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Chapter 8

Approaching a Universal Pattern? Gopi Krishna's Transformational Kuṇḍalinī Experience within the Frame of Universalism and Religious Scientism

I was witnessing in my own body the immensely accelerated activity of an energy not yet known to science, which is carrying all mankind towards the heights of superconsciousness, provided that by its thought and deed it allows this evolutionary force full opportunity to perform unhindered the work of transformation. *Gopi Krishna*¹

1 Introduction

On an early December morning in 1937, the Indian Pandit Gopi Krishna (1903–1984) sat down for his meditation practice². Sitting in his usual cross-legged posture, he breathed slowly and rhythmically, and focussed on the crown of his head, as was his daily routine. After years of meditation, he was able to remain seated without discomfort, consciously observing his position in the room, his posture, his breath, and his steady mind. On that momentous morning of 1937, however, his meditation practice took an unexpected turn. A physical sensation at the lower part of the back caught the meditator's attention, led to increasing physical and mental irritations, and culminated in what the protagonist perceived as an out-of-body experience. Many years later, Krishna would describe

¹ Krishna 1967, 104.

² I gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support of the Austrian Science fund (FWF, project number: P 32232-G, project name: Imagining Energy–The Practice of Energy Healing between Sense-Experience and Sense-Making) and of the Marietta Blau grant, which both made the research for this paper possible.

that extraordinary event as his initial activation of the so-called *kuṇḍalinī śakti*³ or *kuṇḍalinī* energy.⁴

This intended, and yet unexpected and deeply disturbing experience marked a turning point in Krishna's life. The energy activation led not only to an altered perception of reality but also to years of trauma. Krishna's systematic and reflective examination of this decisive event culminated in the publication of his autobiographical book *Kundalini. The Evolutionary Energy in Man*, in 1967, where he expounded his experience.⁵ This book was the point of departure for a series of autobiographical approaches by others describing their (assumed) *kuṇḍalinī* awakenings, which have not ceased ever since. Descriptions of experiences of the rising *kuṇḍalinī* are thus commonly enshrined in autobiographical books reminiscent of Krishna's model.

The overall goal of this paper is two-fold: On the one hand, it aims to outline Krishna's claim of *kuṇḍalinī*'s universalism as a biological mechanism, and at the other hand, it pleads for Krishna's influence among ensuing non-Indian experience reports. The paper is composed of three sections. First, it discusses Krishna's experience report, his sources, and premises. The account of Krishna's personal experience and explanatory model is followed by an elaboration on his claim of universalism. Finally, the paper takes Krishna's impact upon subsequent experience reports among non-Indians into account. This final part of the paper poses examples of biographical narratives and presents one such report in more detail.

Besides Krishna's position as role model among writers on *kuṇḍalinī*, he influenced, as mentioned, the modern interpretation of *kuṇḍalinī*. Until that point, *kuṇḍalinī*'s liberating implications had dominated the Anglo-American discourse on *kuṇḍalinī*. However, in consideration of his severe sufferings in the wake of the experience described below, Krishna's concept of *kuṇḍalinī* was no longer

3 The concept of *kuṇḍalinī śakti* traces back to tantric texts, where the goddess *kuṇḍalinī* was portrayed as Śiva's feminine counterpart. The c. tenth century *Kubjikāmatatantra* counts among the first texts to introduce the idea of *kuṇḍalinī* as a key feature of the subtle body. The text describes how *kuṇḍalinī* latently resides at the base of the spine. Upon activation (through visualization or yoga practices), she will rise towards the crown of the head, to reunite with Śiva. *Kuṇḍalinī* literally means 'she who is coiled' and is hence commonly depicted through an image of a coiled serpent. While the initial description of *kuṇḍalinī śakti* has been subject to change, it has nonetheless maintained an authoritative status. For a thorough discussion of *kuṇḍalinī śakti* in its South Asian context, see, e.g., Mallinson and Singleton (2017, 227–29). For a detailed examination of the history of *kuṇḍalinī* as experience, see Borkataky-Varma and Foxen (forthcoming).

4 Krishna [1967] 1970, 11–13.

5 Leslie Shepard republished Krishna's (1967) autobiography *Kundalini. The Evolutionary Energy in Man* as an extended and reorganized edition under the title *Living with Kundalini. The Autobiography of Gopi Krishna* (Krishna 1993).

confined to its assumed life-enhancing character. On the contrary, he portrayed *kuṇḍalinī* as a bearer of crisis and thus laid a special focus on its dangerous implications. Accordingly, the greater part of his book underlines his agony and reports of his almost unbearable efforts to succeed in averting his own demise. These extensive descriptions of the drawbacks of his *kuṇḍalinī* awakening thus triggered a revaluation of *kuṇḍalinī* inasmuch as potential risks of *kuṇḍalinī* awakenings were increasingly addressed.⁶ Ever since, *kuṇḍalinī* has been discussed equally in terms of spiritual perfection and spiritual emergency. Krishna's book and his emphasis on *kuṇḍalinī*'s pitfalls thenceforward permeated the alternative religious milieu in the second half of the twentieth century. Especially Transpersonal Psychology picked up on that topic. Major Transpersonal pioneers of the notion of 'spiritual emergency' were Christina (1941–2014) and Stanislav Grof (b. 1931).⁷ The renowned couple assumed a similar stance and agreed with Krishna's accentuation of *kuṇḍalinī*'s danger.⁸

Krishna further aimed to unveil the secrets of *kuṇḍalinī* along the lines of scientific methods and language. According to Krishna, the transformation triggered by *kuṇḍalinī*'s activation followed a universal pattern—pertaining to both the process proper and its results. With his endeavour to determine *kuṇḍalinī*'s universal quality, he significantly contributed to the 'scientification'⁹ of *kuṇḍalinī*. The notion of the scientification of the religious sphere among Hindu nationalists, Theosophists, and exponents of modern yoga¹⁰ traces back to the late nineteenth

6 Throughout the paper I am also going to discuss how Krishna managed to reframe these dreadful periods of his life as meaningful and positive.

7 The Grofs published widely on 'spiritual emergency' (also labelled as 'spiritual crisis') and thereby entrenched the topic to the transpersonal psychological agenda. Ever since the 1980s, when the topic gained ground, significant research has been carried out. Further notable protagonists include the Scottish psychiatrist Ronald D. Laing (1927–1989) and the Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagiolo (1888–1974). The most comprehensive publications on spiritual emergency are by Grof and Grof (1989), who argue with a transpersonal psychological stance, and Hofmann and Heise (2017), who aim to cover theoretical and practical approaches from a scholarly perspective.

8 This paper is too short to discuss the complex relationship between Krishna and protagonists of Transpersonal Psychology. While both parties shared similar interests and collaborated to a certain extent, the relation was mainly defined by competition and suspicion (Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.10., Zentralbibliothek Zürich).

9 Following von Stuckrad, the term 'scientification' means the discursive entanglement of religion and science (von Stuckrad 2014, 180).

10 Mallinson and Singleton (2017) provide the best historical overview of yoga. While the academic discipline of modern yoga already evolved in the 1990s, only in recent years, scholarship on modern yoga has increasingly gained ground in academia. In spite of its contestation, the term 'modern yoga' (alternative terms are, e.g., 'contemporary yoga' or 'transnational yoga') has nonetheless achieved the status of an umbrella term for theories, practices, and discourses linked to modern

century in Colonial India. Various religious protagonists have thereafter used science as an epistemological strategy to legitimize their theories, dogmas, and practices.¹¹ This endeavour might be labelled religious scientism.¹² In his recent publication *Global Tantra*, Julian Strube points out, that “[i]n the nineteenth century, the notion of *science* was central to formations of religious identities.”¹³ A notable example of an early representative of religious scientism was Narendranath Datta, better known as Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902).¹⁴ Against the backdrop of Hindu nationalists’ emphasis of ‘Vedic science,’¹⁵ Vivekananda “construed Hinduism to be a scientific religion consonant with modern sciences.”¹⁶ His seminal book *Raja Yoga*¹⁷ remains a classic in the attempt of reconciling science and religion.¹⁸ Other important Indian pioneers of religious scientism were the Indian Sanskrit scholar and active member of the Theosophical Society Srish Chandra

examinations of yoga. Important studies appeared from the 1990s onwards and involve works by Karl Baier (1998), Joseph Alter (2004), Elizabeth De Michelis (2004), Mark Singleton (2010), and Suzanne Newcombe (2019). For extensive compilations of contemporary scholarship on modern yoga see especially Karl Baier, Philipp A. Maas, and Karin Preisendanz (2018), and Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O’Brien-Kop (2020).

11 Hammer 2004, 201–303.

12 Hammer provides a useful definition for the religious appropriation of science: “Scientism is the active positioning of one’s own claims in relation to the manifestations of any academic scientific discipline, including, but not limited to, the use of technical devices, scientific terminology, mathematical calculations, theories, references and stylistic features—without, however, the use of methods generally approved within the scientific community, and without subsequent social acceptance of these manifestations by the mainstream of the scientific community through e.g. peer reviewed publication in academic journals” (Hammer 2004, 206). Related terms in use are “scientific religion” (Baier 2019, 246) and “scientific spirituality” (Strube 2021, 135). Elaborated studies on the entanglement of science and religion are made by, e.g., von Stuckrad (2014), Baier (2019), and Hammer and Lewis (2010).

