Rig Veda, Agni is referred to as “the immortal light among mortals.”¹⁷⁶ Mystic poets have also regarded him as “the luminous guardian of the Truth shining out in his own home.”¹⁷⁷ Additionally, he is also identified with “energy, splendor, efficacy” and “supernatural power.”¹⁷⁸ This correspondence between immortal light and energy harkens back to the metaphor of the cinema explored in earlier chapters in which illumination is equated with a mystical apprehension of will.

And, like the metaphor of will-as-projector-bulb, Agni not only combines attributes of luminosity with “creative powers,” but he also “facilitated syntheses seeking the reduction of multiple and different planes to a single fundamental principle” in the scholasticism of Hindu philosophers.¹⁷⁹ Consider the following exegesis of the “flame of Agni.”

...the seven-tongued power of the Will, a Force of God instinct with knowledge. This conscious and forceful will is the immortal guest in our mortality, a pure priest and divine worker, the mediator between earth and heaven. It carries what we offer to the higher Powers and brings back in return their force and light and joy into our humanity.¹⁸⁰

While this passage retains much in the way of poetic sensibility, it nevertheless draws a clear parallel between Agni, his symbolism, and will that both transcends and includes the human. Although not identical with Schopenhauer’s conception of will, the similarity is enough to give one pause, especially in light of the already established association between Agni and illuminative experience. The further linkage between that illuminative experience and a will that bears the “force” of “higher Powers” is worthy of note. That those “higher Powers” may themselves be reduced to or interpreted as the work of a single Agni/rishi/transpersonal creative energy would introduce greater consonance between Schopenhauer’s will and the vision of the Vedic poets.

Accomplishment of this interpretative feat is made possible by Agni being homologous to the Sun in the Vedic tradition.¹⁸¹ Through this symbolic association, Agni and light are also equal to the *atman*.¹⁸² Synonymous with the “Divine Self, the indwelling soul,” the *atman* is also commonly regarded as the undying spirit of a human individual.¹⁸³ At the same time, however, Vedic wisdom holds that all things collectively have an *atman*, and thus the entire cosmos as a whole has its own everlasting life and Self, which is symbolized by the Sun.¹⁸⁴

Therefore, Agni-as-Sun is the immortal soul of the universe, which is also godhead and “the creative energy at work on all cosmic levels”—bearing a striking resemblance to will.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, Agni-as-rishi (or rishi-as-Agni) speaks to the divinizing experience of attaining transformative knowledge or experience of the light. In this sense, Agni, as “inner Flame” or “mystic fire” elevates human individuals “into the immortal being, into the Great Heaven” while at the same time revealing itself as that into

which an individual has been elevated.¹⁸⁶ Additionally, this elevation also reveals to that individual his or her true nature as both means and end of his or her apotheosis, or ultimate identity as godhead. In other words, spirit brings you into contact with itself and causes you to recognize that you were spirit all along—and as it does this, you see the Light.

THE UPANISHADS

Whereas the Vedas are the most ancient extant sacred texts authored by India's mystic poets, the Upanishads were developed more recently. Although determining the exact dates of their documentation may be impossible, it is generally accepted that their writing culminated sometime after the third century B.C. By the sixth century B.C., however, the Upanishads had already given rise to Vedantism, a “fully constituted religion” wherein Agni and the rest of the Hindu pantheon had been combined into a “monotheistic conception” of the One or the Absolute that was not subject to subdivision into different gods and goddesses.¹⁸⁷

The rishis responsible for the Upanishads succeeded the mystic poets of the Vedas, and many regard the “central intuition” of the Upanishads as existing, albeit without formal systematization, in the Vedas.¹⁸⁸ A basic, recurring theme of the Upanishads is that “being manifests itself by the pure Light and that man receives knowledge of being by an experience of supernatural Light.”¹⁸⁹ This echoes the equation evident in the Vedas between spirit, god, reality, and light.¹⁹⁰

In addition to the correlations as described above, the Upanishads also contain other philosophic notions. “The single most important ‘great teaching’ or fundamental precept” of the Upanishads regards the unity of *Brahman* and *atman*.¹⁹¹ As discussed above, *atman* is the “innermost essential aspect of the self,” or individual soul, as well as the locus of one's subjectivity. *Brahman*, however, is “the eternal, changeless reality; that which transcends all forms.”¹⁹² *Brahman* also goes by the name of “Absolute,” “Ultimate Reality,” or “Divine Power” and gives rise to the world as it exists objectively.¹⁹³

In the Rig Veda, *Brahman* is identified as the One or the All.¹⁹⁴ As described in the *Mundaka Upanishad*, *Brahman* is “self-luminous and formless,” existing “both within and without.”¹⁹⁵ Another description more vividly illustrates “the imperishable *Brahman*” as a “blazing fire” that gives off thousands of sparks.¹⁹⁶ Those sparks represent the multitude of entities and forms found in the cosmos, which, for their apparent diversity, retain their essential kinship to their fire of origin. The parallel of *Brahman* so conceived to the creative power of Agni is too obvious to belabor, though it does bear repeating that, in Vedic thought, Agni corresponded to *atman*. The Upanishads teach that *atman* and

Brahman are “synonymous, each alike signifying the abiding source of all that is, the whole of nature, humankind included.”¹⁹⁷

As referred to in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, the atman is “the immortal, the fearless...Brahman.”¹⁹⁸ For a follower of Upanishadic thought, apprehending Brahman also meant apprehending atman, specifically through meditation directed according to spiritual knowledge.¹⁹⁹ Such meditations are a form of “spiritual exercise,” and rely upon the development of one’s intuition over his or her syllogistic capacities.²⁰⁰ As stated in the *Katha Upanishad*, immediate knowledge of the unity of atman-Brahman is “not to be known through argument” and “cannot be attached by reasoning.”²⁰¹ From *Kena Upanishad*, seekers receive the advice to “meditate inwardly, all the while imagining that the mind has already apprehended the luminous Brahman and has become submerged in it.”²⁰²

According to the Upanishads, there is only one way to verify that one has attained “realization of the self” or direct knowledge of atman, and this is through the experience of “inner light” or *antarjyotih*.²⁰³ Alternately, the appearance of inner light accompanies “[g]rasping one’s own Self”.²⁰⁴ Due to their postulated unity, the Upanishads suggest that knowledge of atman implies knowledge of Brahman, as well. Realization of the self thus resembles realization of Brahman, at which point the “light of God shines perpetually on” and “through” one so realized.²⁰⁵

It should come as little surprise that light serves as the preferred image of both Brahman and atman.²⁰⁶ Their unity speaks to the existence of an even higher all-encompassing ultimate source or principle, which, for the rishis of the Upanishads “was frequently defined as that by contact with which man becomes illuminated.”²⁰⁷ Accounts of the illuminative realization of the atman-Brahman union describe it as an “instantaneous, luminous comprehension” occurring suddenly, like lightning.²⁰⁸ In this way, as well, the legacy of Agni continues in the Upanishads. Identification of one’s essential nature and the source of the cosmos as a whole with the supreme illuminating principle made one regard himself or herself simultaneously as “being and immortality.”²⁰⁹

LIGHT, LIFE, AND BUDDHISM

Around the sixth century B.C., into the cultural milieu occupied by Vedantism as it stemmed from the Vedas and Upanishads was born an infant named Siddhartha Guatama. He would come to be known as Buddha, the key figure of a religion whose popularity would come to eclipse that of its Indian predecessors. The transition from Siddhartha to Buddha hinged upon a mental/spiritual transformation in which he became “awakened” or “enlightened,” thereby freeing himself from all phenomena and

perceiving mystical light.²¹⁰ The importance of light went on to be emphasized in Buddhist texts, which characterized the Absolute as “limitless light.”²¹¹ While the correspondence to Vedantic illumination is rather straightforward, Buddhist teachings marked a significant departure from traditional ones.

The philosophical and religious context in which Siddhartha came of age suggested that every individual existence had, at its base, an eternal and unchanging self or atman that could eventually unite with the Absolute, or Brahman, provided that it was sufficiently liberated through purifying spiritual practices. This notion of an enduring personal atman made a doctrine such as reincarnation plausible.²¹² Buddhist teaching, however, suggests that there is no everlasting individual soul per se, and that “so long as the soul is conceived of as something representing self...and persisting after death, there can be no idea of an ultimate sinking into the blissful peace of [n]irvana.”²¹³

While nirvana is not synonymous with brahman, they are related concepts. For example, when one realizes brahman, he or she is also thought to have “entered the ocean of nirvana.”²¹⁴ It can be useful to think of nirvana as a particular state of consciousness, whereas, even in Buddhism, brahman remains the Absolute. When an individual realizes brahman and enters nirvana, he or she is said to access an “eternal source” of light that will “illumine” the mind as one becomes a “river of life.”²¹⁵ The resemblance between the description of this illuminative experience and those of the Vedas and Upanishads is quite clear, save the metaphor of the “river of life.” Rather than positing an identification with brahman as the achievement of a luminous and unchanging eternity, the “river of life” suggests a dynamic and ongoing flow that, while it may be ultimately creative (à la Bergson), nevertheless remains characterized by motion and thus, temporality.

From a Buddhist perspective, change and transience are to account for what appear as both existence and nonexistence.²¹⁶ Whereas western metaphysics may identify flux as a manifestation of will, Buddhists cosmology focuses less on speculation about such universals and more upon that which is directly relevant to engendering enlightenment. In other words, the only “play of forces” of importance to Buddhist thought are those that “constitute unenlightened beings, not the forces that constitute the natural world.”²¹⁷ Nevertheless, an interesting parallel arises between the Buddhist conception of a generalized motive force for all beings, enlightened or otherwise, and Schopenhauer’s generalized motive force for the cosmos.

Schopenhauer compares willing to “an unquenchable thirst,” writes of “the thirst of will,” and regards willfulness as a “fiery thirst.”²¹⁸ Similarly, Buddhists speak of *tanha*, variously defined as “thirst,” “craving,” or “the fever of unsatisfied longing.”²¹⁹ Of that which is implied in Buddhist myth, *tanha* is both the “ground condition for existing anywhere” as well as “all-pervasive” and a “fundamental characteristic of the Buddhist cosmos.”²²⁰ Contemporary philosopher Robert G. Morrison has demonstrated intriguing

parallels between *tanha* and Nietzsche's notion of "the will to power," itself profoundly influenced by Schopenhauer's thought. Although *tanha* is not regarded as a form or source of energy per se, Buddhist teachings associate it with the evolution of the world as well as the development of enlightened beings.²²¹ When an individual or the cosmos at large undergoes change, *tanha* is implicated.

Strictly speaking, however, a philosophically sophisticated Buddhist would not speak of "something undergoing change," but would rather emphasize only that a particular phenomenon has arisen and then passed out of being.²²² There is no particular thing that changes, but rather the reality of change itself that appears as different things, or as a thing appearing differently. This notion runs parallel to Bergson's assertion that continual change constitutes reality, or Schopenhauer's revelation of all phenomena as manifestations of will in operation. In Buddhism, from ongoing flux ensues the emergence and extinction of apparent entities within a context of "open possibilities (*sunyata*)."²²³

While *sunyata* is often translated as "emptiness," the basic idea is that even the most rigid and enduring form is subject to change, and thus has no intrinsic existence apart from conditions that allow it to arise. Thus, instead of seeing a multitude of things that existed in the past and may continue to exist in the future, individuals can apprehend a metamorphosing unity that exists in its own unique manner at any given moment—even though the multitude of forms that we perceive within it lack their own enduring, independent character.

Rather than seeing the manifestations of particular things as hard-and-fast limitations upon what could possibly exist, we may perceive them as a passing phase that arose from and will return to what we might otherwise perceive as "open possibilities." It is thus that what seems to have its own form is subsumed in and composed of a greater fluidity, and so we might say that it is "empty" of form, as well. And, from a Buddhist perspective, not only does this emptiness apply to apparent objects, but to human beings, as well. Again, instead of the Vedantist notion of the integral unity of *atman-brahman*, Buddhism emphasizes relinquishing traditional characteristics of *atman* in favor of the Absolute. Accomplishing this task, recognizing oneself as one of many impermanent phenomena of the transforming cosmos, allows one to transform psychologically and spiritually, resulting in enlightenment and an experience of illumination.

Reputedly, Siddhartha himself addressed this very subject in rather colorful terms. In his words:

I have during this life entered into Nirvana..and the life of Gautama is extinguished. The self has disappeared. The Truth [Absolute] has taken up its abode in me. The body is Gautama's; in due time it will be dissolved....That dissolution will constitute the final extinction after which nothing survives to form another self. None can then say, the Blessed One is here, or there. It is just as with a flame in a sea of blazing fire. It has been, but it is gone. The flame has vanished, and one cannot say, it is here, or it is there.²²⁴

The “flame in a sea of blazing fire” is unmistakably reminiscent of the imagery and symbolism of Agni. And, as discussed above, interpreters of the Vedas equated the “flame of Agni” with will and heavenly power. In this sense, the man that became known as Buddha surrendered his individuality to a transpersonal will, synonymous with the Absolute, and in so doing, became united with it. While such an interpretation remains speculative, there is more than the heritage of Agni to support a connection between Buddhism and illuminative experience.

In the *Sravakabhumi*, a Buddhist treatise, light, even in symbolic form, can have great consequences for the success of a meditation. “Do not let go of the sign of the light,” it says, “which may be that of a lamp, or the glow of a fire or the solar orb!”²²⁵ By another account, after meditating upon love, compassion, joy, purification, and serenity, an “initiate is prepared to enter into the limitless light of truth.”²²⁶ Within the Mahayana branch of Buddhism, “Clear Light” serves as a symbol for both the Absolute and nirvana.²²⁷ Reportedly, everyone experiences Clear Light “for some moments at the instant of death,” whereas the Buddhas “experience it without interruption.”²²⁸

This parallel between death and nirvana appears repeatedly in the Buddhist cannon. Legend has it that the man who became Buddha taught that physical death “need not mean extinction.”²²⁹ Rather, it could entail “entry into infinite light and everlasting life” wherein one attains “the bliss of supreme wisdom, utter peace, and infinite light.”²³⁰ According to author and lecturer D.T. Suzuki, the enlightened and recently deceased may feel that light as “soft, warm, and proximate,” and thus as “a compassionate working.”²³¹

Because of this relationship to light and nurturance, Buddha also goes by the names of Amita, the Buddha of Boundless Light²³², as well as Amitayus, the Buddha of Infinite Life.²³³ In China, Japan, and throughout East Asia, the Buddhas of life and light are regarded as one, and are known by the name of Amida Buddha.²³⁴ By extension, the sect of Mahayana Buddhism known as Amidism “attaches capital importance” to illuminative experiences.²³⁵

LIFE AND LIGHT AFTER BUDDHA

Centuries after the Guatama Buddha's passing, a man named Patanjali compiled what came to be known as the *Yoga Sutras*. While scholars estimate that the sutras came together around the second century B.C., the exact date of their origin is unknown. Just as Buddhism and Vedanta could trace their roots back to the Vedas, so could practitioners of yoga find the seed of their discipline within the Rig Veda.²³⁶ As defined by Patanjali in the second of the Yoga Sutras, "Yoga is when one ceases to identify with the whirlings of the mind (the fluctuating thoughts)."²³⁷

The Yoga Sutras as compiled by Patanjali constituted the "scriptural source for the philosophical and practical system of yoga," which, in addition to leading one toward no longer identifying with the "whirlings of the mind," also served as a method for attaining *samadhi*.²³⁸ "Samadhi" has many meanings, though to yogis it often suggests a state of ecstatic bliss or enlightenment.²³⁹ Reportedly, the light that Buddhas experience ceaselessly is that which those who have achieved yoga experience during *samadhi*.²⁴⁰ One commentator on the Yoga Sutras mentions "a concentration in the lotus of the heart" which brings about an illuminative experience.²⁴¹

Although it is impossible to know exactly when, many scholars suppose that around the same time that the Patanjali compiled the Yoga Sutras, a manuscript of an epic poem entitled *Bhagavad Gita* emerged on the scene. Also known as *The Song of the Lord*, the Gita relays a dialog in which the god Krishna instructs the warrior Arjuna in the attainment of yoga. Even contemporary practitioners consider it an "essential reference book for the practices of yoga."²⁴² In the words of one scholar, the "spiritual yoga" of the Gita is "love" as well as *samadhi*.²⁴³

That said, *jnana*, or the Light of God, comes across as the "highest theme" in the Gita.²⁴⁴ When Arjuna glimpses "the whole universe in its variety, standing in a vast unity in the body of the God of gods," he does so by seeing it in "the radiance of the Supreme Spirit," which merits comparison to "the light of a thousand suns" suddenly arising in the sky.²⁴⁵ It is thus that he experiences *brahmatejas*, or "splendor of the absolute."²⁴⁶

For approximately one thousand years after the publication of the Gita and the Yoga Sutras, Buddhism spread throughout Asia while Hindu mystics and sages persisted in their meditative practices and study of sacred texts. In the ninth century C.E., one of the greatest proponents of Vedantism conducted his pivotal work. Although he was but one among many, his commentaries were among the first to be widely translated into the languages of the West, and thus his views have come to represent Vedantic philosophy to many Westerners.²⁴⁷ His name was Adi Sankara.

Sankara emphasized the importance of direct experience over a literalistic interpretation of textual accounts. Even in his commentary on the Gita he wrote that if even “a hundred scriptures should declare that fire is cold or that it is dark, we would suppose that they intend quite a different meaning from the apparent one!”²⁴⁸ Sankara also taught that a unitary consciousness pervades the universe, that it exists without distinction from the Absolute, and that people can intuit it directly due to it being “self-luminous.”²⁴⁹ Subsequent scholars have noted a correspondence between the principle of “Pure Consciousness” (*chit*) and “infinite Will or conscious force” (*tapoloka*).²⁵⁰ Similarly, Absolute Consciousness, “matrix of all that becomes,” and “the premise of all thought,” was also characterized as light.²⁵¹

Within about one century of Sankara’s work, a great teacher named Abhinavagupta gained his reputation among followers of the Hindu deity Shiva [also spelled “Siva,” and also known as Paramesvara] who lived in the region of Kasmir.²⁵² According to Abhinavagupta:

The true and supreme nature of the knowable object is indeed Siva, who is nothing but the light [of consciousness]...he is the source and impeller of the manifestation of all the varied forms of the world, animate and inanimate.²⁵³

Again in Indian religious thought, light is corresponded to the generating and motivating force of manifestation and form, much as will is in Schopenhauer’s system. Significantly, however, light is also identified with consciousness in Abhinavagupta’s Saivite tradition. He and his fellow yogins placed a primary importance upon the “immediate intuition of consciousness as light.”²⁵⁴

Interestingly, those Saivites of Kashmir did not regard “pure” consciousness as better or more real than the phenomenal world. Rather, they asserted that the world and its inhabitants were on strong ontological footing in as much as they were actually Siva,

“the light of the Absolute consciousness.”²⁵⁵ In this sense, everything from “difference,” “diversity,” and “darkness,” to “individuality,” “objectivity,” and “name and form,” could all be considered “the supreme play of that light of consciousness.”²⁵⁶ Again, in Abhinavagupta’s words:

Everything that exists resides...within Paramesvara [Siva], who is not measured by time, is of the nature of consciousness, and is united with the entirety of all the saktis [the potencies that rule reality]. Paramesvara constitutes a unity which coexists without contradiction with the hundreds of creations and dissolutions which are manifested by his contraction and expansion...This reality of Siva, therefore, has neither beginning nor end. It is luminous with its own light.²⁵⁷

In the metaphor of the cinema, Abhinavagupta did not force himself nor his pupils to decide between the celluloid and the projector bulb. Nor did he make them choose between identification with the audience or the mechanism whereby the film was projected, neither in whole nor in part. Rather, he suggested a profound unity among the audience, the projector bulb, and the film as it unwound, while positing the primacy of the audience in encompassing and, in a sense, giving rise to the experience of the projected movie itself.

One may rightly wonder why, if the nature of Siva is united with the potencies that rule reality, Abhinavagupta chose to regard it as consciousness instead of characterizing Siva's nature as those potencies which were then united with consciousness. While there certainly are intriguing explanations for this, the point remains that, as far as illuminative experience is concerned, Abhinavagupta and others like him teach that consciousness, will, and its manifestations constitute a fundamental unity. To experience illumination is to behold that unity, and, more radically, to behold it is to experience mystical light.

TOWARD THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AND BEYOND

In the early nineteenth century, translations and interpretations of sacred texts from the East were newly available to Westerners. Among those who read and were influenced by them was one who was widely read and influential himself: Arthur Schopenhauer. He employed ideas and terminology from ancient Hindu and Buddhist thought in his works, including in *The World as Will and Representation*.²⁵⁸ While many have assumed that Schopenhauer's notion of will originated in his reading of the Upanishads, subsequent scholars have contested this assumption. They have alleged that will did not grow out the East, but rather from fellow German F.W.J. Schelling's "ground of God," or the "unconscious urge of God to manifest himself into the plurality of the world which is opposed to the purity of God's intellectual nature."²⁵⁹

Whatever Schelling's impact upon Schopenhauer's thought, the journals of Schopenhauer have revealed his comments on Shiva, with specific regard to "the symbolism of the *lingam*" as it corresponding to Schopenhauer's conception of will.²⁶⁰ Additionally, Schopenhauer explored the concept of brahman as related to his metaphysical speculation, motivated in no small part by encountering a translation of the term as "force, will, wish."²⁶¹ Perhaps most captivating to Schopenhauer's imagination, however, was the notion of *maya*.

Those who wrote the Upanishads tended to think of *maya* as "the medium or 'power' through which [divinities]...created a world of multiplicity, a world of 'names and forms.'"²⁶² Contemporary yogic conceptions of *maya* also regard it as "the illusory

power of the Divine,” and that which “veils, limits, and conceals.”²⁶³ In a sense, maya relates to the fabrication of narrative experience wherein clearly defined entities exist, behave, and then cease to exist. In Bergson’s faculties of mind, maya corresponds to intellect. In Abhinavagupta’s system, maya might be described as one manner of witnessing the supreme play of the light of consciousness.

To Schopenhauer, however, maya was virtually synonymous with falsehood that obscured truth. Schopenhauer did not consider the deceptive power of maya to operate upon or create the world at large, but rather regarded it as a facet of the human process of knowing.²⁶⁴ He likened it to the principle of individuation as proposed by the Scholastics, as that which prevented “the realization of the metaphysical oneness of all phenomena.”²⁶⁵ Whereas Scholastics regarded that oneness as God, Schopenhauer regarded it as will. For him, the lifting of the “veil of maya” corresponded to the revelation of the true nature of the world.²⁶⁶ For a Vedantist or Buddhist beyond maya lay “that which transcends all forms” and illuminative experience.²⁶⁷

Schopenhauer’s influence upon subsequent philosophers has been great, thanks in no small part to his acquaintance with Eastern thought. Nietzsche writes of how he found his “true vocation” through reading Schopenhauer. Just as it was Schopenhauer who first introduced him to Buddhism “and Indian thought in general.”²⁶⁸ As Nietzsche was one of the most outstanding philosophers of the nineteenth century, an Indian native, Sri Aurobindo, was similarly one of the twentieth’s.

In Aurobindo’s writing, he referred to a truth beyond the normal operations of the human mind. In apprehension of this transcendent reality, the mind is replaced by “luminous vision,” and mortal life is replaced by the “breath and force of the infinite existence.” In his view, human progress consisted of the transformation of light and power in their human scale into “an infinite Truth and an immortal Will.”²⁶⁹ Although well-reputed for his adoption of an evolutionary or transhumanist perspective, his thought was not solely anthropocentric.

Aurobindo’s vision of the cosmos included humanity, but was not limited to its current manifestations. Rather, he regarded contemporary human incarnations as transitory, and as involved with greater forces. It was that which transcends and includes humanity of which he writes in *The Life Divine*:

The universe is a self-create process of a supreme Reality whose presence makes spirit the substance of things,—all things are there as the spirit’s powers and means and forms of manifestation. An infinite existence, an infinite consciousness, and infinite force and will, an infinite delight of being is the Reality secret behind the appearances of the universe...at the gates of the Transcendent stands that...perfect Spirit described in the Upanishads, luminous, pure, sustaining the world...²⁷⁰

Aurobindo's assertion of the existence of luminous Spirit as described in the Upanishads is significant, especially in light of the fact that he came of age at a time when cultural contact between East and West had already been firmly established. Had things gone another way, Aurobindo's philosophy could have described reality in terms of Newtonian physics. Subsequently, Aurobindo's intellectual contributions have found popularity in the West, specifically through his influential work in integral theory.

It would be amiss, however, to glorify Aurobindo's legacy solely in terms of his impact upon Westerners. The fact remains that his acquaintanceship with Hinduism in its modern forms and through its ancient texts has proven valuable for all spiritual seekers, regardless of location. In some senses, his references to the Vedas or Upanishads say more about their enduring value than the excellence of his insight. It is in them that the essential core of the traditions of the East have an excellent expression, and the direct experience of which they sing sounds of illumination.

Interestingly, whether they appear in contexts of Buddhism or ancient Greek rites, experiences of illumination are associated not only with the perception of an otherwise hidden and fundamental reality. They are also associated with overcoming death and attaining eternal life. It would seem that mystics seeking to alter their perception are not the only ones who have a vested interest in the nature of experiences of illumination. Rather, a common denominator among human beings is their mortality. Because of this, all people may be interested in what they might experience during or after death. Such a thing is the focus of the next chapter.

DR. RUPNATHJI (DR. RUPAK NATH)

CHAPTER SIX: DEATH IN PROXIMITY AND BY PROXY

As discussed in previous chapters, illumination experiences can have a profound impact upon how those who have them regard their mortality. Interestingly, illumination experiences are not solely confined to the anticipation of death or the afterlife, but also constitute a significant portion of the accounts of those who have died...and lived to tell about it. Whether through medical or divine intervention, millions of people throughout the world today have had what are known as near-death experiences, or NDEs. That such NDEs often involve visions of light borders on the cliché, though its seeming banality belies its importance, not only for thanatology, but also for a greater understanding of the nature of illumination.

With the publication of Ramond Moody's book, *Life After Life*, in the 1970s, Americans, and subsequently citizens of other countries, expressed an unprecedented level of interest in NDEs. Skeptics who might accuse Moody of fabricating the phenomenon face the challenge of addressing the appearance of both afterlife images and accounts of NDEs throughout thousands of years of human history.²⁷¹ In addition to descriptions of heavenly realms offered by Abrahamic religions in the West, one of the most well-known historical tomes on the subject of the afterlife is *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Some of the oldest surviving papyri upon which sections of the book were written date back to the fifteenth century B.C., though much of the content contained therein can be traced back to more than a millennia before.²⁷²

Among the various spells and incantations for living after death appearing in the Egyptian tome include those addressed to the "Sole One" who shines in the moon and glows in the sun.²⁷³ One passage in particular refers to the transformation of the deceased into a god "who lightens darkness."²⁷⁴ Also included are references to the "Lord of

Light” and the “Lake of Fire.”²⁷⁵ Although saddled with various mythological meanings, such accounts of luminosity indicate the ancient association between light and post-mortem existence—or, perhaps, experience.

That individuals or some aspect of the consciousness associated with them might survive physical death is not a new idea. In the industrialized world, however, the notion that the process of dying has an experiential component that remains essentially hidden from the knowledge of those observing those who die is more noteworthy. To put it boldly, “the experience of death is the opposite from the appearance of death.”²⁷⁶ What does this mean?

A dying person, viewed from without, may seem to yield their claim to consciousness, as if falling asleep or having been anesthetized. It is a leap, however, to then assert that the recently deceased is no longer aware in any shape or form. Viewed from within, from the interior of a dying person, one may not only retain consciousness per se, but also attain consciousness of “the face of the all-embracing, all-accepting beloved.”²⁷⁷ While there is no a priori reason to suppose that such awareness does not take place, the first-person accounts of NDEs suggest that quite often, it does.

Generally speaking, near-death experiences (NDEs) typically begin with “an out-of-body experience, various forms of personal life review, and a passage through a dark tunnel...[their] culmination involves an encounter with a radiant divine being, a sense of judgment with ethical evaluation of one’s life, and visits to various transcendental realms.”²⁷⁸ While it is rare for a report of an NDE to include all of those aspects, considering them together as a standard profile nevertheless provide a useful framework for the investigation of otherwise disparate and idiosyncratic reports.²⁷⁹ There is much research left to do, both in terms of primary investigation and secondary analysis. Enough available data does exist, however, for certain trends to evidence themselves.

In the words of one investigator, one of the most “essential components” of an NDE is its illuminative aspect. In addition to the visual sense of apprehending bright light, NDEs also contain emotionally descriptive language, as well. Near-death encounters with light have elicited feelings of those “similar to being immersed in a sea of unconditional love” or of “absolute safety, like finding shelter from a storm, or returning to the womb.”²⁸⁰ Such associations between illuminative experiences and feelings of love appear in the accounts of mystics as explored in preceding chapters.

Additionally, “a very real sense of peace and painlessness” following intense pain also tends to figure into NDE accounts. At the same time, some reports of the experience of death involve going into darkness, whether it is conceived of as a tunnel or otherwise. Such experiences of the dark, however, generally resolve into discoveries of a very bright light that, nevertheless, “does not hurt the eyes” toward or into which one moves.²⁸¹

One individual recalled the feeling of being pulled and ascending rapidly into a dark “tunnel vortex,” at the end of which was a “very little tiny pinpoint of light that kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger.”²⁸² As is not uncommon in such cases, the person came upon the understanding that she could not go deeper into the light because, if she did, “she would be unable to go back into her body.”²⁸³ The difficulty interpreting such accounts may be just as difficult as their initial formulation; many NDErs complain of the challenge of verbalizing their experiences. Fortunately, studies across time and place can facilitate meaningful analysis.

Contemporary cross-cultural investigation has revealed that NDEs as reported in Western countries are not the only ones to have taken place. Although each has their own local flavor, as one might expect, differences among accounts amount to “slight variations of the NDE image to which we are accustomed.”²⁸⁴ If, on balance, humanity’s current reporting of NDEs is internally consistent, what of future accounts, or those from historical sources? The consensus appears in favor of their commonality.

Whether this commonality is attributable to genetics, the structure and function of the human nervous system, or cultural universals remains undetermined. Into this theoretical vacuum, some speculate on the ability of NDE reports to shed light on religious, spiritual, and metaphysical philosophical issues. Such speculation runs rampant in so-called New Age circles. Despite the lack of formal authority afforded to New Age interpretations, they nevertheless accumulate, circulate, and find themselves the object of sociological study.

Not all NDE-related accounts, however, have gone dismissed by traditional authorities. Perhaps most pivotal to discussions of the transcultural meaning of NDEs is a document that is estimated to be over one thousand years old. Whether appropriated by New Agers, recognized by those privileged by traditional power structures, or appearing in numerous translations and adaptations as of late, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* has caused quite a stir.

Composed by Buddhist monks, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* has been used for centuries in the conduct of funerary rites. It was written for use in teaching individuals to “direct and control awareness” for the purpose of achieving “that level of understanding variously called liberation, illumination, and enlightenment.”²⁸⁵ One of the text’s core messages is that one’s death should inspire more than fear due to it being a “rare opportunity” to apprehend “one’s true nature” upon the disintegration of one’s constitutive “mental and physical processes.”²⁸⁶ Although “rare” relative to other life experiences, death is something that all people do—or will—have in common. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* has helped countless individuals to prepare for their final bodily transformation.

Reportedly, before the death of the body, the act of dying involves a process whereby one's senses dissolve. Concurrent with the moment of death itself, the "opportunity" of a lifetime, one's awareness shifts and attains a state called "the clear light." According to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, if one recognizes the clear light as reality, "one immediately achieves liberation from samsara, the cycle of rebirth."²⁸⁷ Although contextualized in the parlance of Eastern religion, such illuminative experiences occur in the West, as well.

Although not necessarily dealt with in a traditional religious context, NDE-related illumination nevertheless carries with it profound implications. According to medical doctor and psychologist Stanislav Grof, his therapeutic work with individuals has revealed the "important healing, transformative, and evolutionary potential" of an experiential confrontation with death."²⁸⁸ Although trained in empirical science, Grof does not hesitate to add that such encounters "can lead to a powerful spiritual opening."²⁸⁹

In the words of one NDEr:

This magnificent light seemed to be pouring through a brilliant crystal. It seemed to radiate from the very center of the consciousness I was in and to shine out in every direction through the infinite expanses of the universe. I became aware that it was part of all living things and that at the same time all living beings were part of it.²⁹⁰

The above account of light as witnessed during an NDE reads like a spiritual epiphany, and with good reason. The apparent luminosity of consciousness, coupled with the apprehension of it in unbounded relationship to life as a whole is reminiscent of the words of Abhinavagupta or Bohme. Similarly, they also hearken back to the insights of Bergson and Schopenhauer. In this way, the illumination of NDEs bears a striking resemblance to much of what is contained in preceding chapters.

It should come as little surprise, then, that additional studies of NDEs have revealed their resemblance to descriptions from Egyptian and Tibetan books of the dead, as well as experiences as relayed "by subjects in psychedelic sessions and modern experimental psychotherapy."²⁹¹ While one's proximity to the end of his or her life can engender "a very distinctive state of consciousness," such a state or opportunity is not limited to those who are close to death.²⁹² In addition to the use of drugs and psychotherapeutic methods, meditation, yoga, and shamanic journeys can "lead essentially to the same state of consciousness" as characterized by "an encounter with the light," and feelings of "ineffable joy" or "total knowledge."²⁹³

There is yet another way that is, although perhaps less ethical, able to bring about an NDE. Evidence suggests that truly believing that one is about to die can be just as

effective in eliciting an NDE as being “physically close” to dying.²⁹⁴ An expectation of immanent death or its threat seems to catalyze the mysterious process whereby an NDE is generated. In the NDE literature, a common example of this involves someone who is mountain climbing, falls in a way that seems as if it could be lethal, and then lands, remaining more or less intact. Despite the fact that one’s life wasn’t truly ceasing, such an individual can experience each of the aspects of a typical NDE.²⁹⁵

This finding is significant, for it suggests that cognition can influence or trigger the onset of an NDE. While this neither confirms nor denies things such as the presence of a soul or consciousness that survives death or the existence of an afterlife, it does imply that, with sufficient skill, one could bring about his or her own NDE through the power of thought, and without needing to subject oneself to physical danger. As the Tibetan view suggests that the experience of dying provides one with a desirable opportunity to realize his or her true nature, it follows that mentally triggering an NDE might help one to do the same. Sure enough, “sects of Tibetan Buddhism developed sophisticated practices in which the stages of death and the intermediate state were anticipated and simulated.”²⁹⁶

Presumably, such practices included meditation. This would make sense, given not only Buddhist tradition, but also the fact that the brain waves of a person in deep meditation often resemble those of a dying person.²⁹⁷ In this sense, Tibetan Buddhist practices and those like them may allow one to taste death before he dies, to paraphrase Abraham a Sancta Clara. And what might this sort of death taste like? In addition to the accounts of illuminative visions given by both Buddhists and NDErs, they may also feel “euphoric” and have senses of “peace and happiness.”²⁹⁸

Additionally, some reports indicate that others have achieved similar states through hypnosis or the ingestion of psychedelic drugs. In the words of one researcher, “the images that appear during psychotropic ‘trips’ are sometimes similar to those reported during NDEs.”²⁹⁹ I do not include references to drugs in order to, in the words of sociologist Michael Kearl, “make dying sound like a lovely acid trip (turn on, tune in, drop dead).”³⁰⁰ Rather, I offer them to provide a basis of comparison for those so acquainted as well as to maintain intellectual honesty. The parallels between experiences catalyzed by dying, spiritual discipline, and the use of certain drugs exist and are well established in the literature. Such parallels are evident perhaps nowhere as obviously as in an adaptation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* known as *The Psychedelic Experience*.