13 Strube 2022, 22, emphasis in original.

14 See Kraler’s insightful chapter in this volume, where she discusses Vivekananda’s use of science and pranayama.

15 The term ‘Vedic science’ denotes the interpretation of Vedic literature, philosophy, and practices, such as Vedic astrology or Ayurveda, as converging with modern science. Hindu nationalists (e.g., the Hindutva movement) and Hindu reformers (e.g., Brāhmo Samāj) used ‘Vedic science’ to stress the primacy of ‘Hinduism.’ The interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ as a monolithic and superior religion was thus based on religious scientism (Nanda 2003, 65–122).

16 Baier 2019, 246.

17 Vivekananda 1896.

18 ‘Religion’ is a complex and multifaceted system, which has been defined differently according to time, place, and the groups involved. In this paper I am applying the notion of ‘religion’ as a dynamic denominator for a set of cultural methods and beliefs, which must be ever reconsidered depending on its historical and geographical context. See Bergunder (2016) for a thorough discussion on the dynamic nature of religion and its link to science.

Basu¹⁹ (1861–1918) and the Theosophist and learned physician Vasant Rele (n.d.a.). Among Basu's many writings, his 1887 translation and interpretation of the *Śiva-saṃhitā* (complemented with the title *The Esoteric Philosophy of the Tantras*) counts among the most influential ones.²⁰ He thereby contributed to the effort to reconcile science and religion on the part of the Theosophical Society.²¹ These protagonists represent but a selective example of the vivid discourse that evolved on religious scientism. As Mark Singleton has pointed out, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards a “scientific imperative [. . .] represents a new departure for yoga and tantra along scientific, rational lines and sets the agenda for the scientific study of yogic phenomena throughout the twentieth century.”²² Following Singleton, this paper therefore suggests that Krishna operated in the tradition of earlier Indian and non-Indian protagonists that laid the foundation for understandings of religion and yoga along the premises of science.

Krishna's main contribution to the ensuing discourse thus equally relates to *kuṇḍalinī*'s potential threats and to her²³ assumed categorization as an empirically verifiable component in the human body, independent of cultural or religious boundaries. In the present paper I am especially interested in the second aspect. I will argue that Krishna's universal approach to the transformative power of *kuṇḍalinī*'s activation yielded significant impact among non-Indian *kuṇḍalinī* aficionados; some of them implementing his concept of universalism even in their own narrative reports.

Religious universalism pertains to the belief that certain concepts, ideas, or theories enjoy universal application throughout the religious spectrum. Religious universalism further includes the notion of a universal or perennial truth. Significant examples of religious universalism are the fundamental Christian notion of universal reconciliation (humanity shall receive salvation in its entirety), the reli-

19 The spelling of Basu's name varies. At times he is also written as Vasu.

20 Basu's *Shiva Samhita* was the first Tantric work to be translated into English (Bose 1932, 236). Initially, it was published in 1883 serially in *The Arya Journal* (which was associated with the reform movement Ārya Samāj), before it was published in 1887 as a book. In 1893 and 1914 the book was re-published, and especially the last edition of 1914 yielded significant influence among scholars and practitioners. However, as James Mallinson has pointed out, it suffers from certain deficiencies (2007, xi). The book's dedication to Colonel Olcott, the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, clearly indicates Basu's devotion to the Theosophical cause.

21 Singleton 2010, 45.

22 Singleton 2010, 53.

23 As already mentioned, the *Kubjikāmatatantra* and subsequent tantric texts portrayed *kuṇḍalinī* as Śiva's feminine counterpart. Most Indian and non-Indian protagonists of modern *kuṇḍalinī* discourses have accepted this fundamental tenet and have thus continued addressing the goddess *kuṇḍalinī* with a feminine pronoun (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 22).

gious inclusivism of Unitarian universalism, or the Neo-Vedāntic essentialist view on religion.²⁴ In India, the concept of religious universalism probably appears in its clearest form in the shape of Neo-Vedānta²⁵ as expounded and popularized by Vivekananda.²⁶ He attempted to nominate Neo-Vedānta as universal religion that underlies in principle any other religion. In his *Raja Yoga* he writes: “I must tell you that there is a basis of universal belief in religion, governing all these different theories, and all the varying ideas of different sects of men in different countries. Going to the basis of them we find that they also are based upon universal experiences.”²⁷ Vivekananda’s ideas on universal religion had a significant impact upon subsequent writers and thinkers in India. Another influential writer who considered universal religion was Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), mostly known as Sri Aurobindo.²⁸ Educated in England, Aurobindo developed into an Indian nationalist upon his return to India. Against the backdrop of Aurobindo’s increasing ‘Indianization,’ his initial understanding of universal religion revolved around Hindu religion. As his theory evolved, however, the concept of evolution²⁹ occupied a predominant role. Accordingly, Sharma describes his approach as “universal evolution” or as “cosmic evolution,”³⁰ and argues that:

The concept of universal religion achieves an unexpected extension in the thought of Śrī Aurobindo. The incorporation of the process of evolution imparts to the term universal a significance which extends far beyond its usual association, and identifies it as the locus of a religious evolution, which involves the transformation of the entire universe, that is, cosmos. In this transformation all the individuals have their own role to play.³¹

Intriguingly, Aurobindo suggested the necessity of transcending religion for the sake of “a sustained and all-comprehending effort at spiritual self-evolution.”³² His understanding of spiritual evolution thus relates to individual efforts and

²⁴ King [1999] 2009, 139–40.

²⁵ For a thorough discussion of Neo-Vedānta, the colonial impact on its revival, and its widespread interpretation as the core of a homogenized ‘Hinduism,’ see King [1999] 2009, 118–42, and Sharma 1998 for an in-depth study of universal religion within modern Hindu thought.

²⁶ Other significant proponents of Hindu universalism in the shape of Neo-Vedānta were the Hindu reformer and co-founder of the Brāhmo Samāj Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) (King 2009 [1999], 69).

²⁷ Vivekananda [1897] 1920, 2.

²⁸ For Aurobindo’s specific understanding of universal religion, see Sharma 1998, 117–23.

²⁹ Borkatakya-Varma (2020, 377) has pointed out that evolutionary biology has been vital for Aurobindo’s understanding of *kuṇḍalinī*.

³⁰ Sharma 1998, 121.

³¹ Sharma 1998, 122.

³² Ghose 1916, 20.

spiritual experiences. Krishna, I argue, followed Vivekananda's notions of a universal religion, and was at the same time inspired by Aurobindo's universal evolution.³³

Krishna drafted and published plenty of literature. In-depth scholarship on his person and theories, however, has been surprisingly scarce.³⁴ While Krishna is addressed in many *kuṇḍalinī* related publications,³⁵ he hardly receives the attention he deserves. Notable exceptions are Sravana Borkataky-Varma, who dedicated parts of her PhD dissertation to Krishna and his exchange with Aurobindo;³⁶ Dimitry Okropiridze's paper on *kuṇḍalinī*'s discursive production within Orientalist dichotomies;³⁷ and Mary Scott's *The Kundalini Concept. Its Origin and Value*.³⁸ The findings of this paper therefore aim to contribute to the scholarship on Krishna.

2 Gopi Krishna's Kuṇḍalinī Experience

Krishna entered the international stage in 1967 when he published his book *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man*. It was Krishna's second book of a total of seventeen, which in one way or the other all originated from that initial extraordinary event described at the beginning of this chapter. He decided to compose this book as a first-person autobiographical account.³⁹ He thus narrated his own transforma-

³³ Aurobindo's impact on Krishna's concept has been first detected by Borkataky-Varma (e.g., Borkataky-Varma 2020, 377). William I. Thompson, who was a close collaborator (yet also a critic) of Krishna, in contrast, stressed in his book *Passages about Earth* (1973) how Krishna had lost his interest into Aurobindo after the latter had confirmed Krishna's experience as the rise of *kuṇḍalinī*, but recommended Krishna to look for another (i.e., tantric) source of support: "Now because Sri Aurobindo did not serve Gopi Krishna as a Tantric guru, Gopi Krishna concluded that Aurobindo was merely a writer of books" (Thompson 1973, 107).

³⁴ Krishna's collaborator Teri Degler (2023) published a detailed biography of Krishna's life.

³⁵ The psychiatrist Lee Sannella considered Krishna's account as consistent with his understanding of *kuṇḍalinī* in his 1976 publication *Kundalini. Psychosis or Transcendence* (Sannella [1976] 1978, 4). This notwithstanding, Sannella barely portrays Krishna's perspective. Kurt Leland's (2016) comprehensive account *Rainbow Body. A History of the Western Chakra System from Blavatsky to Brennan* includes a significant amount on *kuṇḍalinī*. However, the 500-page book mentions Krishna only once (Leland 2016, 320).