First published in 1964, *The Psychedelic Experience* was written by three researchers at Harvard University, all of whom held Ph.d.s: Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and Ralph Metzner. According to one historical commentator, *Experience* transformed *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* into a manual for the use of LSD, “describing not death...but the various hallucinations encountered in what used to be called an acid

trip.”³⁰¹ *Experience* gained additional notoriety when a phrase from it appeared in the Beatles song “Tomorrow Never Knows” on the album *Revolver*: “Turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream.”³⁰² Of course, the advice as popularized by the Beatles (and the many musicians who subsequently covered the song) takes the form of a general directive, whereas in *Experience*, its appropriateness is conditional, and should be heeded “[w]henever in doubt.”³⁰³

The authors of *Experience* interpreted The Tibetan Book of the Dead to concern itself with the “death and rebirth” of the personal ego and not the physical body per se.³⁰⁴ Facilitating this interpretation was their belief that the book’s original authors cloaked this doctrine in an “exoteric façade adopted to fit the prejudices of the Bonist tradition in Tibet.”³⁰⁵ The idea that one would be subject to metaphorical death and rebirth while still living is compatible with Buddhist teachings as discussed in the preceding chapter, specifically those that suggest there is no such thing as an everlasting individual soul per se. Recognizing this notion as truth could lead to a transformation of one’s sense of selfhood or its elimination entirely, thus facilitating one’s attainment of the light of nirvana. Conversely, a taste of nirvana or a glimpse of divine light might transform or “kill” one’s ego or self-concept.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, physical death could entail “entry into infinite light and everlasting life” wherein one attains “the bliss of supreme wisdom, utter peace, and infinite light.”³⁰⁶ According to author and lecturer D.T. Suzuki, the enlightened and recently deceased may feel that light as “soft, warm, and proximate,” and thus as “a compassionate working.”³⁰⁷

In *Experience*, its authors draw parallels between Buddhist accounts of NDEs and the illuminative experiences of Western saints and mystics. Their comparison hinges upon the similarity of reports involving the “conscious recognition of the Clear Light” as it corresponds to an “ecstatic condition of consciousness.”³⁰⁸ From their vantage point, NDEs and spiritual epiphanies the world over that share an illuminative component are not only significantly congruent with each other, but also with experiences catalyzed by psychedelic drugs.

The authors of *Experience* assert plainly and intriguingly that such drugs do not “produce” transcendent experiences per se.³⁰⁹ Rather, in their view, such substances can act as a “chemical key” that “opens the mind” and “frees the nervous system from its ordinary patterns and structures.”³¹⁰ Meditative practices and death can deliver a similar liberation from ordinary patterns and structures, resulting in experiences of illumination. The authors also suggest that what one perceives once the ego has died and the mind has opened, regardless of the method employed, remains fundamentally the same to all who behold it.

“The White Light” that one experiences in a liberated state may be ineffable to many, though an accounting of possible interpretations appears in *Experience*.³¹¹ In the language of archetypes and religious symbols, the light may be considered as “God the Creator,” “The Central Sun,” or “Radiant Father-Mother.”³¹² In more abstract, metaphysical language, one may regard that light as “The Power which makes all shapes visible,” “The Source of all Organic Life,” or “The Female Creative Principle.”³¹³ That such symbols often signify consciousness and will, and specifically will as the biological continuity described by Bergson, is rather straightforward.

At another level, even the religious and metaphysical imagery are in literal accord, specifically in as much as the Sun is, from an ecobiological perspective, indeed the source of Life on Earth. And, as recounted in the previous chapter, the Sun was associated with the Hindu god Agni, who played a crucial role in both Vedic texts and mystical aspirations of the rishis who composed them and eventually gave rise to Vedantism and Buddhism in its many forms.

As one might expect, the Sun occupied a central position in a vision of an NDE in the Upanishads. According to the text, at “the moment of death,” one’s soul would separate from his body and begin its ascension.³¹⁴ It would rise “upwards on the rays of the Sun.”³¹⁵ Not only was the issue of the Sun the means whereby one’s soul would be elevated, the Sun also constituted the destination of one’s soul. The Sun, was considered “the Gate of the World,” and those souls who possessed the correct knowledge could pass through it to the beyond.³¹⁶

Other civilizations, in addition to those of Asia, have placed an emphasis on the importance of NDEs. According to Grof, psychospiritual death and rebirth experiences “similar to those of shamans,” played a key role in ancient mystery rites.³¹⁷ This recontextualizes some of the information presented in the third chapter of this book regarding the religious practices of pre-Christian Greece. The Dionysian Mysteries were intimately associated with death and resurrection, as well as ceremonial intoxication. While it remains unclear to what extent participants had illuminative experiences per se, we do know that they expected to gain freedom from mortality, and perhaps even achieve life after death due to their participation in the Mysteries and their involvement with immortal light.

This expectation survived or reappeared through the later Mysteries at Eleusis. Initiates there believed that they would behold a constant, dazzling, and splendid light upon dying, just as they had at the supreme vision the rites in which the rites culminated, the epopteia. The Greek poet Pindaros writes of those who have witnessed such a vision before their deaths as blessed, for they know “the end of life, as well as its divinely granted beginning.”³¹⁸ According to a Roman’s account of what took place at Eleusis,

there existed nothing “higher than these mysteries...They have not only shown us the way to live joyfully, but they have also taught us to die with hope.”³¹⁹

While evidence does not suggest that the ancient mystery rites involved NDEs per se, it does indicate that something transpired akin to them. Just as participation in the rites and the epopteia facilitated individuals’ hopeful acceptance of their deaths, such rites also placed them in experiential contact with divinity and the origin of life. The resemblance between the consequences of involvement in the Mysteries and having an NDE is quite pronounced.

Research into reports of NDEs has shown that most have an emotional character that can only be described as overwhelmingly positive. In contrast to traditional Western portrayals of death as a grim reaping, the subjective experience of dying often involves “profound feelings of peace or bliss, joy, and a sense of cosmic unity.”³²⁰ One psychologist went so far as to assert that the content of NDEs frequently has nothing to do with death whatsoever, “much less with life after death.”³²¹ Rather, in his interpretation, NDEs do not indicate the existence of an afterlife or the likelihood of one’s participation in it as an individual soul as much as they engender states of “cosmic consciousness” that provide glimpses of one’s “expanded eternal nature.”³²² As discussed above, such awareness tends to equate with experiences of illumination.

Unless one is staunchly inured to a materialist conception of human life, psychospiritual interpretation of NDEs is difficult to avoid. Whether one is a Tibetan monk from one thousand years ago attentive to the reality of the clear light or the manager of a sales team in twentieth century America who thinks he is having a heart attack, the experience seems to be fundamentally similar. Apart from visions of light, the common denominator of NDEs seems to be not the death of the body, but the death of the ego. In the words of pioneering researcher Kenneth Ring:

You die to yourself, and you are born as a cosmic being. You understand that you are a part of the cosmos, that there is an aspect of you that is beyond birth and death, that is eternal. Any experience that brings about an ego death will also bring about many of the same perceptions and insights as those that occur to near-death experiencers. Ego death is really a...key that unlocks the door to the transcendental world and shows you who you really are and what the nature of things is.³²³

While NDErs can undergo the deaths of their egos and their rebirths as cosmic beings, the story does not end there. After individuals realize an eternal aspect of themselves and gain insight into the nature of the universe, they do not remain “in the presence of the light,” but rather return to their bodies and, from the outside, those bodies—those people—appear to return to life. I have already established that many who undergo such ordeals have shared descriptions of their experiences, though relaying their

stories tends not to be their sole preoccupation. What do those who have returned from the dead, and who have returned from a state of illuminative cosmic consciousness, concern themselves with?

A common finding is that of a change in the attitudes and value systems of those who have had an NDE upon their return to everyday life. Given the ubiquity of pleasant NDEs, many experiencers understandably report a diminished fear of dying again. Interestingly, their interest in formal religion tends to wane whereas they express an increase in “spiritual values and lifestyles.”³²⁴ A new or renewed thirst for knowledge is also common, as is “a more accepting and tolerant attitude toward people in general.”³²⁵ And, perhaps most concordant with traditional religious notions of ego death, those who have reported an NDE also have reported a subsequent urge to provide assistance and service to others.³²⁶

Typically, the testimony of experiencers contains what they may refer to as the “most important” thing that they have gleaned from their NDE, namely that one should “stop and help people...[and] all living things.”³²⁷ Other “lessons” shared by those who have returned to life include the correctness of providing encouragement and comfort to others, as well as the importance of comprehending the motivations of those who exhibit cruelty and unskillful means. NDErs who gain such insight are then inclined to share it compassionately with those who they may have once been regarded as enemies. In the words of one experiencer, it is “better to do everything out of love.”³²⁸

To be sure, NDEs and other similar experiences do not make people into saints or moral authorities. They do, however, seem to prompt transformations within those who undergo them. People who return to life tend to believe different things and behave in a different way than prior to their proximity to death. While many experiencers have found that their NDE convinced them of the existence of an afterlife, even those who would not claim certainty in such matters still tend to come away from the experience with a new emphasis upon the “supernatural forces or possibilities” that exist.³²⁹ (To what extent such forces at work in the world pertain to illumination constitutes a portion of the next chapter.)

As indicated above, many experiencers become “convinced of a life after death.”³³⁰ Additionally, this may bear some causal relation to the fact that many who report having had an NDE also report a “dramatically reduced fear of death.”³³¹ Nevertheless, despite the lack of fear of death, belief in an afterlife, and having had what is usually a markedly pleasant experience of dying, those do return to life tend to persist in living, and tend to “value life.”³³² As great as cosmic consciousness may be, and however much NDEs may change the priorities of those who have them, experiencers still find the mundane world to be of import. This is not to say, however, that they find it to be on solid ontological footing.

Some experiencers of NDEs have asserted that “their NDEs were as real or more real” than their ordinary experiences.³³³ (Such an assertion is reminiscent of the relationship between brahman and maya as explored in the previous chapter.) Some believe that, upon returning to life, the minds of NDErs “process the individual succession of events characteristic of earthly space-time.”³³⁴ At the same time, however, having tasted the Absolute, an unshakable memory of that taste remains in the minds of experiencers, a taste of something “more real,” “more inherent,” and “more primitive” than what is perceived through the dividing lens of spatial and temporal categories.³³⁵ In this way, the experience of mundane life seems to correlate to Bergson’s notion of intellect, whereas the experience of the Absolute seems to correlate to Bergson’s notion of intuition.

But how are we to judge what experiences are more real or less real than others? Professor Michel Lefeuvre suggests an interesting approach. For those who liken an NDE to a figment of the imagination or a dream, Lefeuvre encourages us to examine what happens when we feel that what we are dreaming is real. While we may feel that it is real while we dream it, that feeling tends to fade as soon as we wake up. In other words, the dream does not hold up to a more convincing sense of being physically situated in space and time. Our experience of waking life, however, however well organized along spatial or temporal lines, does not feel as real as that which NDErs report experiencing. This leads to the notion that perceptions bounded by space-time are but a “degraded form” of what people perceive via “the mind’s intuition during the NDE.”³³⁶

While such a claim regarding the perception of reality is thought provoking, it nevertheless may appear outlandish in that it flies in the face of conventional opinion. As should be the case with any new theory, debunkers have emerged from the woodwork. The guardians and upholders of convention, however, have a vested interest in denying the veracity of such alternative perceptual content. Not surprisingly, some of the most outspoken critics of NDEs have been those whose knowledge claims are privileged in society. Thus the most common critiques in the contemporary West come from scientists, mainly psychological and medical professionals.

DEFENDING THE LIGHT AGAINST PRIVILEGED HATERS

While neither medicine nor psychology are monolithic enterprises, they share in common a similar relationship to the status quo, and a well-established bias toward materialism ideologically. While mainstream professionals from neither camp have gone out of their way to deny illuminative experiences and NDEs per se, they have made efforts to control and define their possible—or socially acceptable--interpretations.

Psychology in the West is generally regarded as an outgrowth of nineteenth century medicine, and, in large part, of the work of Sigmund Freud, M.D. Although Freud's work strays from strict materialist interpretations of reality and human existence, it nevertheless features some of the cultural assumptions of his milieu and the industrialized West at large. Most relevant among these to this discussion is the notion that death is threatening and annihilating to, as well as universally feared by, human individuals. In Freud's system, people tend to deny what they fear, and thus logic would have it that the West engages in a tremendous denial of death.³³⁷

The denial of death can occur both culturally as well as intra-personally. Viewed from such a perspective, individual near-death experiences themselves and popular enthusiasm for them can both be interpreted as a means of attempting to deny the reality of death. In the words of one researcher, when confronted with the "prospect of annihilation, the mind turns to a last-minute show to relax us before the lights of the theatre go out."³³⁸

The use of the cinematic metaphor is telling, not only because it confirms its popularity as a metaphor for conscious experience, but also because it suggests that death equates with the cessation of conscious experience. The "light of the theatre" going out is almost a direct reversal of what a multitude of sources recognize as a key feature of NDEs, namely the presence and increasing intensity of light. Whether or not this reversal is further evidence of the efficacy of NDEs as a mechanism of denial is open to debate. What remains clear, however, is that the reality of the "dying of the light" (or one's ability to perceive it) is an assumption that is not proven by scientific investigation nor held by all people across all cultures.³³⁹

Similarly, the supposition that death is universally feared is also specious. While it may be reasonable to posit a human "fascination" with death, not all cultures define or share the same beliefs about death in the same way.³⁴⁰ Within this diversity is a wealth of contradiction. Whereas Freud and his ilk may believe that death amounts to the "cessation of mental functions," and is therefore unimaginable by one who imagines by virtue of mental functions, others take quite an opposing view.³⁴¹ In the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, one's awareness does not cease at death, but rather passes through a variety of states and stages until its progression culminates in the "achievement of buddhahood."³⁴²

Additionally, those schooled in Tibetan Buddhism might agree with a Westerner's claim that nobody who has actually died and remained dead has been able to relay information about death to the living. This superficial concordance hinges upon a more fundamental disagreement: Tibetan Buddhists teach that no one dies and remains dead, but rather all pass through successive reincarnations, and thus everyone now living has

died before and, unless they become a Buddha, will likely die again.³⁴³ It appears likely that such a doctrine did not inform Freud's musings on human responses toward death.

The case of Tibetan Buddhism, however, is not all that unique. It resembles the conditions in many preindustrial societies with regard to human mortality. Generally, their views of death agree, seeing it not as an "ultimate defeat" or "the end of everything," but rather as transition that had great spiritual and social importance.³⁴⁴ One of the underlying causes supposed by researchers in this area for why attitudes toward death in industrial societies differ so greatly from those found among preindustrial cultures is that, in the latter, individuals have access to "experiential training for dying" that often involves transcendent states of consciousness wherein their identities expand beyond their embodied egos.³⁴⁵ Although such training is not unknown in the West, it has, for the most part, fallen into obscurity and disrepute. Conversely, in preindustrial societies, experiences associated with death are often interpreted "as visits to important dimensions of reality that deserved to be experienced, studied, and carefully mapped."³⁴⁶

While there is a growing movement in the West toward reclamation of and innovation in the art of dying, to what extent that will address individual's spiritual concerns and experiences remains to be seen. If death continues to be regarded as a medical problem, as it has been for some time, one must wonder what the influence of the secular medical establishment will continue to be upon how it is approached, coped with, and accomplished. Consider a recent Gallop survey of doctors that revealed approximately "68 percent of them indicated that they did not believe in life after death," whereas "16 percent held 'no opinion.'"³⁴⁷ While, in the public at large, one's level of education is not correlated to how he or she might interpret accounts of NDEs, on the whole, "the beliefs of those with a medical education preclude the possibility of life after death."³⁴⁸

The preclusion of this possibility seems to have resulted in some strained efforts to detract from the credibility of NDE reports. With specific regard to experiences of illumination, various medical facts have been trotted out in an attempt to account for them through a reductionist medical model. Most basically, a doctor's explanation for NDE visual phenomena tends to resort to the impact of pupil dilation and oxygen starvation upon retinal and brain function. While there seems little if anything in NDE literature that might contradict the demonstrable facts of ocular and aerobic processes, standard readings of such processes alone cannot account for all aspects of NDEs, nor their illuminative aspect in particular.

It is a generally accepted truth that widened pupils allow more light into the eyes than normal, just as it is known that pupils may widen due to a variety of causes, including those such as "disease, fever, medicines, or oxygen starvation."³⁴⁹ To attribute postmortem illuminative experiences to pupil dilation alone, however, seems something

of a stretch. Pupil dilation compounded by abnormal brain function, however, does seem more plausible. The oxygen starvation that accompanies and hastens many deaths alone could account for functional brain abnormalities, perhaps producing even such novelties as “sensory and visionary experiences.”³⁵⁰

Medical science can also explain the sense of passing through a dark tunnel through reference to oxygen starvation. In the words of one doctor, because:

outer regions of the retina are more sensitive to oxygen starvation than the central retina...people suffering moderate oxygen starvation first notice failure of their peripheral vision. This means that those affected by moderate to severe oxygen starvation can only see a central spot of light surrounded by darkness: a situation similar to looking through a tunnel.³⁵¹

Those who challenge reductionist medical explanations for NDEs can counter such medical explanations in two main ways. The first is by offering counterexamples for which materialist explanations cannot account. The second is by conceding that while some aspects of NDEs may have physiology at their root, such somatic origins should not necessarily negate the veracity of the interpretations of what is experienced.

One of the most common of the former refutations is the counterexample of congenitally blind individuals reporting illumination as part of their NDEs. Regardless of the width of such a person’s pupil, they were still incapable of sight—*until they died*. And, upon returning to life, the people who were blind come back blind. Something unusual happened for a spell that had nothing to do with the oxygenation of retinal tissue, though perhaps it did have something to do with abnormal neurological functioning. By and large, the NDEs of people who cannot normally see are “indistinguishable from those of sighted persons” even with regard to “encountering a light.”³⁵² In death, even the blind are capable of something akin to mystical illumination.

Secondarily, the reductionist interpretations of NDEs propagated by medical professionals is, in many ways, inappropriate. Not because it is a strong stance that is part of a heated debate, but rather because it often involves an overstepping of the bounds of one’s expertise without sufficient qualification. In other words, a doctor may be an expert at setting my broken bone, but that doesn’t make him an expert at everything—not an expert chef, not an expert choreographer, and not an expert philosopher. That last one is the most relevant to this discussion, because there are doctors out there who seem to have publicly mistaken their grasp of anatomy and physiology with mastery of epistemology and phenomenology.

As one NDE researcher put it:

...if neuroscience wishes to enter the *philosophic* domain, to claim that NDEs—or smiles or dreams—are *nothing but* physical mechanisms, it will need better and more credible equipment for its purposes than mere physics, chemistry, and rhetoric.³⁵³

To be clear, I am not attempting to discourage interdisciplinary inquiry—quite the opposite. It is my belief that if neuroscientists were better versed in philosophy, and the general public better educated in both fields, much of these controversies would dissipate, or at least become a more constructive dialog. That human bodies can be analyzed as physical mechanisms is irrefutable. As irrefutable is that human experience cannot be analyzed as physical mechanisms alone. To what extent each path of analysis informs the other is a question for future researchers.

What remains is the fact that a central feature of reported NDEs, even among the congenitally blind, is illumination. Traditionally and presently, visions of light are often interpreted to signify that one has gained knowledge of reality in a more meaningful and immediate way than is ordinary, and that the character of reality is essentially loving, caring, creative, and dynamic. Additionally, such encounters with light are also connected with the persistence of consciousness independent of one's physical body, and of the death or diminishment of one's individual ego.

Physical trauma or the metabolism of physical substances can facilitate such illuminative experiences, just they can also come about through certain cognitions. Even when physical means appear to have elicited illuminative experiences, one must wonder to what extent such physical changes correlated to, caused, or were caused by state-altering cognitions. In addition to the interdependency of body and mind in catalyzing NDEs and experiences like them, one must also note accounts suggestive of the capacity of body and mind to dissociate completely.

The following chapter explores illuminative experiences in the context of an integral association between consciousness, universal will, and human bodies.

CHAPTER SEVEN: NOT-SO-SUBTLE ENERGY

While reductionist science may argue that near death experiences or illuminative experiences in general are due to nothing but physical processes, metaphysicians and mystics might counter that physical processes themselves are nothing but expressions or manifestations of that light which is simultaneously will and consciousness. In the parlance of the cinematic metaphor, the film on the screen may be a misapprehension of the unity of the projector bulb and audience, or perhaps it is their creative issue or play.

To apprehend the light in or as physical processes speaks to an integrated mode of perception, wherein intellect, intuition, and that which gives rise to them and which they behold are as one. If one were to perceive in such a way, what would he or she see?

That such a mode of perception would entail an illuminative experience should not come as a surprise. But beyond characterizing visions as supernal luminosity, how might the light come across? How could we, as human beings, first begin to notice it? While previous chapters have touched upon the illuminative power of meditation, death, and the spontaneity of grace, they have not placed the light in a personal or embodied context. That is what this chapter, however, focuses on: the light in or as experiences of human physicality.

Some may scoff at the notion that their bodies constitute a valid launch pad from which to conduct spiritual or metaphysical inquiry. The conceptual separation of spirit and matter has a long history, one whose entirety is outside the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that the denigration of the material world and dissociation from one's identity as an embodied being tend to go hand in hand, as they have for millennia. For

many, transcendence has meant escape from the physical as well as from the self. For others, however that perspective has been neither meritorious nor obvious.

It is to those others that we now turn our attention, and to their teachings. And, as fascinating a subject as traditions of spiritual embodiment may be, for our purposes we will only examine those aspects that contribute to a broad-based conception of them as they relate to experiences of illumination.

That said, there might still be those who remain skeptical of this subject and prefer their discussions of spirituality to have a more abstract or cosmological air. To them I would point to the the Kashmiri Saivite tradition as articulated in the wake of Abhinavagupta, who we touched upon in chapter five. In that worldview “the individual body does not differ from the universal body,” which therefore implies that there is “no need to go out of the body to perceive the universal.”³⁵⁴ While the Saivites have asserted that the human body, and the cosmos as large, is “pervaded by Consciousness,” they have not denied the materiality of that same cosmos, nor their bodies that function as an integral part of it.³⁵⁵ Rather, they viewed physical aspects of existence as expressions or manifestations of consciousness, and that apprehension of this fundamental unity between the physical and the metaphysical was synonymous with illuminative experience.

The Saivites, for all their originality, were not alone. Throughout human history the human body has not only been regarded as a microcosm of the whole, but also as constituted by and capable of revealing the true nature of things through light. One of the primary ways in which this motif emerged was through people’s intuitive apprehension of various life forces or subtle energies. The research of Edward Bruce Bynum has revealed that testimonies of “bioluminous energy” that moves through the human body have been reported by “innumerable cultures from time immemorial,” and that such energy is often directly observable to many who practice “psychospiritual disciplines.”³⁵⁶ Characteristic features of how this energy has been regarded across time and space include its status as the “primal energy” of humanity, its association with “evolutionary forces,” as well as its tendency to ascend against gravity as if it “seeks to be united or reunited with light.”³⁵⁷

The association of biological energy with experiences of illumination really does span the globe. For example, the !Kung people of southwest Africa report being possessed by energy that normally is asleep in the stomachs of individuals and that, when awakened by ritual dancing, it begins to travel upwards until it reaches the top of the body. After meeting with the brain, “it dissolves or transcends the egoic consciousness in a wave of ecstatic energy and intelligent light.”³⁵⁸ One master of that altered state said that when he occupies it, “I can really become myself again.”³⁵⁹

The association between illuminative experience and the regaining or recognition of one's true identity is not unprecedented. Rather, one need look no farther than the mystical tradition of India to find other similar assertions. As explored in chapter five, the pursuit of Self-realization or the union of atman and brahman serves as the backbone of many different disciplines and practices. Although such terminology is usually associated with Hindu or Vedantist exploits, a similar thread can be traced through Buddhism, as well—and with the energy of the human body in mind.

In Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, one may utilize bodily energies during meditative practice. According to Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama, mobilization of such energies through mental exercise takes place through paying special attention to “channels, winds, and drops.”³⁶⁰ In the Tibetan system, the winds are “vital energies” that cause all bodily movement and the channels are the multitude of conduits through which the winds travel. The drops, however, are the “pure essence” of male and female reproductive fluids that not only constitute the physical body at conception but also contain vital energy, as well. Through meditation, individuals can regulate the distribution of the winds, thereby altering one's consciousness. Without the employment of such techniques, individuals may only glimpse certain states of consciousness “at the moment of death.”³⁶¹ When knowledge of the channels, winds, and drops is employed, however, individuals may gain access to illuminative states as described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (and in the preceding chapter of this book).

The relationship between subtle energies associated with the force of life and visions of light associated with death or near-death experiences presents an interesting puzzle, at least for those that conceive of life and death as two separate entities engaged in unrelenting opposition. How might such an apparent disparity be reconciled? Without resorting to any explanation of excessive complexity, one may instead view the energies of life and death as fundamentally unified—but even that would imply that some disparity existed between them that required getting resolved. Rather, if one views life and death as aspects of one ongoing process, the energies of growth and decay are not plural and antagonistic, but rather essentially one and ongoing, as well. And, at an even deeper level, that one and ongoing force may be regarded as a manifestation or expression of an even more fundamental unity or whole, that of consciousness and will.

The fundamental unity of apparent opposites has been one of the main tenants of Taoism for thousands of years. It seems fitting, then, that illuminative experience as related to subtle energy has also been a part of their ancient traditions. In China, Taoists have practiced an exercise known as the “circulation of the light,” whereby they direct energy through their bodies as synchronized with their inhalations and exhalations.³⁶² Another example from Taoist China holds true for those who have already learned how to achieve “stillness of mind.”³⁶³ In that tradition, individuals accumulate vital power within

their lower abdomens through meditation until it erupts, spilling itself into the body at large and causing various movements and sensations. That energy, called prana by some, is felt as hot, and “not only spreads its warmth to parts of the body, but may even become bright and perceptible to the meditator.”³⁶⁴ Thus prana is directly associated with illumination—but what is prana?

This is not an easy question to answer. As we will see, good translations of the various names for subtle energies into English are difficult to come by. According to one source, prana cannot be considered as “consciousness,” “Life,” “energy,” or “breath,” because those words referred to distinct notions, “whereas prana appears as their common denominator, ranging from conscious universal energy to the very life-force of the body.”³⁶⁵ That said, prana is most commonly rendered as “breath,” though it has also been translated as a verb meaning “to breath forth.”³⁶⁶

In yogic contexts, where the word is most commonly used, prana “enters, leaves, and flows through the body with the breath.”³⁶⁷ Additionally, some consider prana to be an aspect of kundalini, whereas others find kundalini to be “made of breath,” or prana.³⁶⁸ Assuredly, this controversy is somewhat esoteric and its resolution certainly is not pressing for our investigation. But what is kundalini?

In the words of Indian mystic Gopi Krishna, kundalini:

...is the real cause of all genuine spiritual and psychic phenomena, the biological basis of evolution and development of personality, the secret origin of all esoteric and occult doctrines, the master key to the unsolved mystery of creation, the inexhaustible source of philosophy, art and science, and the fountainhead of all religious faiths, past, present and future.³⁶⁹

Admittedly, such a definition is not particularly specific, though it does paint a rather impressive picture. To be sure, kundalini is quite relevant to a discussion of illuminative experiences and subtle energies, for it is intimately associated with both. To discuss it plainly, however, comes at the risk of being misleading. Time and time again, writers have proclaimed that kundalini “cannot be grasped nor described by the intellect,” and that entire volumes on the subject “fail to convey the slightest idea of what she really is.”³⁷⁰ There is hope, however, for those who have experienced kundalini directly. They might say that it (or she) “is the very source of all life.”³⁷¹

Even ancient Taoist practices by way of Japan demonstrate some familiarity with the basic principles of kundalini, as well as their association with illuminative experience. The practice of *shoshuten*, or “small light circulation” involves using one’s breath to absorb energy and “fuse it” with kundalini.³⁷² After inhaling, one is instructed to hold his

or her breath “in the head,” then to exhale “down the front of the body to the area of the sexual organs.”³⁷³ (We will explore the relationship between sex and subtle energy later in this chapter.) It is believed that this circulates an energy throughout the body that interacts with its bones, glands, organs, and systems and is both nourishing and “luminous.”³⁷⁴

So what is it?

KUNDALINI IN DEPTH

Often referred to as “the serpent power,” kundalini is generally reported to be a form of energy that can move in a serpentine fashion, capable of laying dormant, coiling, and unleashing its power in sudden extensions.³⁷⁵ While it normally seems to slumber near the base of one’s spine, it can rise toward the top of one’s head, either due to adherence to certain practices and disciplines or due to no proactive action in particular. The energetic path from the base of the spine upward may be “blocked” in any number of ways; eliminating or bypassing such obstructions constitutes “the core of the discipline of Kundalini Yoga and all of its various manifestations.”³⁷⁶ Some, such as Gopi Krishna, even go so far as to suggest that kundalini constitutes “the foundation of all Yoga.”³⁷⁷

With regard to kundalini yoga in particular, its practitioners learn how to direct the life energy that normally resides in their reproductive systems toward their brains and beyond. If and when the sexually charged energy makes its way to the top of the skull, individuals can experience “ecstasy, bliss, and clarity of consciousness” in their heads and throughout their bodies.³⁷⁸ Reports also indicate that as kundalini ascends, people can have “out-of-body experiences, profound feelings of peace, and visions of light very similar to those encountered during the NDE.”³⁷⁹ If this association between kundalini and illuminative experience weren’t enough, Gopi Krishna’s account of his experiences with kundalini included “the perception of a luminous energy” that moved “from the surface of his internal organs toward his spinal line and then into the braincore.”³⁸⁰

As the popularity of yoga and other spiritual practices in the West has grown since the mid-twentieth century, reports of kundalini experiences are virtually a dime a dozen. According to the account of one male scientist, his experience involved feeling various cramps and tingles in his lower body. Later:

The tingling rose to his lower back and he “saw” a reddish light there. The light became like a rod which he felt and saw being pushed up his spine. Then it extended forward to the umbilical area with many tingling, vibrating sensations. Step by step, it proceeded up the spine to the level of his heart and then extended forward to stimulate the cardiac plexus. When it reached his head, he “saw” floods of white light, as if his skull were lit up from inside.³⁸¹

The experience of an awakened kundalini can often culminate in illumination. It is important to note that most of these experiences cannot be dismissed as merely visual hallucinations, but rather that they also tend to include vivid kinesthetic and tactile sensations, as well as significant emotional content. When one allows the ascending energy of kundalini to travel up toward the top of the head, he or she may sense a burning sensation “in the top of the cranium.”³⁸² While such a thing may sound like—or feel like—torture for the uninitiated, to a person who is adequately prepared, it can be “accompanied by the most intense feelings of joy and illumination.”³⁸³

Gaining adequate preparation for the awakening of kundalini within one’s body is no small feat. Most of the literature on kundalini stresses its oft-unpleasant and potentially harmful effects and encourages individuals interested in the phenomenon to seek out the advice and tutelage of an experienced master. In the West, individuals who have endured a seemingly premature awakening of kundalini have been diagnosed as psychotic and hospitalized against their will. And, perhaps more significantly, many have reported feeling as if they were insane or in intense pain. Suffice it to say that while some may dismiss kundalini as imaginary or unreal, for those who have known it firsthand it can be quite dangerous.

Once Kundalini has awakened, it can be “an extremely potent force” whose tendency is to “destabilize the uninitiated.”³⁸⁴ In the words of one psychologist who supports the careful and intelligent awakening of kundalini, when improperly handled, it can result in an “extraordinarily powerful energetic movement that tends to radically transform the ego-structured consciousness principle.”³⁸⁵ As stated above, the condition such a transformation engenders can resemble—or become—psychosis. While some recover from such episodes, others do not.

For all of its potential danger, however, cultivating the ascent of kundalini has appeared worth the risks to generations of mystics and seekers. And, for at least some of them, the gamble has paid off. When kundalini rises fully and illumination takes place, the experience can be quite rewarding; of this there can be little doubt. But what exactly is the nature of that reward? Such a question touches upon the issue of how illumination as brought about through raised kundalini is thought of by those who successfully accomplish it and help others to do so.

According to Tantric teachings, the crown of the head is also known as *brahmarandhra*, or “the orifice of Brahman.”³⁸⁶ In this sense, when kundalini ascends to the crown of the head, a sort of channel is opened that allows the energy to join, or reunite, with its divine source. Additionally, one may experience this merger or reunion as the transcendence of one’s individuality or as recognition of the unity of atman and brahman as described in chapter five. In the context of rising kundalini, this recognition also entails the experience of illumination.