³⁶ Borkataky-Varma 2016.

³⁷ Okropiridze 2017.

³⁸ Scott 1983.

³⁹ Initially, Krishna intended to write his second book not as an autobiography but rather as a general treatise on *kuṇḍalinī*. At the recommendation of his early collaborators James Hillman (1926–2011) and Frederik J. Hopman (n.d.a.), Krishna decided against his original idea (Degler 2023, 98).

tional story, which was not only confined to the experience proper, but also to his individual response thenceforth. Anglophone autobiographies were a rather uncommon literary genre for an Indian writer at that time.⁴⁰ Probably the best-known autobiography by an Indian yogi is the influential work by Paramhansa Yogananda *Autobiography of a Yogi*, which was published in 1946. It may be argued that Yogananda's autobiography rather belongs to the genre of hagiography—or, as Anya Foxen argues convincingly, of “auto-hagiography”.^{41,42} Yogananda's book was but the beginning of similar accounts by yogis, which likewise tended to be written in a hagiographical manner. Notable examples are Swami Narayananda's autobiography *The Primal Power in Man or the Kundalini Shakti*,⁴³ Swami Sivananda's *Autobiography of Swami Sivananda*,⁴⁴ or Swami Muktananda's *Play of Consciousness*.⁴⁵ Krishna's autobiography, in contrast, was not intended as an auto-hagiography—although his supporters partly transfigured it as such.

Krishna's autobiographical book *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* revolves around religious concepts,⁴⁶ just as the above-mentioned auto-hagiographical accounts. However, Krishna aimed to dissociate himself from Hindu tradition and to assume a scientific stance. He thereby left the auto-hagiographical stage in favour of religious scientism. To reinforce his aspired credibility, Krishna's account was supplemented by psychological commentaries by the US-American psychologist James Hillman. While Frederick Spiegelberg claims in the introduction to the first edition that “Gopi Krishna's approach appears as a great surprise because in his book,” there is “no mention of spirituality, religion and metaphysics,”⁴⁷ indeed the book is full of references to religion, clad in modern, scientific terms. As I have already outlined in the introduction, Krishna thus stood in line with exponents of reli-

40 Early exceptions were written by Indian politicians, such as Bhimrao R. Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa* (1935), India's former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who wrote *An Autobiography* (1936), or Mohandas K. Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1948, Gujarati original published in 1927).

41 The term ‘auto-hagiography’ was coined by Robin Rinehart 1999. The major difference between an (auto)biography and an (auto)hagiography lies in the latter's amalgamation of history and myth, whereas the former claims to confine its contents to historical facts (Rinehart 1999, 2).

42 Foxen 2017, 18.

43 Narayananda 1950.

44 Sivananda 1958.

45 Muktananda 1978.

46 Religious concepts that are particularly evident within the book are, e.g., notions of subtle physiology as related to yoga and meditation; the belief in *kuṇḍalinī* resulting in a rebirth (Krishna 1967, 132); or revelations of divine truth in the wake of a supposed *kuṇḍalinī* awakening (256).

47 Spiegelberg, in Krishna 1967, 2.

gious scientism. In contrast to the physician Vasant Rele,⁴⁸ Krishna was not a learned scientist, nor was he a member of any yogic school or promulgated a religious agenda, as Vivekananda did. This notwithstanding, Krishna joined these men in their objective to reconcile religious and scientific elements. I will elaborate on Krishna's scientistic reading of *kuṇḍalīnī* below. Let me first outline Krishna's life and the reported experience.

Krishna was born in 1903 in a small Kashmiri village and spent the first years of his life mostly in Srinagar, then capital of the princely state Jammu and Kashmir,⁴⁹ and the Punjabi capital Lahore. On several occasions Krishna described his childhood, praising his mother's diligence and devotion, and his father's generosity and faith. From an early age, Krishna was confronted with yogis and saints, who were regular visitors in his family's house. While both of his parents were firm believers and reared their children in a religious atmosphere, his father's belief left a lasting impression on Krishna. Accordingly, he described his father as a man "with a deep mystical vein in him, [. . .] always on the look-out for Yogis and ascetics reputed to possess occult powers."⁵⁰ At times, Krishna even attributed psychic and clairvoyant powers to his father, recollecting him in a hagiographic manner. After the early death of Krishna's elder brother, his father increasingly refrained from mundane tasks and worldly activities. His extreme asceticism further resulted in a lack of vitality and a major health crisis. Later in his life Krishna interpreted his father's crisis as an uncontrolled activation of *kuṇḍalīnī*: "He was clearly passing through the upward and downward phases of a now active kundalini sending streams of impure prana (vital energy) into the brain."⁵¹ Thenceforth, his much younger mother carried all the responsibility of the household and set all her expectations on her only son.⁵² Despite his father's unsteady condition and his mother's sorrow and strain, Krishna held both his parents in high esteem and considered his upbringing as the lifeline in the challenges he would face later in his life:

I am convinced that it was this conjugation of a highly intelligent father with exceptional, noble traits of character, and a strong, able-bodied mother, with a deep religious bent, endowed with all the virtues of a simple unpretentious character, that helped me to brave,

⁴⁸ I am going to discuss Rele's role in the scientification of *kuṇḍalīnī* below.

⁴⁹ The unsteady history of the most northwestern region of India, nowadays known as the union territory Jammu and Kashmir (since 2019), has led to innumerable religious and ethnic conflicts. For a thorough account on the religious and political challenges this region has witnessed, see, e.g., Schofield (2003).

⁵⁰ Krishna [1967] 1970, 17–18.

⁵¹ Krishna 1993, 19.

⁵² Krishna 1993, 8–24.

without succumbing, the psychic storm released in my body on the arousal of kundalini, the Serpent Fire.⁵³

Throughout his youth, Krishna spent much energy on intellectual pursuits and read any available book related to mind control, development of personality, yoga, occultism, spiritualism, and was further well versed in Hindu scriptures, such as the Bhagavad Gita. Besides these intellectual examinations, Krishna also started practising yoga at the age of seventeen.⁵⁴ Thus, while he claimed no affiliation with any specific yogic school,⁵⁵ he had acquired a significant knowledge about yoga and associated topics. Despite his religious knowledge and involvement, Krishna emphasized that until the age of thirty-four, he was “leading the normal life of a householder without any previous indoctrination, religious bias, or monastic mental discipline.”⁵⁶ He was then married, had three kids, considered himself an agnostic, and was serving as a clerk under the Director of Education in Srinagar and Jammu. And still, his interest into yoga nonetheless outweighed his interest in his career.⁵⁷

On the fateful morning in December 1937, Krishna experienced a bodily sensation while meditating, which led to various psychosomatic effects that would utterly change his life. He described the experience with the following words:

I suddenly felt a strange sensation below the base of my spine. [. . .] The sensation was so extraordinary and so pleasing that my attention was forcefully drawn towards it. [. . .] Suddenly, with a roar like that of a waterfall, I felt a stream of liquid light entering my brain through the spinal cord. [. . .] The illumination grew brighter and brighter, the roaring louder, I experienced a rocking sensation and then felt myself slipping out of my body, entirely enveloped in a halo of light.⁵⁸

In the beginning, Krishna did not indicate his changed condition and his internal transformation to anyone. He suffered silently and blamed himself “for having

53 Krishna 1993, 15.

54 Krishna described his daily practice either as yoga or as meditation. From his descriptions, however, it appears that his yogic exercises were limited to calmly sitting cross-legged and concentrating on easing his mind. He did not include any further mention of postural yoga (Krishna [1967] 1970, 23). Therefore, when referring to Krishna’s practice, I use meditation and yoga interchangeably.

55 In his autobiography, Krishna frequently referred to haṭha yoga. This notwithstanding, he emphasized that there was no authoritative school or teacher that had influenced or directed his practice. It was only when he witnessed his psycho-somatic crisis that he contacted several yogis in his quest for support (Krishna [1967] 1970, 92–93).