As kundalini makes its way toward the crown, it generally encounters and overcomes a number of obstacles. Its final obstacle prior to reaching the crown of the head is known as *bhrumadhya*, and when it is “pierced,” whatever energy has accumulated there gets released.³⁸⁷ Concurrent with the release of that energy is the appearance of a “dot of dazzling light” and/or “a subtle fire flashing forth as a flame.”³⁸⁸ Reportedly, if one focuses his or her attention upon that shimmering as it dissipates then one is “absorbed in the splendor of Consciousness.”³⁸⁹

SEX AND SUBTLE ENERGY

Traditional conceptions of the awakening of kundalini maintain that a common consequence of its ascension is the transformation of the consciousness of the individual in whose body it occurs. The specific nature of that transformation is generally held to be that of the unification of one’s awareness as that of an individual with that of the cosmos as a whole.³⁹⁰ With this in mind, it is significant that the iconography representative of this process involves a depiction of gods in sexual congress, namely Shiva, representing “imminent and all-pervasive consciousness,” and Shakti, who represents “the energetic aspect of the phenomenon.”³⁹¹ Experiences of illumination are often regarded as a consequence of—or direct evidence of—their holy union.

As much as the conscious state of an individual in which kundalini has arisen is subject to transformation, so it would seem that kundalini itself is transformed in the accomplishment of its task. When kundalini reaches the zenith of its ascent, it reportedly “unites” with Siva, after which point it appears as “universal Life,” the “energizer of the living beings,” as one might expect, though it also appears as “absolute Consciousness.”³⁹² This points to a fundamental non-duality between energy and consciousness in Tantric worldviews. The point of their teachings—and the meaning of their illuminative experiences—indicates that, beyond the illusory categories of the analytical mind, the two are fundamentally one.

The basic and eternal unity of Shiva and Shakti, or what they represent, makes the experience of awakening kundalini not an on-again/off-again affair between two gods conducted in the bodies of human individuals per se, but rather a potentially universal psychospiritual process of disillusionment described in mythological allegory. In other words, Shiva and Shakti are never really reunited because they are never really apart to begin with. The experiences associated with the emerging recognition of their ongoing unity, as recognized cognitively, intuitively, and “in the flesh,” constitute the essential core of kundalini’s ascension.

Because Shiva and Shakti are “always already” together as one, the idea that kundalini is transformed into consciousness may make sense as a poetic metaphor, but it

is not to be taken as literally true. This is why conceptions of Shiva as “conscious light (*prakasa*) and self-awareness (*vimarsa*)” do not conflict with the notion that such things are ultimately “the vibration of the divine Energy.”³⁹³ Does kundalini, as a form of subtle energy, become consciousness, or has consciousness arisen from the vibration of energy? In a way, such distinctions are meaningless and arbitrary, and serve only to occlude the non-dual nature of brahman.

After all, those who practice raising their kundalini aim to “reunite all the energies of body, thought, and speech in order to blend them into a single current of intense vibrations” rather than obscure that single current under the weight of intellectual theory.³⁹⁴ The goal is not abstract understanding per se, but direct experience and personal transformation. When that is attained, an individual, all of his or her vibrations or energies, will be “harmoniously blended,” and he or she will identify with Paramasiva [the Absolute].³⁹⁵

To ensure experience of that union, to bridge the apparent gap between “pure Consciousness” and kundalini as it “lies motionless in the ordinary human being,” a variety of strategies may be employed. While various meditative and yogic practices are standard fare in this regard, of particular relevance to an exploration of subtle energies are pursuits that involve sexuality. As mentioned above, both male and female sexual secretions are believed by many to hold energetic powers. One needn’t even engage with bodily fluids, however, to feel or understand the psychological, spiritual, and physical power associated with human sexuality.

In the views of some nondual traditions, pleasure in any form can facilitate Self-realization and serve as a microcosm of the blissful experience of Self at large. This is not only because it feels good, but also because enjoyment usually follows the satisfaction of a particular desire, and thus its extinguishing or cessation. In the words of one scholar, “when desire has been fulfilled one rests within oneself.”³⁹⁶ While this may hold true for any desire or any joy subsequent to its fulfillment, it is especially the case with regard to sexual cravings and fulfillments.

According to some Tantric sects, certain purified forms of sexual congress are the method par excellence for converting somatic pleasure into the bliss of pure consciousness. Although such ritual intercourse differs from that which is born merely of lust and executed without refinement or education, it nevertheless involves “fervor and bodily satisfaction,” and raising pleasure “to its climax.”³⁹⁷ While sexual practices often involve the conscientious raising of kundalini as outlined above, they also serve a more specific agenda of ego transcendence. Through sex, “the polarity of desire can give way to the delight of the Self.”³⁹⁸

The eradication or surpassing of the “polarity of desire” speaks to more than its mere cessation. Rather, implicit in relationships of desire is a presumption of duality between oneself and what one wants. In other words, if you already had or were what you wanted, you would also be less likely to perceive yourself as a separate, isolated individual. A sense of lack or need—the essence of desire—is intimately associated with the belief that one is a finite, separate individual. If one is able to decrease his or her sense of lack, one also helps reduce his or her attachment to an egoic mindset or identity.

This is, in part, why Abhinavagupta puts forth the directive that one should:

Let bliss be experienced...through the unifying friction of the sexes at the moment of mutual enjoyment; and by its means, let the unparalleled, ever-present essence be recognized.³⁹⁹

After the above passage, Abhinavagupta goes on to discuss the recognition of the “ever-present essence” which may well be experienced as Illumination. He states that the “consciousness or breath” that enters the human body and “infuses life to all bodily parts” is known as *ojas*, or the vitality that energizes the entire body.⁴⁰⁰ This *ojas*, however, is not a distinct human or even biological energy per se, but is, in essence, related to “the universal breath” or *anupranana*.⁴⁰¹ In this way the “breath” of the cosmos as a whole is one with that which animates human existence, both in the bodies of individuals as well as, through the sexual function, the species (and perhaps all life) as a whole across generations.

Consider the similarity between this notion and the sense of continuity, and specifically the continuity of life, in the cosmos as expressed by Bergson and explored in chapter three. Like those who discuss *prana* or *anupranana*, he describes the apparent materialization of the “invisible breath” that bears living things.⁴⁰² Additionally, he regards the transmission of life itself as a sort of mysterious power of movement granted through movement and identifies it as “the essence of life.”⁴⁰³ Without getting into the relationship he supposes between this biological power and consciousness per se, it is worthy of note that he suggests its relationship to the transcendence of ego.

In describing the shifting of perspective characteristic of ego transcendence, he writes:

When we put back our being into our will, and our will itself into the impulsion it prolongs, we understand, we feel, that reality is a perpetual growth, a creation pursued without end. Our will already performs this miracle. Every human work in which there is invention, every voluntary act in which there is freedom, every movement of an organism that manifests spontaneity, brings something new into the world...We are not the vital current itself; we are this current already loaded with matter, that is, with congealed parts of its own substance which it carries along its course.⁴⁰⁴

Bergson has become well known for proposing the existence of a sort of biological energy he dubbed *élan vital*, though he did not elaborate on how it may be manipulated or harnessed for healing or spiritual growth in medical or therapeutic contexts. This makes Bergson something of a rarity among those who posit the existence of subtle energies, especially in the West. Many have suggested an essential equivalence between prana, *élan vital*, Qi, and orgone (we will examine the last two shortly).⁴⁰⁵⁴⁰⁶ It should come as little surprise, then, that we have already seen prana and *élan vital* described so similarly as they relate to biological reproduction and ego transcendence. But what of Qi and orgone?

A belief in concordance between the sexuality of human individuals and the greater life of the cosmos has not been confined to Eastern religion or speculative metaphysics. Surprisingly, it has made an appearance in twentieth century science and medicine, and has aroused the scorn of Sigmund Freud as well as the curiosity of Albert Einstein. The subject of such belief is known to us now through the work of one of Freud's former assistants, a doctor named Wilhelm Reich, and often goes by the name of *orgone*.⁴⁰⁷

Unlike its sibling subtle energies, the origins of orgone as a concept are well documented. As Freud formulated his views on human sexuality, he posited the existence of a psychic and emotional energy that he termed *libido*. While the notion of libido facilitated his composition of theoretical explanations for human attitudes and behaviors, Freud regarded it as more of a metaphor or abstract principle than as an actual force per se. Discussing the psychology of individuals was easier with the term libido in use, though Freud did not seek to investigate the properties of libido outside of its applicability as a heuristic device. This, among other theoretical differences, led to Reich's parting company with the famed psychoanalyst.⁴⁰⁸

Different from Freud, Reich approached psychoanalysis from a perspective that suggested a person's body indicated much about their mental functioning. This bias toward the physicality of his clients led to Reich's development and use of innovative treatment strategies that dealt with neurotic psychological patterns through "calling the patient's attention to chronic tensions" and releasing them.⁴⁰⁹ Such bodily releases were often accompanied by the emergence of otherwise repressed emotions and memories, and led to an increase in the patient's well-being. Reich interpreted such findings to indicate that the release of bodily and emotional tension was also a release of dammed-up energy. He initially equated this energy with Freud's idea of libido, though for Reich it was more than a metaphor—it was a bodily, physical force that might be measured empirically.⁴¹⁰

Further research prompted Reich to regard people's orgasms as a means whereby accumulations of this energy could be discharged, and, in turn, allow one to release chronic physical and emotional tensions and thereby overcome neuroses. Reich found corollaries to this physically active psychosexual energy in the movements of microscopic vesicles and came to believe that it was an energy that was germane to all organisms. He named it *orgone*.⁴¹¹ Later, Reich found evidence of orgone as active upon inorganic matter, as well. Eventually he came to posit orgone as "the primordial form of energy," and as more fundamental than matter and other natural forces.⁴¹²

Some researchers into mystical experiences have supposed that the elation and sense of new life common to such experiences may be accounted for in terms of feeling the streaming of orgone in one's body.⁴¹³ Dr. Ola Raknes put forth the notion that awareness of orgone emerging in one's conscious experience may be "responsible for the photisms or subjective light impressions" common among reports in the biographies of spiritual adepts.⁴¹⁴ Reich himself documented his observations of visible "orgone sparks," which he supposed were "the universal radiation of all living matter."⁴¹⁵ He also assumed that, while orgone was not light per se, it could serve as "the medium" for the transmission of light waves.⁴¹⁶

According to Reich's journals and his documented correspondence with Einstein, when he presented Einstein with an orgonoscope, or device for viewing orgone, Einstein reported seeing scintillation right away. To Reich's dismay, however, Einstein regarded what he saw as "subjective light phenomena."⁴¹⁷ That Reich's device may have been capable of eliciting such phenomena, however, is worthy of note, especially with regard to an exploration of illuminative experiences.

The idea of a mysterious energy at work in the human body that, when blocked, corresponded to poor health appears to be one that Reich came about through his original thought and research. It was not, however, unprecedented in human history. In addition to Indian teachings regarding prana and kundalini, the theory and practice of traditional Chinese medicine revolves around *Qi*. In the opinion of at least one Western physician also trained in Traditional Chinese Medicine, a particular kind of *Qi* is "identical" with Reichian orgone energy.⁴¹⁸

I say one kind because *Qi* is a very broadly defined concept in China. According to one guide to alternative medicine, "[t]he Chinese have more than 1000 different representations...of what [Q]i is, which makes defining it extremely difficult."⁴¹⁹ It is notoriously difficult to translate into English, though in Western publications it is generally referred to as a form of life energy or "vital energy."⁴²⁰

According to an introductory text to Traditional Chinese Medicine:

Qi is an invisible substance, as well as an immaterial force that has palpable and observable manifestations. Qi has its own movement and also activates the movement of things other than itself. Qi begets motion and heat. Within the context of the human person, Qi is that which enlivens the body...All physical and mental activities are manifestations of Qi: sensing, cogitating, feeling, digesting, stirring, propagating.⁴²¹

As in the cases of orgone, prana, and élan vital, the sphere of influence attributed to Qi extends well beyond the human body, though it also encompasses it. In testimony to the integral association between living and non-living entities, Qi relates intimately with what Westerners might call abiotic phenomena: the formation of mountains, flowing of rivers, and such. Matter, regarded in the Western tradition as essentially lifeless and inert, is viewed by many as “Qi taking shape.”⁴²² The temptation to associate Qi with physical energy and invoke the succinct majesty of Einstein’s famous equation involving “the speed of light squared” runs high for many, though it may ultimately prove unwise and reductionist.

Enlightenment science has yet to fully account for various conceptions of subtle energy or why healing modalities that employ them actually work. Mysticism and traditional knowledge, however, have put forth their own theories and practices for millennia. While it may be foolish to suggest that one mode of knowledge or inquiry is “right” or “wrong,” it is important to note the high degree of concordance regarding the relationship between subtle energies and illuminative experiences across time and place. To what extent a similar concordance may be found in contemporary scientific circles may be of interest to those who regard contemporary science as *the* final authority on such matters.

A reliance upon conventional scientific inquiry for validation of mystical experiences or their interpretations, however, is unwise. Wilber does a good job of articulating why this is so in *Quantum Questions*. To avoid replicating his thought entirely, suffice it to say that he offers a sound argument against the popular belief that quantum physics supports the insights of traditional mysticism. The main thrust of his reasoning does not revolve around how physics *doesn't* support mysticism (though he does touch on that point), but rather that it *shouldn't have to*. In his words, “[g]enuine mysticism, *precisely* to the extent that it is genuine, is perfectly capable of offering its own defense, its own evidence, its own claims, and its own proofs.”⁴²³

In this sense, practices involving subtle energies, or subtle energies themselves, are not languishing in some ghetto of knowledge waiting to be rescued by positivist science. In the long-term, regarding them as such may do them more harm than good.

In addition to respecting the knowledge claims of Wilber's "genuine" mystical traditions, it is also worthwhile to keep in mind that while reductionist science may argue that all things are due to nothing but physical processes, metaphysicians and mystics might counter that physical processes themselves are nothing but expressions or manifestations of the conjoined twins of will and consciousness, and that their unity appears to some as supernal light.

One might say that recontextualizing conventional science in this manner, whereby it is "swallowed" by more penetrating forms of insight, is all well and good, though it may not actually amount to much. So what if the true nature of reality and selfhood is radically different from what we normally imagine? What value does that knowledge actually have? Such questions take us out of discussions of subtle energies per se and force us to address a different class of issues. It is that class of issues that constitutes the focus of the next chapter.

DR. RUPNATHJIK (DR. RUPAK NATH)

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE VALUES OF ILLUMINATION

In the eyes of some, experiences of illumination may have no value whatsoever. Of course, in that class of person are bound to be at least a few who repudiate all claims of value, either because they consider all to be worthless (which sounds like an unfortunate—or merely neutral—mentality to occupy) or because they find value claims lack an objective basis, and thus lack “real truth.” In the following chapter, I am quite comfortable in acknowledging the apparent baselessness of values, that is to say, their foundation in subjective considerations and thus variability across person, time, and place. I am less comfortable, however, with the notion that experiences of illumination have no value whatsoever.

All sorts of evidence contradict the idea that illuminative experiences lack value, provided that one is not staunchly committed to an ideological position of extreme nihilism (which ultimately contradicts itself). Individuals who have reported experiencing illumination have spoken highly of it, and have encouraged others to have their own similar experiences. Entire cultural institutions have been created and maintained to facilitate experiences of illumination. It is clear that people have valued such experiences, and will likely continue to do so indefinitely. It is in this sense that experiences of illumination can be said to have value—because people value them.

That said, not everyone appreciates experiences of illumination for the same reasons. Some consider such experiences as intrinsically valuable, or worth having for their own sake. In addition to this, others see value in illuminative experiences as arising from a function that they serve in personal as well as social contexts. I will explore the intrinsic, personal, and collective value of illuminative experiences, as well as particular sets of values common to those who have reported them.

As is generally the case, none of the values pertaining to experiences of illumination hold true without exception across the board. Some differences hinge upon how one interprets illuminative experiences, and whether they are considered part of a worthwhile end or whether they are regarded as merely a means. Additionally, not all who have experiences of illumination hold exactly the same values, nor do all forms of social organization benefit from the values germane to experiences of illumination. Despite this diversity, however, significant commonalities can and do exist. Some of those commonalities, in general terms, constitute the remainder of this chapter.

EXPERIENCES OF ILLUMINATION AS INTRINSICALLY VALUABLE

The idea that something is intrinsically valuable can be something of a sticky wicket. On the one hand, it can suggest that something has worth independent of its assessment by partial observer. For example, some might say that the enlightenment of all beings is intrinsically good, regardless of whether or not someone believes it. On the other hand, the notion of intrinsic value can indicate that something has worth, not a means to an end, but rather as the end in itself. A contrast that illustrates this point is that some people sing for their supper, whereas others simply love to sing—in the latter, the singing has intrinsic worth.

Because this section is concerned primarily with the values that people assign to things, and illuminative experiences in particular, we will not examine the possibility that illuminative experiences have some kind of objective worth. We will, however, examine the idea that they are rewarding to certain individuals *in and of themselves*. While this may seem rather straightforward, it is a bit more complicated than it may appear at first blush. For while there is much to like about experiences of illumination, whether or not they are valued as an end unto themselves is a question that demands scrutiny.

If one asserts that he likes illuminative experiences because they feel good, for example, he runs the risk of suggesting that they are merely a means to an end—namely, the end of feeling good. The same goes for those who suggest that illuminative experiences are great because they expand one's mind or because they open one's heart. In as much as the experience is contributing to something else beyond itself it can be regarded as a means and not an end. To the extent that experiences of illumination can be construed to serve a purpose outside of themselves they may be considered to have extrinsic value, but perhaps not intrinsic value. In theory, something could serve a purpose outside of itself and *also* have value for its own sake—one can love to sing *and* get a supper for it.

In this investigation, however, we have yet to establish a basis for claiming that illuminative experiences offer an intrinsic reward. To do that, we would have to posit that

someone could appreciate them solely for what they were, and not just as a means to an end. This can be quite difficult to do, and some might say impossible. Success or failure in this regard depends upon how strict one is or to what depth one probes various ends.

For example, if you say that you like looking at a flower solely because it is beautiful, someone could argue that you value apprehending beauty, and that looking at a flower is but a means to that end. Some might say that, from your perspective, apprehending beauty has an intrinsic worth. However, another may counter by saying that you like apprehending beauty because it makes you feel good; thus apprehending beauty is but a means to the end of having that feeling. Perhaps feeling good has intrinsic value in your book.

But it doesn't stop there. Why do you like to feel good? Perhaps it is because it reinforces a subconsciously held belief that you are safe, or perhaps it is because it makes you more attractive to the opposite sex and thus more likely to procreate and pass along your selfish genes. And there is no a priori reason to assume that primal drives toward reproduction or safety are the end of the line or are the ultimate source of your judgments of what has intrinsic worth. Clearly, one could undermine any assertion of intrinsic value by asserting that "in the end" a particular, supposedly valuable, thing serves as the more important, attractive, or worthwhile thing.

Conversely, to construct an argument that something indeed possesses intrinsic value, all one must do is posit a foundation beneath which no inquiry may penetrate. Thus someone could say—perhaps arbitrarily—that the soul seeks harmony above all or that the exercise of power as it increases and predominates is the most fundamental and noble thing. So as to prevent the disclaiming of such assertions as arbitrary, to silence the objection that such foundations are themselves baseless, philosophers often yoke them to specific metaphysical or cosmological notions, thereby grounding them in the fabric of the universe itself.

While no well-established consensus currently exists on the greater implications of illuminative experiences, there are many reasons to believe that they pertain to spiritual epiphany, and may even be synonymous with one's recognition of the truth of their union with the greater cosmos. That this integral unity between human individuals and the Absolute is not just a matter of perception, but can also be taken as metaphysical feat in some systems, forms the basis for how illuminative experiences may be regarded as having intrinsic value.

According to Wilber's pioneering work in *The Atman Project*, people want to remember that they are one with everything. This, however, may understate the case. He suggests that all beings have an inner knowledge (which he calls *Atman consciousness*) that they are always whole as members of the greater cosmos, though they sometimes

lose sight of that fact. To recall it, to rediscover one's "infinite and eternal Wholeness" is not just a nice thing, but is "men's and women's single greatest need and want."⁴²⁴ Thus, one could argue that whatever is synonymous with fulfillment of that desire has intrinsic value.

Again, it is important to note that whatever leads to "infinite and eternal Wholeness" is likely not intrinsically valuable, for it merely is a means to an end. According to this view, only the regaining of Atman consciousness is intrinsically valuable. This is significant, for Wilber argues that, in essence, all of human development and striving serves as an "attempt to regain Atman consciousness" or as an attempt to gain ultimately unsatisfying substitutes for it.⁴²⁵ In this sense, any experience or endeavor lacks intrinsic value to the extent that it is not Atman consciousness.

Where does this leave experiences of illumination? In short, to the extent that they are synonymous with Atman consciousness, they have intrinsic value. To the extent that they are not synonymous with Atman consciousness, their value is extrinsic. Thus, the question is whether or not they and Atman consciousness are the same thing. Unfortunately, the answer to that question is not clear-cut and is subject to debate. As stated in Chapter One, Wilber's own position on this issue appears to be that illuminative experiences are not equal to Atman consciousness. However, there is much evidence to suggest that they may be.

Consider that Wilber characterizes Atman consciousness an individual's "joining again" with "that which is prior to time...space, self, desire, memory, separation, mortality, identity, mind, body, and world."⁴²⁶ He also describes that with which one (re)joins as "one's highest potential" which is variously known as "Buddha-nature, Atman nature, Spirit," or "God-consciousness."⁴²⁷ That such joining has often been marked by—or been equivalent to—experiences of illumination has been illustrated in preceding chapters.

As discussed earlier, solar symbolism in the Vedas shows a commonality between Agni, light, and atman, particularly with regard to divinization as coincident with the revelation of transformative knowledge or illuminative experience. Essentially, experiences of illumination amount to spirit bringing an individual into contact with itself and causing him or her to recognize that he or she has been spirit all along. According to the Upanishads, the appearance of inner light accompanies "[g]rasping one's own Self," or knowing atman directly.⁴²⁸ And, just as Buddha is reputed to have realized brahman and entered nirvana, he is said to have accessed an "eternal source" of light that illuminates the mind.⁴²⁹

In the history of the West, Plotinus suggests that a self "knowing its Godhood" is "wrought to splendor, brimmed with the Intellectual light."⁴³⁰ Similarly, St. Augustine

asserts the equivalency of illuminative experience and the attainment of God-consciousness when he writes that one who knows truth knows a special light, and that one who knows that light also knows eternity.⁴³¹ Meister Eckhart declared that when the soul's striving for God is achieved, "the soul is called light...God, too, is light and when the divine light pours into the soul, the soul is united with God, as light blends with light."⁴³² Such experiences are but a few of many recorded by mystics for millennia.

Based upon such evidence, it stands to reason that experiences of illumination, at least in some cases, may be achievements of Atman consciousness. In as much as these experiences are the fulfillment of the penultimate desire motivating all people (or even just one person), they may be said to possess intrinsic worth.

EXPERIENCES OF ILLUMINATION AS MEANS

The criteria for establishing that experiences of illumination have value as means, rather than as an end in themselves, are much less intellectually demanding to meet. For example, if someone asserts that they like illuminative experiences because they look nice—or for any other reason outside of the experience itself—they then have extrinsic value. Granted, a prankster could say that he or she liked illuminative experiences because they lacked value, thereby establishing something of a paradox. Such games with logic, however amusing and of their own merit, are not in the spirit of this investigation, and thus fall outside its scope.

In focusing on the extrinsic value of experiences of illumination, it is revealing to consider that while such experiences could conceivably further any aim in some fashion, more often than not they serve a particular constellation of ends. Such ends are often interrelated, as are the various underlying values and goals that, in turn, make experiences of illumination worthwhile. In that sense, illuminative experiences are something of a good bargain, in that they allow one to kill multiple birds with one stone. Having explored the nature of that powerful stone, what is the precise nature of those birds?

A discussion of the various interrelated ends that illuminative experiences serve cannot help but appear somewhat arbitrarily fragmented, especially given their frequently simultaneous coincidence. An informed analysis, however, suggests at least a few broad categories of ends that one may sensibly explore without constantly making reference to the others. In this way, I will do my best to address aspects of the whole with regard to their specific facets.

Perhaps the easiest facet to begin with is one most directly related to the preceding section: the relationship of illuminative experiences to the realization of Atman consciousness. If experiences of illumination are themselves synonymous with the

attainment of Buddha-nature or its homologues, then they may possess intrinsic worth provided that such an attainment is of supreme motivating power. If, however, the realization of Atman consciousness is not the ultimate prize or source of value, then illumination experiences, especially if they are essentially that realization, will not have intrinsic worth.

However, such experiences may have extrinsic worth, especially if they are not equal to the attainment of Atman consciousness and if that attainment truly is the greatest need and want of human individuals. As discussed in Chapter One, Wilber's system posits experiences of illumination as characteristic of the subtle level of development, a level that must be attained and transcended if one is to go on to achieve an enduring stage of causal or nondual awareness. In this view, experiences of illumination have value both as a signpost of one's development as well as a sort of stepping stone toward ultimate realization.

Additionally, many descriptions of illuminative experiences encompass pleasant feelings and emotions, such as those associated with bliss and love. In as much as one desires such feelings, one may value experiences of illumination as per their ability to grant them. The revelation of such hedonism may strike some spiritual aspirants as blasphemous or sacrilegious, especially if one compares communion with the divine to a journey on a special pleasure train. It stands to reason, however, that if experiences of illumination felt disgusting, they may have proven less appealing throughout the ages.

While the pleasure principle may go a long way toward explaining the rationale for many systems of value, that does not exclude that which may take on a more cerebral or rarified air. For those who seek wisdom or a transformation of their worldview, illuminative experiences can definitely foot the bill. As discussed previously, many have considered illuminative experiences as indicative of a higher or truer reality than is normally encountered, including the reality of oneself and one's identity. Whether or not such ontological and transpersonal apprehensions *should* be regarded as valuable is a different question—what remains clear is that experiences of illumination are definitely worthwhile to those seeking insight in such regards.

Assuredly, part of the shift in perspective that can accompany or stem from an experience of illumination regards not only the truer and higher nature of oneself and reality at large, but also what is by comparison lower or more false. For example, what mystics commonly refer to as the death or transcendence of the ego is a common feature of experiences of illumination, one that is certainly of value, not only to metaphysicians and seekers, but all sentient beings. This is not necessarily because all beings place a premium upon phenomenological truth or higher awareness (though, in some sense, they may). Rather, ego-transcendence may relate closely to overcoming one's aversion to impermanence, including one's fear of his or her own annihilation and death.

From the prehistoric origins of the Mysteries of Egypt and Greece to the Eastern-influenced spiritual movements of the twenty-first century, coming to terms with pain, death, and fear has been at the top of the agenda. Experiences of illumination are definitely of use in this regard. Whether by giving individuals a glimpse of a supposed afterlife, allowing them to attend to something blissful beyond their mortal and mundane conditions, or through granting them a sense of indestructible unity with the eternal, illuminative experiences have value to those coping with the oft-unpleasant aspects of the continual flux of the cosmos.

The utility of an illuminative experience to a person thus tends to rest upon its ability to serve as a vanguard of enlightenment, a source of pleasure and new perspective (including perspective on who one is and how he or she associates with the cosmos at large), and as an anxiolytic. Such an experience often does all these things simultaneously, or at least furthers the engendering of their related states. In this way, experiences of illumination generally have extrinsic value to individuals. But what of their value to society at large?

FROM ILLUMINATIVE EXPERIENCES TO COLLECTIVE ENDS

It is difficult to ascertain what, if anything, is of value to “society at large,” if for no other reason than society as such does not declare itself. Rather, individuals that constitute society speak and behave, and at times may claim to know what society wants or needs as if society were its own organism. Does society really have its own goals, drives, and judgments beyond those of its constituent members? While an intriguing notion, the jury is still out on this one. If we cannot say that a society as such has its own values, how can we say what society at large considers worthwhile?

The answer that I propose to that question comes in two parts. The first is that when we think about what may have extrinsic value to a society, we think about society’s *collective ends*. Collective ends, in this context, are those that benefit most, if not all, members of a particular social group. Whereas purifying a glass of water for the consumption of one individual serves a personal end, building a water treatment facility for universal access to clean water serves everyone at an individual level *as well as society as a whole*.

The last part of that sentence is important, and brings us to the second part of the definition of collective ends. The widespread satisfaction of personal ends is not the same as an end that serves the collective. The invention of a machine that met all human needs and allowed or required individuals to never interact with another again could conceivably satisfy everyone’s personal ends, though it could facilitate the breakdown of society. Conversely, a machine that met all human needs provided that individuals

cooperated as parts of a self-organizing and self-sustaining whole would serve collective ends.

In short, collective ends simultaneously serve the interests of the individuals that constitute a given social group as well as the continual creation and recreation of that group itself. Given this definition, how might the illuminative experiences of individuals serve collective ends? In other words, how do they facilitate the cooperation of individuals in the shaping and perpetuation of a society?

There are many answers to this question, which is why it is important to further specify. We need not spend time exploring the function that various rituals or roles serve in the structure of social relations. For instance, I will not explore the maintenance of a priestly caste that presumably has illuminative experiences as it contributes to the upholding of social norms. Nor will we examine how rituals involving experiences of illumination can serve to facilitate the mediation of conflicts between individuals and groups. While such things are fascinating from a sociological and anthropological perspective, in broad terms the efficacy of neither hinges upon whether or not one has an illuminative experience per se.

Theocracy can bind people together and organize them without anyone apprehending supernal light; ceremonies involving negotiation, reconciliation, and altered states of consciousness can bring about desirable outcomes without anyone having a glimpse of divine effulgence. Rather than looking at those particular forms of social interaction and organization, we will attend to what it is about experiences of illumination specifically that facilitates the cooperation of individuals in the creation and recreation of a society.

To do this, one must examine the particular sets of values held by those who have reported experiences of illumination. Admittedly, it is conceivable that someone could hold the same values without being so experienced, though those who have such experiences tend to credit them with engendering or eliciting certain values within them (and not necessarily the reverse). This causal relationship between having illuminative experiences, then certain values, and then those values leading to the serving of collective ends is what comes in to play here.

The new values of the recently illuminated tend to resemble one another (i.e. the change in values is not random—illuminative experiences don't merely "scramble" one's value systems, but rather help them to develop in a certain direction), and may thus be regarded as their own sort of value system. It appears that such post-illumination values or *values of light* lead to certain attitudes and behaviors that are beneficial to society as a whole. Illumination experiences lead to holding values of light which, in turn, leads to

serving collective ends. Thus, society as a whole benefits from the illuminative experiences of individuals.

Assuming that what is stated above is indeed the case, what might the values of light be? As with the personal ends that experiences of illumination can serve, they are interrelated and are often present simultaneously. They may, however, be broken down into some basic categories. At a glance, they include:

- reverence over hubris
- the affirmation of flux over stasis
- education and knowledge over static thoughts and thinking
- spirituality over formal religion
- openness to “supernatural” forces or possibilities over closed-minded positivism
- service over narcissism
- sympathy over callousness
- good humor over taking things too seriously

While an elaboration upon any one of these values could (and sometimes does!) constitute another book entirely, the remainder of this section is devoted to articulating their depth and interrelatedness.

Perhaps chief among the values of light is that of reverence in contrast to hubris, or arrogance. While this contrast may have a distinctly Grecian flavor, scholarship has also found it articulated in cultures throughout the world, including that of ancient China. As a set of feelings and emotions, reverence:

...begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside of our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all...reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods.⁴³³

Experiences of illumination have been described as both awe-inspiring and transcendent. Such transcendence not only indicates the nature of that which lay beyond conventional modes of perception, but also that which is outside the bounds of what is normally regarded as oneself, or even that which is regarded as human. In glimpsing the eternal, what might be called higher truth and higher self, one who has an experience of illumination gains perspective on that which is, by comparison, lower. To view one’s conventional, relative, or egoic self as something lowly—yet still deserving of love,

respect, and care—contributes to his or her humility and how he or she may regard that which appears (or may have once appeared) as beneath him or her. In this sense, reverence, though it may be born of an experience that seems otherworldly, affords one the sense of the importance of maintaining his or her proper place in the hierarchies of the world.

One of the most fundamental aspects of operating reverently in the world involves the affirmation of time's advance and the continual flux of phenomena. One's affirmation can range from merely accepting the reality of impermanence to embracing it as itself a desirable good. Adopting such attitudes is in harmony with the idea that only strife can result from resisting and denying the natural procession or manifestation of will and consciousness, especially when such natural transformation is revered as an integral aspect of the Absolute. It is beyond the power of mere mortals to prevent every change, and irreverent to try to refuse the evolution of the cosmos in its various cycles of growth and decay. One may assert that ongoing transitions involving gain and loss constitute a fundamental good regardless of whatever pain they may contribute to experience. This sentiment is echoed in the assent to life so passionately articulated by Nietzsche throughout his career. It is also a blessing that can come with experiences of illumination.

A reverent approach to life also entails recognizing one's limitations, and not only in grand metaphysical terms. Mortal limits include not being able to conquer death nor the advance of time, to be sure, though they also encompass things like forgetfulness and being mistaken or misled by common sense. In essence, human beings are quite ignorant, though they can sometimes act like they think they know best and everything.

In as much as one cares about truth or holding correct views, he or she doubts his or her opinions and opens himself or herself to education and new knowledge. While egocentrism may dictate that one cling to the same old thoughts and habits of thought, one who is no longer identified with the an ephemeral self and who recognizes the shortcomings of intellect in both its analytic and synthetic functions is apt to be more open-minded and eager to learn than someone who has never tasted the brilliant fruits of intuition.

Someone who has had an illuminative experience likely has gained a healthy suspicion of symbolically expressed claims regarding absolute or objective truth, not only coming from himself, but coming from others, as well. Perhaps it is for this reason that such individuals tend to prefer a flexible approach to spirituality over formal or rigidly dogmatic religion while at the same time also entertaining the notion of "supernatural" forces or possibilities over the rigid discourse of positivist or reductionist science. And, as one might guess, the sort of spirituality such individuals are likely to support is one that honors the validity of knowledge gained through direct experiences as well as the mystery that must remain to mere human intellect.

Of all the many forms that human ignorance can take, perhaps the most basic is ignorance of one's true identity, oft characterized by confusion between one's phenomenal ego and transcendent self. While those who have experiences of illumination may be inclined to forsake making claims of absolute knowledge, they often retain the awareness that they are not who they once assumed that they were. This sort of realization can serve as an effective antidote to narcissism as well as powerful nourishment for an attitude of service toward others (or those who appear falsely as separate others but with whom one is united). Although the commonly stated contrast between one's pre- and post-illumination persona may be one of selflessness versus selfishness, the meaning of those words can be rather ambiguous and change dramatically according to the context in which they appear. Suffice it to say that in the wake of illuminative experiences individuals often realize that things are not "all about them," but that they are "all about all."