56 Krishna [1967] 1970, 227.

57 Krishna [1967] 1970, 26.

58 Krishna [1967] 1970, 12–13.

delved into the supernatural without first acquiring a fuller knowledge of the subject.”⁵⁹ In the course of time and with the help of relatives, friends, and self-proclaimed experts, he interpreted this extraordinary experience as the activation of an energy stream, traditionally associated with *kuṇḍalinī śakti*.⁶⁰ Despite his far-reaching research on yoga and associated topics, Krishna claimed previous ignorance about the concept in question. He merely recalled that he had come across some books on yoga, which dealt with “a vital mechanism called Kundalini.”⁶¹ This, however, had been long time ago, wherefore he was not especially familiar with the topic. Moreover, these “books on Yoga, both of the East and the West” rather concerned “the development of psychic powers.”⁶² He further claimed that in his practice he had not come across a similar sensation or experience so far. By then, Krishna had already practised meditation for seventeen years on a regular basis. As part of his strict self-imposed routine, he had increasingly prolonged the duration of his practice from age seventeen onwards, until after a few years he was able to remain seated and focused for several hours a day without a break. Krishna considered the advanced level of his regular practice as the lifeline to sanity after his supposed activation of *kuṇḍalinī*.⁶³

The peculiarity of Krishna’s experience report pertains not so much to his description of the ascension of the energy stream. This description differs only marginally from other accounts. What is striking, is rather his endeavour to integrate and contextualize the transformative experience along universal premises detached from any cultural tie. Moreover, the described transformational process extends over a period of more than twenty-five years. The greater part of his description thus focuses on his condition in the wake of his initial *kuṇḍalinī* experience and on long-term transformations. During these years Krishna went through different phases. Some years passed without any internal reaction, and then again, he reports of severe psychosomatic crises, which had a major impact on his physical and mental health to the point where he feared for his life. A very vivid description of such a supposedly lethal period is the following:

Suffering the most excruciating torture, I clenched my hands and bit my lips to stop myself from leaping out of bed and crying at the top of my voice. The throbbing of my heart grew more and more terrific, acquiring such a spasmodic violence that I thought it must either stop beating or burst. [. . .] I knew I was dying and that my heart could not stand the tre-

59 Krishna [1967] 1970, 55.

60 Krishna 1967, 94–109.

61 Krishna 1967, 14.

62 Krishna 1967, 37.

63 Krishna 1967, 23.

mendous strain for long [. . .] every part of my body flaming and burning, but I could do nothing to alleviate the dreadful suffering.⁶⁴

In other phases, Krishna was tormented by major doubts on the plausibility of his assumption. Many years passed without any sign of him gaining psychic powers or related supernatural abilities, as his consulted books on *kunḍalinī* predicted. At times he thus despaired over his situation:

I had undergone a singular experience, but how could I be sure that I was not the victim of an abnormal pathological condition, peculiar to me alone? How could I be sure that I was not suffering from a continuous hallucinatory affliction [. . .], the unexpected result, in my case, of prolonged concentration and too much absorption in the occult?⁶⁵

In the final phase, however, Krishna eventually overcame his doubts. With a sense of certainty, he perceived his condition as a “superconscious⁶⁶ state”,⁶⁷ witnessing psychic powers and divine grace: “After years of acute suffering I had at last been given a glimpse into the supersensible and at the same time made the fortunate recipient of divine grace, which all fitted admirably with the traditional concepts of Kundalini.”⁶⁸ The claimed special abilities involved automatic writing in for him unknown languages, access to “an inexpressible fount of all knowledge,”⁶⁹ and clairvoyance. Moreover, Krishna perceived that he emitted an all-encompassing brilliant light of his internal radiance. He thus concluded that the glowing light of his visualized lotus had diffused throughout his body and environment as a result of his supersensible state.⁷⁰ To Krishna, however, these extraordinary events were only of secondary interest.

His superconscious condition, as Krishna claimed, did not arise at once. Instead, it was the culmination of a transformational process, triggered by a biological mechanism. He insisted that the transformation towards a higher state of consciousness was therefore not engendered by a spiritual agency or practice, but rather by a biological process intrinsic to every human being. Based on his

⁶⁴ Krishna [1967] 1970, 64–65.

⁶⁵ Krishna [1967] 1970, 137.

⁶⁶ Scholars of modern yoga commonly trace the term ‘superconscious’ or ‘superconsciousness’ back to Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga*, where it constitutes a key concept to describe the sublime state of samadhi (e.g., De Michelis 2004, 171). However, as Jacobs and Kraler have shown in their study, the term was introduced by the German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann in 1873. The term was thereafter in common use by Theosophists, exponents of psychology, and early promoters of yoga. For a thorough discussion, see Jacobs and Kraler (forthcoming).

⁶⁷ Krishna [1967] 1970, 14.

⁶⁸ Krishna [1967] 1970, 209.

⁶⁹ Krishna [1967] 1970, 212.

⁷⁰ Krishna [1967] 1970, 211–13.

physical and mental alterations and his claimed achievement of psychic powers, Krishna further suggested that *kuṇḍalinī* was the underlying force of any genius, prophet, or saint in human history:

The awakening of Kundalini is a perfectly natural biological phenomenon of an uncommon kind. [. . .] The only peculiarity which gives it a semblance of the bizarre and the uncanny is the biological process which, set afoot, leads to the emergence of a conscious personality so superior [. . .] as to make the whole phenomenon appear to be the performance of a supernatural agency rather than the outcome of [. . .] natural though as yet unknown biological laws.⁷¹

I would like to briefly discuss Krishna's preceding meditative practice, that he had followed for many years. On the one hand, he considered the practice as the primal cause for his *kuṇḍalinī* awakening, and on the other hand, he believed that devoid of his yearlong meditative experience and knowledge, he would not have mastered the severe crises in the wake of his initial *kuṇḍalinī* awakening. The meditation practice, as Krishna described it, confined to the concentration on the symbol of the lotus: "I steadied my wandering thoughts, and fixing my attention on the crown, tried to visualize a lotus in full bloom as was my custom."⁷² The lotus as his target of concentration was located "at the top of his head,"⁷³ and was "of brilliant colour, emitting rays of light."⁷⁴ Intriguingly, after Krishna's acquaintance with *kuṇḍalinī*, the symbol of the lotus was totally replaced by various metaphors of *kuṇḍalinī*. His concentration accordingly shifted from the crown of the head towards the lower end of his spine.⁷⁵ It is not clear from Krishna's description, however, whether initially he associated the targeted lotus with a *cakra*, or whether he dissociated it from concepts of subtle physiology and used it as a mere meditative visualization. It is most likely that he had received this basic instruction from Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga*, where he writes: "Imagine a lotus upon the top of the head, several inches up [. . .] surrounded with effulgent light."⁷⁶ Vivekananda's teachings of yoga and meditation were then (as now) widely spread and kept in high esteem. Leland argued

71 Krishna [1967] 1970, 167.

72 Krishna [1967] 1970, 16.

73 Krishna [1967] 1970, 12.

74 Krishna [1967] 1970, 11.

75 As indicated above, the lower end of the spine is traditionally associated with the resting point of *kuṇḍalinī*. As the alleged point of departure for his experience, Krishna laid special focus on this region of his body. This notwithstanding, he also claimed that he noticed the activation of a "high-powered conscious centre" (Krishna [1967] 1970, 163) at the crown of his head in the wake of the movement of *kuṇḍalinī*. The lower end of the spine and the top of his head (and thus the first and the last *cakra*) both developed into major centers of concentration for Krishna.

76 Vivekananda [1897] 1920, 90–91.

that Vivekananda's manual of *cakra* development was not merely among the first English publications on meditative practices linked to the *cakras* but also clearly and concisely expressed.^{77,78}

Another source that possibly yielded influence on Krishna's meditative visualization was Sir John Woodroffe's highly influential book *The Serpent Power*,⁷⁹ which was published under the pen name Arthur Avalon.⁸⁰ In the book Woodroffe wrote that the "Sahasrāra or thousand-petalled lotus [is located] at the top of the brain, [. . .] which is the state of pure Consciousness."⁸¹ Woodroffe described each of the lotuses in great detail in his introduction, however, he did not link the *cakras* with 'rays of light' or the like, but rather with sound.⁸² Woodroffe's major opponent, the Theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater (1847–1934), on the contrary, described the *cakras* akin to Vivekananda's account. Both in *The Inner Life*⁸³ and *The Chakras*,⁸⁴ he described the activated force centres (as he called the *cakras*) as being "of blinding brilliancy, and [. . .] coruscating like miniature suns"⁸⁵ or as being "radiant, throwing out brilliant golden rays,"⁸⁶ respectively.⁸⁷ At the time of the publication of Krishna's book, Theosophy's determining influence had already ceased and they no longer acted as role models for practices and patterns of individual experiences. This notwithstanding, it is reasonable to assume that Theosophical books have provided most of the preliminaries for Krish-

77 Leland 2016, 156.

78 An even earlier, if far less known English publication on related matters was *Om. A Treatise on Vedantic Raj Yoga Philosophy* (1880) by the Tamil yogi Sri Sabhapaty Swami (ca. 1828–1923/4). Unlike Vivekananda, Sabhapaty Swami has remained largely forgotten. For this reason, it is rather doubtful that his manual yielded any influence on Krishna's meditative practice. For a thorough discussion on Sabhapaty Swami, his work, context, and legacy, see the excellent study by Cantú (2021), as well as his illuminating chapter in this volume.

79 Woodroffe 1919.

80 Behind the pseudonym Arthur Avalon stood the collaboration of John Woodroffe and several Indian intellectuals. Kathleen Taylor was the first to underline this fact in her well-received 2001 study *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: An Indian Soul in a European Body?* However, Woodroffe himself also openly admitted such a collaboration (Strube 2021, 133). For a thorough discussion on the Arthur Avalon team, see Strube (2022).

81 Woodroffe [1919] 1974, 103.

82 Woodroffe [1919] 1974, 1–16.

83 Leadbeater 1922.

84 Leadbeater 1927.

85 Leadbeater 1922, 289.

86 Leadbeater [1927] 2013, 7.

87 Other Theosophists, e.g., Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891) or George S. Arundale (1878–1945), likewise considered the *cakras*. Leadbeater, however, has been most famously associated with the topic.

na's and others' re-invention of *kuṇḍalinī*.⁸⁸ Thus, while Krishna remained vague about precise sources and inspirations for his meditation practice and subsequently for his understanding of *kuṇḍalinī*, Woodroffe's *The Serpent Power* represents the most secure source, which he frequently mentioned in later works. The intention of his initial secrecy runs along the common line of highlighting his experience as original and unaffected, and of emphasizing its independency from Indian religious tradition. Accordingly, Krishna was credited by Frederick Spiegelberg as "a self-taught prophet of an original kind."⁸⁹ Furthermore, Krishna's secrecy led to his classification as a practitioner rather than a theorist. An unwelcome reputation, which persisted, no matter how much Krishna stressed the opposite.⁹⁰

We may conclude that Krishna interpreted *kuṇḍalinī* as a biological process, whose activation results in a change of consciousness. This corresponds with his understanding of a transformational experience, which he clearly defined in his account. According to his empirical knowledge, such experiences involve physical and mental alterations brought about by the vital current of *kuṇḍalinī*. These alterations may engender a complete metamorphosis of consciousness and personality. Transformation for Krishna thus involved mutually defining physical and psychological planes.^{91,92} Moreover, he underlined how any single person at any time and any place might experience this process. Against this backdrop, Krishna further interpreted *kuṇḍalinī* as a universal force, which will be outlined in the next section.

⁸⁸ Some of the earliest books on *kuṇḍalinī* in English language were composed by Theosophists (and associates) and thus underline this claim. This includes, i.e., Woodroffe's (1919) *The Serpent Power*, Rele's (1927) *The Mysterious Kundalini*, and Arundale's (1938) *Kundalini. An Occult Experience*. Another Theosophical book related to the topic in question was Richard M. Bucke's (1901) *Cosmic Consciousness*. Much of Krishna's descriptions of the transformation of the mind and related shifts in consciousness are reminiscent of Bucke's statements (Bucke [1901] 1905, 51–68). Intriguingly, however, Krishna did not possess a copy of Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* before 1971, when he received the book by his friend and collaborator Karl Basedow: "Many thanks for the book 'Cosmic Consciousness' which I was very keen to have. It is an important book on the subject, and I am grateful to you for having sent it to me in time" (Krishna to Basedow, 25 April 1971, Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.2.).

⁸⁹ Spiegelberg, in Krishna 1967, 2.

⁹⁰ Okropiridze 2017, 352.

⁹¹ Intriguingly, Krishna referred to Woodroffe's *The Serpent Power* to underline this claim (Krishna 1993, 354–55).

⁹² Krishna [1967] 1970, 14; Krishna 1993, 354.

3 Kuṇḍalinī Within the Frame of Religious Universalism and Religious Scientism

Krishna's primary agenda revolved around his objective to promote *kuṇḍalinī* as a universal pattern both in religion and science. Indeed, Krishna was convinced that the "basis of universal belief in religion"⁹³ pertains to *kuṇḍalinī*. I already outlined how Vivekananda and Aurobindo assumedly served as sources of inspiration for Krishna's understanding of universalist traits of consciousness. Different from Vivekananda and Aurobindo, however, Krishna did not take Neo-Vedānta or Hindu religions as point of departure for his claim in question. Instead of religious doctrines, Krishna underpinned his theories with what he perceived as objectivity, rationality, and empirical science. He thus applied scientism as a language of faith that served his claim of universalism.⁹⁴ Along these lines, Krishna argued that by means of science, the fundamental truth of *kuṇḍalinī*'s universal existence could be empirically demonstrated and should thus be generally accepted.⁹⁵ Krishna hoped that this acceptance of *kuṇḍalinī* as a biological mechanism of the human body would finally reveal its real essence as an evolutionary law of nature. Moreover, he claimed that the scientific demonstration of *kuṇḍalinī* "will have such an effect on the world as to succeed in creating the mental climate that will [. . .] usher in an era favourable to the establishment of a universal religion."⁹⁶ Krishna thus fused scientific and religious claims within his system.

As underlined in the introduction of this paper, similar approaches were already laid out by Theosophists, who used scientism to underpin the claim of religious truth. This agenda experienced increasing popularity from the early 1880s

⁹³ Vivekananda [1897] 1920, 2.

⁹⁴ Hammer 2004, 227.

⁹⁵ Ever since Krishna had published his book, he aimed to collaborate with like-minded scholars, politicians, activists, and believers. Among this multifaceted crowd, several individuals set themselves the task to empirically prove *kuṇḍalinī* and other elements of the subtle body. The Japanese parapsychologist Hiroshi Motoyama (1925–2015) and the Israeli American inventor and self-proclaimed scientist Itzhak Bentov (1923–1979) represent important examples. While the former was directly in contact with Krishna (Krishna to Hopman, 29 October 1969, Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.1.), the latter was rather considered a competitive force (Kieffer to Krishna, 3 June 1975, Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.5.). Moreover, from 1982 onwards, Krishna and his team, e.g., supporters from the United States, Canada, and Europe, promoted their own 'experimental center.' Located at Dehra Dun, India. The 'Kundalini-Yoga Experimental Project' was meant as an open laboratory to empirically demonstrate the claim of *kuṇḍalinī*'s existence within the human body by guiding and tracing its activation among participants. Due to Krishna's death in 1984, the 'Kundalini-Yoga Experimental Project' was never officially inaugurated (Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.7.).

⁹⁶ Krishna 1976a, 206.

onwards, when yogic texts and phenomena were interpreted along scientific and medical lines.⁹⁷ Against this backdrop, Theosophists also attempted to address the subtle body and its components along medical and scientific lines. This “scientific emphasis”⁹⁸ captured the interest of several Theosophists that laid the foundation for a scientific reading of *kuṇḍalinī*.⁹⁹ Among the more important ones count the Tamil Theosophist and translator Narayana Swami Aiyer (1854–1918) and the above-mentioned Vasant Rele.

Aiyer’s article *Occult Physiology* (1891)¹⁰⁰ mainly aimed to “reconcile his findings from the Yoga Upaniṣads with theosophical doctrine.”¹⁰¹ Aiyer provided a Theosophical coloured description of *kuṇḍalinī*. Not only did he link *kuṇḍalinī* to magnetic currents, the etheric double, and *fohat*¹⁰²—all very common Theosophical terms—but he also interpreted *kuṇḍalinī* along the lines of a destructive, dangerous force, which “is able to create as well as undo the things of the world, that

97 Foremost representatives of this episode were the above-mentioned Indian Sanskrit scholar Sri Chandra Basu, his brother (and publisher) Baman Das Basu, and N.C. Paul (born Navīna Candra Pāla). Another significant period of reconciling science and religion occurred during the 1920s and 1930s, with Sri Yogendra (1897–1918) and Swami Kuvalayananda (1883–1966) emerging as key figures. (Singleton 2010, 50–52).

98 Singleton 2010, 53.

99 Singleton 2010, 49–53.

100 Little is known of Narayana Swami Aiyer, whose surname indicates his affiliation to the caste of Tamil Brahmins. He was an active and esteemed member of the Theosophical Society of Kumbakonam, a town in Tamil Nadu, and was a frequent contributor to *The Theosophist*. Aiyer delivered his lecture on *Occult Physiology* at the Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in Adyar on December 29, 1890. At the time of his lecture, Aiyer had already earned a reputation as a proficient translator of some of the Yoga-Upaniṣads (Kraler 2022, 128–29).

101 Kraler 2022, 129.

102 The term ‘fohat’ or ‘fohatic-power’ traces back to the Theosophical Society. In the *Theosophical Glossary* (1892), Madam Blavatsky defines *fohat* as an “occult Tibetan term,” which is “used to represent the active (male) potency of the Sakti [. . .], the ever-present electrical energy and ceaseless destructive and formative power” (Blavatsky 1892, 120–21). In other words, the Theosophical term *fohat* corresponds to Blavatsky’s understanding of the eternal life force. According to Blavatsky, *kuṇḍalinī* assumes the shape of this very life force. In her *The Voice of the Silence* (1889), Blavatsky expressed that implicit relation between *kuṇḍalinī* and *fohat* more clearly: “Kundalini is [. . .] an electric fiery occult or Fohatic power, the great pristine force, which underlies all organic and inorganic matter” (Blavatsky [1889] 1973, 14–15; emphasis in original). However, Blavatsky’s association of *kuṇḍalinī* with *fohat* drew on the article “The Aryan-Arhat Esoteric Tenets on the sevenfold principle in man” (1882), published in *The Theosophist* by the Indian Theosophist T.S. Row. There Row writes: “Śakti, that mysterious energy or force [. . .] is called by the Buddhist Arahats of Tibet—FO-HAT” (Row 1882, 94). Aiyer was thus neither the first nor the only one applying the term *fohat* in relation to *kuṇḍalinī*.