One of the chief ways in which such concern for all beings comes to the fore is through sympathy, through understanding what others feel and acting accordingly. Such a sympathetic approach can take various forms, most broadly in terms of recognizing the pain and pleasure of others as well as subsequently treating them in a kind and loving manner. In Pali, the language of early Buddhism, things such as compassion, sympathetic joy, and loving kindness are known as *karuna*, *mudita*, and *metta*, respectively.⁴³⁴ Together they constitute attitudes or emotional orientations that are believed to facilitate and be facilitated by illuminative experience.

Whereas an attitude of gentle friendliness may characterize *metta*, and thus also broadly encompass both *karuna* and *mudita*, the latter two terms have their own specific meanings.⁴³⁵ *Karuna*, as it corresponds to compassion, is intimately associated with the notion of suffering with another, as well as taking steps to end that suffering.

It may be telling that there seems to be no one word in current popular use synonymous with sympathetic joy in the English language, which is why I have proposed one: *confruition*. As an emotion, *confruition* concerns itself with the appreciation of another's gladness, coupled with the wish to enhance it. Like *mudita*, *confruition* comes with the realization that one's happiness and that of others "is inseparable."⁴³⁶

The values of light articulated above form a powerful combination. From experiences of illumination and subsequent reverent attitudes, including those of doubt or skepticism as well as those of an open mind, common threads run. Perhaps most crucial among them is the lack of emotional investment in the petty and destructive inclinations of egotism. Taken in sum, these things form the basis for and are facilitated by a perspective of good humor, of taking things in stride and not too seriously. Although illuminative experiences may sensitize one to pain, deception, and injustice, they can also help to counteract a saturnine disposition with a more jovial outlook.

While values of light may share similarities with other ideals and characteristics of traditional or religious value systems, that fact alone does not suffice as an explanation for how they serve collective ends, and in turn indicate that experiences of illumination have that particular kind of worth. As described above, collective ends simultaneously serve the interests of the individuals that constitute a given social group as well as the cooperation of individuals in the shaping and perpetuation of that group. How might people who enact values of light facilitate the achievement of collective ends?

Implicit in such a question is the assumption that those who hold values of light consider it worth their while to do anything; in short, they place at least some importance upon being in the world. While this may seem like a silly technicality, it is important, especially when discussing those who have made contact with eternity. Given its almost universal reputation for blissfulness and exultation, why on earth would anyone want to go back to life on earth? Part of the answer to this question has to do with reverence: those who hold values of light have a high regard for the importance of the mundane world, not because it is the happiest, most ideal place to be, but because it is part of a cosmos that they neither created nor controlled, and is part of a natural and/or divine order of which they are in awe, especially when functioning as a mere part of it. In as much as experiences of illumination prompt one to reinvest oneself in life, they also serve to enable an individual to regard enacting values of light as worthwhile.

As mentioned above, the affirmation of flux over stasis entails that one do more than merely affirm the necessity of transformation or time as an expression of divine creativity. Indeed, if one truly recognizes himself or herself as an integral part of the cosmos and affirms its continual change, one considers himself or herself as both subject to and an agent of that change. Those who have reported experiences of illumination tend to continue on, doing and being done unto. *That* they do is an expression of values of light as much as *what* they do in particular.

And, as is typical for such individuals, they often prefer to dedicate themselves to providing service to others instead of only serving themselves. This alone, almost by definition, means that they are involved in supporting the interests of those who are not them, which itself tends to involve some form of social interaction. And, in as much as such interests include those that cannot be met by machinery and alienated interactions alone, those serving them also have a vested interest in fostering the viability of social ties. For example, if basic human (or mammalian) needs include those of relating with others of the same species, for someone to meet those needs necessitates ensuring the sufficiency (at the very least) or the excellence (at the very best) of those relationships.

Given that many post-illuminates who do value service to others wish to extend that service to all beings, and not simply those of a particular social niche, they tend toward wanting to establish and defend nourishing bonds as universally as they can. This

inclination toward ignoring or transcending the limits and boundaries dictated by convention is not motivated at its core by disrespect or anti-authoritarianism, but rather by a reverent regard for ideals and realities that may at times conflict with the dictates of a particular culture or tradition. To the extent that such universalism appears to serve collective ends may depend upon how one defines the parameters of a particular group. From the standpoint of someone holding values of light, however, the collective in question may include the cosmos as a whole. Thus the promotion of the well-being of all can become the litmus test whereby the execution of the values of light are judged.

Clearly implicated in such a grand project is the contrast between sympathy and callousness. It can help a great deal if one actually cares about the suffering and joy of those he or she wishes to serve. If one is not sensitive to the actual feelings of those toward one directs his or her supposed benevolence, the ground becomes ripe for all manner of good-intentioned but horrible projects, including those whose altruistic rationale may be but a smokescreen for a thoroughly destructive agenda. One need not point to Hitler and Stalin in this regard so much as observe the so-called “tough love” doled out on much more intimate scales by anyone in a position of relative power who abuses his or her authority.

Although many wary of the growing influence of science and technology in contemporary society have pointed to them as sources of apathy, indifference, or hostility between alienated individuals. However, it is important to recall that callousness did not originate with scientific inquiry, nor has it reached its apex through scientific research. Plenty of atrocities and less grandiose acts of cruel insensitivity have been waged by those who were more convinced of their righteousness than of the significance of other’s feelings. Whether due to religious or political ideology, many have believed that they were serving collective ends while failing to serve the interests of the individuals within their groups and also failing to facilitate the cooperation of individuals in the shaping and perpetuation of those groups. How many families, tribes, civilizations, and species have perished because of self-destruction that was made possible by ideological rigidity? And how much of that rigidity numbed people to the realities of suffering taking place all around them?

From this perspective, adopting an attitude of good humor and not taking things too seriously is no laughing matter. Such an outlook may be one of the best defenses against tyrannical dogma and its narcotizing effects upon the human heart. Significantly, it is not uncommon among those who have had experiences of illumination. This may be due in part to regarding the everyday world as mere play or game, though much of it is also likely attributable to reverent humility and skillful affects such as karuna or mudita. When one approaches all beings with care and remains conscientious of his or her own

ignorance, it is unlikely that he or she will support a worldview that demands outrageous sacrifices or promises final solutions.

Despite an ongoing regard for one's own ignorance, it is important to remember that what one ought to revere is not unknowing per se, but truth, especially with regard to the idea that truth may ultimately exceed the capacity of human beings to apprehend it fully. That individuals may only partially apprehend truth, however, does not prevent those who have had experiences of illumination from seeking new information and ways of thought—quite the opposite. That the advancement of human knowledge may never cease is no disincentive to those who care about its progress, especially in as much as they perceive a connection between what and how people think and the ways in which they treat themselves and each other. To one who enacts values of light, education in the broadest sense not only pays homage to truth, but can also improve the manner in which he or she serves common ends.

Given that those who have experienced illumination tend to concern themselves, not only with the improvement of society and the conditions that may help or hinder it, but also educating themselves on that very subject, the most pressing question is this: what have they learned? What are the best practices for society according to those who live in the wake of illuminative experiences? Would they not entail practices for eliciting such experiences themselves? What might some such practices be?

We begin to address such questions in the following chapter.

DR. RUPNATHJI (DR. RUPAK NATH)

CHAPTER NINE: LIGHT AND SOCIETY

The preceding chapter concerned itself with the value of experiences of illumination--not only to those who have them, but also with regard to how such experiences contribute to the development of value systems that benefit society at large or serve collective ends. While this notion may seem farfetched to some, it has grounding in historical tradition. According to the fourteenth Dali Lama, to Tibetan Buddhists, such an idea is “not revolutionary” and is an example of the principle that “when you transform your individual mind, the whole society is transformed.”⁴³⁷ Many would agree that such transformation is desirable, though the specifics of how it may look are not readily apparent to most. Examining such specifics is the focus of this chapter.

As discussed in previous chapters, reports reveal the pursuit of Buddhist practices as a means whereby one may bring about an experience of illumination. Not surprisingly, in addition to bringing individuals closer to nirvana, Buddhism has also initiated and shaped social transformations. The aim of such reforms and innovations has been to change “societies based on ignorance and selfishness into societies based on wisdom and enlightenment.”⁴³⁸ Many scholars and social activists point to Tibet as an example of where this kind of transformation has succeeded most.

While the facts of Tibet’s exemplary character are themselves impressive, it is further significant that the nation has served as an inspiration to utopian thinkers for centuries. In the West, this inspiration has perhaps been most popularly crystallized in the form of *Lost Horizon*, both in the novel by James Hilton and in the film of the same name based upon it. Although *Horizon* may not ring a bell with the denizens of the twenty-first century, its most significant contribution to the popular lexicon lives on: the name *Shangri-La*.

An idyllic community modeled after Tibet, Shangri-La definitely incorporates Buddhist influences, though it draws upon those of other religions, as well. Shangri-La also stands as one of the first popular instances of a utopian civilization characterized by a blending of European and Eastern cultural contributions. In addition to lamas, Shangri-La also plays host to Jesuit missionaries and Capuchin friars--and to the works of Plato, Nietzsche, and Newton.⁴³⁹ Formulated succinctly, the “doctrine” of Shangri-La is thus: “the exhaustion of the passions is the beginning of wisdom.”⁴⁴⁰ (That such a doctrine so closely resembles the Tantric philosophy examined in previous chapters is noteworthy.)

Echoing William Blake’s views on the road to excess, Hilton does not advocate for ascetic or cerebral detachment as much as that which is higher than the ugliness of lust and brutality. While he has this in common with many proponents of civilized refinement and hedonism, Hilton’s dictum of exhausting the passions does not necessitate snuffing them out or repressing them. Rather, he suggests working with and through them given an attitude of acceptance, sublimation, and temperance.

In the tradition of Aristotle, the most overriding belief in Shangri-La is one of moderation. As revealed by one of its residents:

We inculcate the virtue of avoiding excess of all kinds—even including, if you will pardon the paradox, excess of virtue itself...We rule with moderate strictness, and in return we are satisfied with moderate obedience...our people are moderately sober, moderately chaste, and moderately honest.⁴⁴¹

In explaining the presence of Taoist and Confucian temples in Shangri-La in addition to the appearance of Buddhist and Christian faiths, the notion is put forth that “many religions are moderately true,” a concept of which those who hold it tend to be “only *moderately* certain.”⁴⁴²

So characterized, this conception of moderation resonates quite well with values of light as articulated in the preceding chapter. Moderate certainty, however humorous in the above context, also relates to humility and reverence for truth, whereas honoring the truth of multiple religious forms relates to embracing spirituality over formal religion per se. The very presence of, let alone importance of, spiritual and religious pursuits also indicates a worldview unobstructed by reductionism or positivism. Rather, the inhabitants of Shangri-La upheld syncretism, and peacefully so.

In addition to Tibetan and Chinese forms of Buddhism, the founder of Shangri-La embraced yogic practices from India, including those “based upon various special methods of breathing.”⁴⁴³ He also indulged in “the mild ecstasies” of a berry-based narcotic, which, combined with “deep-breathing exercises” was credited with allowing him to extend the length and quality of his life.⁴⁴⁴ Conversely, the real-life people of

Tibet were always subject to aging and death, and knew that they were “not in Shangri-la [sic].”⁴⁴⁵ Despite this fact, their society was overwhelmingly geared toward the “ecstatic and positive; intrigues, violence, and persecution were rarer there than in any other civilization.”⁴⁴⁶

The affirmative and spiritual character of the Tibetans is reflected in descriptions of Shangri-La. Interestingly, the low incidence of “intrigues, violence, and persecution” are not attributed to a highly sophisticated law-enforcement apparatus, but rather a way of life that made such a thing unnecessary. Having “neither soldiers or police,” Shangri-La may be read as a sort of anarchist utopia. The success of such an endeavor is accounted for by the notion that “only serious things were considered crimes,” and is also due to “the chief factor” in the preservation of the social order being “the inculcation of good manners.”⁴⁴⁷ While such a thing may seem unrealistic, we will explore social forms operating today under such principles below.

As for *why* the social order of Shangri-La may seem unrealistic to modern readers, one may look toward the role of “good manners” from a historical perspective. Whereas certain social customs and traditions once held a sacred place in people’s lives, dramatic shifts occurred that lead not only to their secularization, but radical redefinition worldwide. Such transformations are inextricably bound up in the history of European religion, colonialism, and the emergence of certain kinds of global capitalism.

In essence, much of social life has become subordinate to the pursuit of financial gain; how and why this occurred is addressed in Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber shows how opinions that were once commonly held regarding “unlimited lust for gain...as anti-social and immoral” shifted to view the opportunistic stewardship of profit as not only tolerable, but as a moral imperative.⁴⁴⁸ To be clear, the moral imperative of seeking profit has, at best, a questionable status among the values of light.

Without conscience and reverence to guide one toward sympathetic action for others, one instead succumbs to—or aspires to—the methodical accumulation of wealth. Those possessed by Weber’s spirit of capitalism tend to make moral judgments, not out of love or compassion, but out of a particular action’s “demonstrated capacity to yield objectively verifiable results.”⁴⁴⁹ Not only do such individuals prefer to act out of such empirical verification over their own emotional inclinations, they also tend to perceive things in terms of extrinsic rather than intrinsic value. Consequently, they view each “attained objective” as “the means to the attainment of further ones.”⁴⁵⁰

Given this profile, it may come as little surprise that Protestants-cum-capitalists “disapproved of visionary experience.”⁴⁵¹ In other words, not only do the values of those possessed by the spirit of capitalism differ from the values of light, the former set would

seem to preclude experiences of illumination themselves. Whereas Catholics regarded such experiences positively, both Catholics and Protestants placed “supreme value” upon the printed word of the Bible rather than mystical apprehension per se.⁴⁵²

As one might expect, Grof cites Protestant ethics as a causal factor in “great difficulties accepting ecstatic experiences.”⁴⁵³ Unlike Buddhists, or the spiritual pluralists of Shangri-La, those taken by the spirit of capitalism “usually respond to [ecstatic experiences] with a strong sense of guilt or with a feeling that they do not deserve them.”⁴⁵⁴ Such feelings of guilt or unworthiness should not be confused with humility that stems from reverence. Rather, they may be interpreted as the neurotic residue of a culturally toxic background.

While poverty has generally been associated with grim prospects, in a capitalist society, so too may be the pursuit of wealth. Going after monetary gain, when “stripped of its religious and ethical meaning...tends to become associated with purely mundane passions,” and frequently takes on “the character of sport.”⁴⁵⁵ The object of the Protestant-capitalist game is not to have fun or to recognize one’s unity with the divine cosmos, but rather to control one’s tendency to “smother one’s striving towards distant objectives once proximate ones are achieved.”⁴⁵⁶ In this model, the struggle for profit and against one’s slacker tendencies is ongoing until it is stopped by death, which players often regard as a horror. This outlook and the culture that corresponds to it contrast sharply with societies shaped by the values of light.

Rather than time being equated with money and the efficient use of both considered imperative, the inhabitants of Shangri-La considered time to be in abundance, and the neurotic fixation upon its passing and utilization ultimately deleterious to the quality as well as the quantity of human life. As one representative of Shangri-La explains:

It is significant...that the English regard slackness as a vice. We, on the other hand, should vastly prefer it to tension. Is there not too much tension in the world at present, and might it not be better if more people were slackers?⁴⁵⁷

Keep in mind, Hilton was not writing in the late twentieth century while listening to grunge rock and living in his parent’s basement, but rather in the aftermath of the first World War and the large-scale industrialization of much of the Northern Hemisphere. For him, or the fictional characters he created, slacking was associated with a relaxed, organic, and holy approach to life in contrast to one marked by anxiety, alienation, and materialism. In *Horizon*, the excessive liberties and brutality of the First World War are credited with exhausting the mundane passions of at least one character and allowing him to appreciate the value of Eastern wisdom and practices as exemplified by Shangri-La.

Later, the Second World War brought with it another opportunity for Westerners to reflect upon the pathological elements of their cultural project and how they may be bested or remedied. In the wake of the devastating conflict, George Orwell wrote the dystopian classic *1984*. However, there is little of Orwell's public persona or the content of his work to suggest an acquaintanceship or appreciation for experiences of illumination. In contrast, author Aldous Huxley not only published a utopian work, *Island*, as the children of WWII came of age, but also publicly and intelligently contributed to discourse surrounding visionary and mystical experiences as well as the appreciation of Eastern philosophy and religion in the West.

Like *Lost Horizon*, Huxley's *Island* posited a nation existing in relative geographic isolation. While accessible enough to foster a blend of the best of Eastern and Western approaches to living, Huxley's island—named *Pala*—remained secluded enough to escape—at least for a while—being tainted by the unfortunate characteristics of both traditions. In addition to an emphasis upon attentiveness to present circumstances, one of the keystones of Pala's success is a periodic ritual wherein participants are acquainted with the transcendent nature of both themselves and the cosmos. In addition to a generous blend of poetic imagery and Tantra, what makes the ritual work is a substance known as *moksha-medicine*.

Also known as “the reality revealer” and “the truth and beauty pill,” characters describe *moksha-medicine* as enabling one to “catch a glimpse of the world as it looks to someone who has been liberated from his bondage to the ego.”⁴⁵⁸ In essence, the *moksha-medicine* promotes the effectiveness of the ritual in allowing participants in it to achieve a transcendent state or illuminative experience. While the *moksha-medicine* may correlate to the berry-based narcotic and its “mild ecstasies” as mentioned in *Horizon*, in *Island*, it is said to be derived from mushrooms.