is it will either kill man or give him power if properly controlled.”¹⁰³ This quote is most reminiscent of Blavatsky’s own wordings in her *The Voice of Silence*, where she uttered an urgent warning that “when aroused into action [*kuṇḍalinī*] can as easily kill as it can create.”¹⁰⁴ These ambiguous descriptions of Blavatsky and Aiyer resemble Krishna’s account of his experiences with *kuṇḍalinī*.¹⁰⁵ Finally, Aiyer also applied a scientific reading and interpretation of the subtle body and its components, according to the Theosophical vogue.¹⁰⁶ Accordingly, he claimed that *kuṇḍalinī* “contains the latent quality of magnetic oxygen which preserves the body even when the [. . .] breath is stopped.”¹⁰⁷

Aiyer’s significance for the ensuing discourse notwithstanding,¹⁰⁸ Vasant Rele’s importance as a forerunner to *kuṇḍalinī*’s scientification outweighs Aiyer. I have already presented this protagonist as a general representative of religious scientism. His major work *The Mysterious Kundalini*¹⁰⁹ was initially delivered as a paper at the Bombay Medical Union in 1926. The following year, Rele extended the paper and published it as a book with a dedication “to those interested in the science of yoga.”¹¹⁰ The book revolves around the anatomy of the yogic body, its associated practices and theories, and may be classified a paradigm of religious scientism. As the title of his book suggests, the ‘mysterious’ *kuṇḍalinī* took a prominent position in this account. His major objective thus targeted the explanation of yogic phenomena, such as the activation of *kuṇḍalinī* or the achievement of siddhis, through the language and laws of non-Indian anatomy and physiology. Accordingly, Rele described within his ‘Tantric anatomy of nerves’ the *cakras* as the plexuses of the body, the *Vāyu-nādis* as the nerves of impulse, and the *kuṇḍalinī* as a distinctive cranial nerve, the (right) Vagus nerve.¹¹¹ He wrote: “To my mind, Kundalini or the serpent power as it is called is the Vagus nerve of modern times, which supplies

103 Aiyer 1891, 357.

104 Blavatsky [1889] 1973, 84.

105 It may be argued that members of the Theosophical Society anticipated Krishna’s stress of *kuṇḍalinī*’s dangers. This notwithstanding, Theosophical references to *kuṇḍalinī*’s negative effects were rather scarce (with the notable exceptions mentioned in the text) and therefore did not play a major role for the elaboration of Krishna’s position.

106 See, e.g., Aiyer 1891, 352–54.

107 Aiyer 1891, 358.

108 Aiyer’s translations of the Yoga-Upaniṣads formed the basis for any further examination of these Sanskrit texts. John Woodroffe, e.g., used Aiyer’s translation when referring to the Yoga-Upaniṣads, which is attested in a footnote of his *The Serpent Power* (Woodroffe [1919] 1974, 263).

109 Rele 1927.

110 Rele [1927] 1929, 5.

111 Rele [1927] 1929, 20–21.

and controls all the important vital organs.”¹¹² *Kuṇḍalinī* thus takes the position of an anatomical rather than a subtle component. Accordingly, *kuṇḍalinī*’s awakening would ultimately lead to the “control over the autonomic nervous system over which we have normally no control.”¹¹³ Rele continued by tracing “[a]ll the miracles of a Yogi, such as stopping the beats of the heart and pulse”¹¹⁴ back to the scientific exposition of the *kuṇḍalinī* phenomenon. John Woodroffe, who contributed to the book with a foreword, expressed an ambivalent attitude to Rele’s theory of the physiological basis of the phenomena associated with *kuṇḍalinī* yoga.¹¹⁵ This critical response notwithstanding, throughout his treatise Rele merged physiological with yogic terms and thereby aimed to undermine *kuṇḍalinī*’s esoteric character. As I have already stressed, such a scientific reading had become prevalent among Theosophist writers. Although Rele’s book lacks any such references, he probably relied on earlier publications when attributing subtle components with anatomical terms.¹¹⁶ *The Mysterious Kundalini* and similar publications must therefore be contextualized within Theosophical readings of Tantric anatomy.

In the same trajectory, Krishna’s argument revolved around *kuṇḍalinī*’s universal existence within the human body, the universal pattern of her arousal, and her universal application in the course of a global shift of consciousness. This implies an individual and a global layer of transformation.

But how does the universal pattern of *kuṇḍalinī*, as developed by Krishna, pertain to what Krishna perceived as transformational experience, i.e., the claimed awakening of the energy and its ensuing physical and mental process? Most importantly, according to Krishna, this transformation comes at a price: physical suffering. The bodily discomfort endures until the organism got accustomed to the new biological mechanism. Krishna thus interpreted physical and mental suffering as

112 Rele [1927] 1929, 46.

113 Rele [1927] 1929, 87.

114 Rele [1927] 1929, 87.

115 Woodroffe cherished the innovative scientific findings of Rele, while rejecting Rele’s identification of *kuṇḍalinī* with the Vagus nerve. Woodroffe stressed how *kuṇḍalinī* was “the Grand Potential. As such she cannot [. . .] be identified with any of the products which she becomes” (Woodroffe, in Rele [1927] 1929, x).

116 The above-mentioned Baman Das Basu and his article *The Anatomy of the Tantras* (1888) initially suggested a correspondence between components of the subtle and the physical body. Furthermore, his brother Sri Chandra Basu included in his highly influential translation of the *Shiva Samhita* (1887) subheadings, which indicated his understanding of the subtle body and its components as nerves and nerve centers. Moreover, James Morgan Pryse provided in his *The Apocalypse Unsealed* (1910), a graphic representation of the *cakras* as plexuses in the physical body (Leland 2016, 101).

indispensable parts of a *kuṇḍalinī*-induced transformation and accordingly as parts of the claimed universal pattern of this experience. The manner, intensity, and time frame of such sufferings may vary. However, once the distress has ceased, the individual might accomplish a radical change of mental and physical abilities. Krishna insisted how the basic procedure remains unaltered with any individual witnessing *kuṇḍalinī*, owing to its evolutionary character. Accordingly, Krishna claimed that while his experience was genuine, it was by no means a “special divine favour, vouchsafed to me in particular or earned by me as a reward for merit.”¹¹⁷ Instead, he underlined how the experience was:

an ever-present possibility, existing in all human beings, by virtue of the evolutionary process still at work in the race, tending to create a condition of the brain and nervous system that can enable one to transcend the existing boundaries of the mind and acquire a state of consciousness far above that which is the normal heritage of mankind at present.¹¹⁸

Krishna thus pled for *kuṇḍalinī* as a biological, evolutionary process, slumbering in each human being, and holding the potential for the attainment of higher states of consciousness.

The second layer relates to *kuṇḍalinī* as triggering a global transformation. While the first layer involved a biological and mental plane, the global level targets the transformation of ‘collective consciousness.’ Based on his own experience and the claim of its universal character, Krishna thus suggested that *kuṇḍalinī* has the capability to inaugurate a new phase of consciousness. Crucially, however, *kuṇḍalinī* as a transformative trigger will not merely shape future generations but has rather played a significant role from time immemorial: “The highest products of civilization, prophets, mystics, men of genius, clearly indicate the goal of human evolution. [. . .] they will all be found to have common characteristics. The motive and guiding power behind them in all cases without exception is *Kundalini*.”¹¹⁹ This involves that *kuṇḍalinī*-induced alterations of consciousness have caused spiritual transformation throughout history. *Kuṇḍalinī* thus represents (and has always represented) the driving force for this asserted universal ascent of humanity’s collective consciousness towards a superconscious state. Krishna considered it his task to spread the knowledge which he had gained access to, and thus to support the transformation of as many as possible. Considering Krishna’s definition of *kuṇḍalinī* as a universal experience, he was certain that the greater the amount of people who had awakened their *kuṇḍalinī*, the greater the

¹¹⁷ Krishna [1967] 1970, 226.

¹¹⁸ Krishna [1967] 1970, 226.

¹¹⁹ Krishna [1967] 1970, 242.

global impact: *Kuṇḍalinī* as the only possible solution for an all-encompassing shift of consciousness.¹²⁰

Both layers are deeply intertwined. Following Krishna, devoid of the universal mechanism of *kuṇḍalinī*'s physical activation, no individual transformation of consciousness would ever be achieved, save on a global scale. This implies that the (individual) biological mechanism constitutes the precondition for a collective shift in consciousness. The transformation in question thus depends on Krishna's understanding of a universal experience. Thus, Krishna believed that the *kuṇḍalinī* pattern, in its individual and collective dimension, entails liberating, transformational, and universal qualities. These qualities notwithstanding, the process, even when intended, potentially provokes loss of control as well as physically and mentally lethal risks. Each exponent of the "cult of Kundalini"¹²¹ must nonetheless endure risks as such for the sake of collective transformation. The new era of transformed consciousness must ultimately culminate in a universal religion with *kuṇḍalinī* as its spiritual underpinning. *Kuṇḍalinī* thus fuses both transformational and universal experiences.

Corresponding to Krishna's increasing success, a growing number of people required his advice in the wake of their own *kuṇḍalinī* experiences. While Krishna had emphasized that he did not wish to become a guru of *kuṇḍalinī*, nor to take any disciples,¹²² he nonetheless aimed to satisfy such requests. He did so in several ways: Through personal correspondences, e.g., with the Indian professor Dr. Asrani,¹²³ through general essays published in journals, e.g., Krishna's "Meditation: Is It Always Beneficial? Some Positive and Negative Views,"¹²⁴ or through workshops/seminars held at international events, e.g., Gopi Krishna's lakeside workshop in Canada (July / August 1979, Northern Ontario). First and foremost, however, he wished to support his fellow sufferers by exclusively dedicating his time to writing about the matter. As thoroughly outlined above, Krishna interpreted *kuṇḍalinī* as a biological mechanism, engendering a meaningful transformation. Based on this premise, this paper argues that Krishna's scientific interpretations eased his initial experience of pain and torture. His increasing research and writing endeavours

120 Krishna [1967] 1970, 241–42.

121 Krishna 1976a, 62.

122 "I am not having disciples for the reason that then I take a moral responsibility upon myself which I cannot discharge satisfactorily, as I wish to devote my whole time to the research of this subject" (Krishna 1976b, 29).

123 Dr. Asrani required help from Krishna concerning his daughter's spontaneous ascent of *kuṇḍalinī*: "Out of several so called 'Kundalini Yogis', I know, you are the only one, who can give a scientific or atleast [sic] dependable advice" (Asrani to Krishna, 15 July 1975, Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.2.).

124 Krishna 1975.

therefore resemble a form of therapy: His total immersion in theories on consciousness and related matters helped him to reframe his experience in a positive manner. Krishna thus considered it his duty to publish widely on his ‘discovery,’ i.e., the claimed biological basis of *kuṇḍalinī*, and thereby assuring others of the universal value of their experience in spite of its potentially distressing nature.

These innovative theories left a lasting impression on several of Krishna’s readers. Therefore, I would like to address the impact of Krishna’s claim of universalism in the final part of this paper.

4 Impact on Subsequent Examinations and Narrations

Krishna’s account was a milestone in *kuṇḍalinī*’s transmission to non-Indians. His book *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* has enjoyed great popularity ever since its initial publication in 1967. Designated groups on social media still praise his merits and continue to keep his heritage alive.¹²⁵

When Krishna published his book in 1967, Indian swamis had already disseminated some of their teachings overseas and *kuṇḍalinī* had consequently developed into a vogue concept among US-American alternative religious seekers. Krishna’s biographical account nonetheless filled an open gap: At the end of the 1960s, there were no experience reports about *kuṇḍalinī*, neither in India, nor beyond, that were narrated from a personal perspective, independent of a particular spiritual practice, and devoid of traditional or religious ties.¹²⁶ While Krishna’s readership was quite diverse,¹²⁷ most consultants of Krishna’s books and his distinctive inter-

¹²⁵ A notable example pertains to the private Facebook group *KUNDALINI AWAKENING Guidance & Support*. It counts more than 72.000 members and has around seventy new contributions per month (as of September 2023). The group discusses various topics associated with *kuṇḍalinī*, whom they consider as “the inexhaustible source of philosophy, art and sciences, and the fountainhead of all religious faiths” (Kapur 2022). The group clearly follows Krishna when writing: “In every human being there is a biological mechanism for enlightenment which is also responsible for the evolution of the species towards a higher consciousness” (Kapur 2022). Numerous contributions mention, praise, or discuss Krishna.

¹²⁶ I have already shown above how Krishna’s book was propagated as a non-religious account, while in fact religion played a major part.

¹²⁷ His readership has ranged from transpersonal psychologists, yoga practitioners, occultists, to Christian mystics. The Californian based *Yoga Journal* (est. 1975), the work of White (1979), and the above-mentioned Facebook group constitute useful sources for Krishna’s readership.

pretation of *kuṇḍalinī* were non-Indians who did not associate themselves with Hindu religions. Moreover, those who believed to have experienced an uncontrolled or accidental rise of *kuṇḍalinī*, possibly even attended by negative effects likely turned to Krishna's books. For those, on the contrary, who experienced *kuṇḍalinī* through the guidance of a guru or as a result of spiritual exercises, Krishna's approach was usually not the first choice and at times even rejected. Krishna thus polarized the debate: Opinions about his credibility varied and his explanatory model was not unanimously approved. Some praised his interpretation of *kuṇḍalinī* as "the most important discovery in scientific history,"¹²⁸ or as "the only literature [. . .] on kundalini that is absolutely true."¹²⁹ Others dismissed his autodidactic lay approach to science and denied his claim of universalism: "Gopi Krishna's autobiography appears to be an honest representation of his experiences, but it is only one extreme datapoint in the panorama of experience on kundalini yoga. It represents dangers in forceful unguided practice, but it is not representative of a typical practitioner's experience."¹³⁰ This polarity notwithstanding, Krishna has become a significant authority in the field of *kuṇḍalinī* research—a fact which was even acknowledged by his critics. Krishna initiated and inspired research endeavours on the part of individuals and organizations, such as Lee Sannella and his Kundalini Clinic or international *kuṇḍalinī* research organisations, some of them existing until today.¹³¹

Innumerable books were published in reference to Krishna's experience.¹³² I will discuss, as an example of Krishna's impact, one book which I consider paramount: W. Thomas Wolfe's *And the Sun is Up: Kundalini Rises in the West*.¹³³

¹²⁸ Kundalini Research Foundation, n.d.a.

¹²⁹ Scrudder 1979, 196.

¹³⁰ Kreutzer 1996.

¹³¹ The most important still existing research association is the Institute for Consciousness Research (ICR). Some of its active members (e.g., Michael Bradford) have already worked with Krishna in his Central Institute for Kundalini Research (located in Kashmir, India), a preceding organization dedicated to the research of *kuṇḍalinī*. For further information, see <https://www.icrcanada.org/about>.

¹³² See, e.g., Lee Sannella's (1976) *Kundalini. Psychosis or Transcendence*; Christopher Hills's (1977) *Nuclear Evolution: Discovery of the Rainbow Body*; W. Thomas Wolfe's (1978) *And the Sun is Up: Kundalini Rises in the West*; and John White's (1979) *Kundalini. Evolution and Enlightenment*. White's edited volume was the most important *kuṇḍalinī* handbook of the 1970s written for and by US-American exponents of alternative religion. It comprises experience reports, immersions into US-American occulture and Indian perspectives, and an entire chapter on warnings and suggestions on how to overcome *kuṇḍalinī*'s difficulties. Most articles within the book refer to Krishna and even the title is reminiscent of Krishna's autobiographical account.

¹³³ Wolfe 1978.

Wolfe's book consists of four major parts: *Kundalini Them*, which introduces what the author classified as traditional Hindu and Christian perspectives of *kuṇḍalinī* in scripture and experience; *Kundalini Me*, which deals with the author's personal experience and lays special attention towards his dreams; *Kundalini You*, which provides information on how to prepare for a *kuṇḍalinī* experience; and *Kundalini We*, which considers millenarian and collective aspects of *kuṇḍalinī*. *Kundalini Me* and *Kundalini We* are of paramount importance when analysing to what extent Krishna's account yielded impact upon Wolfe's book.

The structure of Wolfe's experience report is reminiscent of Krishna's, inasmuch as he highlights several phases in his *kuṇḍalinī* experience and lays a greater focus on the aftermath of the experience than the experience itself. Unlike Krishna, however, he also associated the months prior to his activation as belonging to his *kuṇḍalinī* experience. Accordingly, he reported how extraordinary feelings and "psychic events" had begun "to build up in intensity and frequency—a direct result of the growing Kundalini fires within."¹³⁴ In these preceding months, as Wolfe underlined, the importance of meditating, dreaming, and experimenting with a biofeedback machine had grown.¹³⁵ In contrast, the description of his initial *kuṇḍalinī* experience appears almost trivial: "The Kundalini event was quite spectacular, but I was able to pass through it rather quickly."¹³⁶ Wolfe's initial activation thus differed fundamentally from Krishna's traumatic experience. Some of Wolfe's ensuing phases, however, involved crises and severe health problems reminiscent of Krishna's, which he interpreted as "yogic problems."¹³⁷ He described the physical and mental changes that he had undergone in the wake of his activation with religious terms, such as "the descent of the white light"¹³⁸ or "the baptism by fire,"¹³⁹ and at

134 Wolfe 1978, 67.

135 Wolfe 1978, 67–71. By means of a biofeedback machine Wolfe aimed to train his 'cerebral muscles' and to practice 'mental gymnastics.' Wolfe interpreted his experiments with the biofeedback machine as spiritual practices that might have a beneficial effect on one's spiritual path. For a thorough discussion on the employment of biofeedback within energy healing discourses, see Endler (2016). The above-mentioned Itzhak Bentov approached *kuṇḍalinī* in a similar manner. He aimed to trigger the mechanism with a so-called ballistocardiograph, thereby developing empirical evidence (Bentov, in Sannella [1976] 1978, 71). Wolfe added Bentov's (1977) most important publication *Stalking the Wild Pendulum* to his reference section and discussed it in *Kundalini We*.