While Huxley has publicly acknowledged his experiences with psilocybin, the main psychoactive ingredient in so-called “magic mushrooms,” Huxley's wife at the time that he wrote *Island* uses the term “*moksha-medicine*” to refer to LSD, specifically the LSD that she administered to Huxley upon his request as he lay dying.⁴⁵⁹ The exact origin or chemical composition of the *moksha-medicine* may matter less than the fact that a consciousness-altering substance is employed in an institutionalized and formally-sanctioned setting wherein individuals may experience illumination and thereby be more inclined to hold the pro-social values of light. Unlike the chemically-aided social programming of Huxley's dystopian work *Brave New World*, however, the *moksha-medicine* is not used to deny or repress pain, but rather to facilitate metaphysical insight and psychological growth.

Even in *Pala*, such positive aspects of spiritual pharmacology are not without their detractors. Some characters argue that the *samadhi* that the *moksha-medicine* elicits isn't

real, and that spiritual insight can only come after years of celibacy, meditation, and purifying ritual. While the majority of the population of Pala supports the noble aims of meditation and religious practices, and may even engage in them, the objection to the reality of one's samadhi as facilitated by moksha-medicine is generally regarded as irrelevant to its value and that of the experiences it facilitates. In essence, the majority of the residents of Pala believe that there is no practical difference between an illuminative experience elicited through pharmacological means and one brought about by asceticism and mental training.

The potential for the abuse of psychedelic drugs in Pala is managed by the careful administration of moksha-medicine as part of the education of children. Instead of its irrational prohibition and glamorization, moksha-medicine is regarded as something of a sacrament. Citizens of Pala generally take it but "once a year and under supervision, beginning at adolescence."⁴⁶⁰ That such initiation into scared experience and knowledge is tied to sexual maturation is no mere coincidence.

As mentioned above, the ceremony that is conducted while under the influence of the moksha-medicine involves much of the philosophy and iconography of Hindu Tantra. Initiates drape garlands around a statue of Shiva and his female consort in the act of sexual congress. As they pass circuits of orchids over the metallic heads of the amorous deities, they recite an affirmation of nonduality: "each is both."⁴⁶¹ The elaboration of this basic sentiment is articulated in the words of the character Dr. Robert:

What wisdom beyond all spoken wisdoms in that sensual experience of spiritual fusion and atonement! Eternity in love with time. The One joined in marriage to the many, the relative made absolute by its union with the One. Nirvana identified with samsara, the manifestation in time and flesh and feeling of the Buddha Nature...the ending of sorrow, ceasing to be what you ignorantly think you are and becoming what you are in fact. For a little while, thanks to the *moksha*-medicine, you will know what it's like to be what in fact you are, what in fact you always have been. What a timeless bliss!⁴⁶²

Dr. Robert goes on to urge the participants in the ritual to allow their experience of the "shining, alive, glorified" to influence how they live even after it fades and they return to their mundane responsibilities.⁴⁶³ (This is reminiscent of the relationship some individuals have had to their near death experiences, as explored in Chapter Six.)

The ability of one's illuminative experience to influence his or her ordinary life is a crucial aspect of how experiences of illumination correlate to values of light and how or why those values are subsequently enacted. In essence, the well-being of society in Pala is to some extent a function of the continuing influence of the memory of each individual's illumination.

For all of Huxley's interest in and support of the proper use of psychedelic substances, he was not so narrow-minded so as to maintain that they alone were sufficient for the optimum organization and function of an ideal human society. Rather, such substances had value in as much as they yielded rewarding experiences to individuals that, in turn, had a positive impact upon society at large. In that regard, the use of mescaline, LSD, and psilocybin were merely means, and their use not an end unto numbness, forgetting, or escape. In the absence of such substances or their efficacy in promoting experiences of illumination and the subsequent enactment of values of light, other means may suffice.

Most of the previous chapters concern themselves with experiences of illumination that arise without pharmacological intervention, as in the case of meditation, though such experiences may also come about through practices involving the regulation of respiration, such as the *pranayama* of yoga or the Grofs' *holotropic breathwork*.

Stanislav Grof and his wife, Christina, integrated aspects of "ancient and aboriginal traditions, Eastern spiritual philosophies, and Western depth psychology" to create a set of practices that can alter one's state of consciousness as well as help one to release "bioenergetic and emotional blocks."⁴⁶⁴ The resulting holotropic breathwork involves the acceleration of breath, evocative music, and physically therapeutic techniques. Although much of Stan Grof's early work involved treating patients with LSD, holotropic breathwork employs no exogenous pharmacological interventions whatsoever.

In addition to having cathartic and psychotherapeutic value, holotropic breathwork sessions can also lead to experiences of illumination. As one might expect, such experiences often have religious and philosophical overtones. In many instances, individuals reporting their experiences claimed to have gained knowledge of the Absolute. They experienced it as a "radiant source of light of unimaginable intensity," though they made a point of clarifying that it also "differed in some significant aspects from any form of light that we know in the material world."⁴⁶⁵ Of those significant aspects, breathworkers further characterized their experience of the Absolute as regarding "an immense and unfathomable field of consciousness endowed with infinite intelligence and creative power."⁴⁶⁶ Again, the unity of awareness and energy, or the nonduality of witness and will, comes to the fore.

Given the above examples, one who seeks to enact values of light would likely promote illumination experiences for many, if not all, individuals within a given society--as well as the world at large. Whether through Buddhist meditation, traditional rites of Tantra, psychedelic drugs, or other practices evolved from innovative syntheses, individuals ought to have many options before them. In many countries, they already do. The trick, as it were, may be in guiding one who, consciously or unconsciously, is

seeking an experience of illumination to a method for attaining it that works for him or her.

Until effective methods for facilitating experiences of illumination gain popularity and a consequent increase in the enactment of values of light takes place, the issue of the relationship between the illuminated and those who have yet to be stands. Some governments and cultural mores are supportive and protective of those seeking illuminative experiences. Others, however, are more indifferent--or even hostile. Despite the aspirations of those who hold values of light for peaceful coexistence among all beings, they may never the less conflict with those who hold other sets of values.

There are a number of different strategies for navigating such potentially dangerous waters. In Shangri-La and Pala, contact with the outside world is kept to something of a minimum. Their protective isolation hardly seems feasible in this day and age, though its motives and means may still ring true to many.

The visionary principles that gave rise the paradise of Shangri-La, while for the term of the novel confined to a rural mountain enclave, were intended to eventually “inherit the earth” in the wake of the self-destruction of military-industrial societies. The inhabitants of Shangri-La preferred to wait for and hopefully survive a coming Armageddon rather than travel widely and proselytize, given their view that “the opinions of reasonable men” were no match for vulgarity and brutality empowered by “iron and steel.”⁴⁶⁷ In this sense, the fate of Shangri-La as a global kingdom is bound to a sort of end-time prophecy familiar to Christians the world over. Instead of a war between the rulers of Heaven and Hell leading to the establishment of the Kingdom of God, one has a World War among secular powers consumed by base passions and immoderate opinions leading to the establishment of an evolved and well-balanced human society.

The contrast between the good society and one marked by militarism and greed is a recurring theme among those espousing and enacting values of light. In contrast to academic and monastic pursuits, militarism is:

anchored in organizations in which the human being’s basic feeling of enlightenment is trained out and armored over, encouraging individual regression to subhuman insensitivity, viciousness, and harmfulness. Militarism allows for a politics of compulsion, if it allows for any politics at all.⁴⁶⁸

This is not to say that all armed conflict may be described as militaristic. In this sense, militaristic cultures are characterized by their dehumanizing and destructive tendencies made possible by reinforcing individuals’ ignorance of their divine nature rather than the presence of warriors per se. For example, one may posit that the contextualization of war in the *Bhagavad-Gita* is not militaristic due to its spiritual nature. Conversely, Christian crusades or Muslim jihads may be considered militaristic

despite their religiosity in as much as those who participate in them also engage in the suppression of Atman consciousness.

Militarism, however, is only half of the military-industrial coin. Whether characterized as capitalistic or communistic, many critiques formed by those holding values of light aimed at industrial labor systems are applicable to both. In contrast to those subject to the alienation and dehumanization of industrial work are individuals who adopt “slacker” or “dropout” attitudes toward labor. Offering more than simple laziness, such individuals often also emphasize the importance of offering contributions to others through gifts, play, or other non-alienated forms of productive work. In essence, they maintain that one can serve others better by giving intimately and enthusiastically as they are inclined and inspired than through calculated schemes whose objectives are but the maximization of financial gain for themselves or their employers.)

Although the citizens of Shangri-La are willing to wait until the end of the world for their vision to manifest fully, others have drawn upon the idea that the world has already ended, or that “a world” comes to an end with the passing of each moment. Following such a train of thought, theorist and poet Hakim Bey has popularized the notion within certain subcultures that, since profane time is over or had never really begun, people are “living angelic time—only most of us don’t know it.”⁴⁶⁹ The trick to personal and social liberation in this worldview entails nonordinary states of consciousness in which the freedom and divinity of individual or social existence may be realized. In this way, the post-apocalyptic fantasy of heaven on earth may be actualized for anyone sufficiently aware, at any time and place.

Bey’s ideas on the nature of reality and society have not only been influenced by the numerous theorists that he cites, but also his travels through Persia and Northern India. Whether recounting his adventures in Darjeeling, Gauhati, or Kathmandu, he also shares insights from having studied various traditional religious and spiritual practices. One of the more notable among Bey’s influences in this regard stands Swami Nirmalananda of the Biligri Hills of southern Karnataka, also known as “the Anarchist Swami.”⁴⁷⁰ Nirmalananda defined anarchy as “Self-rule,” or “being ruled by the enlightened Self.”⁴⁷¹ The mantras that Nirmalananda taught to seekers included sentiments regarding the happiness and freedom of “all beings,” as well as the importance of allowing one’s “thoughts and actions” to contribute to that freedom and happiness.⁴⁷² Although I have yet to come across a reliable account of Nirmalananda having an experience of illumination, his expertise in yogic practices and apparent embrace of values of light suggest it strongly.

Although many conceive of anarchism as nihilistic or destructive, the likes of Nirmalananda and Bey regard it as something of a spiritual imperative with regard to the proper relation of spiritually actualized and autonomous beings with one another. Unlike

those who advocate assassination and anti-social tactics, Bey suggests that those presently attempting to enact anarchist revolt or “*insurrection blossoming spontaneously into anarchist culture*” are likely to accomplish nothing but “a futile martyrdom.”⁴⁷³ Instead of a violent confrontation with authoritarian government and its supporters, Bey proposes the liberation of Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZs) that, like floating dinner parties or subversive quilting bees, self-organize and self-dissolve without engaging in territorial or other conflicts with established powers.⁴⁷⁴

As Bey writes:

...we must realize (make real) the moments and spaces in which freedom is not only possible but *actual*. We must know in what ways we are genuinely oppressed, and also in what ways we are self-repressed or ensnared in a fantasy in which *ideas* oppress us. WORK [sic], for example, is a far more actual source of misery for most of us than legislative politics. Alienation is far more dangerous for us than toothless outdated dying ideologies... The TAZ is not a harbinger of some pie-in-the-sky Social Utopia to which we must sacrifice our lives that our children’s children may breathe a bit of free air. The TAZ must be the scene of our present autonomy, but it can only exist on the condition that we already know ourselves as free beings.⁴⁷⁵

According to sociologist Michael Niman, an actualization of the TAZ concept may be found in the intermittent congregation of the Rainbow Family of Living Light. Classified as an “intentional group,” the Rainbows, as they are also known, periodically gather in rural locations around the world to advance world peace through prayer and to create a working model for “peaceful and cohesive nonhierarchical society,” only to then dissolve into the larger society until they “reconstitute in another time and space.”⁴⁷⁶ Emerging from a confluence of peace activists and war veterans, Rainbow Gatherings have also been influenced by the heritages of Native Americans, Eastern mystics, and “anarchist-pacifist traditions.”⁴⁷⁷

In addition to Rainbow congregations resembling the TAZs described by Bey, they also have much in common with other utopian models. For example, the inhabitants of Shangri-La are disinclined toward the practice of voting, and instead make communal decisions through the negotiation of consensus rather than “having to declare that one policy was completely right and another completely wrong.”⁴⁷⁸ Similarly, decisions within the Rainbow Family are also arrived at through consensus.⁴⁷⁹ Because majority does not automatically rule, even a minority of one may have “veto power” over a particular agenda item, and thus the concerns voiced by individuals cannot be ignored or disregarded without their consent.⁴⁸⁰

Interestingly, once the Rainbow community arrives at a decision acceptable to all, there is no government or executive branch per se charged with ensuring compliance with the group’s edicts. In opposition to maintaining a class of personnel specialized in law

enforcement, Rainbows have adopted an ethos wherein each individual is considered a peacemaker (or “peace center”) who shares in “keeping the gathering safe and harmonious.”⁴⁸¹ While such conceptions of distributed power with regard to the upholding of community norms are nothing new in terms of social and political theory, they never the less strike many as shocking, fantastic, or unreal. Unlike those confined to the realm of speculation in everyday life and the political sciences, however, Rainbows enact their beliefs with great success on a regular basis.

As gatherings of Rainbows resemble societies of fiction and ideal conception, they also share in common some aspects of Tibetan culture. In describing Buddhism’s revolutionary power in Tibet, Thurman writes that the “one sure way to secure individual rights in the long run” entails the popular acceptance of an ethic which inspires individuals “to take responsibility for respecting one another’s rights.”⁴⁸² Such inspiration does not originate merely in response to the threat of outside sanctions, but as an affirmation of one’s inner convictions. The voluntary enactment of mutual respect, in harmony with values of light, “drives a politics of enlightenment.”⁴⁸³

Such a politics of enlightenment born of illuminative experiences and their subsequent values stands in contrast to a politics of compulsion characteristic of militaristic societies. Individuals in societies marked by the former are not generally imposed upon or coerced by their fellows, nor do they regularly engage in such base assertions of dominance. This is true in terms of law-enforcement as well as in the economic sphere. Rather than regarding industrial capitalism or communism as their only options, individuals who enact values of light tend toward more complex and nuanced views of wealth and labor.

Again, like in Shangri-La, Rainbows are able to accommodate and negotiate their way through a variety of approaches to productive contribution. In the words of one sociologist, their work is “a labor of love.”⁴⁸⁴ While work is not required of nor demanded from Rainbows, they are often motivated to provide services and goods without the incentive of monetary gain—“most people eventually succumb to the spirit of the event.”⁴⁸⁵ When Rainbows come together they find themselves willing to give of themselves and their resources, not only because it is expected of them by others, but also because they expect others to do likewise. In this sense, while Rainbows retain individual property claims, they also are willing to relinquish them for a common or greater good.

As pleasant as this system may seem, it is not without its imperfections. How Rainbows deal with those imperfections, however, is noteworthy. With regard to those who don’t contribute, Rainbows do not “institutionalize the distinction between willingness/ability and unwillingness/disability into holders of power and subjects of power, dominators and dominated.”⁴⁸⁶ Rather, loving and healing approaches are employed in an effort to involve individuals in productive activity. The underlying

assumption is that, through an informed and sympathetic regard for their fellows, Rainbows can facilitate the realization of individuals' natural inclination toward productive social contribution, a natural inclination that often goes ignored or thwarted in other social milieus.

In the words of one Rainbow, the elevated feelings associated with freely-given work are the result of “the highest spiritual stuff you’ll ever see, and the most gritty nuts and bolts you’ll ever see,” combined in such a manner so as to yield “no dichotomy” between the two.⁴⁸⁷ Interestingly, this anecdote provides a succinct summation of how one’s realization of nondual consciousness—which may take the form of illuminative experience—can coincide with the enactment of certain social forms. Because values of light have their origin in the typically pleasant transcendent knowledge of a higher reality, it seems common sense that the enactment of those values may, in turn, help to keep one pleased by and in contact with their generative state of consciousness. In this sense, certain forms of Bey’s TAZ may not only arise from experiences of illumination, but also help to engender them, as well.

While the issue of how one may bring about his or her experience of illumination has been addressed above and in preceding chapters, the question still remains how one may bring about a society that is organized and functions according to values of light. In addition to the obvious popularization of illuminative experiences, other advances and reforms may be necessary. The most central of these may be something already advocated for by values of light: education.

In his book, *Inner Revolution*, Thurman proposes a political platform based on what he calls *enlightenment principles*. That platform includes making “lifelong education for all citizens the nation’s top priority.”⁴⁸⁸ It also advocates for not only transforming punitive prisons into “real rehabilitation centers,” but subordinating them to the educational system at large, as well.⁴⁸⁹ Through universal access to education, including education in spiritual realization, society may “prepare the young to make full use of their precious human lives.”⁴⁹⁰ Education for self-actualization is also an important ingredient of Huxley’s Pala, and will undoubtedly remain crucial to any practical scheme for the advancement of individuals and society as a whole, especially one that upholds values of light.

Although the experiences of illumination that give rise to such values are quite personal, their social repercussions can be astoundingly public. To some, this causal relationship is self-evident. To others, even those who have been privy to illuminative experiences, it may defy rational understanding or verbal representation. Values of light, however, are expressed rather easily. Enacting them at the level of an entire society, planet, or universe offers a substantially greater challenge.

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