136 Wolfe 1978, 93.

137 Wolfe 1978, 126.

138 Wolfe 1978, 99.

139 Wolfe 1978, 142.

the same time referred to the modification of his brain by pondering on the “reintegration of the left- and right-brain functions.”¹⁴⁰

While Wolfe’s experience appeared less traumatic, he still articulated his urge to explain it through similar rhetorical strategies as Krishna had done. Religious scientism thus also appealed to Wolfe as a useful explanatory model. This is especially evident in his appreciation of biofeedback to unfold *kuṇḍalinī*’s full potential.¹⁴¹

Biofeedback may be *the* key to unlocking the Western door to the Kundalini event. [. . .] Remember that biofeedback concentrates the physiological effects of meditation into a shorter time period. You don’t want to arouse the Kundalini before you are ready. Use the machine sensibly and your risk will be minimal.¹⁴²

Another parallel runs along the authors’ dreams. Both Krishna and Wolfe discussed their dreams in relation to their transformational experiences. They suggested that changes in their waking state of consciousness must have corresponding effects on their dreams and interpreted them accordingly. Wolfe had kept a dream diary from a young age onwards. After a hiatus of several years, he resumed this practice a few months prior to his initial *kuṇḍalinī* experience. This resumption correlated with his increasing meditation practice, his biofeedback experiments, and with what he labelled “attainment dreams”.¹⁴³ “These dreams [. . .] reflected internal changes that were caused by meditation, biofeedback training, and the consequent approach of the Kundalini event.”¹⁴⁴ He thus believed that these attainment dreams had heralded his *kuṇḍalinī* experience. In the aftermath, they underpinned the categorization of his perceived transformation along scientific and mythological lines: “The first dream I had after the morning of the Kundalini experience [. . .] informed me that right-brain (represented by anima symbology) had been modified, and perhaps even hurt [. . .]. It is evident from this dream that my internal body mechanism had been confounded.”¹⁴⁵ Wolfe thus claimed a mutual link between

140 Wolfe 1978, 129.

141 Krishna likewise took an interest in biofeedback. He collected articles related to the topic and wrote several contributions himself. Moreover, Krishna was in contact with leading biofeedback experts, such as Elmer E. Green (1917–2017) and Erik Peper (n.d.a.) (Nachl. G. Krishna, 6.10.). However, Krishna cherished biofeedback machines exclusively as a therapeutic means and clearly distanced himself from the belief that they may engender an experience similar to *kuṇḍalinī* (Krishna 1975, 41).

142 Wolfe 1978, 160, emphasis in original.

143 Wolfe 1978, 71.

144 Wolfe 1978, 67.

145 Wolfe 1978, 93.

his (preceding and successive) dreams and what he perceived as his initial *kuṇḍalīnī* experience.

For Krishna dreams likewise played an important role to make sense of the experience. He noticed how his dreams had altered as a result of his *kuṇḍalīnī* activation: “I became aware of an alteration in my dream consciousness.”¹⁴⁶ Both protagonists speak of their dreams as being accompanied with images of light and luster: “The bright luster in my head, always present during wakefulness, continued undiminished during sleep”;¹⁴⁷ and “I had an attainment dream that was almost classic in its symbolic offering of Grace, an event that is said to be a prerequisite to the Kundalini awakening. [. . .] *I see hundreds of pinpoints of light in the sky.*”¹⁴⁸

Among the most intriguing aspects of Wolfe’s report count his speculations on the growth of a collective *kuṇḍalīnī*. These speculative claims relate most evidently to Krishna’s notion of universalism. In *Kundalini We*, Wolfe proclaimed the expected re-appearance of the so-called ‘Christ Consciousness.’ According to Wolfe, Christ Consciousness is directly associated with *kuṇḍalīnī*, inasmuch as both may trigger a collective shift of consciousness and consequently launch a spiritual era. “The coming of the Kundalini, Christ Consciousness, the second coming [. . .] are all slightly different views of the same phenomenon: mankind is moving into an age of spirit, an age in which the universe takes a giant, mutational step in its evolutionary path.”¹⁴⁹ The individual experience of the rising of *kuṇḍalīnī* is thus interpreted as the first step of a new evolutionary phase in human history. Wolfe’s claim of *kuṇḍalīnī*’s quality as a millenarian force strongly resembles Krishna’s confidence in the emergence of a spiritual revolution caused by the evolutionary mechanism of *kuṇḍalīnī*.

Their approach, however, differ in a crucial aspect. While Krishna emphasized how *kuṇḍalīnī* would ultimately transcend any religious or traditional link, Wolfe, on the contrary, took Christianity as point of departure and illustrated his assumptions by means of the Bible and Christ’s Passion.¹⁵⁰

Wolfe’s book is imbued with Krishna’s unambiguous, if subtle influence. The final chapter, in particular, was inspired by Krishna’s universal approach. Wolfe’s

146 Krishna [1967] 1970, 147.

147 Krishna [1967] 1970, 147.

148 Wolfe 1978, 81, emphasis in original.

149 Wolfe 1978, 164.

150 “The Bible illustrates that the individual Kundalini event is but the **start** of the spiritual process. [. . .] Christ’s first coming was a great gift to mankind. It was a collective baptism by water. The second coming of the Christ Consciousness will be on an even grander scale: it will be a baptism by fire that will catch up all humanity” (Wolfe 1978, 166–67; emphasis in original).

final words of the book clearly draw on Krishna's—and Theosophy's—claim of the dawn of a new era of transformed consciousness in the wake of increasing *kuṇḍalinī* activations: "And from our new-found individualism we will form a new collective universe—[. . .] one in which the spiritual man [. . .] will live in peace with himself and with other men, for those of other nature will be no more. The age of the Kundalini man is dawning."¹⁵¹ Wolfe's account thus perfectly shows how Krishna's claims had become common-sense among non-Indian spiritual seekers witnessing their supposed activation of *kuṇḍalinī*.

5 Concluding Remarks

Innumerable protagonists have addressed the experience of *kuṇḍalinī* and aimed to adorn the mysterious serpent with their particular interpretation. The influential metaphor of the serpent winds its way through uncountable interpretative endeavours: A dormant serpent that patiently awaits the right moment to rise and alter the spiritual seeker's consciousness. This metaphor has also attended *kuṇḍalinī*'s modern transition from an individually perceived inner experience to a collectively shared transcultural mechanism. Crucially, however, *kuṇḍalinī*'s modern re-imagination was not confined to a single interpretative model. The view of a biological mechanism and transformational experience, which will ultimately change the entire course of humanity, discussed above, is just one prominent pathway.

Initially, *kuṇḍalinī* pertained to those aspects of a spiritual life, which were too precious or too dangerous to be shared. However, the twentieth century witnessed willingly shared personal narrations of such inner experiences, embracing delights and dreads. Narratives of experiences thenceforward emphasized the primacy of personal experiences. Over and above, such autobiographical (or auto-hagiographical) accounts provided spiritual seekers with insights into teachings and insights on "privileged experience,"¹⁵² previously unavailable to the reader. This "democratization of experience"¹⁵³ resulted in an increase of experience reports and allowed the readership to reinterpret their experiences as belonging to the occult. Krishna's seminal position among the growing number of experience reports rested on his endeavour to detach *kuṇḍalinī* from its religious and traditional boundaries. He portrayed *kuṇḍalinī* as a universal mechanism,

¹⁵¹ Wolfe 1978, 173.

¹⁵² Hammer 2004, 435.

¹⁵³ Hammer 2004, 435.

which is easier understood and approached through scientific than religious metaphors and language. He further believed that *kuṇḍalinī* followed a designated universal pattern: As a biological mechanism transforming the physical body and as an evolutionary force altering the individual and collective consciousness independent of any cultural or religious ties.

The accompanying psychological commentaries by James Hillman leave no doubt how Krishna's narration was to be interpreted from a psychological stance: As an archetypal story comprising of several determined stages. Against this backdrop, Krishna's *kuṇḍalinī* represented an archetypal manifestation of a perennial experience, which has re-occurred at times of crises and vast changes. *Kuṇḍalinī* was thus not confined to a mere biological mechanism enabling an alteration of consciousness. Krishna firmly believed that "before her time [*kuṇḍalinī*] was acclaimed a Vira, meaning a hero, and the practice itself designated as Vira Sadhana, or heroic undertaking."¹⁵⁴ This seemingly incidental link of *kuṇḍalinī* and her activation with the monomyth underlines the essence of Krishna's claim: The activation of this evolutionary, potentially threatening mechanism corresponds to a universal pattern that unfolds a transformational scheme. The serpent power had indeed stimulated Krishna's transformational journey.

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¹⁵⁴ Krishna [1967] 1970, 165.

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